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Ravalli County Commissioners

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Dear Interested Party:

The Darby/Sula Ranger District of the Bitterroot National Forest is proposing vegetation management, fuels reduction, and watershed improvements on National Forest System lands in the upper East Fork of the Bitterroot River. The proposed action includes commercial timber harvest, non-commercial thinning, slash piling, and prescribed burning on approximately 3,200 acres. The proposed treatments would reduce the potential of crown fire behavior in low and mixed severity fire regimes within the Wildland Urban Interface, reduce current and future fuel loadings, and improve forest resilience to natural disturbances. The project also proposes road improvements, and decommissioning and storage of routes to improve watershed condition by reducing sediment sources.

The Meadow Vapor Project area is approximately 8,400 acres surrounding the communities of Springer Memorial and Bonanza, east of Sula, Montana and is administered by the Darby/Sula Ranger District, Bitterroot National Forest in Ravalli County (legal location: T.2N. R.17W. sections 7-10, 15-21, 28-30; T.2N. R.18W. sections 13 & 23-27 PMM). Drainages within the Meadow Vapor project area include Meadow Creek, Vapor Creek, Needle Creek, Lick Creek, Reynolds Creek and Teepee Creek all of which drain into the East Fork of the Bitterroot River.

The purpose of this letter is to share information regarding the proposed Meadow Vapor Project and to gather your insights and comments about the project area, our proposed activities, and their potential effects. This letter provides a brief description of the project origin, the purpose and need for treatment in the area, and proposed activities. The enclosed map displays the proposed treatment unit locations, and proposed road storage and decommissioning. Route specific management information is provided in enclosed table.

The Meadow Vapor project area is one of several areas on the Bitterroot National Forest identified as high priority for fuel reduction work through the Bitterroot Community Wildfire Protection Plan (DNRC et al., 2006) <http://bitterrootrcd.org/commWildfireProtect.htm> Priority setting was based primarily on forest and fuel conditions, population density, buildings and other improvements. The Meadow Vapor project is designed to respond to goals and objectives of the Community Fire Plan, National Fire Plan, and the Bitterroot Forest Plan. Over the last 10 years the Bitterroot National Forest has completed fuels reduction activities in a large portion of the high priority areas. This proposal would help move this area towards desired future conditions described in these plans.

On July 28, 2009 the residents of the East Fork submitted a written petition with 82 signatures to the Sula Ranger District asking for the removal of dead trees, near their homes, to mitigate the potential fire hazard and the devastating effects a high intensity fire would have on homeowners. Private landowners along the National Forest boundary have managed the tree density and structure on their lands to reduce their susceptibility to uncharacteristic, high severity wildland fire and insects. Vegetation management on National Forest lands in the East Fork watershed would complement the treatments on private land by extending the treatment area across a larger landscape.



The project is expected to meet most of the Forest-wide standards and guidelines, and the Management Area direction as described in the Land and Resource Management Plan. However, there may be a need for site-specific Forest Plan amendments in regards to Elk Habitat Effectiveness standards, thermal cover in elk winter range, and old growth habitat depending on alternative development following scoping and project *analysis*.

What is the purpose and need for the project?

The Interdisciplinary (ID) Team considered the difference between existing and desired conditions in the Meadow Vapor project area and determined there is a need to:

- Reduce the potential for crown fire behavior in low/mixed severity fire regimes within the Wildland Urban Interface by altering fuels in both the amount available to burn and arrangement.
- Improve forest resilience to natural disturbances such as fire, insects, and disease.
- Address immediate and long term vegetation concerns in mature and old growth ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir.
- Improve watershed conditions through road management activities (Best Management Practice - BMP upgrades, maintenance, storage, and decommissioning).
- Provide forest products.

The East Fork drainage is comprised of stands of mixed conifer which include ponderosa pine, lodgepole pine and Douglas-fir. In some locations, there are dense pockets of dead and dying lodgepole, Douglas-fir and ponderosa pine due to insect mortality as well as severe western spruce budworm damage in *Douglas-fir*. These stands are vulnerable to increasing insect infestations and disease rates because of high stocking densities, lack of age class diversity and species composition.

In the mature and old growth ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir there is little diversity in the composition and structure of these stands. Preliminary treatment proposals include harvesting and/or burning in some old growth stands. These treatments would be designed to retain old growth characteristics while increasing the resiliency of the stands to insects and diseases.

Dense tree crowns, ladder fuels, snags, and down wood all contribute to high potential for severe wildland fire. Should a fire start with these vegetative conditions in combination with severe weather (especially along the southern portion of the project area) there is a high probability that the area would burn as an uncharacteristic severe wildland fire. Currently, under severe weather conditions and fuel moistures the potential flame lengths coupled with the existing stand characteristics and topography would result in 31% of the project area burning as surface fire, and 69% of the project area burning as passive or active crown fire. Historically, based on the fire regimes present within the project area, only 10% of the acres would have burned as a stand replacing crown fire.

