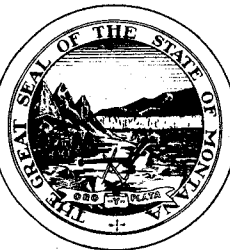


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JUDY MARTZ, GOVERNOR

D.N.R.C.



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DECISION NOTICE
GOAT SQUEEZER TIMBER SALE PROJECT
April 18, 2003

LEGISLATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL
POLICY OFFICE

INTRODUCTION

I have reviewed all information and comments received during the preparation of the Goat Squeezer Timber Sale Project.

I have reviewed the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), including comments received on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and the responses to those comments, prepared for the Goat Squeezer Timber Sale Proposal.

I have compared the alternatives to the project objectives and evaluated their advantages and disadvantages.

I have reviewed each identified issue and the analysis of environmental effects for each alternative displayed in the FEIS.

I have carefully compared the Proposed Decision in the FEIS to the State Forest Land Management Plan (SFLMP).

DECISION

I have chosen to implement Action Alternative C, as described in the FEIS Proposed Decision (FEIS, pages II-30 through II-34, enclosed) with the following modification:

Harvest units 27 and 29 will be changed from a seedtree harvest to a commercial-thin harvest. Detailed reconnaissance discovered a healthy and vigorous midstory of the appropriate covertime. This change will reduce the total volume for the project from 10.2 million board feet (mmbf) to 10.153 mmbf.

The modified Action Alternative C does meet the PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT and PROJECT OBJECTIVES as displayed in the FEIS PROPOSED DECISION. The proposed mitigations are adequate and feasible.

The rationale for choosing Action Alternative C is adequately explained in the FEIS Proposed Decision (FEIS, pages II-33 through II-34).

I believe the potential environmental effects of the alternatives, including the modification, were adequately identified and analyzed in the FEIS.

A legal notice of my decision will appear in the Daily Interlake during the week of April 21, 2003.

Upon execution of this decision, I will recommend that the first Goat Squeezer Timber Sale Contract be submitted to the Board of Land Commissioners for approval. This should occur at their regularly scheduled meeting in July 2003.

Robert L. Sandman

Handwritten signature of Robert L. Sandman in cursive.

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**GOAT SQUEEZER TIMBER SALE PROJECT
PROPOSED DECISION**

This portion of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) presents the proposed decision by Robert L. Sandman, Manager, Stillwater State Forest, Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC).

The scope of the proposed decision is limited to actions associated with the Goat Squeezer Timber Sale Project proposal. The proposed decision is site-specific and is neither programmatic nor a general management plan for Swan River State Forest.

An interdisciplinary team (ID Team) has completed the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and prepared the FEIS for the Goat Squeezer Timber Sale Project proposal. Mr. Sandman proposes the following decision after a thorough review of the DEIS, project file, public correspondence, corrections and additions made by DNRC that were reflected in this FEIS, Department policies, and the State Forest Land Management Plan (SFLMP).

**1. PROPOSED ALTERNATIVE SELECTION:
Action Alternative C**

Three alternatives were developed and are presented in the FEIS:

- No-Action Alternative A includes existing activities, but does not include a timber sale.
- Action Alternative B harvests approximately 13.4 million board feet (MMBF) from 2,444 acres; constructs 4 miles of new road consisting of 2.3 miles of permanent road, 1.1 miles of temporary road, and 0.6 mile of permanent road relocation; and reconstructs 3.3 miles of existing road. Action Alternative B will earn approximately \$1,236,330 for the school trust. Both old-growth

stands and non-old-growth stands will be harvested.

- Action Alternative C harvests approximately 10.2 MMBF from 1,866 acres; constructs 1.8 miles of new road consisting of 1.0 mile of permanent road, 0.8 mile of temporary road, and 0.6 mile of permanent road relocation; and reconstructs 3.3 miles of existing road. Action Alternative C will earn approximately \$817,800 for the school trust. Only non-old-growth stands will be harvested.

(Alternatives A through C are presented in the FEIS on pages II-1 through II-10).

To varying degrees, each alternative meets the project objectives and could be chosen.

The proposed decision is to select Action Alternative C with the following modifications:

- Mitigations and specifications identified in the FEIS will be implemented as prescribed.
- The 10.2 MMBF of merchantable timber will be presented to the State Land Board in multiple contracts. Units 3 through 8, 10, 12, 14, 23 through 25, and 30 through 32 with approximately 2.7 MMBF will be in the first contract. The remaining Units and volume will be sold in 1 or more subsequent contracts, yet to be determined.

