



Forest Service News Release

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Mud Creek Project – Analysis and Draft Decision Released

Hamilton, MT, July 6 — The Bitterroot National Forest has released the Draft Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact (DN/FONSI) for the Mud Creek Project on the West Fork Ranger District. The documents are available for public review and objection. The vegetation management, fuels reduction, and transportation system project encompasses approximately 48,486 acres including the West Fork Bitterroot River–Rombo Creek watershed, and portions of Nez Perce Fork–Nelson Lake, Little West Fork, Lloyd Creek, Lower Blue Joint, and Painted Rocks Lake watersheds, southwest of Darby.

The area is accessed by the public mainly from the West Fork Highway and Nez Perce Road. 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. There is also a need to address and reduce chronic sediment sources which are currently impacting water quality and fish habitat.

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 proposes a suite of road and trail system changes, vegetation treatments, and prescribed fire in some locations. The proposed action also involves project-specific amendments to the forest plan direction for elk habitat effectiveness, elk thermal cover, old growth, and course woody debris.

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). 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.

“Thank you to our local and regional communities, stakeholders, and collaboratives who have expressed interest in or submitted feedback during the planning and analysis of this project,” said Matt Anderson Bitterroot National Forest Supervisor. “The public engagement has been critical to the overall project design and we look forward to implementing these restorative treatments to improve the sustainability of our natural resources, while also reducing wildfire threats to lives, property, and communities.”

A copy of the draft decision and environmental assessment, along with other supporting documents are available on the project website at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=55744>.

The draft decision is subject to public objection under Code of Federal Regulations §218. Objections may only be filed by those who previously submitted comments on the project. All objections must be submitted to the Forest Service within 45 days of the legal notice publication in the Ravalli Republic newspaper.

Objections may be mailed to: USDA Forest Service, Northern Region, ATTN: Objection Reviewing Officer, 26 Fort Missoula Road, Missoula, MT 59804. Electronic objections must be submitted to: appeals-northern-regional-office@usda.gov. Faxed objections may be submitted to (406) 329-3411. Please specify “Mud Creek Vegetation Project Objection” in the subject line.

If you are unable to submit electronic, fax, or postal objections and must submit them by hand to the Northern Regional Office, please refer to signage at the front door regarding the delivery of hand delivered items, which will include a phone number to arrange delivery of your objection. The office is not open at-this-time for hand-delivered submissions.

All objections are open to public inspection and will be posted to the Forest Service website.

For additional information concerning the Mud Creek Project, contact David Fox, West Fork Ranger District at (406) 821-3269 or Michelle Norton, Interdisciplinary Team Leader at michelle.norton@usda.gov.

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