



**File Code:** 1950  
**Date:** June 9, 2017

Dear Interested Party,

The Bitterroot National Forest is proposing vegetation management, fuels reduction, and road improvements in the Gold Butterfly project area on National Forest System lands (Fig. 1). The Gold Butterfly project is on the east side of the Bitterroot Valley and extends from the confluence of Gold Creek and the Burnt Fork of the Bitterroot River south to Saint Clair Creek, and from the Bitterroot National Forest boundary east to the boundaries with the Lolo and Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forests. Most of the project area is on the Stevensville Ranger District but units in the St. Clair drainage overlap the Darby Ranger District.

The Forest Service proposes commercial timber harvest, non-commercial thinning, piling slash, and prescribed burning on about 10,500 acres of the Bitterroot National Forest in Ravalli County (legal location: T.6N. R.18W. sec.1-12, 16-20, 29, 30, T.6N. R.19W. sec. 1, 2, 10-15, 22-27, T.7N. R.18W. sec. 1-36, T.7N. R.19W. sec. 1, 2, 11-14, 22-27, 34-36, T.8N.R.18W. sec. 20, 21, 28-34). Some of the proposed treatments overlap into the Stoney Mountain Inventoried Roadless Area (IRA), however, no roads would be constructed in the IRA to access the treatment areas.

The purpose of this letter is to share information about the proposed Gold Butterfly project and to gather your information and knowledge about the project area related to the proposed activities. In this letter, I provide a brief description of the project, the need for treatment, proposed activities, and how you can participate in the process and comment on the proposal.

### Project Development

The Gold Butterfly project proposal was developed from recommendations in two ecosystem analyses at the watershed scale (EAWs) – the Burnt Fork EAWs (2004) and the Daly-Gold EAWs (2008). In these analyses, resource conditions were evaluated for future management opportunities. The Gold Butterfly Interdisciplinary Team field reviewed the recommendations made in these analyses, defined the preliminary purpose and need for the project, and proposed actions that would fulfill the project's purpose and need.

### The Need for Action

The Interdisciplinary Team determined there is need to:

- Improve landscape resilience to disturbances (such as insects, diseases, and fire) by modifying forest structure and composition, and fuels
- Provide timber products and related jobs
- Reduce chronic sediment sources in Willow Creek and Burnt Fork of the Bitterroot River watersheds to improve water quality and bull trout habitat in the long-term
- Restore or improve key habitats, such as meadows, aspen, and whitebark pine

### The Proposed Action

The proposed action was developed in response to the needs listed above. Elements of the proposed action include:

- Harvest, thin, and prescribe burn units with Douglas-fir beetle, mountain pine beetle, western spruce budworm, and dwarf mistletoe, especially in the wildland-urban interface (WUI)
- Harvest, thin, and prescribe burn natural meadows that are being colonized by trees
- Harvest or thin conifers from declining aspen clones



- Harvest, thin, or prescribe burn areas with whitebark pine or sensitive plant habitat
- Close Burnt Fork Rd. at the Gold Creek campground and move the Gold Creek trailhead to the Gold Creek campground, and manage NFSR 312 behind the closure as a trail
- Decommission NFSR 969A at the junction with NFSR 969 (Willow Creek Rd.) and convert it to a non-motorized trail, move the trailhead to the junction, develop trailhead facilities, and remove the culvert on the North Fork of Willow Cr.
- Construct specified and temporary roads to support timber removal from the forest
- Upgrade road conditions on NFSR 364 and 969 with the application of BMP recommendations
- Build a crossing (temporary/permanent) where NFSR 13131 crosses North Fork of Willow Creek
- Decommission the first half mile of NFSR 13111 from the junction with NFSR 364 where the road encroaches on Butterfly Creek. This portion of the road is stable and will not require rehabilitation treatments. It would be available for non-motorized use. An alternate route would be constructed away from the stream to provide access to the lower Butterfly area.
- Decommission or store specific upland roads in the Willow Creek and Burnt Fork watersheds closed by the Travel Management Plan decision, especially those roads that encroach on streams (see Road Decommissioning section below)

The proposed project activities would improve forest growing conditions in a variety of forest types and improve their resilience to natural disturbances (Fig. 2). Clearcut harvest may be required in some units because of the forest types and insect or disease conditions affecting the units. Some clearcuts may exceed 40 acres. Forest treatments would improve wildlife and other key habitat conditions and contribute to the economy of local communities and counties. The areas proposed for treatment integrate multiple objectives to maximize the effectiveness of treatments and meet the project goals and objectives. Table 1 summarizes activities proposed in the Gold Butterfly project.

