



### **Bitterroot National Forest**

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Web: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/bitterroot>

# News Release

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## **Forest Seeks Comments on Project**

Hamilton, Montana (March 24, 2021) – The Bitterroot National Forest has released its draft Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Mud Creek Project and is inviting the public to review and make comments on the proposal. The project is located on the West Fork Ranger District and encompasses approximately 48,486 acres, including the West Fork Bitterroot River-Rombo Creek watershed, and portions of the Nez Perce Fork-Nelson Lake, Little West Fork, Lloyd Creek, Lower Blue Joint, and Painted Rocks Lake watersheds, southwest of Darby.

The forest is proposing vegetation treatments, fuels reduction, and transportation system management in the Mud Creek project area. The primary purpose of the project is to restore healthy, resilient forest ecosystems that meet multiple resource objectives for the area, including fire and fuels, wildlife, aquatics, and recreation, among others.

Dense vegetation conditions in the project area have decreased the ability of the forest to recover or adapt to future disturbances and stressors such as insects, disease, fire, and climate change. Fire suppression efforts since the early 20th century have caused a departure from historic fire frequencies, resulting in overstocked forest stands with high stem densities, hazardous fuels build up, and stressed tree conditions.

Objectives of the project include:

- Improve landscape resilience to disturbances (e.g., fire, insects, and disease) by modifying forest conditions and fuels
- Reduce potential fire severity
- Improve wildlife habitat
- Design and implement a suitable transportation system for long term land management

The Bitterroot Community Wildfire Protection Plan has identified the project area as a 'high priority' for fuels reduction with a need to reduce crown fire hazards adjacent to communities and private property. In addition, the Montana Forest Action Plan identifies the area as having high wildfire risk to communities and infrastructure or as having significant forest health concerns.

The project area also has one of the highest road densities found on the forest and field surveys have identified roads in need of repair and maintenance. There is also a need to address and reduce chronic sediment sources which are currently impacting water quality and fish habitat.

Project planning was completed with participation and input from local collaborative organizations and partners such as the Ravalli County Collaborative (RCC), Bitterroot Forest Collaborative (BFC), and Ravalli County Off Road Users Association (RCORUA). The project is proposing a suite of road and trail system changes and vegetation treatments including commercial timber harvests, non-commercial thinning, and prescribed burning to improve forest resilience.

The proposed action also includes project-specific amendments to forest plan direction for elk habitat effectiveness, elk thermal cover, old growth, and coarse woody debris. The project will use a condition-based, phased approach to implementation. Throughout the implementation period, the public, tribes, and other stakeholders will have the opportunity to collaborate with the Forest Service on treatment identification and prioritization.

The draft environmental assessment is available online at [www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=55744](http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=55744). Printed copies are also available upon request from the West Fork Ranger Station at 406-821-3269.

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 April 20, 2021.

Submit comments to Seth Carbonari, District Ranger, by one of the following methods: online: <https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public/CommentInput?Project=55744> (preferred); mail: West Fork Ranger District, 6735 West Fork Road, Darby, Montana, 59829; FAX: (406) 821-1211; or hand deliver comments to the address above between 8am-4:30pm weekdays, excluding holidays.

Comments should include: 1) name, address, phone number, and organization represented, if any; 2) title of the project on which the comments are being submitted; and 3) substantive comments including specific facts and supporting information for the Responsible Official to consider. Please include "Comments on Mud Creek Project" in the subject line for all electronic or hard copy comments.

The Bitterroot National Forest will host an online public webinar to provide additional information about the Mud Creek project. The event will take place on Tuesday, April 6<sup>th</sup> from 6-7 p.m. Visit the project website above for additional details and login information.

For more information contact Seth Carbonari, West Fork District Ranger at (406) 821-1212 or [seth.carbonari@usda.gov](mailto:seth.carbonari@usda.gov). Stay in touch with us through [www.fs.usda.gov/bitterroot](http://www.fs.usda.gov/bitterroot) and [www.facebook.com/DiscoverBitterrootNF](https://www.facebook.com/DiscoverBitterrootNF).

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