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JAN 23 2023

DATE: January 17, 2023

Ravalli County Commissioners

Five empty rectangular boxes for names or addresses.

Dear Neighbor:

I am seeking public comments about the proposed Thunder Mountain Project within the Alta/Thunder Mountain area on the West Fork Ranger District of the Bitterroot National Forest. The project is located adjacent to Alta, MT and extends about 1.5 miles southeast of the intersection of the Hughes Creek Road 9630 and the West Fork Highway, in T2S, R22W, Sec 34 and T3S, R22W Sections 2 & 3. This project proposes to implement several treatments to reduce fuels and stand densities within 4 units covering approximately 466 acres of National Forest lands bordering private property.

Background/Origin

The Thunder Mountain project is located in an area of the Bitterroot National Forest identified as medium priority for fuel reduction work through the Bitterroot Community Wildfire Protection Plan (DNRC et al., 2006). Proposed treatments are located within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) and identified as a Montana Priority area for Focused Action due to fire risk.

This project is designed to respond to goals and objectives of the Community Fire Plan, Montana Forest Action Plan, National Fire Plan, National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy and the Bitterroot Forest Plan. Over the last 15 years the Bitterroot National Forest has worked to plan and complete fuels reduction activities in priority areas identified by the CWPP to reduce fire impacts on our communities. This proposal would help move this area towards desired future conditions described in these plans and complement the work previously completed in adjacent areas.

The proposed actions would occur in Forest Plan Management Areas 1 (Timber Emphasis), 2 (Winter Range Emphasis using timber management practices) and 3a (Maintain Partial Retention visual quality objective and manage timber).

What is the purpose and need for the project?

- 1. Reduce the likelihood of crown fires within the WUI by altering fuels in both the amount available to burn and arrangement.
2. Provide for firefighter and public safety in the event of a wildfire by reducing potential fire behavior.
3. Promote insect and disease resiliency and increase the health and vigor of early seral species (ponderosa pine)

Proposed Vegetation and Hazardous Fuel Management

Proposed activities would include mastication, mechanical thinning and non-commercial thinning, piling (hand and machine), pile burning, low intensity prescribed fire and maintenance burning. These treatments would reduce ladder fuels, reduce fuel loadings and change potential fire behavior in the event of a wildfire in the area. The proposed treatments would also provide defensible space along the forest boundary with private land creating safer conditions for the private landowners who live in and firefighters who respond to these areas. Treatments in these areas would build upon previously completed fuels reduction/prescribed fire activities and allow for increased control while conducting maintenance burning in those areas.



Unit 1 (181 Acres): Is a ponderosa pine plantation that would be mechanically thinned and/or masticated down to approximately 70 trees per acre. Mechanical equipment would be utilized for mastication, tree thinning, piling and yarding. Mastication may be used in portions of the unit where the average tree sizes are <10" DBH and stem densities are lower. Mechanical thinning may occur in portions of the unit, up to 70 acres, where tree sizes are larger 10-14" DBH and densities are too high for mastication, trees would be mechanically thinned, processed in the woods and yarded/forwarded/decked along roadsides to avoid the need for large landings. Products generated from the mechanical thinning would be sold. Stored roads (74239, 74249, 74250, 74251, 74252, 74253) may be used for access and returned to storage following treatment. Hauling will utilize FR 5685 and the Hughes Creek Road (County Road C-9630).

Areas not mechanically treated would be thinned and piled by hand. Following the thinning and pile burning, low intensity prescribed fire would be used to reduce smaller surface fuels <3", create opportunities for natural ponderosa pine regeneration and stimulate grasses/shrubs to improve big game forage. Maintenance burning with low intensity fire would be utilized on an average interval of 10-15 years to maintain desired conditions.

Units 2-4 (285 Acres): Are natural stands comprised of a mix of ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir. Treatments would include non-commercial thinning, hand piling, pile burning and under burning. Maintenance burning with low intensity fire would be utilized on an average interval of 10-15 years to maintain desired conditions.

What are the next steps in the process?

This project is being designed to be consistent with the Bitterroot Forest Plan (1987). An interdisciplinary team is reviewing the proposal and will provide me recommendations to address any biological, physical, or social concerns.

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations (40 CFR 1508.4) provide for categorical exclusions to implement the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). I believe this project meets categories of action that may be excluded from documentation in either an environmental assessment (EA) or an environmental impact statement (EIS). The project is proposed under the categorical exclusions:

36 CFR 220.6(e)(6): Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction and

36 CFR 220.6 (e)(12): Harvest of live trees not to exceed 70 acres, requiring no more than 1/2 mile of temporary road construction.

Resource conditions that are considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or an EIS are the presence of:

- a) *Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species;*
- b) *Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds;*
- c) *Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas;*
- d) *Inventoried roadless areas;*
- e) *Research natural areas;*
- f) *American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites; and*
- g) *Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas.*

How to Comment and Timeframe

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral and electronic comments will be accepted. This scoping period provides those interested in or affected by this proposal an opportunity to make their concerns known prior to a decision being made by the Responsible Official. I am interested in any specific information you believe I should consider about this proposal; particularly any extraordinary effects you think the project may have on people or the environment and reasonable mitigations you think might help limit those effects. I will use your specific comments to:

- 1) *improve the proposed project,*
- 2) *determine whether there are extraordinary circumstances that would preclude me from*
- 3) *categorically excluding the project from documentation in an EA or EIS and,*
- 4) *help decide whether or not to authorize the project.*

I plan to complete the environmental review and make my decision in March 2023. Therefore, I ask you to review the proposed activities and submit any comments and information you may have by February 17, 2023.

