

CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	Forest in Focus Blackfoot Community Conservation Area Forest Restoration Project
Proposed Implementation Date:	December 2014
Proponent:	Blackfoot Challenge
Location:	Sections 3, 10, 14, 15, and 23 T 15N R 12W
County:	Powell

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

The proposed project is part of the Forests in Focus grant project, MT DNRC Request for Proposal number 155011FSU. The Forests in Focus grant would provide partial funding to thin trees from approximately 350 acres. Both commercial and pre-commercial thinning would take place. Thinning would focus on leaving the healthiest trees resulting in timber stands more resilient to insects, disease, and catastrophic wildfire. Approximately 2,450 tons of pulp and 1,117 tons of sawlogs would be produced and sold to local timber processing facilities.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED:

Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project.

The land on which this specific project is proposed is the Blackfoot Community Conservation Area (BCCA) Core. This land is managed by a 15 member council that involves representatives from the community, adjacent landowners, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, Montana DNRC, the United States Forest Service, and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. The BCCA core is under conservation easement with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and they must approve all land management actions.

All BCCA meetings are open to the public. The meeting and the agenda is advertised on the Blackfoot Challenge website and Facebook page. The Forest in Focus grant proposal was on the September 2014 agenda and the Council unanimously agreed to submit the proposal.

The Montana DNRC conducted public scoping for the Forests in Focus Grant Project as a whole by soliciting comments at four public meetings, (held in Forsythe, Billings, Missoula, and Kalispell), and by publishing requests for comments in the legal advertisement sections of the following newspapers. The Miles City Star, the Billings Gazette, The Missoula Missoulian, and the Kalispell Daily Interlake. No comments on the project as a whole were received either written or at the meetings.

2. OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES WITH JURISDICTION, LIST OF PERMITS NEEDED:

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation: Slash Hazard Reduction Agreement will be required and the Streamside Management Zone Law must be followed

Montana Department of Environmental Quality: Slash Burning Restrictions

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Alternative A (action): The action alternative, as described within this document, would provide partial funding, through the Forests in Focus grant program to commercially and pre-commercially thin approximately 350

acres. It would provide approximately 2,450 tons of pulp and 1,117 tons of sawlog material to local timber processing facilities.

Alternative B (no action): This project would not be funded under the Forests in Focus grant program. The grant monies could be awarded to another entity. Pre-commercial and commercial thinning could possibly still occur but would only be feasible if additional funding sources become available or log markets substantially improve.

III. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" if no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

4. GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE:

Consider the presence of fragile, compactable or unstable soils. Identify unusual geologic features. Specify any special reclamation considerations. Identify any cumulative impacts to soils.

Alternative A: No direct, indirect, or cumulative impacts to geology or soils would be expected because equipment operation would be limited to periods when soils are dry, frozen, or snow covered. On approximately 320 acres 2-4 tons of slash would be left scattered throughout the treatment units to provide nutrient recycling into the soil. Approximately 30 acres is a dry ponderosa pine site. To mimic natural processes on this site less than two tons of slash per acre would be retained.

Alternative B: No funding would be provided to facilitate commercial or pre-commercial thinning. No direct, indirect or cumulative impacts would be expected.

5. WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION:

Identify important surface or groundwater resources. Consider the potential for violation of ambient water quality standards, drinking water maximum contaminant levels, or degradation of water quality. Identify cumulative effects to water resources.

Alternative A: Class 1, 2, and 3 streams, surface drainage areas, springs and wet areas exist within the project area. The Montana Streamside Management Zone Law and Forestry Best Management Practices would be followed therefore no direct, indirect, or cumulative impacts to water quality would be expected.

Alternative B: No funding would be provided to facilitate commercial or pre-commercial thinning. No direct, indirect or cumulative impacts would be expected.

6. AIR QUALITY:

What pollutants or particulate would be produced? Identify air quality regulations or zones (e.g. Class I air shed) the project would influence. Identify cumulative effects to air quality.

Alternative A: Under the Action Alternative, slash piles consisting of tree limbs and tops and other vegetative debris would be created throughout the project area during harvesting. These slash piles would ultimately be burned after harvesting operations have been completed. Burning would introduce particulate matter into the local airshed, temporarily and minimally, when burned on approved days, affecting local air quality

To mitigate the hazards of burning slash piles non-industrial timberland operators are regulated by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality and burning is only allowed during seasons that provide good ventilation and smoke dispersion. Thus, direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to air quality due to slash pile burning associated with the proposed action would be expected to be minimal.

Alternative B: No funding would be provided to facilitate commercial or pre-commercial thinning. No direct, indirect or cumulative impacts would be expected.

7. VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY:

What changes would the action cause to vegetative communities? Consider rare plants or cover types that would be affected. Identify cumulative effects to vegetation.

