



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Region One
490 North Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901
(406) 752-5501
Fax: 406-257-0349
Ref: JS063-12
August 23, 2012

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP), Region One, has completed the environmental review process for the proposed West Kootenai Wildlife Management Area Forest Management Project. The project is intended to improve wildlife habitat and reduce the risk of wildfire.

The draft EA was out for public review through Tuesday, August 21, 2012. In reviewing all the public comment, and evaluating the environmental effects and other relevant information, it is recommended that FWP pursue the completion of the West Kootenai WMA Forest Management Project. A copy of the decision notice is enclosed.

Sincerely,

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

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Enclosure

c: *Governor's Office, Attn: Sheena Wilson, PO Box 200801, Helena, 59620-0801

*Environmental Quality Council, PO Box 20, Helena, 59620-1704

*Dept. of Environmental Quality, Planning, Prevention & Assistance, PO Box 200901, Helena, 59620-0901

*Dept. of Environmental Quality, Permitting Compliance, PO Box 200901, Helena, 59620-0901

*Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Director's Office; Legal Unit – Jessica Snyder; Wildlife – Steve Knapp; Rebecca Cooper.

*DNRC, PO Box 201601, Helena, 59620-1601 (Patty Greene)

*Montana Historical Society, SHPO, 225 North Roberts, Veteran's Memorial Building, Helena, 59620-1201

*Montana State Library, 1515 East Sixth Ave., Helena, 59620-1800

*Adam McLane, Montana Environmental Information Center, PO Box 1184, Helena, 59624
George Ochenski, 4 Harrison Avenue, Helena, MT 59601

*Wayne Hirst, Montana State Parks Foundation, PO Box 728, Libby, 59923

*Montana State Parks Association, PO Box 699, Billings, 59103

*Joe Gutkoski, President, Montana River Action Network, 304 N 18th Ave., Bozeman, 59715

*Senator Chas Vincent, 34 Paul Bunyan Lane, Libby, MT 59923

*Representatives Mike Cuffe, P O Box 1685, Eureka, MT 59917 & Gerald Bennett, 784 Taylor Road, Libby, MT 59923

*Lincoln County Commissioners, 512 California Avenue, Libby, MT 59923

Lincoln County Libraries, 220 W 6th Street, Libby; 318 Dewey Avenue, Eureka; and 207 N 3rd, Troy, MT

Interested Parties

**Region 1
490 N. Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901**

**DECISION NOTICE
and
Finding of No Significant Impact
for the
WEST KOOTENAI WMA FOREST MANAGEMENT PROJECT**

August 23, 2012

Description of the Proposed Action

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to thin approximately 240 acres of forested habitat within the West Kootenai Wildlife Management Area (WMA) near Eureka. The purpose of this thinning is to improve the long-term habitat needs for wintering ungulates and reduce the risk of wildfire spreading to and from adjacent private lands. Thinning would utilize variable tree spacing in which the largest and healthiest trees are retained. Thinning activities would be focused along approximately 12,000 feet of interior roadways and the southern and eastern boundaries, with several interior thinning units as well. Approximately 300 yards of road would be constructed in order to complete this project. Wood products of commercial value harvested during this thinning operation would be sold by the contractor. However, costs to complete this project are expected to exceed revenues by approximately \$85,000. Costs would be off-set by a \$41,000 grant from the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) for fuels reduction. FWP would pay the remaining \$44,000.

Public Involvement – Scoping

FWP did not conduct a formal scoping review. However, conversations with local residents have long indicated a desire for FWP to do some type of thinning within the WMA to improve the safety of area residents and their property in relation to the risk of wildfire. This culminated in a 2009 petition signed by 57 area residents urging FWP to conduct thinning operations within the WMA.

