



Forest Service News Release

Media Contact: Tod McKay
(406) 363-7122

Forest Service Issues Decision on Mud Creek Project

Hamilton, MT, January 13 — Bitterroot National Forest Supervisor Matt Anderson has signed a Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact for the Mud Creek Project on the West Fork Ranger District. The decision authorizes the forest to move forward on the fuels reduction, vegetation management, and transportation system project southwest of Darby.

The project area 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. The area is accessed by the public mainly from the West Fork Highway and Nez Perce Road.

“Our goal is to reduce the threat of negative impacts from wildfire and insects and disease to the forested areas around our neighboring communities,” said Dan Pliley, West Fork District Ranger. “Neighbors in the area have voiced the need to address fire risk and forest health in the West Fork and we have listened and incorporated their input. This project will also allow the opportunity for cross-boundary fuels reduction with state and private partners to enhance forest health on both public and private lands.”

Objectives of the project include:

- ✓ Improve landscape resilience to disturbances (such as insects, diseases, and fire) by modifying forest conditions and fuels
- ✓ Reduce crown fire hazard potential within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) and community protection zone
- ✓ Improve habitat and forage for bighorn sheep, mule deer, and elk
- ✓ Design and implement a suitable transportation system for long term land management

Several road segments in the project area need maintenance and repairs to address resource concerns including chronic sediment sources that reduce water quality and fish habitat.

Fire suppression efforts since the early 20th century have resulted in forest stands characterized by high stem densities, hazardous fuels build up, and stressed tree conditions. The Bitterroot Community Wildfire Protection Plan has identified the project area as a ‘high priority’ for fuels reduction.

In addition, the Montana Forest Action Plan identifies the area as having high wildfire risk to communities and infrastructure. Of particular concern is increased fire risk because 43% of the project area is located within the WUI.

The project proposes a suite of road and trail system changes, vegetation treatments, improved recreation opportunities, and prescribed fire. 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).

Over the next few months, the West Fork Ranger District plans to work through the implementation planning process to identify specific treatment units and activities. The public, Tribes, and other stakeholders will have the opportunity to collaborate with the Forest Service at workshops and provide feedback for the proposed treatments identified. Once the implementation plan is completed, treatments within portions of the project area could begin as early as this summer.

The Environmental Assessment, Decision Notice, Finding of No Significant Impact, and analysis for the project is available online at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=55744>. These documents will also be available for review at the Bitterroot National Forest Supervisor's Office at 1801 N. First Street, Hamilton, MT 59840, and the West Fork Ranger District at 6735 West Fork Road, Darby, MT 59829.

For additional information concerning the Mud Creek Project, please contact Dan Pliley, West Fork District Ranger at (406) 821-3269.

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