Existing conditions: The 5,600 acre BCCA Core is primarily forested and was managed as industrial timberland until 2009 when it was purchased by the Blackfoot Challenge. Many of the forest stands were high-graded in the past, leaving many stands in poor condition. Approximately 850 acres of precommercial thinning and strategic fuel treatments have been completed, however many stands remain severely overstocked at over 2,000 trees per acre. Stands consist of saplings, pulp size trees, and scattered mature trees. Many of the mature trees have poor form and crowns. The result of this is reduced tree growth and forest stands that are at risk of insect and disease outbreaks and stand replacement wildfire.

Grindelia howellii (howell's gumweed) and *Carex crawei* are known to exist within Powell County. Howell's gumweed has been found on the project area, but not within the proposed thinning units.

Alternative A: Under the proposed action 6 units ranging in size from 30 to 81 acres would be thinned. Thinning would remove trees of all size classes. Thinning would leave the healthiest trees. Target stocking is approximately 5-10 foot crown spacing in the overstory and 10-14 foot stem spacing in the understory. The proposed thinning would restore forest stands to a more historic species composition and stocking level. It would also result in stands less susceptible to stand replacing wildfire and insect and disease epidemics.

Alternative B: No precommercial thinning or harvest would take place at this time. Stands would continue to be at risk of stand replacing wildfire, insects and disease. As trees grow overstocking would worsen and tree growth would continue to decline. Harvest or precommercial thinning could occur in the future, but only if funding or log markets allow.

8. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS:

Consider substantial habitat values and use of the area by wildlife, birds or fish. Identify cumulative effects to fish and wildlife.

Alternative A: The United States Fish and Wildlife Service and Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks have been consulted during project development. The proposed action would reduce screening cover within the proposed thinning units but the project has been planned with the following wildlife considerations: road access to the proposed units is on a limited basis and monitored by the BCCA Land Steward and the Montana Block Management Program. The proposed units are relatively small in size and adjacent to screening cover, areas of dense conifer regeneration less than ¼ acre will be left within the units to provide screening cover. Where available up to ten wildlife snags per acre would be retained and large woody debris would be left on the ground. Due to the above mentioned considerations the proposed action would be expected to have low risk of direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to terrestrial and avian life and habitats beyond what is expected under the no action alternative.

The Montana streamside Management Zone Law and Best Management Practices for forestry would be followed so no direct, indirect, or cumulative impacts to aquatic life and habitats would be expected.

Alternative B: No funding would be provided to facilitate commercial or pre-commercial thinning. No direct, indirect or cumulative impacts would be expected.

9. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES:

Consider any federally listed threatened or endangered species or habitat identified in the project area. Determine effects to wetlands. Consider Sensitive Species or Species of special concern. Identify cumulative effects to these species and their habitat.

Alternative A

Grizzly Bear - The project area is located in occupied grizzly bear habitat. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service and Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks have been consulted during project development. The proposed action would reduce screening cover within the proposed thinning units but the project has been planned with the following wildlife considerations: road access to the proposed units is on a limited basis and monitored by the BCCA Land Steward and the Montana Block Management Program. The proposed units are relatively small in size and adjacent to screening cover, areas of dense conifer regeneration less than ¼ acre will be left within the units to provide screening cover. To reduce human-bear conflicts BCCA has a proactive grizzly bear education program consisting of educational talks and information boards at BCCA portals. Due to the above mentioned considerations the proposed action would be expected to have low risk of direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to grizzly bears beyond what is expected under the no action alternative.

Lynx - Some areas proposed for thinning may contain lynx habitat. Thinning in these areas may make them less desirable to lynx. The proposed units are relatively small in size and adjacent to dense habitat, areas of dense conifer regeneration less than ¼ acre will be left within the units to provide screening cover. Where available up to ten wildlife snags per acre would be retained and large woody debris would be left on the ground. Due to the above mentioned considerations the proposed action would be expected to have low risk of direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to lynx beyond what is expected under the no action alternative.

Fisheries - West slope Cutthroat Trout and Bull Trout may inhabit streams within the project area. Under the proposed action alternative streamside buffers consistent with the Montana Streamside Management Zone Law would be used. No direct, indirect, cumulative impacts would be expected under either alternative.

Wetlands - Several wetlands occur within the BCCA core. These would be protected by wetland management zones (WMZ's). Within these WMZ's ground based equipment would be avoided where possible. If ground based operations cannot be avoided within a WMZ operations would be limited to periods of low soil moisture, frozen soil, or snow covered ground conditions. Based on the project design there is low risk of the proposed project impacting wetlands.

Alternative B: No funding would be provided to facilitate commercial or pre-commercial thinning. No direct, indirect or cumulative impacts would be expected.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:

Identify and determine effects to historical, archaeological or paleontological resources.

No effects to historical or archaeological sites would be expected under either alternative.

11. AESTHETICS:

Determine if the project is located on a prominent topographic feature, or may be visible from populated or scenic areas. What level of noise, light or visual change would be produced? Identify cumulative effects to aesthetics.