Draft Environmental Assessment and Initial Public Comments

FWP released a draft environmental analysis document for public review on July 31, 2012, and asked for comments on the analyses and alternatives by August 21. We sent postcards announcing the public comment period to at least 60 individuals and organizations, including all landowners bordering the WMA and individuals who signed a petition, for whom addresses were available. FWP ran legal ads that described the proposed project, the availability of the draft EA, and the public meeting information in 3 regional or local newspapers and the draft was available on FWP's official web site. FWP also issued a press release that focused on the availability of the draft EA and the time, date, and location of the public meeting. A news article on the proposed project appeared in the Tobacco Valley News August 9, 2012. The draft document was also available at public libraries in Eureka, Troy, and Libby, and copies were available at Region

One headquarters. Fliers were printed and posted in the West Kootenai community announcing a public meeting.

FWP held a public meeting on August 9, 2012, at 7:00 p.m. at the Kootenai Kraft and Grocery in the West Kootenai community. We provided information about the project and answered questions. Twenty-seven people provided their names and addresses at the meeting, with several refraining. Verbal comments were generally very supportive, with a number of comments/concerns regarding logging truck traffic and public safety. Other comments/concerns included firewood availability for area residents, effects of logging on wintering wildlife, unauthorized use of vehicles on Border Lane, and the awarding and administration of contracts. Prior to leaving the meeting, 8 people submitted written comments – all were supportive.

Following the public meeting, an informal meeting was held with approximately 10 members of the local Amish Community. They were also quite supportive of the proposal.

Summary of Recent Public Comment

FWP received 6 email comments, with one individual submitting 2 emails regarding the project, both of which were quite critical. However, no one submitted comments in opposition to the project. Rather, the comments submitted generally focused on public safety and access issues, with 3 people saying they were wholly supportive of the project.

FWP RESPONSE TO RECENT PUBLIC COMMENTS

1. Comments Received About Logging Truck Traffic.

Several people expressed a variety of comments regarding the additional traffic, especially from the logging trucks, that would be associated with this project. One individual stated that FWP needed to not only enforce the speed limit relating to logging truck traffic, but to also provide a “Hotline” for speeders and an ambulance in case of an accident. FWP should also do an “Impact Study” on the damage that will be done to the West Kootenai Road (#474) and pay for all damages. Other issues raised by this individual and several others include the noise from trucks, diesel fumes, hours of operation, dust prevention, winter traffic and icy roads, use during spring break-up, mud and gravel deposited on the West Kootenai Road, and unauthorized use of Border Lane (private).

FWP Response: Northwest Montana has a long history of logging and logging truck traffic, including within the West Kootenai community. As such, FWP does not feel there is a need to conduct an impact study on the potential damage to the West Kootenai Road specific to this project. Nor do we believe that a formal “Hotline” or an ambulance on stand-by in case of an accident is warranted. The West Kootenai Road is paved, so dust should not be much of an issue. Trucks utilizing FWP’s roads may kick up some dust, but it is not believed to be substantial nor wide-ranging due to their location and slower speeds. Also, much of the work is planned during winter months when dust should remain minimal. Some mud and gravel may be deposited on the West Kootenai Road as the trucks turn onto it from the WMA. If it becomes an issue in regard to public safety, the contractor will be asked to clean it up. Truck drivers will be required to abide by the speed limit, and law enforcement officers will be notified if speeding becomes an issue. Residents are encouraged to contact FWP when, and if, this becomes an issue. To insure

compliance, FWP will state in the contract that all pertinent safety and traffic laws must be adhered to, and that failure to abide by them may result in the loss of the contract. Use of heavy trucks during spring break-up must legally cease. Taxes on all vehicles pay for road maintenance and repair. As in other logging operations, truck drivers and contractors will not be limited to their hours of operation due to concerns regarding noise. Rarely will operations occur outside of daylight hours, especially in evening. The effects of diesel fumes relative to air quality are expected to be minimal.

