



## Forest Service News Release

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### Forest Service Issues Decision on Eastside Project

**Hamilton, MT, December 6** — The Bitterroot National Forest, in partnership with the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), has issued a decision on the Eastside Forest and Habitat Improvement Project on the Stevensville and Darby-Sula Ranger Districts. The project area is located east of Highway 93 in the Sapphire Mountains starting in Stevensville at 8 Mile Creek and extending south to Conner including the Sula Ranger District.

The main objectives of the project are to improve forest health and wildlife habitat conditions using a mix of prescribed burning and non-commercial thinning. No commercial timber harvests (logging) are being proposed and no roads will be built or reconstructed.

“Implementation of portions of this project could begin as soon as this spring,” said Steve Brown, Stevensville District Ranger. “We are really looking forward to working with CSKT on this project. The work that we’ve identified is integral to restoring fire to its proper role on the landscape and being able to maintain that into the future.”

The project area covers the majority of the ‘eastside’ of the Bitterroot National Forest. Increased risk of wildfire and insect and disease impacts within the project area is due to dense vegetation conditions which includes a high concentration of dead and down trees. Based on current conditions shaped by decades of fire exclusion and suppression, there is a need to manage vegetation to improve forest health and wildlife habitat.

Proposed actions would:

- Improve resilience to insect & disease and high-intensity wildfire in timber stands.
- Reduce fuel loading and tree densities, thereby setting stands up for future use of prescribed fire on a rotational basis.
- Improve the natural forage quality and quantity in elk habitat and elk winter range.
- Restore native plant species and allow fire to play a natural role where appropriate.
- Promote and maintain old growth status.

Non-commercial thinning will be manually and mechanically conducted in the project area. Manual treatments would be done with hand tools and chainsaws and/or pre-commercial thinning saws (brush saws). Project treatments could occur over an approximately 20-year period as conditions allow.

The number of acres treated annually will depend on a variety of factors including funding, weather conditions, resource protection measures, and resources available to accomplish treatments.

Prior to implementing, forest staff would determine the final details of prescribed fire plans to coordinate with stakeholders and conduct public outreach.

“We are committed to managing our landscapes proactively and in partnership with the CSKT, local landowners, and affected public interests,” said Abbie Jossie, Darby-Sula District Ranger. “Improving elk habitat on the east side has also been an objective of the Bitterroot National Forest. This project allows us to make significant progress toward that goal.”

Project planning was completed in collaboration with local partners including the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

“CSKT Tribal Forestry strongly supports the Eastside Forest and Habitat Improvement Project,” said Tony Incashola Jr., CSKT Director of Forestry. “The Bitterroot Valley is part of the Salish people's aboriginal territory and an area where our Ancestors were the first stewards of the land. They managed the land to keep first food plants and animals in abundance and their primary tool for managing the land was fire. Reducing fuels and returning fire to the ground will help restore the Eastside to the fire resilient landscape it once was, while also restoring native plants and foods.”

In 2021, the BNF and CSKT signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to partner in the planning of vegetation treatment projects. The MOU ensures that forest management objectives of the CSKT are considered in all BNF project planning efforts.

A copy of the decision, maps, and analysis for the project will be posted and available online at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=59985>. Printed copies of the decision are also available for review at the Stevensville Ranger District at 88 Main Street, Stevensville, MT 59870 and the Darby-Sula Ranger District at 712 Main Street, Darby, MT 59829.

For more information contact Steve Brown, Stevensville District Ranger at (406) 777-5461 or Abbie Jossie, Darby-Sula District Ranger at (406) 821-3913.

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