



APR 05 2017

File Code: 1950  
Date: March 27, 2017

Ravalli County Commissioners

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Dear Interested Party:

I am seeking public comments about the proposed Nee-Me-Poo/Waugh Hazardous Fuels Reduction project within the Waugh Gulch area on the Sula Ranger District of the Bitterroot National Forest. The project is located about three miles south of the Sula Ranger Station, in portions of T1S, R19W Sections 4, 5, 9, 10, 15 & 16. This project would reduce fuels across approximately 328 acres through the use of pre-commercial thinning, hand piling and prescribed fire within 3 separate treatment units identified on the attached map. These treatments would reduce ladder fuels, reduce fuel loadings and change potential fire behavior in the event of a wildfire in the area. The proposed treatments would also provide defensible space along the forest boundary with private land creating safer conditions for the private landowners who live in and firefighters who respond to these areas.

**Background/Origin**

The Nee-Me-Poo/Waugh Hazardous Fuels Reduction 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://bitterrootred.org/commWildfireProtect.htm> Priority setting was based primarily on forest and fuel conditions, population density, buildings and other improvements. This project is designed to respond to goals and objectives of the Community Fire Plan, National Fire Plan, National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy 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 the area towards desired future conditions described in these plans. Currently, all proposed actions occur in Forest Plan Management Areas 2 (Winter Range Emphasis using timber management practices and roaded dispersed recreation), and 3a (maintain partial retention visual quality objective and manage timber while providing roaded dispersed recreation, old growth and big game cover).

**What is the purpose and need for the project?**

1. Reduce the likelihood of crown fires within the WUI by altering fuels in both the amount available to burn and arrangement.
2. Provide for firefighter and public safety in the event of a wildfire.
3. Improve winter range for elk & mule deer.

**Proposed Vegetation and Hazardous Fuel Management**

The Nee-Me-Poo/Waugh project is proposing fuel reduction activities using a combination of understory thinning to remove ladder fuels, favoring ponderosa pine, hand piling of thinning slash and existing down fuels, and the burning of hand-piles. Following the pre-commercial thinning and pile burning, an underburn would be conducted using hand ignitions to reintroduce fire as a natural process on the landscape. The underburn may take place in multiple phases that might take up to 10 years to complete. Underburning would reduce fuel accumulations and break-up the continuity of natural fuels throughout the project area, stimulate browse and shrub re-growth, and reduce shade intolerant species.

The combination of proposed treatments will reduce the density, quantity and arrangement of surface and ladder fuels. The proposed action is designed to reduce the potential severity, size, and adverse impacts of wildfire within low severity fire regimes and 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. This would make conditions safer for firefighters, increase the probability of success during initial attack and better protect private property and national forest resources in the area.

**What are the next steps in the process?**

*Chris when you scan email to each BCC. TX-Glen*



**ENVIRONMENT**

This project is being designed to be consistent with the Bitterroot Forest Plan (1987). An interdisciplinary team is reviewing the proposal and will provide me recommendations to address any biological, physical, or social concerns.

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations (40 CFR 1508.4) provide for categorical exclusions to implement the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). I believe this project meets a category of action that may be excluded from documentation in either an environmental assessment (EA) or an environmental impact statement (EIS). The project is proposed under the categorical exclusion 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.

Resource conditions that are considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or an EIS are the presence of: a) Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species; b) Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds; c) Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas; d) Inventoried roadless areas; e) Research natural areas; f) American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites; and g) Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas.

#### **How to Comment and Timeframe**

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral and electronic comments will be accepted. This comment period provides those interested in or affected by this proposal an opportunity to make their concerns known prior to a decision being made by the Responsible Official. I am interested in any specific information you believe I should consider about this proposal; particularly any extraordinary effects you think the project may have on people or the environment and reasonable mitigations you think might help limit those effects. I will use your specific comments to: 1) improve the proposed project, 2) determine whether there are extraordinary circumstances that would preclude me from categorically excluding the project from documentation in an EA or EIS and, 3) help decide whether or not to authorize the project.

I plan to complete the environmental review and make my decision by June 2017. Therefore, I ask you to review the proposed activities and submit any comments and information you may have by May 1, 2017.

**Submit written comments to:** Responsible Official: Eric Winters, 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). Oral comments must be provided at the Responsible Official's office during normal business hours via telephone 406-821-4244 or in person; or at an official agency function (i.e. public meeting) that is designed to elicit public comments. Electronic comments must be submitted to [comments-northern-bitterroot-darby@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-northern-bitterroot-darby@fs.fed.us). The subject line must contain the name of the project 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.

