

**Decision Notice
and
Finding of No Significant Impact
for
West Shore, Lake Mary Ronan, & Finley Point State Parks
Forestry Project Environmental Assessment**

**Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 1
490 N. Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901**

October 10, 2007

Description of Proposed Action

The purpose of this action is to complete a forest-thinning project at West Shore, Lake Mary Ronan, and Finley Point State Parks. The combined total acreage proposed for treatment is approximately 200 acres. The objective is to maintain the property over time for safe public use, with a forest cover that is healthy and insect, disease, and fire resistant. A healthy stand, with a mixture of tree species native to the site and with a diversity of tree sizes and ages, is the desired future condition. The long-term goal is to restore the site to the historic stand structure of large, open, park-like stands dominated by ponderosa pine and western larch, with some Douglas fir. The specific objectives of this project include:

1. Creating a forest structure that improves forest resilience to insect and disease infestations.
2. Reducing fuel loads, ladder fuels, and lower the risk of stand replacement fire in order to protect the park and adjacent private lands.
3. Removing trees that are potentially hazardous to park visitors and facilities.
4. Restoring the parks to the historic, large, open stand structure.
5. Maintaining and improving the aesthetic value of the parks' forests.

Existing Condition

West Shore, Lake Mary Ronan, and Finley Point State Parks are located in areas that have seen rapid growth in recent years. All are surrounded by private property, both in large parcels and small housing lots. No significant forest management has been done at these sites for at least 35 years. As a result, most portions of the existing forests are dense and overcrowded, with stands dominated by Douglas fir.

All three parks in varying degrees have similar forest conditions. Competition for site resources from overcrowded conditions is stressing the surviving trees, causing them to be more vulnerable to root rot and bark beetle attack. Heavy ground fuel build-up is also apparent in the denser stand areas. This has resulted in an increase in the risk of stand-replacement fire. The area is highly susceptible to a crown fire with a likely spillover to adjacent properties.

Alternatives

The following is a brief description of the three alternatives that were developed in the EA:

Alternative A: No action.

Action: FWP would not do forest management at West Shore, Lake Mary Ronan, and Finley Point State Parks and would let the natural progression take place.

Impacts: Dense stands of predominantly Douglas fir will be less vigorous and continue to be more susceptible to fir beetle, dwarf mistletoe, and root rot. Competition for nutrients and moisture will result in many trees dying out. Dead and dying trees will add fuel loads in the park, increasing the likelihood of stand-replacement fire. Deadfall and ladder fuels will increase the possibility of a crown fire, which could threaten adjacent properties.

Because beetle-infested trees will not be removed, beetles will continue to disperse from currently impacted trees, causing adjacent stressed trees to be attacked, with potential spillover to trees on nearby lands. Dead and dying trees could become hazardous to recreational users near developed areas. The long-term aesthetics of the park will be impacted. Since the forest cover will remain dense, little new tree growth will be generated in the understory. This will lead to a homogenous forest of one age class, which reduces diversity and is more at risk to stand-replacement events.

Alternative B: Complete the prescription as recommended for one park with other parks to follow over a multiyear period.

Action: This alternative would address the major concerns at a particular park by use of three different treatment methods. These have been identified as those that focus on 1) forest health and restoration, 2) hazardous tree removal and visual enhancement, and 3) roadside fuel reduction. The parks have been divided into units in which one of the above treatment methods would be utilized. The alternative would remove dead and dying trees from the park through selective harvesting of all size classes, leaving the remaining trees more resistant to insect and disease infestation. It would focus on reducing the density of the Douglas fir, the predominant species, and favor the restoration of ponderosa pine and western larch to more historic levels. Most of the dwarf mistletoe trees would be removed to slow the spread of that parasite. Spaces would be opened around ponderosa pine to promote growth and regeneration. Larger dead snags would be left for wildlife habitat.

Crown density and fuel loads will be reduced to lower the risk of stand-replacement fire. Efforts to reduce the fire hazard and improve overall forest health are intended to have long-term benefits for park visitors and homeowners residing adjacent to the park.