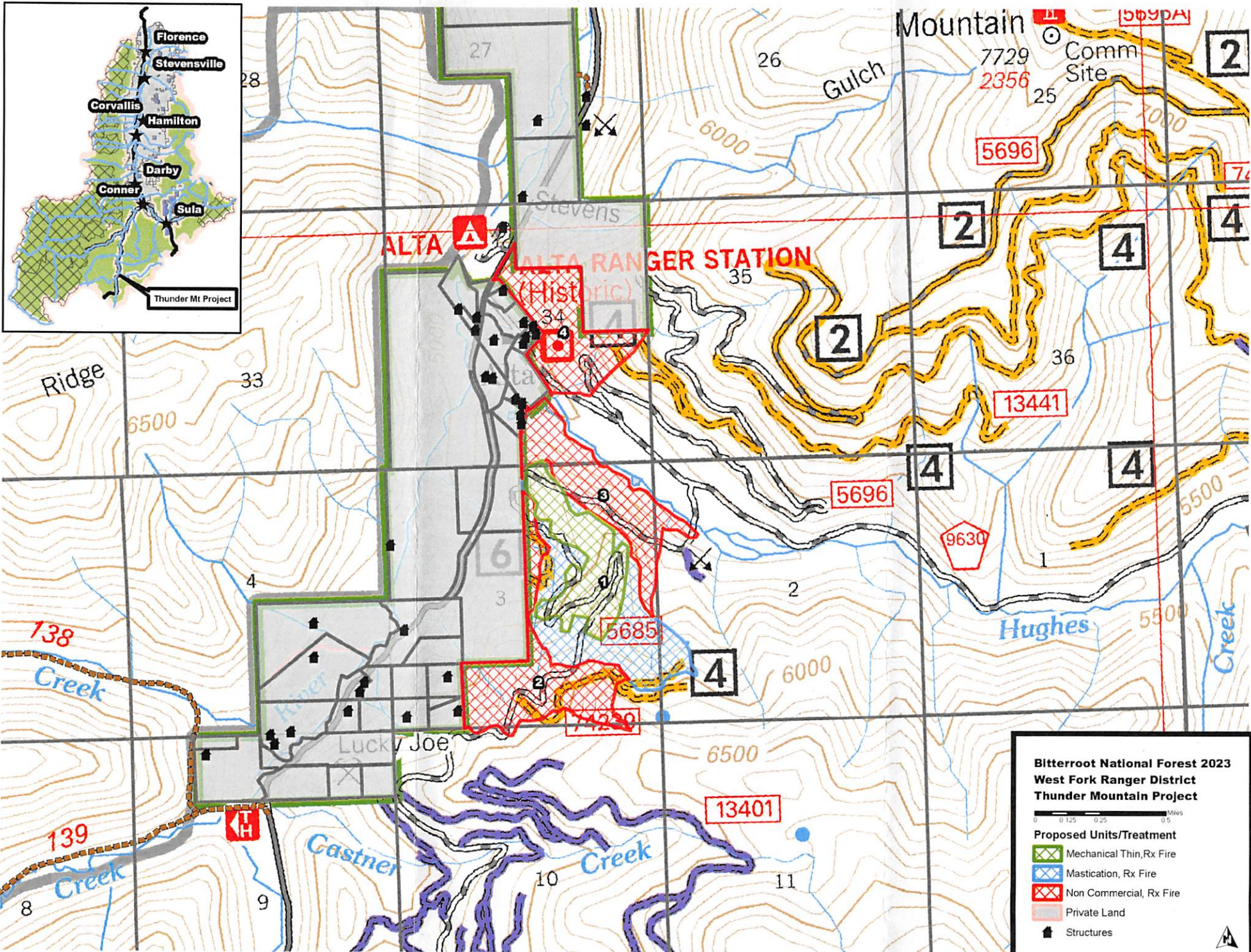
Submit written comments to: Responsible Official: Daniel Pliley, District Ranger, West Fork Ranger District, 6735 West Fork Road, Darby, MT 59829. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00- 4:30, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays (FAX- 406-821-1211). Oral comments must be provided at the Responsible Official's office during normal business hours via telephone 406-821-1212 or in person. To provide electronic comments, please visit the project website at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=63393>. The "Get Connected" menu on the right side of the page provides an option to comment as well as to subscribe to email updates. Comments received, including names, addresses, and e-mail addresses of those who comment, will be posted to the project website and considered part of the public record for this project.

If you need additional information regarding this proposal, please contact me at (406) 821-1212, daniel.pliley@usda.gov or District Fuels Specialist David Fox at (406) 821-1226, david.fox@usda.gov

Sincerely,



DANIEL PLILEY
District Ranger



**Bitterroot National Forest 2023
West Fork Ranger District
Thunder Mountain Project**

0 0.125 0.25 0.5 Miles

Proposed Units/Treatment

- Mechanical Thin, Rx Fire
- Mastication, Rx Fire
- Non Commercial, Rx Fire
- Private Land
- Structures