I have compared the modifications and specifications proposed for Action Alternative C to the analysis presented in the FEIS and have concluded that the modifications and specifications are within the scope of the FEIS.

The rationale for this decision is presented in item 4.

2. **RELATIONSHIP OF THE OBJECTIVES TO THE PROPOSED DECISION**

- a. If sold in today's market, Action Alternative C will yield an estimated return of \$817,800 for the school trust.
- b. The timber sale will contribute an estimated 10.2 MMBF to DNRC's annual timber-harvest requirements over a 3-year period.
- c. Action Alternative C promotes biodiversity by managing for appropriate stand-structure characteristics.
- d. All project roads and hauls routes will meet Best Management Practices (BMPs).
- e. Harvesting and regeneration methods address insect and disease problems.
- f. Temporary easements to access harvest units and conduct project-related activities will be obtained from the United State Forest Service and Plum Creek Timber Company.

3. **RELATIONSHIP OF THE ISSUES AND PUBLIC COMMENT TO THE PROPOSED DECISION**

- a. **VEGETATION** (FEIS, pages III-2 through III-11)

Harvesting will result in a net 20-acre decrease in the lodgepole pine coovertype and a 1,142-acre decrease in the mixed-conifer coovertype. The ponderosa pine coovertype will increase by 108 acres, the western white pine coovertype by 57 acres, and the western larch/Douglas-fir coovertype by 997 acres.

Stand age classes will change with net increases of 233 acres in the 0-to-39-year-old stands. Net reductions of 91 acres will occur in the 40-to-99-year-old stands, 52 acres in the 100-to-149-year old

stands, and 90 acres in the 150+-year-old stands.

All treatments will increase growth rates in retained trees and improve the health of the stand.

Using forest improvement funds (FI) collected from the purchaser of the timber sale, rust-resistant western white pine, western larch, and ponderosa pine trees will be planted. Some harvest units will be allowed to regenerate naturally.

No harvesting will occur on acres that currently meet DNRC's old-growth definition (DNRC has formally adopted the old-growth definitions proposed by Green et al, [Old Growth Forest Types of the Northern Region, R-1 SES 4/92, USDA Forest Service, Northern Region, Missoula, MT]).

Ground disturbance by logging equipment will create seedbeds for noxious weeds. Mitigation measures will reduce the risk of noxious weed establishment.

- b. **HYDROLOGY** (FEIS, pages III-12 through III-15)

Taking all BMPs and mitigation measures into account, the risk of sediment delivery to streams from harvest units is low. Therefore, it is unlikely that Action Alternative C will adversely affect beneficial use and water quality.

Direct and cumulative water-yield increases will occur, but all watersheds impacted will remain below conservative annual water-yield threshold levels.

- c. **FISHERIES** (FEIS pages III-16 through III-21)

Fish populations will not be directly affected since

harvesting activities are located well away from the fish-bearing streams. Some fine sediment is likely to reach stream channels as a result of road construction, reconstruction, and improvement/maintenance work. However, the application of BMPs, seeding, and location of activities will likely reduce the amount to a level that will not directly affect fish health.

By timing the project, utilizing wider SMZs, following BMPs, locating harvest units away from stream channels, and applying erosion-control measures, harvest-related activities will not substantially impact the cumulative amount of fine sediment delivered to stream channels.

d. **WILDLIFE** (FEIS, pages III-22 through III-29)

Displacement and disturbance is expected for wildlife species in the area. In the long term, species that use the more-open stands and more-diverse landscapes will be positively affected. Species that use late-successional forest structure will be negatively affected.

Risks to gray wolves, fishers, bald eagles, Canada lynx, and flammulated owls will be minor. Adequate hiding cover and suitable habitat will remain.

Localized impacts to pileated woodpeckers may occur due to the removal of potential nesting habitat.

A minor level of risk to grizzly bears is expected with 67.2 to 77.7 percent of the area still providing hiding cover. Road density in the

Goat Creek, Lion Creek, and South Fork Lost Soup grizzly bear subunits are in compliance with the 33 percent open-road-density standard.

