



## Forest Service News Release

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<https://www.fs.usda.gov/bitterroot>

### Forest Seeks Comments on Bitterroot Front Project

**Hamilton, MT, August 17** — The Bitterroot National Forest (BNF) has released its draft Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Bitterroot Front Project and is inviting the public to review and make comments on the proposal. The project is located on the Stevensville and Darby-Sula Ranger Districts and is a proposed fuels reduction, vegetation management, and forest health improvement project.

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. The landscape-scale proposal will address the wildfire risk to communities using a wide range of tools including tree thinning, harvest, and prescribed burning.

The project was first announced last year following a series of public meetings and field trips. The project's primary purpose has been refined since the initial scoping notice to focus on restoring a healthy and resilient forest ecosystem through fire and fuels treatments.

The BNF 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 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.

Increased tree mortality from insects and disease is also a serious concern. The project area has dense pockets of dead and dying trees impacted by mountain pine beetle, Douglas-fir bark beetle, and western spruce budworm damage.

The proposed action also includes project-specific amendments to forest plan direction for elk habitat objectives, old growth, coarse woody debris, and snag retention.

Project planning was completed with participation and input from local collaborative organizations and partners such as the Ravalli County Collaborative, and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

The Chief of the Forest Service has approved the Bitterroot Front Project to be implemented as an Emergency Action Determination project. Emergency actions are taken to protect public health and safety, critical infrastructure, and natural resources on National Forest System lands from destructive wildfires.

As a result of the Emergency Action Determination, the project will not be subject to the pre-decisional objection review process. It is critical that the public provide feedback during the designated comment period described below, as they will not be able to raise additional project concerns during an objection period.

Public comments specific to this project are valuable in helping the Forest Service identify concerns, develop alternatives, and refine the analysis to focus on issues. Comments are due by September 16, 2023.

To provide electronic comments (preferred method), visit the project website at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=57341> . Click on Comment/Object on right side of the page.

If you wish to comment in writing, please address comments to Matt Anderson, Forest Supervisor at: Bitterroot National Forest, 1801 N. First Street, Hamilton, MT 59840. Comments may also be hand delivered weekdays 8:00am – 4:30pm.

Comments should include: 1) name, address, phone number, and organization represented, if any; 2) title of the project on which the comments are being submitted; 3) substantive comments including specific facts and supporting information for the responsible official to consider. All comments are open to public inspection and will be posted to the Forest Service website.

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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