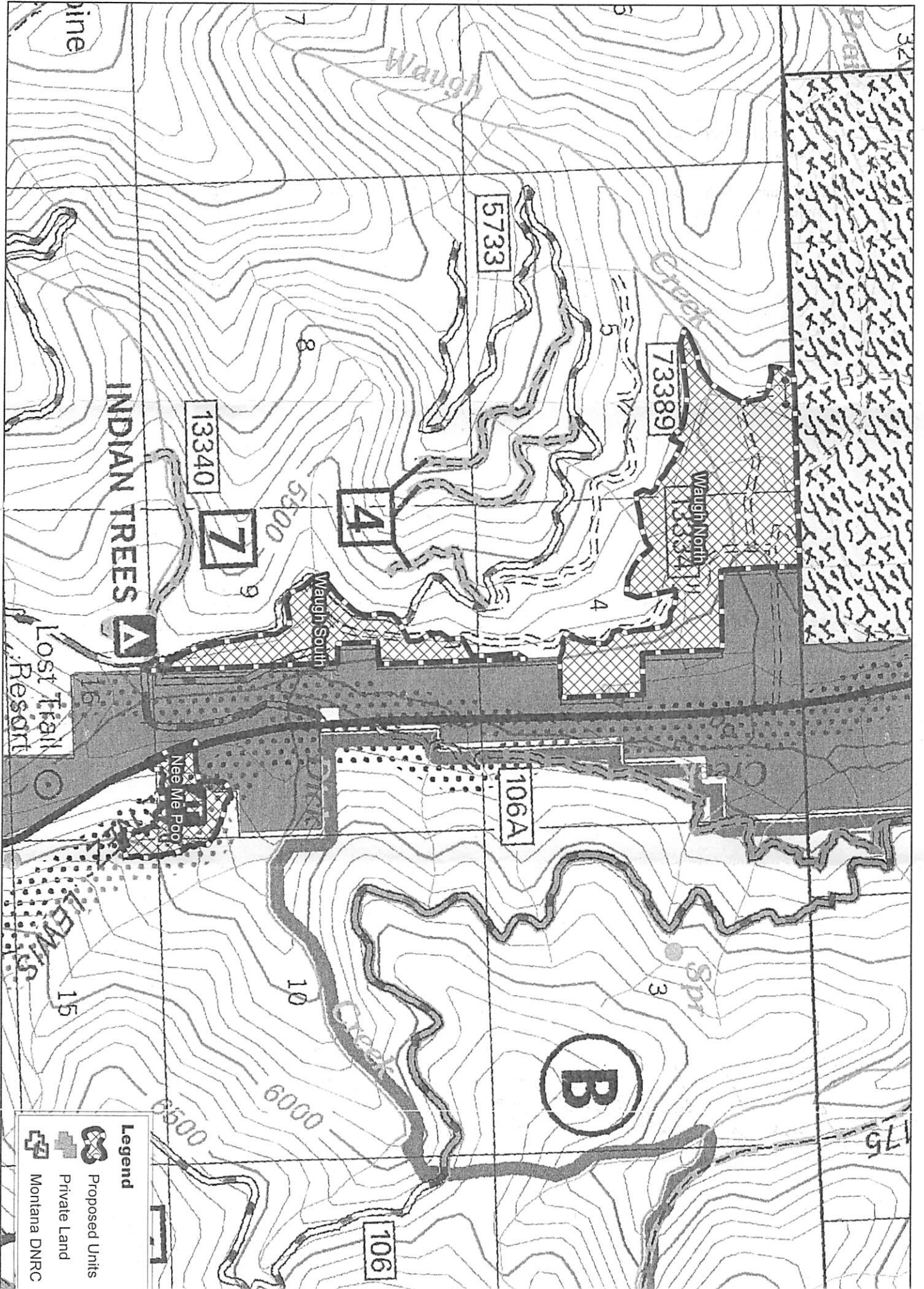
If you need additional information regarding this proposal, please contact me or David Fox at (406) 821-1226, [dbfox@fs.fed.us](mailto:dbfox@fs.fed.us)

Sincerely,



ERIC WINTERS  
District Ranger

# Nee Me Poo/Waugh Fuels Reduction



**Legend**

- Proposed Units
- Private Land
- Montana DNRC