These predictions are based on the existing stand conditions. There are areas with lodgepole beetle mortality located immediately adjacent to private land and homes. These areas would have a higher risk of a high intensity fire occurring in the future when the standing dead trees from the beetle mortality fall down and accumulate on the forest floor. These conditions could compromise public and firefighter safety, reduce the probability of success during initial attack, and limit the options for fire suppression. This type of fire behavior would not be conducive to direct attack by firefighters with hand tools during fire suppression activities.

Currently, all proposed actions occur in Forest Plan Management Areas (MA) 1 (timber management, forage, and roaded dispersed recreation emphasis), MA2 (Winter Range Emphasis using timber management practices and roaded dispersed recreation), and MA3a (maintain partial retention visual quality objective and manage timber while providing roaded dispersed recreation, old growth and big game cover). The north eastern project boundary adjoins the Needle Creek roadless area but does not propose any treatments in the roadless area.

What are the components of the project?

Vegetation Management

Several types of vegetation treatments are proposed on approximately 3,200 acres (roughly 37% of the project area). The treatments include commercial timber harvest fuel reduction treatments, (whole tree yarding, slashing, handpiling and prescribed fire), non-commercial thinning, and plantation thinning. The proposed treatments are designed to create stands that are more resilient to fire, insects, and disease. The treatments would result in stands that have a variety of tree sizes and species, and increased crown spacing. The treatments will also reduce the potential severity, size, and adverse impacts of wildfire within the Wildland Urban Interface by increasing the likelihood that future fires would burn on the forest floor at lower severity as opposed to fire burning in the tree crowns at high severity.

It should be noted that not all 3,200 acres displayed on the enclosed map will be commercially thinned. Areas will be dropped or treated by other methods based on resource protection, policies, regulations, and comments received on the project.

Commercial Timber Harvest and Logging Systems

Commercial timber harvest would reduce hazardous fuels and create more diverse forest structures and resilient, sustainable, productive forests. Timber removal from the harvest units would be accomplished by using both skyline and ground-based yarding systems. With skyline yarding systems, cable is stretched between two points and logs are pulled uphill with one end suspended to a landing. In ground-based systems, logs are yarded to the landing using a rubber-tired skidder or forwarder. Logs are loaded onto trucks at the landing for transport to a mill.

- **Improvement Harvest**

Improvement harvest thins the smaller trees from the understory and then trees in the overstory until the desired density (as measured by basal area) is reached. The objective of this treatment is to feature the largest diameter trees and promote fire-resilient stands by reducing the number of stems and removing individual dead, dying and diseased trees. Opening the forest canopy increases space between tree crowns and the distance between the forest floor and the bottom of the canopy (canopy base height). This treatment reduces the density of the forest canopy (canopy bulk density) and the ability of the forest to support a crown fire.

- **Irregular selection harvest**

Irregular selection harvest would create a forest with variable density and improve structural diversity. Small openings would be created for natural regeneration. The forest between the openings would be thinned to various densities to provide varying levels of site protection and support regeneration of ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, or lodgepole pine. This treatment will initiate the development of uneven-aged forest, improve forest structure, and retain trees for future snags and coarse woody debris. Irregular selection harvest is intended to develop at least three age classes within each treatment unit.

To develop staggered age classes, additional harvest and thinning entries would be needed in the next 15-20 years.

- Retention Areas within Harvest Units

Harvest units were delineated based on stand boundaries, logging systems, and topographic features such as roads, ridges, and drainages. The acreage in each unit is the total area within the unit boundary. However, because units include areas that cannot be harvested (steep slope inclusions, presence of surface water, sensitive plant or animal habitats, riparian areas, or other unique features), timber harvest would not occur on every acre of the unit; unharvested areas would remain in most units.

- Reforestation

Natural regeneration would generally occur in the created openings because ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir or lodgepole pine left in the units would provide adequate seed. We will survey irregular selection harvest units after harvest to verify that openings are sufficiently stocked. If stocking is not sufficient, the openings would be planted with the appropriate tree species.

Non-commercial Thinning

We anticipate natural regeneration will occur within the proposed harvest units in the first 10-15 years following harvest. With natural regeneration, there is the potential for high stocking levels that would induce competitive stress. Non-commercial thinning would be necessary to maintain adequate growing space for regenerated species.

Within the project area, there are 400 acres of plantations that need non-commercial thinning. Non-commercial thinning would retain trees 10 inches diameter-at-breast height and greater and; no timber would be removed from the plantations. Non-commercial thinning would increase stand resilience to insect, disease, and/or fire disturbances in the long-term and favor shade intolerant trees. This treatment would set back changes in species composition that have occurred at the landscape level.