**Table 1: Summary of activities proposed in the Gold Butterfly Project and estimates of treatment areas and road mileages. (Note: estimates may change through the analysis process.)**

| <b>Proposed Harvest and Associated Activities</b>                   |              |
|---|--------------|
| <b>Vegetation Treatments</b>  |              |
| Total commercial harvest  | 7,700 acres  |
| Non-commercial Thinning   | 1,900 acres  |
| Meadow enhancement  | 120 acres    |
| Prescribed fire only  | 840 acres    |
| Total vegetation management   | 10,560 acres |
| Fuel treatments associated with vegetation treatments               | 9,600 acres  |
| <b>Logging Systems</b>  |              |
| Ground based  | 3,200 acres  |
| Skyline   | 4,500 acres  |
| Total logging systems   | 7,700 acres  |
| <b>Roads</b>  |              |
| Construction of permanent (system) roads                            | 8 miles      |
| Construction of temporary (non-system) roads                        | 13 miles     |
| Construction of Tracked Line Machine trail and excavated skid trail | 13 miles     |
| Decommission National Forest system roads                           | 33 miles     |
| Decommission undetermined roads                                     | 8 miles      |

#### Road Decommissioning

The Bitterroot National Forest proposes to decommission roads no longer needed for long-term forest management. Up to 33 miles of National Forest System roads would be decommissioned and about 8 miles of undetermined roads would be decommissioned. Most of the roads proposed for decommissioning are currently closed to motorized use. Roads that are stable and vegetated will typically

not require treatment other than culvert removal and entrance closure with berms or recontouring to prevent illegal motorized travel. Specific segments of roads may require recontouring or decompacting to resolve erosion, water infiltration, or slope stability issues. Rehabilitation treatments and entrance closures will be designed to accommodate continued non-motorized uses.

### Healthy Forest Restoration Act

The Gold Butterfly project will be analyzed under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) authorities, as amended in 2014. The HFRA has several titles that apply to the Gold Butterfly project:

- Title I provides for hazardous fuel reduction on Federal land
- Title IV provides for systematic information gathering and research on applied silvicultural treatments to address the effects of insects, disease, and their interactions on forests
- Title VI provides for the designation of insect and disease treatment areas to increase forest resilience to insect or disease infestations

About 9,500 acres of the Gold Butterfly treatment areas are within the insect and disease designated treatment area (Title VI). This area is affected by mountain pine beetle, Douglas-fir bark beetle, Douglas-fir dwarf mistletoe, and western spruce budworm to various degrees. The designated treatment area overlaps the wildland-urban interface (WUI), which cover 6,600 acres of the treatment units. The Bitterroot Community Wildfire Protection Plan (2006), developed through a collaborative process, identified much of the WUI as high priority for treatment.

The higher elevations in the project area contain whitebark pine, a sensitive tree species that is weakened and killed by white pine blister rust and mountain pine beetle. This occurrence provides an opportunity to study treatment methods to promote the retention and development of healthy whitebark pine forests.

The HFRA modifies the analysis process prescribed in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the administrative review process, and the judicial review process. The modification of the analysis process under NEPA limits the range of alternatives to the proposed action, the No Action, and an additional alternative proposed during scoping or the collaborative process. If more than one additional alternative is proposed, the Forest Supervisor shall select which additional alternative to consider and describe her reasons for selecting that alternative (HFRA §104(c)(2)(A)(B)).

