



Bitterroot National Forest

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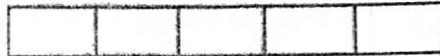
News Release

NOV 05 2019

Ravalli County Commissioners

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Tod McKay



Forest Seeks Comments on Project

Hamilton, Montana (November 5, 2019) – The Bitterroot National Forest is inviting the public to review and make comments on a proposed vegetation management and fuels reduction project in the Sapphire Mountains southeast of Hamilton. The Buckhorn GNA Project located along Gird Point Road #714 at the headwaters of Coffee, Tenderfoot, and Fullerton Gulches encompasses approximately 1,300 acres of overstocked National Forest System lands on the Darby Ranger District.

Objectives of the project include:

- Improve forest health and resilience to natural disturbances (fire, insects, and disease).
- Manage timber to provide forest products, jobs and income to local communities.
- Reduce hazardous fuels and lower crown fire hazards within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI).

Proposed activities would use a combination of commercial timber harvest, non-commercial thinning, and prescribed fire. Additionally, the Montana Department of Natural Resources (DNRC) is proposing similar treatments on approximately 400 acres of State land adjacent to Forest Service lands. The Forest Service road system would be used as a haul route for removing logs harvested on State lands. No additional permanent roads would be constructed for the project and temporary road segments (up to 1 mile) would be decommissioned upon project completion.

The project would be implemented through a partnership between the Forest Service and DNRC using the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA). This is the second GNA project on the Bitterroot National Forest. Earlier this year, the Threemile GNA in the Sapphire Mountains northeast of Stevensville was announced. It will treat approximately 1,740 acres within and adjacent to the Threemile Wildlife Management Area and is a three agency partnership between the USFS, DNRC and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Habitat types in the Buckhorn GNA proposed treatment areas are primarily a mix of warm/dry ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir. Long time fire exclusion and suppression and subsequent development of shade-tolerant species have resulted in high tree densities in the project area. The high number of trees per acre has resulted in competitive stress through competition for growing space, water, nutrients, and sunlight.

The current conditions are more likely to support stand-replacing fires which would threaten the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI). The project also includes pockets of dead and dying trees due to insects and disease including western spruce budworm defoliation and Douglas-fir dwarf mistletoe. The Bitterroot Community Wildfire Protection Plan has identified this area as a 'high priority' for fuels reduction within the WUI.

The project area is entirely within a designated priority landscape and environmental analysis would be conducted using Categorical Exclusion Authorities established in the 2014 Farm Bill. Title VI of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) Section 303 provides for the designation of insect and disease treatment areas to increase forest resilience to insect or disease infestations.

To learn more about the project and to view maps visit <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=56927>.

Public comments specific to this project and/or to individual sites and resources are valuable in helping the Forest Service identify concerns, develop alternatives, and refine the analysis to focus on issues. Comments are due by December 3, 2019.

If you wish to comment in writing on this proposal, please address your comments to: Bitterroot National Forest, Attn: Buckhorn GNA Project, 1801 N. 1st Street, Hamilton, MT 59840. Comments should include: 1) name, address, phone number, and organization represented, if any; 2) title of project on which the comment is being submitted; and 3) specific facts and supporting information for the responsible official to consider.

Electronic comments must be submitted via the project comment page: <https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public//CommentInput?Project=56927>

For additional information contact Eric Winthers, District Ranger, Darby/Sula Ranger District at 406-821-4244.

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