Border Lane is a private road that parallels FWP's access on which FWP does not have legal access. A small portion of it crosses FWP property for which area residents do not have legal access. Until a 300-yard section of new road is built on the WMA, FWP's only vehicle access to the WMA is on a 200' section of Border Lane that is privately owned. Attempts to legally settle this issue have been ongoing for years, but pending that resolution, both FWP and private landowners continue to make use of that road. FWP plans to construct the 300 yards of new road across the WMA, giving us legal access from the county road to our property in the initial stages of this work, negating any need for FWP or its contractors to use any portion of Border Lane at any time. In the interim, access for standard-sized vehicles (e.g., pickups) will still be necessary. Those whose comments suggested that FWP immediately cease all vehicle use on Border Lane must realize this is not possible, just as residents cannot immediately cease all use across FWP property. All contractors will be notified of this situation, and all large-truck traffic will be confined to the new FWP access. Unrelated to this proposed forest management activity, FWP will continue to work with all parties to resolve the Border Lane access issue.

2. Comments Received About Logging Activity and Slash Disposal.

FWP received several comments regarding logging and slash disposal. One commenter stated we should prepare an emergency plan in respect to this project, and that there should be 24-hour, round-the-clock monitoring of burning slash piles until they are out. Also, there should be adequate fire protection on scene at all times in case a fire breaks out. Other concerns included increased, illegal access to the WMA following logging and thinning adjacent to Border Lane. Several questions at the public meeting centered on how contracts would be awarded.

FWP Response: FWP does not believe an emergency plan is necessary, and we are unclear of the writer's specific concerns. All reasonable precautions will be taken in the burning of slash, but it will probably not include round-the-clock monitoring or fire trucks on-site at all times. Slash disposal on this project will follow state law using standard practices utilized in all other forest management activities in our state. It is our contention that failure to complete this work will result in greater risks from wildfire to area residents than doing nothing. Illegal access onto the WMA is not expected to increase following completion of this project. Thinning is indeed planned within the WMA for the entire length that borders Border Lane and not just the 200' access strip. Contracts would be awarded on the basis of which qualified contractor can do the prescribed work at least cost; FWP cannot guarantee that this contract will be awarded locally.

3. Comments Received About Firewood Availability.

Quite a large number of comments were received at the public meeting and in writing asking about firewood availability. One commenter stated that while it may be a good idea to provide firewood, it will create problems for burning if slash piles are disturbed.

FWP Response: FWP will try to work with the community to the degree possible in providing access to firewood. However, it should be noted that it is the contractor's responsibility to get the greatest values for wood products removed during this operation. This may include an on-site chipper, in which case there would be little logging waste remaining for firewood. Any firewood salvaging would occur after the logging is completed and before slash is burned. It would have to occur during a limited, specified period and allow motorized public access in an area that is normally restricted. We agree with the commenter that firewood salvage may disrupt slash piles to the point of interfering with burning. One possible option would be to deposit several loads of wood near the parking area for public salvaging. At this point, all we can guarantee is that various options with the contractor will be explored.

4. Comments Received About Impacts on Wintering Wildlife.

One person commented that winter logging will only further stress animals.

FWP Response: While winter logging may indeed stress some animals, this disturbance is relatively short compared to the long-term benefits we perceive for wintering ungulates from this project. Most ungulates will actually benefit from winter logging in that it will provide forage (Douglas-fir needles and lichens) during a time of year when food is in short supply. The greater the winter severity and stress, the more likely they are to feed on newly created slash. In addition, the plowed roads and skid trails allow them to move more freely in deep snow, thereby conserving energy. Total ungulate density is expected to increase on the WMA during winter logging activities instead of decrease because animals will be attracted to increased food supplies resulting from logging operations.

FWP RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE AND FINAL DECISION RECOMMENDATION

In reviewing all the public comment, evaluating the environmental effects, and other relevant information, I recommend that FWP pursue the completion of the West Kootenai WMA Forest Management Project. Through the MEPA process, FWP found no significant impacts on the human or physical environments associated with this proposal. Therefore, the EA is the appropriate level of analysis, and an environmental impact statement is not required. FWP believes the completion of this project is in the best interests of wildlife, the long-term management of the WMA, and the people within the West Kootenai community. DNRC's assistance and cooperation with a \$41,000 grant to assist with fuels reduction, not to mention broad public support, is testament to the importance of completion of this project.

James R. Satterfield, Jr.

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

August 23, 2012
Date