### Collaboration

HFRA requires the Forest Service to facilitate collaboration among State and local governments, Indian Tribes, and participation of interested persons to encourage meaningful public participation during the preparation of the HFRA project. It also requires the public comment opportunities specified in NEPA and administrative guidelines during the preparation of the environmental impact statement. Collaboration on the Gold Butterfly project includes early opportunities for public engagement as well as opportunities specified in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Administrative Review Act (ARA).

The Bitterroot National Forest held a public meeting to describe the preliminary Gold Butterfly project proposal and the analysis process on April 18, 2017. The purpose of the meeting was to present the project proposal to the public, describe the sideboards for the collaborative process, gather information from the public about the project area and their views on the proposal, and to explain the authorities under which the project would be analyzed. The Bitterroot National Forest held an open house on May 17, 2017 to present more specific information about resources in the project area, discuss concerns with individuals, and receive comments. The Interdisciplinary Team reviewed and considered the comments to determine whether to modify the proposed action or identify alternatives to the proposed action. The information from these two meetings is posted on the Bitterroot National Forest web page:

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

The Bitterroot National Forest plans to host additional opportunities for public engagement; specifically, a

field trip to the project area on June 21, 2017 (see enclosure), an alternative development workshop following the analysis of public scoping comments, and another open house when the effects analysis is nearing completion.

During the Alternative Development Workshop, there will be an opportunity to review and contribute to the development of an alternative to the proposed action. Details and dates of the workshop are to be determined. Information regarding this workshop will be provided to those who comment during the scoping period.

Please let us know if you are interested in participating in these opportunities by providing us your e-mail address or the best way to contact you.

### **Bitterroot National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan**

The Bitterroot National Forest Plan (1987) assigns Management Areas to portions of the Gold Butterfly project area. The Management Areas emphasize different resource management goals and objectives. Management Area 3b emphasizes management of riparian areas. Management Area 3b standards are applied to the riparian habitat conservation areas, which either border or lie within other management areas. MA 3b consists of the riparian habitat 100 feet on either side of streams, or the area defined by water-influenced vegetation, whichever is greater. Timber harvest is compatible with the goals of each Management Area, however Management Areas 5 and 8a are not suitable for timber production so timber harvest is not included in volume estimates. The following proportion of Management Areas are proposed for treatment in the Gold Butterfly project:

- MA 1 (Timber emphasis): 3,300 of 11,989 ac. MA 5 (Semi-primitive Rec): 1 of 23,395 ac.
- MA 2 (Winter Range): 3,900 of 7,874 acres MA 8a (Minimum Level): 240 of 2,789 ac.
- MA 3a (Partial Retention): 3100 of 7,945 acres

The project is expected to meet Forest-wide and Management Area standards and guidelines as described in the Forest Plan. A plan amendment to the Bitterroot National Forest Plan may be required to provide a project-specific variance for four standards. The 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219) requires notice of which substantive requirements of sections 219.8 through 219.11 are likely to be related to the amendment. Suspension of the coarse woody debris amendment is likely related to the requirements for soils and soil productivity at § CFR 219.8(a)(2)(ii). Suspension of the old growth standard is likely related to the requirement to maintain or restore key ecosystem characteristics a § CFR 219.9(a)(2)(i). Suspension of the winter range thermal cover and elk habitat effectiveness standards are likely related to the consideration of habitat conditions for wildlife commonly used and enjoyed by the public at § CFR 219.10(a)(5).

### **Stony Mountain Inventoried Roadless Area**

Approximately 43,720 acres of the 103,346-acre Stony Mountain IRA is adjacent to the Gold Butterfly project. The Forest Service proposes to treat approximately 270 acres of the IRA, generally north of Palisade Mountain. Silvicultural treatments include about 200 acres of commercial and about 70 acres of non-commercial treatment. Most of the commercial harvest and associated prescribed fires are to research treatment effects on the maintenance of healthy whitebark pine as a forest component.

These activities are consistent with the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (Roadless Rule), as they would maintain or restore the characteristics of ecosystem composition and structure by maintaining the presence of whitebark pine as a forest component (36 CFR 294.13(b)(1)(ii)). Generally, small diameter timber would be cut and one or more roadless characteristics (36 CFR 294.11) would be maintained or improved. No roads would be constructed or reconstructed to facilitate logging.