Drawbacks to the project center primarily around the spread of noxious weeds. Timber projects will cause disturbance to soils. Noxious weeds have been observed at each of the parks and are known to occur in localized, moderate-to-heavy infestations. Treatment and monitoring for weeds will be an ongoing action. Costs associated with chemicals and labor will increase expenditures and will require additional funding and labor over time.

Alternative C: Complete the prescriptions as recommended for all three parks.

This alternative is similar to Alternative B, but is greater in scope as it involves all three state parks versus only one. The primary benefit of this method is derived from the economy of scale. By combining all three parks under one project there is a greater chance that the value of all the timber combined will pay for the work involved, which results in less cost to the Department. Additionally, if parks are done separately over a multiyear period, then the process from proposal to completion will need to be completed each time, resulting in additional costs of time and labor.

For all park units, treatment will be implemented through a commercial timber-thinning sale, specifying mechanical harvesters, and logs and slash being transported to designated loading or disposal areas. The commercial thinning will take place in the fall and winter to decrease ground and vegetative disturbance. Native grass seeds will be sown in all areas of ground disturbance. Stumps will be cut to 4 inches or less. It is anticipated that the commercial value of the excess trees on the site will cover the cost of disposing of the slash resulting from the harvested trees as well as the natural accumulation of excess ground fuels.

Precautions will be taken to close roads during the project to prevent vehicles from entering. Signs will be prominently displayed, informing visitors of the project and hazardous conditions. Areas will be closed to public access while work is being performed and machinery is operated or if conditions are deemed unsafe.

Public Comment

The environmental assessment was published in local newspapers and posted on the FWP web site. Public comments were accepted for 30 days, from September 6 through 5:00 p.m., October 5, 2007. Two on-site walking tours of marked treatment sample areas were conducted at West Shore State Park on September 20 and 29. A total of seven individuals took part.

Three written comments were received. All were generally in favor of the project as described in the EA, with the primary concern being control of noxious weeds, especially at West Shore State Park.

Other concerns mentioned: 1) Additional objective being added to include visual quality; 2) not burning slash on-site, but rather favoring grinding and removal; 3) more aggressive action toward weed control; 4) maintaining the proper number of wildlife snag trees; 5) use of seed that reflects native plant species currently existing on-site; 6) no mention of specific type of harvesting equipment to be used; and 7) use of the term “healthy forests.”

Responses to concerns:

- 1) Visual quality is addressed in the EA on page 21, in Section 11, with noted mitigation measures.
- 2) Grinding/chipping and removal from site is the preferred method to deal with slash, but burning will not be totally excluded and impacts can be mitigated.
- 3) Noxious weeds are addressed in the EA on pages 11 and 14: “The area is managed under Region One’s noxious weed management program, and any occurrence of noxious weeds will be treated chemically, biologically, or mechanically under that program.”
Additionally, West Shore State Park was treated for noxious weeds in the first week of

October 2007. This work was performed by contract and included major known areas of knapweed along roads and trails. Finley Point and Lake Mary Ronan were treated during the past summer. This included hand pulling and spot spraying.

- 4) Sufficient snag trees as determined by FWP will be marked and left.
- 5) Native grass species mix is listed in Appendix F. FWP will specify as part of any contract what seed will be used.
- 6) Specification of type of equipment is left in general terms. Specific type of equipment used by a bidder would be part of the evaluation of the work plan section in the Request for Proposal.
- 7) Although it is acknowledged that the term “healthy forests” can have different meanings depending on whom one talks to, it is the one used by the consultant in writing the forest prescriptions and will remain for consistency purposes.

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

Based on analysis in the EA, I find Alternative C to be the selected alternative. I have evaluated the EA and applicable laws, regulations, and policies, and have determined that this action will not have a significant impact on the human or physical environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

The final EA may be viewed at or obtained from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Region 1, 490 North Meridian Road, Kalispell, MT 59901, (406) 752-5501.

James R. Satterfield, Jr., Ph.D.
Regional Supervisor

Date