Fuels Treatments

Following the commercial harvest, slashing or thinning of small diameter trees may be completed to reduce ladder fuels and tree densities depending on site conditions. Fuels generated from the slashing/thinning activity would either be lopped and scattered or piled and burned in areas where the post thinning fuel loads exceed desired conditions.

Following the non-commercial thinning and pile burning, an underburn would be conducted using hand and/or aerial ignitions to re-introduce fire as a natural process on the landscape. The underburn would take place in multiple phases that might take up to 10 years to complete. After the initial entry, maintenance underburning may be used at varying time intervals, to maintain fuel loads and reduce excess natural regeneration. The desired result of the underburn would be a low to moderate intensity fire that leaves a mosaic of burned and unburned patches within the project area. All prescribed fire treatments would comply with requirements of the Clean Air Act and the Montana/North Idaho Smoke management guidelines. Underburning would reduce fuel accumulations, break-up the continuity of natural fuels, reduce small shade intolerant tree species and stimulate grass and shrub growth throughout the project area. This would help reduce fire intensities, increase fire management options, lessen the risk to firefighters, restore fire to the ecosystem, and increase the quality and quantity of big game forage.

The enclosed map displays the location and summary of proposed vegetation treatment units in the Meadow Vapor project.

Road Management

No new, permanent road construction is planned for the Meadow Vapor project. Segments of existing roads would be reconditioned to accommodate harvest activities by cutting or clearing brush and small trees that have encroached into the road prism and restoring the native surface of the roads. Road drainage would be improved by restoring the appropriate road template and improving cross drainage. There will be temporary roads built to provide adequate access to treatment areas. These temporary roads will not remain open for more than one season to minimize potential for erosion and sediment. Temporary roads will be recontoured back to natural grade and revegetated with *native species* after harvest activities are complete.

Transportation analysis has been completed for the project area. This analysis reviewed forest system roads as well as roads not currently on the forest system labeled as "undetermined". The ID team review provided recommendations for the future management of all roads including "undetermined" status roads. Several of the "undetermined" routes were not originally constructed as roads but were used as skid trails and terraces in plantations and are not suitable for motorized travel and in some cases are difficult to locate on the ground.

Road Storage

Approximately 6 miles of "undetermined" roads needed for this project and future management are recommended to be incorporated into the forest system. These roads would be opened and improved for access in this project and then would be hydrologically stabilized and stored for future use. Hydrologic stabilization would include removal of water crossing structures, decompaction of the road prism where necessary and closure of the entrance by barricading, blocking, or recontouring. Approximately 5 miles of existing, closed forest system routes would be stored after use.

Road Decommissioning

"Undetermined" roads and several closed forest system roads have been determined as not needed for future management by the ID team and are recommended for decommissioning. In most cases, these roads have been previously treated or have naturally recovered and are not accessible by motorized vehicles. This project proposes to decommission approximately 30 miles of roads but it should be noted that a majority of these roads are currently closed and are often difficult to locate on the landscape because they have naturally recovered, or they originally consisted of skid trail or terrace bench in a plantation. Approximately 8 miles out of the 30 miles proposed for decommissioning will require work on the ground.

Information on roads proposed for maintenance, BMP upgrades, storage or decommissioning is provided in enclosed table. The proposed road storage and decommission roads are also shown on the enclosed map.

What are the next steps in the process?

Your comments on this proposal will be used to refine our proposal and develop alternatives to the proposed actions in relation to the project's purpose and need. Alternatives will be analyzed in the environmental analysis process. At this time, we anticipate that this analysis will be documented in an Environmental Assessment (EA).

How to Comment and Timeframe

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral and electronic comments will be accepted through December 18, 2015.

How to submit comments:

Only individuals or entities (as defined by 36 CFR 218.2) who submit timely and specific written comments (as defined by 36 CFR 218.2) about this proposed project or activity during this or another public comment period established by the responsible official will be eligible to file an objection. Other *eligibility requirements* are defined by 36 CFR 218.25 (a)(3) and include name, postal address, title of the project, and signature or other verification of identity upon request and the identity of the individual or entity who authored the comments. Individual members of an entity must submit their own individual comments in order to have eligibility to object as an individual. A timely submission will be determined as outlined in 36 CFR 218.25 (a)(4). It is the responsibility of the sender to ensure timely receipt of any comments submitted.

Comments should be within the scope of the proposed action, have a direct relationship to the proposed action, and must include supporting reasons for the Responsible Official to consider (36 CFR 218.2).

