USDA United States Department of Agriculture | Forest Service | Bitterroot National Forest | 1801 North First Street Hamilton, MT 59840

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Ravalli County Commissioners

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Dear Interested Party,

The Bitterroot National Forest is requesting your input on the non-commercial **Bitterroot Stand Improvement Thinning Project**. The project is a total of 5,200 acres located in 195 small units scattered across the Bitterroot National Forest. These units range in size from 1 acre to 153 acres. The project is designed to improve the health and vigor of young forested stands. Please see project area maps provided at https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=51131.

The units proposed for small tree, non-commercial thinning are young even-aged or two-storied forests that were nearly all harvested between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s. These areas were planted and are now densely stocked with sapling to pole sized trees. Due to high tree density and crowded conditions, these forests are experiencing high levels of competition and are increasingly more susceptible to mountain pine beetle. The proposed treatment is designed to reduce stand density, enhance growth and vigor; reduce competition for sunlight, water, and nutrients; and modify stand conditions to lessen the risk of potential mountain pine beetle caused mortality and stand replacing fire in the future. Due to variation in tree spacing, it is likely that some areas within the proposed thinning areas will not require treatment.

The treatment would thin small diameter trees to a stocking of approximately 100 - 200 trees per acre, favoring the most vigorous, dominant and best-formed trees. The majority of the trees cut will be less than 8" in diameter at breast height (DBH), however incidental trees or locations deemed to be non-merchantable or unfeasible for a small sale may have cut trees up to 12" DBH. Thinning would be accomplished by hand, using chainsaws. No heavy equipment, road building, or product removal is proposed. All slash would be treated onsite by lopping and scattering tops and limbs to speed decomposition. Hand piling slash and burning piles would be completed in areas where fuel loading is determined to be an unacceptable risk. All treatments are designed to favor ponderosa pine and western larch while a mix of other native species would be retained for diversity. In the long term, the treatment would render these forests more resilient to natural fire occurrence and bark beetle outbreaks. Thinning would most likely occur over the next five to ten years.

We are interested in any specific information you believe should be considered; particularly any effects from the proposed project and any reasonable mitigations you think might help limit those effects. This project is being considered as categorically excluded (CE) from documentation in an environmental assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The category proposed to be used is 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. The information you provide during this scoping period

will help to further refine the project and determine whether there are extraordinary circumstances that would preclude categorically excluding the project from documentation in an EA or EIS.

How to Comment

Written, hand delivered, and electronic comments will be accepted until March 31st, 2017. If you wish to comment on this project, please address your comments to: Amy Campbell, Project Leader, Stevensville Ranger District, 88 Main Street, Stevensville, Montana 59870. Electronic comments may be submitted to comments-northern-bitterroot@fs.fed.us. Comments should include: 1) name, address, phone number, and organization represented, if any; 2) title of project on which the comment is being submitted; and 3) specific facts and supporting information for the responsible official to consider. Comments may also be hand delivered weekdays 8:00 am - 4:30 pm at the above stated address. Commenter names, addresses and e-mail addresses will become part of the public record. For additional information, contact Amy Campbell, Project Leader at the Stevensville Ranger Station, (406) 777-5461.

Sincerely,

Julie K. King

JULIE K. KING
Forest Supervisor