Harvesting may reduce the ability of big game, especially white-tailed deer, to survive severe winters with the reduction of 875 acres of thermal cover. The percent of thermal cover is below the 50-percent threshold recommended for white-tailed deer. To what extent this will affect big game is not clear.

f. **SOILS** (FEIS, pages III-30 through III-33)

Harvest methods will impact approximately 10.5 percent of the harvest-unit areas, well below the 15 percent standard, causing minimal levels of soil erosion and little risk of sediment delivery. Of the 1,866 acres harvested, erosion-control, compaction, and displacement mitigation measures will lower the risk of cumulative effects to soil productivity.

e. **ECONOMICS** (FEIS, pages III-34 through III-37)

In today's market conditions, the selected alternative will generate approximately \$817,800 in trust revenue. In addition, the sale will produce \$535,800 in FI collections. The revenue generated by this project represents support for 135 students for 1 year and 108 local jobs for 1 year, with wages and salaries totaling \$3,678,600.

g. **RECREATION** (FEIS, pages III-38 through III-39)

As a whole, General Recreational Use License revenue not expected to change as a result of implementing

Action Alternative C. Recreationalists may be inconvenienced or temporarily displaced by project-related activities.

h. **AIR QUALITY** (FEIS, pages III-40 through III-41)

Log hauling and other project-related traffic on dirt roads will generate dust during dry periods. Postharvest burning will produce smoke emissions. None of the impacts to air quality are expected to exceed standards, requirements imposed by the Montana Airshed Group, or negatively impact local population centers.

i. **AESTHETICS** (FEIS, pages III-42 through III-45)

Action Alternative C harvest treatments will alter foreground and middleground views. Seedtree and group-selection treatments will appear similar to the results of a moderately severe fire. The other treatment types will appear similar to the results of a low-intensity fire of mixed severity.

j. **IRRETRIEVABLE AND IRREVERSIBLE COMMITMENTS** (FEIS, page 46)

Harvesting will cause live trees to be irretrievably lost. Harvested trees will no longer contribute to snag recruitment, stand structure and composition, diversity, aesthetics, wildlife habitat, nutrient recycling, and other important ecosystem functions. However, the loss of trees from harvesting will not be irreversible. Natural and artificial regeneration will promote the establishment of new trees that will ultimately become equivalent in size and ecosystem function as those harvested.

Areas converted from timber production to permanent roads will be irretrievably lost until such time as they are reclaimed.

4. **RATIONALE FOR THE PROPOSED DECISION**

- a. The lands involved in this project are held by the State of Montana in trust for the support of specific beneficiary institutions. DNRC is required by law to administer these trust lands to produce the largest measure of reasonable and legitimate return over the long run (*Enabling Act of February 22, 1889; 1972 Montana Constitution, Article X, Section 11; and, 77-1-202 MCA*). The SFLMP provides the management philosophy and framework to evaluate which alternative would maximize real income while sustaining the production of long-term income.
- b. The proposed timber sale project contributes to harvest levels mandated by State Statute (*Montana Codes Annotated 77-5-222*) for a 3-year period.
- c. The Swan Valley Grizzly Bear Conservation Agreement (SVGBCA) outlays scheduling in the nondenning period for designated subunits. Action Alternative C does the best job of fully complying with the SVGBCA, meeting annual harvest obligations, and analyzing cumulative impacts for all of the management harvests that will occur while this subunit is open for nondenning activities.
- d. DNRC is in the final stages of receiving relief from an injunction to harvest old-growth stands that were included in timber sales

developed under DNRC's 1998 Biodiversity Guidelines. Although this may be viewed by some as justification to pursue Action Alternative B, I do not think that new legislation, nor DNRC's attempt at rulemaking, have reduced the legal uncertainty surrounding old growth on State lands in the foreseeable future. I would not expect real resolution to the old-growth issues in time for implementation of this project.

- e. Swan River State Forest is about to complete an Environmental Assessment that addresses a salvage operation of primarily blown-down timber from areas classified as old growth. State statutes concerning salvage operations (77-5-207 MCA) provide clearer direction concerning harvests within old-growth stands than for proposed management harvests. Given that Swan River State Forest is proposing to enter old-growth stands in the vicinity for salvage, it will be prudent to delay management harvests within old growth in this area until a future date.
- f. Since Action alternative C meets target harvest obligations, it is prudent to delay the harvesting within old-growth stands to another entry period with, hopefully, better market conditions.
- g. Alternative C retains more big game thermal cover than Action Alternative B.
- h. Comments received on the DEIS that recommended an alternative were primarily split between Action Alternatives B and C. Although Action Alternative B addresses needed management

actions within more timber stands than Action Alternative C, the political, social, and legal uncertainty surrounding those actions within old-growth stands significantly increases the likelihood that Action Alternative C will be successfully implemented.

Summary

Overall, Action Alternative C best complies with the Agency's legal requirements and the content of the SFLMP; harvests timber in a manner that moves Swan River State Forest toward appropriate conditions while balancing the recovery of value with the limiting of high-risk effects to other valuable resources; and treats a number of timber stands while avoiding the uncertainty surrounding the harvesting of old growth.