Alternative A: The proposed harvest and pre commercial thinning would change the aesthetics from within and looking into the stands. In many places, it would go from a thick stand (where the viewer cannot see into it) to a very open stand. Most slash would be treated, but some would be expected to remain after treatment.

Alternative B: No funding would be provided to facilitate commercial or pre-commercial thinning. No direct, indirect or cumulative impacts would be expected.

12. DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AIR OR ENERGY:

Determine the amount of limited resources the project would require. Identify other activities nearby that the project would affect. Identify cumulative effects to environmental resources.

No change from existing conditions would be expected under either alternative.

13. OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS PERTINENT TO THE AREA:

List other studies, plans or projects on this tract. Determine cumulative impacts likely to occur as a result of current private, state or federal actions in the analysis area, and from future proposed state actions in the analysis area that are under MEPA review (scoped) or permitting review by any state agency.

BCCA Management Plan for the Core, 2007, Outlines BCCA land management goals and integration of numerous objectives and values

IV. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" if no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY:

Identify any health and safety risks posed by the project.

Alternative A: Human health would not be impacted by the proposed timber sale or associated activity. Log truck traffic would increase but safety concerns would be minimized by posting signs and, imposing a speed limit, if necessary.

No additional negative effects would be expected as a result of the proposed action

Alternative B: No changes from existing conditions would be expected.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:

Identify how the project would add to or alter these activities.

Alternative A: The proposed action would provide approximately 2,450 tons of pulp and 1,117 tons of sawlog material to local timber processing facilities. Cumulatively, the proposed project would encourage faster growth of the residual timber stands. Based on the BCCA Management Plan for the Core this would result in shortening the timeframe these timber stands could again supply timber to local mills in the future.

Alternative B: The no action alternative would not provide funding to facilitate commercial harvest. No raw material would be provided to local timber processing facilities. Cumulatively, if these timber stands are left in their current state growth will continue to stagnate. This stagnant growth would likely result in a longer time before harvest and less valuable material to be harvested in the future.

16. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT:

Estimate the number of jobs the project would create, move or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to the employment market.

Alternative A: Would be expected to provide approximately 6 months of contract work for local contractors utilizing 4-8 personnel during that time.

Alternative B: The no action alternative would not provide any immediate employment or contract opportunities. If, in the future, funding or log markets allow similar opportunities could be possible.

17. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES:

Estimate tax revenue the project would create or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to taxes and revenue.

Both alternatives have only indirect, limited implications for tax collections.

18. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES:

Estimate increases in traffic and changes to traffic patterns. What changes would be needed to fire protection, police, schools, etc.? Identify cumulative effects of this and other projects on government services

Alternative A: The proposed action alternative would provide grant funding as part of the Forest in Focus Grant Project Request for Proposal # 155011FSU. Implementing the proposed alternative would not create any direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to the demand for government services beyond existing conditions.

Alternative B: If the no action alternative were selected it is likely the funding would go to another applicant of the Forests in Focus Grant Project Request for Proposal # 155011FSU. Choosing the no alternative would not create any direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to the demand for government services beyond existing conditions.

19. LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS:

List State, County, City, USFS, BLM, Tribal, and other zoning or management plans, and identify how they would affect this project.

None:

20. ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES:

Identify any wilderness or recreational areas nearby or access routes through this tract. Determine the effects of the project on recreational potential within the tract. Identify cumulative effects to recreational and wilderness activities.

The project area receives moderate recreation use. Recreation opportunities would continue under the proposed action. The nearest wilderness area is approximately 6 miles north of the proposed project area.

No direct, indirect, or cumulative impacts to recreation would be expected under either alternative.

21. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING:

Estimate population changes and additional housing the project would require. Identify cumulative effects to population and housing.

There would not be any direct implications for density and distribution of population or housing under either alternative.

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:

Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.

Neither alternative would have any implications on social structures or mores.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:

How would the action affect any unique quality of the area?

Neither alternative would have any effects on cultural uniqueness or diversity.

24. OTHER APPROPRIATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES:

Estimate the return to the trust. Include appropriate economic analysis. Identify potential future uses for the analysis area other than existing management. Identify cumulative economic and social effects likely to occur as a result of the proposed action.

NONE.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	Name: Neil C. Simpson	Date: 17 November 2014
	Title: Service Forester	

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

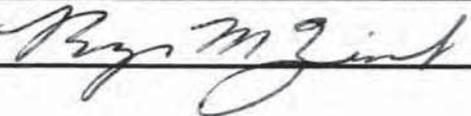
Alternative A with the specified mitigation measures.

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

NONE

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

EIS More Detailed EA No Further Analysis

EA Checklist Approved By:	Name: Roger Ziesak
	Title: Forest Practices Program Manager
Signature: 	Date: 12/2/14