

CC Jeff B



Forest Service Stevensville Ranger District

88 Main Street Stevensville, MT 59870

Ravalli County Commissioners

FEB 11 2019

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File Code: 1950  
Date: January 31, 2019

Dear Interested Party,

The Stevensville Ranger District is proposing vegetation management activities located in the upper Wheelbarrow and Spring Creek watersheds. The area proposed for treatment encompasses approximately 238 acres in the Sapphire mountain range, and is located about 12 miles NE of Stevensville, Montana. The project area is located in Township 9 North, Range 18 West, Sections 3 and 4; and, Township 10 North, Range 18 West, Sections 32, 33, and 34 (see attached map).

The area proposed for treatment consists of landlocked FS parcels within and adjacent to the Threemile Wildlife Management Area (WMA) (see attached map). The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) is currently proposing approximately 1500 acres of vegetative treatments to improve elk habitat in the WMA. The essential road upgrades proposed by FWP to support their project also provide improved access to the adjacent FS parcels, increasing the feasibility of vegetation treatments on FS managed land. The project would be a three agency partnership between the FS, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), and FWP using a Good Neighbor Agreement.

The FS parcels would benefit greatly from treatments to improve forest health and resilience. The area where the project is proposed is comprised of warm and dry ponderosa pine/Douglas-fir type forests. These forest types were historically characterized by frequent low-intensity fire, fire-resistant and shade-intolerant species, and lower stem densities. Long time fire exclusion and suppression and subsequent development of shade-tolerant species have resulted in high stem densities. The current conditions are more likely to support stand-replacing fires which would threaten the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) and stands that have old growth characteristics. High tree densities and competition for sunlight, water, and nutrients have also increased the susceptibility to insect and disease activity including western spruce budworm, dwarf mistletoe, and bark beetles.

Based on current conditions in the project area, our initial proposal is to implement vegetation treatments to accomplish the dual purpose of improving stand resistance and resilience to disturbances as well as meet Forest Plan Objectives to provide wood products. We are considering removing diseased and unnaturally high tree densities of shade-tolerant species such as Douglas-fir while retaining ponderosa pine trees and old growth characteristics. Our intent is to break up the homogeneous and continuous horizontal and vertical structure and create non-uniform stand structures and a diverse array of clumps and openings. This would create sufficient space between overstory tree crowns to reduce the potential spread of crown fire, further increasing the resilience of old growth ponderosa pine.

This project will be done entirely within a designated priority landscape and NEPA 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. The treatment area is entirely within the WUI. The 2006 Bitterroot Community Wildfire Protection Plan, developed through a collaborative process, identified much of the WUI as high priority for treatment. HFRA requires the FS to facilitate collaboration among State and local governments, Indian Tribes, and participation of interested persons to encourage meaningful public participation.



We would appreciate your comments and ideas on our proposal. If you have ideas that you believe should be considered in helping us develop a final proposal that meets the purpose and need described above, please consider responding with written comments or attending an informal project planning meeting. We will host an open house to share information about the project area, existing conditions, our initial project plans, and to further collect comments and ideas. The open house will be held on Wednesday, February 13<sup>th</sup> from 6:00-8:00 p.m. We intend to hold the open house at the Stevensville Ranger Station; however depending on the level of interest, the venue may change. Please RSVP directly to Jo Christensen (contact information below) if you are interested attending.

The information you provide during this scoping period will also help determine whether there are extraordinary circumstances that would preclude categorically excluding the project from documentation in an EA or EIS.

If you wish to comment in writing on this proposal, please address your comments to: Jo Christensen, Stevensville Ranger District, 88 Main Street, Stevensville, MT 59870. 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.

Comments may also be hand delivered weekdays 8:00 am - 4:30 pm at the above stated address. Commenter names, addresses and e-mail addresses will become part of the public record. Comments must be received or postmarked by March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019. For additional information, contact Jo Christensen at the Stevensville Ranger Station (406-777-7425) or at melissajchristensen@usda.gov.

Sincerely,

  
 TAMI SABOL *for DR*  
 District Ranger

Enclosure: Vicinity and Project Proposal Map

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Map 1. Threemile Project Scoping Map: Project Vicinity and Areas Proposed for Treatment