### **Your Opportunity to Comment**

The Forest Service is accepting comments on the Gold Butterfly proposed action for 30 days following the publication of the proposal in the Federal Register. We anticipate the project will be published June 9,

2017.

Projects authorized under the HFRA are subject to the Pre-decisional Administrative Review Process (referred to as the "objection process") pursuant to 36 CFR 218, Subparts A and C. Objections will only be accepted from those who have submitted written comments specific to the proposed project during the scoping period or other public involvement opportunity where written comments are requested by the responsible official (36 CFR 218.5).

A comment form has been enclosed for your convenience but you are not required to use it. The comment form also provides the opportunity for you to choose whether you would like to have your name kept on the list to receive future mailings about the Gold Butterfly project, or to have your name removed from the mailing list for this particular project.

Comments should include:

1. Name, address, phone number, and organization represented, if any
2. Title of project on which the comments are being submitted
3. Substantive comments including specific facts and supporting information for the Forest Supervisor to consider.

Written comments must be mailed or hand-delivered to the Stevensville Ranger District Office, Attention: Tami Sabol, 88 Main St., Stevensville, MT 59870. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. The facsimile number is 406-777-7423

Electronic comments must be submitted in rich text format (.rtf), Word (.docx) or Word Perfect format to: [comments-northern-bitterroot-stevensville@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-northern-bitterroot-stevensville@fs.fed.us). The subject line must contain the name of the project for which you are submitting comments (Gold Butterfly). 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.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record, and will be available for public inspection. If you have questions regarding the Gold Butterfly project, please contact Project Leaders Sara Grove (telephone 406-375-2608, email: [sgrove@fs.fed.us](mailto:sgrove@fs.fed.us)) or Marilyn Wildey (telephone 406-363-7101, email: [mwildey@fs.fed.us](mailto:mwildey@fs.fed.us)).

