



Forest Service News Release

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Bitterroot Front Project – Authorized Emergency Actions

Hamilton, MT, July 20 — The Bitterroot National Forest (BNF) announced today that it has received approval for emergency actions from Forest Service Chief Randy Moore to implement the Bitterroot Front Project.

Earlier this year, the Secretary of Agriculture invoked the emergency authority, under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (Section 40807), across 250 high risk firesheds in the western United States. The law authorizes the Forest Service to take emergency actions to protect public health and safety, critical infrastructure, and natural resources on National Forest System lands from destructive wildfires.

The Bitterroot National Forest contains five of the highest risk firesheds in the nation, four of which are in the Bitterroot Front Project area. The Montana Forest Action Plan has identified the area as having high wildfire risk to communities and infrastructure and significant forest health concerns. [Ravalli County has the highest risk to structures from wildfire of any county in Montana.](#)

The project, which was announced last year following a series of public meetings, is a proposed fuels reduction, vegetation management, and forest health improvement project on the Stevensville and Darby Ranger Districts. The project planning area extends the length of the main Bitterroot Valley along the front of the mountains from McClain Creek on the northern end of the forest to Trapper Creek on the southern end.

Use of emergency authorities must be approved on a case-by-case basis by the Chief of the Forest Service. As a result of the Emergency Action Determination, the Bitterroot Front Project will not be subject to the pre-decisional objection review process. Using the right tools in the right places, the emergency authorities would provide the BNF the opportunity to accelerate the implementation of these critical fuels and forest health treatments. The work will be done in full compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and all other applicable laws. The project scope has been narrowed to focus only on emergency fuels treatments, including prescribed fire, non-commercial thinning, and commercial harvesting.

The project aligns with the USDA Forest Service's [Wildfire Crisis Strategy](#) that works with partners to protect communities and improve the resilience of America's Forests. This crisis is being driven by declining forest health in the West, which is due to a combination of overgrown forests following a century of fire suppression and a warming climate with record-breaking drought. The problem is

compounded by expanding development in fire-prone areas. The strategy includes an increase in fuels and forest health treatments by up to four times current treatment levels in the West.

“Every summer we are all crossing our fingers hoping that we don’t get a fire start anywhere along the Front,” said Steve Brown, Stevensville District Ranger. “We know that the current situation is dire, with much of the area in need of fuels reduction work now if we want to have any hope of success at suppressing those fires when they do happen.”

“With each passing year the problem gets worse,” said Abbie Jossie, Darby/Sula District Ranger. “That is why the Secretary has declared an Emergency in the highest risk fireheds, to give us the tools to get out in front of this problem.”

Project planning is moving forward in collaboration with local partners including the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT).

“The Bitterroot Valley is a homeland to the Salish and Qlispe people,” said Tony Incashola Jr., CSKT Director of Forestry. “It holds a deep meaning to our tribes. There is a lot of history in the valley and the Bitterroot range. Protection of that history for current and future cultural use is of high importance to us as a people. The Bitterroot National Forest plan to treat the front area will help ensure that protection. With coordination from our tribal preservation and resource specialists we are aiding their efforts to not only improve forest health and conditions but also reduce the risk of large wildfire potential.”

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.

The Bitterroot Front Project is also supported by the Ravalli County Collaborative (RCC), a diverse group of volunteers whose mission is to promote the wise use and management of public natural resources within Ravalli County.

“The RCC believes that a landscape-level management strategy is warranted along the Bitterroot Front to address the potential for loss of life, catastrophic wildfire and subsequent damage to private property. Wildfire damage potential is very high in these areas because of forest fuel loads, rapid suburban development adjacent to BNF lands, and climate changes.” (*April 12, 2022 - RCC News Release*).

Following a robust scoping comment period in 2022 (*400+ public comments, most in favor*), the next step for the Bitterroot Front Project includes release of the Draft Environmental Assessment (EA), scheduled for this summer.

To learn more about the Bitterroot Front Project and to view maps visit <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=57341>. To see a video about the project area visit <https://vimeo.com/569513796>.

For more information or questions concerning the project, please 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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