



# Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

## DECISION NOTICE:

### Threemile Wildlife Management Area Forest Habitat Restoration Project

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
Region 2  
3201 Spurgin Road, Missoula MT 59804  
406-542-5500  
March 19, 2015

RECEIVED

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Ravalli County Commissioners

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#### DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposed to thin up to 400 acres of forest on the Threemile Wildlife Management Area (WMA), in Ravalli County. If approved by the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission, the work would begin as early as June 2015 and extend into the winter months of 2015-16. The purpose is to improve wildlife habitat; this project would not be proposed if not for a need to conserve and improve wildlife habitat on the WMA.

Components of wildlife habitat to be left untreated (if existing) or recruited (if not existing) are: coverage of aspen and upland willow, big trees (living and snag recruits), clumps of small regeneration, and dense forest cover in the steeper draws. Thinning patterns generally would be derived by first locating leave trees and leave clumps and stands of trees. Thinning patterns would result in an irregular mosaic with relatively short sight distances. Cut trees would be marked, in collaboration between FWP and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) service foresters. To the extent possible, burn piles will be located in openings within treated stands where little ground cover currently exists; openings supporting native rangeland will be avoided. Timber harvest is encouraged in winter, when the ground is frozen and snow-covered. Timber harvest will not occur during the general big game hunting season. Road improvement and construction will occur in summer. The segment of existing road to be abandoned will be left in a condition that allows continued travel on foot or horseback, but will be closed to motorized vehicles. Roads and harvest will comply with Best Management Practices. Control of noxious weeds will be included as part of the treatments.

Following this action, FWP anticipates that important ungulate winter range condition would improve due to increased grass and woody browse understory recruitment. Treatment would also reduce the risk of high-intensity stand-replacement fire events that would remove the remnant large overstory trees, damage thin organic soils, slow grass and woody browse recruitment, and pose a significant risk to neighboring landowners.

Costs to FWP for these forest habitat restoration treatments are expected to be covered by the sale of merchantable timber byproduct. Any revenue in excess of project costs will be deposited into the legislatively established FWP Forest Management Account to implement further forest management projects pursuant to the provisions of 87-1-201(9)(a)(iv), MCA.

## PUBLIC REVIEW PROCESS

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environments, *evaluate those impacts* through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and make a decision based on this information. FWP released a draft environmental assessment (EA) for public review of this proposal (Threemile WMA Forest Habitat Restoration Project) on February 9, 2015 and accepted public comment for 30 days until March 10, 2015.

Legal notice of the Threemile WMA Forest Habitat Restoration Project Draft EA was published in the *Bitterroot Star* (Stevensville, Feb 11), *Independent Record* (Helena, Feb 9), *Missoulian* (Feb 9) and *Ravalli Republic* (Hamilton, Feb 8) newspapers. The *Ravalli Republic* published a feature article on the proposal on February 25, 2015, which is available at [http://ravallirepublic.com/news/local/article\\_959d2c58-bd54-11e4-b48b-139d385ba40a.html](http://ravallirepublic.com/news/local/article_959d2c58-bd54-11e4-b48b-139d385ba40a.html)

FWP mailed 20 copies of the EA (and approximately 35 email notifications of the EA's availability) to adjacent landowners and interested individuals, groups and agencies. The EA was available for public review on FWP's web site (<http://fwp.mt.gov/>, "Public Notices") from February 9 through March 10, 2015.

## SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

FWP was contacted by 3 members of the public during the comment period; 2 (including one adjacent ranch) supported the project, 1 requested a copy of the Draft EA, and none objected to the project. Comments received are in the table below.

Table. Comments received by FWP on the Draft EA for the proposed forest habitat restoration project on Threemile WMA. (Comments received via: E = email, M = mail.)

Com- men- ter #	Via	Para- graph	Comment
1	E		I support the Threemile WMA Forest Habitat Restoration project. It looks like a great plan, that possibly should be continued across most of this WMA.
2	M	1	On behalf of the Brown Valley Family Ranch up Three Mile and adjoining the WMA, we are very encouraged to see FWP and your partners taking action with your proposal to conduct forested habitat improvement treatments on 400 acres with the Threemile Wildlife Management Area.
		2	As you know, our family has advocated just such action for a very long time as we have been deeply concerned about the wildfire risk. That is why we have done thinning projects on our adjacent forest lands. We also recognize the significant long term benefits to the wildlife and the public by this program.
		3	We hope that you will duplicate this "trial" run as soon as possible to more acreage. Now that timber prices have somewhat recovered, we hope you will take advantage of the timing and continue this good work.
		4	On behalf of the Brown family, thank you for this timely effort.
3	E		Can you send me the EIS for the proposed thinning at Three Mile WMA. Thanks in advance. [FWP emailed EA to him next day.]

## DECISION

Based upon the EA and the applicable laws, regulations, and policies, we have determined that the proposed action will not have negative effects on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, we conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis, and the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is unnecessary.

This project is the first product of many years' investments by a number of *cooperating* professional foresters and wildlife biologists toward understanding forest processes and wildlife habitat values on the Threemile WMA. The project benefited from the involvement and guidance of professional service foresters from the DNRC during its development, and will continue that partnership through project administration and completion to ensure that *prescriptions are followed as intended*. FWP found general support in its informal scoping conversations with members of the public over the past several months, as well as in the years preceding the development and release of the draft EA. Formal comments on the EA, though few, were supportive, without opposition. The proposal was well publicized.

In consideration of these facts, FWP approves the Threemile WMA Forest Habitat Restoration Project as described in the EA. With this Decision Notice, we adopt the Draft EA as final.



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Randy Arnold  
Region 2 Supervisor  
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

3/19/15

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Date