Sincerely,













JULIE K. KING  
Forest Supervisor

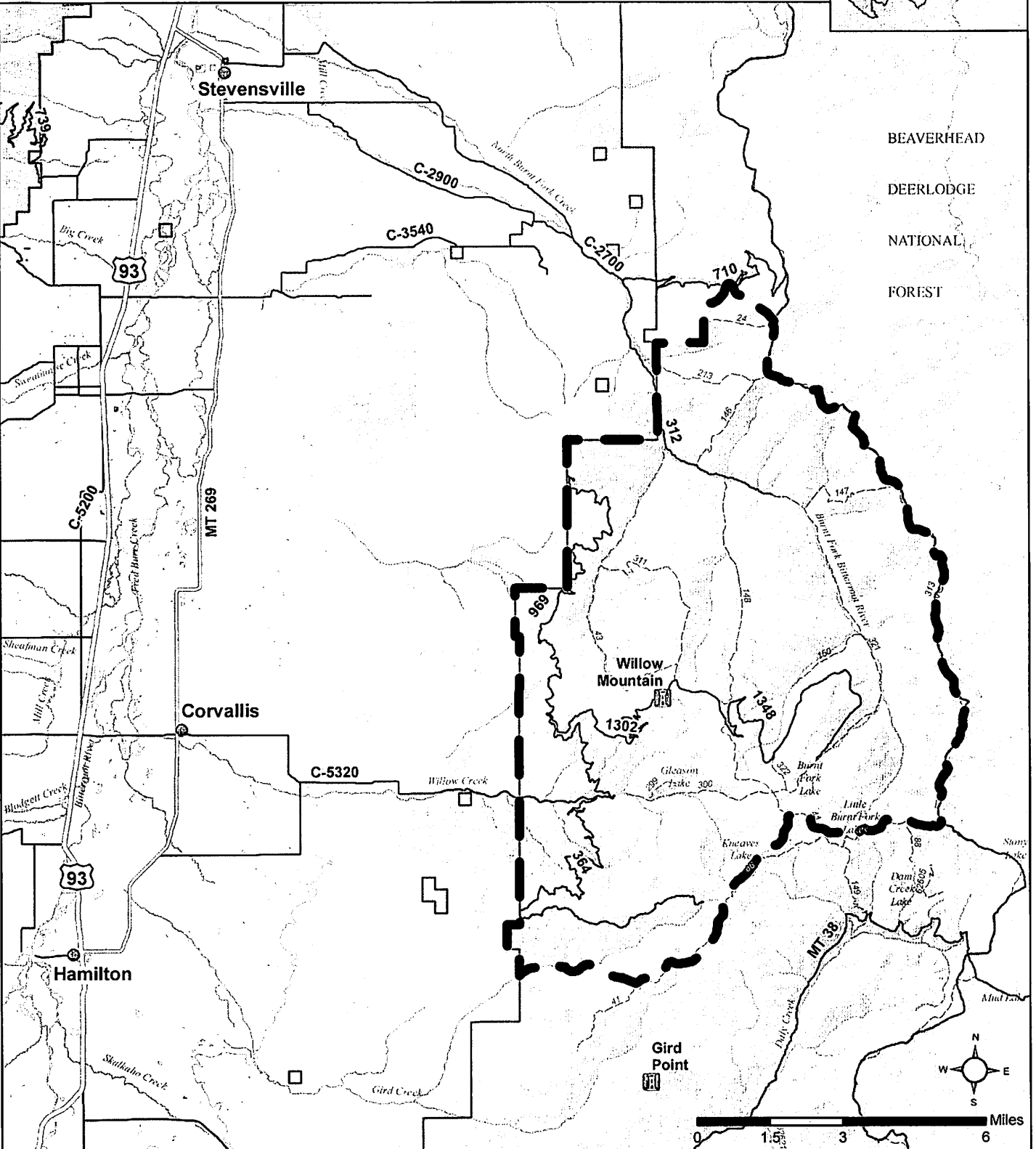
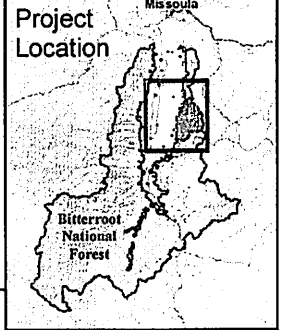
Enclosure: Vicinity map  
Project Proposal map  
Invitation to field trip June 21  
Comment Response form

# Figure 1: Gold Butterfly Project

Stevensville Ranger District  
Bitterroot National Forest

## Vicinity Map

-  Gold Butterfly Project Area
-  Forest Administrative Boundary
-  US Forest Service Land
-  State Managed Land
-  Other Ownership
-  Town
-  Main Road
-  Road
-  Trail
-  Stream



BEAVERHEAD  
DEERLODGE  
NATIONAL  
FOREST





---

**File Code:** 1950**Date:** June 7, 2017**Route To:****Subject:** Gold Butterfly Field Trip**To:** Interested Party

On June 21st, the Bitterroot National Forest is hosting a public field trip to the Gold Butterfly Project Area. We will be leaving the Supervisors Office in Hamilton (1801 N. 1<sup>st</sup> in Hamilton) at 1:00 in the afternoon and plan to return by 6:00. Please bring a water, snack, and wear comfortable clothes and shoes suitable for hiking in the forest. Be prepared for all types of weather! Transportation will be provided. We will carpool to the site because parking and turnarounds are very limited.

We will visit predetermined locations to address public concerns that have arisen during the collaborative process. Field trip stops will focus on:

- Water quality
- Fisheries
- Road improvements to reduce sediment runoff
- Forest stand conditions and potential treatments
- Road relocation, construction, and decommissioning

Please contact Marilyn Wildey (406-363-7101 or [mwildey@fs.fed.us](mailto:mwildey@fs.fed.us)) by June 16<sup>th</sup> to reserve space on this field trip. Space is limited to 20 people. If there is more demand than capacity, a second field trip will be scheduled for Saturday June 24th.

Sincerely,

/s/ Tami Sabol  
TAMI SABOL  
District Ranger