Submit comments to the Responsible Official: Eric Winthers, District Ranger, Darby/Sula Ranger District, P.O. Box 388, Darby, MT 59829. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00- 4:30, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays (FAX- 406-821-4264). Electronic comments must be submitted to comments-northern-bitterroot-darby@fs.fed.us. The subject line must contain the name of the project (Meadow Vapor) for which you are submitting comments. For electronically mailed comments, the sender should normally receive an automated electronic acknowledgement from the agency as confirmation of receipt. If the sender does not receive an automated acknowledgement of the receipt of comments, it is the sender's responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other means. All names, addresses, and e-mail addresses of those submitting comments become part of the public record.

If you would like to receive all further correspondence electronically, please provide your e-mail address in your scoping comments to us.

If you need additional information regarding this proposal, please contact me at (406) 821-3913 or ewinthers@fs.fed.us

Sincerely,



ERIC WINTHERS
District Ranger

cc: Julie King, Amy Fox, Shirley Ehmann, Cole Mayn

Meadow Vapor Scoping - Proposed Road Treatments

Road Number	Total Road Miles	Treatment Miles	Type of Road	Proposed Treatment	Existing Condition/Recommended Treatment
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Decommission					
5770b	0.5	0.5	UND	Decommission	This road leaves 5770 in Section 1, follows on the contour for approximately ¼ mile and ends before the stream crossing. No vehicle use was observed. The road surface is compacted with some grass cover. Recontour road to decommission.
13332	1.6	0	UND	Decommission	Road naturally recovering, no existing vehicle access. No additional work needed to decommission road.
13362	0.5	0.5	NFSR	Decommission	Road mostly open with compacted soils. Recontouring needed to decommission.
73267	0.2	0	UND	Decommission	Road naturally recovering, no existing vehicle access. No additional work needed to decommission road.
73272	3.8	0	UND	Decommission	Road previously treated with Meadow Mink Springer project. No additional work necessary to decommission.
73319	0.1	0	UND	Decommission	Road previously treated, no work necessary to decommission.
73552	0.2	0	UND	Decommission	Road naturally recovering, no existing vehicle access. No additional work needed to decommission road.
73553	0.5	0.1	UND	Decommission	Road naturally recovering, no existing vehicle access. Recontour entrance to decommission.
73554	0.2	0.1	UND	Decommission	Road naturally recovering, no existing vehicle access. Recontour entrance to decommission.
73556	0.5	0.1	UND	Decommission	Road naturally recovering, no existing vehicle access. Recontour entrance to decommission.
73557	0.9	0.1	UND	Decommission	No existing vehicle access. Decommission portion of road from 73555 to junction with 5771. Recontour entrance at 5771 junction to
73558	0.9	0.1	UND	Decommission	Road naturally recovering, no existing vehicle access. Recontour entrance to decommission.
73559	0.3	0.1	UND	Decommission	Road naturally recovering, no existing vehicle access. Recontour entrance to decommission.
73560	0.6	0.1	UND	Decommission	Road naturally recovering, no existing vehicle access. Recontour entrance to decommission.
73561	1.2	0	UND	Decommission	Road naturally recovering, no existing vehicle access. No additional work needed to decommission road.
73568	0.5	0.1	UND	Decommission	Road naturally recovering, no existing vehicle access. Recontour entrance to decommission.
73569	0.5	0.1	NFSR	Decommission	Road naturally recovering, no existing vehicle access. Recontour entrance to decommission.
73584	0.5	0.4	UND	Decommission	No existing vehicle access. Recontour the first 0.4 miles (second draw) to decommission.
73585	0.4	0.1	UND	Decommission	Road naturally recovering, no existing vehicle access. Recontour entrance to decommission.
73587	0.9	0.9	UND	Decommission	No existing vehicle access. Recontour to decommission.
73589	0.7	0.7	NFSR	Decommission	Motorized vehicles can access the road and minor use was observed. The road surface is compacted. Recontour to decommission.
73591	2.6	0	UND	Decommission	Terrace – no road on ground. No work needed.
73593	0.4	0	UND	Decommission	Terrace – no road on ground. No work needed.

Meadow Vapor Scoping - Proposed Road Treatments

Road Number	Total Road Miles	Treatment Miles	Type of Road	Proposed Treatment	Existing Condition/Recommended Treatment
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Convert to Trail					
5765	0.2	0.2	UND	Decommission and convert to system trail	Trailhead to McCart Lookout. No work necessary to convert to system trail.
Total	0.2	0.2			

Rehabilitation of User-Created Trails					
User made trails	NOT MAPPE D	<2	User-made	Obliteration	Non-system, user made trails in the vicinity of Reynolds Creek and Road 432, that are scattered across the low gradient area, one leads to the stream. Should block, decompact and revegetate, leave access for dispersed camping where no resource damage would occur.
Total		<2 miles			