



File Code: 1950

Date: September 13, 2017

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Ravalli County Planning Dept.

Dear Interested Party:

I am seeking public comments about the proposed Canyon Creek Fuels Hazardous Fuels Reduction project between the Canyon Creek Trailhead and Barley Creek drainages on the Darby Ranger District of the Bitterroot National Forest. The project is located about three air miles west of the Hamilton, Montana, in portions of T6N, R21W Sections 20 & 29. This project would reduce fuels across approximately 255 acres through the use of pre-commercial thinning, hand piling and prescribed fire within two 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 augment the defensible space being created along the forest boundary by private landowners who are treating approximately 150 acres under the Bitterroot RC&D (Resource Conservation & Development) grant program. The project will create safer conditions for the private landowners who live in the area and for firefighters responding to fires in this area.

Background/Origin

The Canyon Creek 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., 2009) http://dnrc.mt.gov/divisions/forestry/docs/fire-and-aviation/wui/ravalli_cwpp.pdf/view 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 5 and 3c. Emphasize dispersed recreation activities associated with developed sites and wilderness, old growth, big game cover, and fish. Provide low levels of timber harvest, livestock forage, big game forage and access for mineral exploration.

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 improved firefighter safety in the event of a wildfire.
3. Improve winter range for elk & mule deer.

Proposed Vegetation and Hazardous Fuel Management

The Canyon Creek Fuels Reduction project is proposing fuel reduction activities using a combination of understory thinning to remove ladder fuels, favoring ponderosa pine and large fir, 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 2 to 5 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 to moderate 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 buffer private property and national forest resources in the area.

What are the next steps in the process?

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.

This project is located within the Selway-Bitterroot Roadless area. Preliminary analysis indicates that proposed treatments are consistent with direction in the 2001 Roadless Rule under § 294.13(b)(1)(ii).

How to Comment and Timeframe

This scoping 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 environmental effects you think the project may have 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 January 31st 2018. Therefore, I ask you to review the proposed activities and submit any comments and information you may have by October 13, 2017.

Submit written comments to: Responsible Official: Eric Winthers, District Ranger, Darby/Sula Ranger District, P.O. Box 388, Darby, MT 59829. Electronic comments must be submitted to 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.

To learn more about the project and to view maps visit <https://www.fs.usda.gov/bitterroot>. Click on 'NEPA Projects' and 'Canyon Creek Fuels'. Public comments are due **by October 13, 2017**. If you need additional information regarding this proposal, please contact Eric Winthers, Darby/Sula District Ranger or Jacquie Parks at (406) 821-4268.

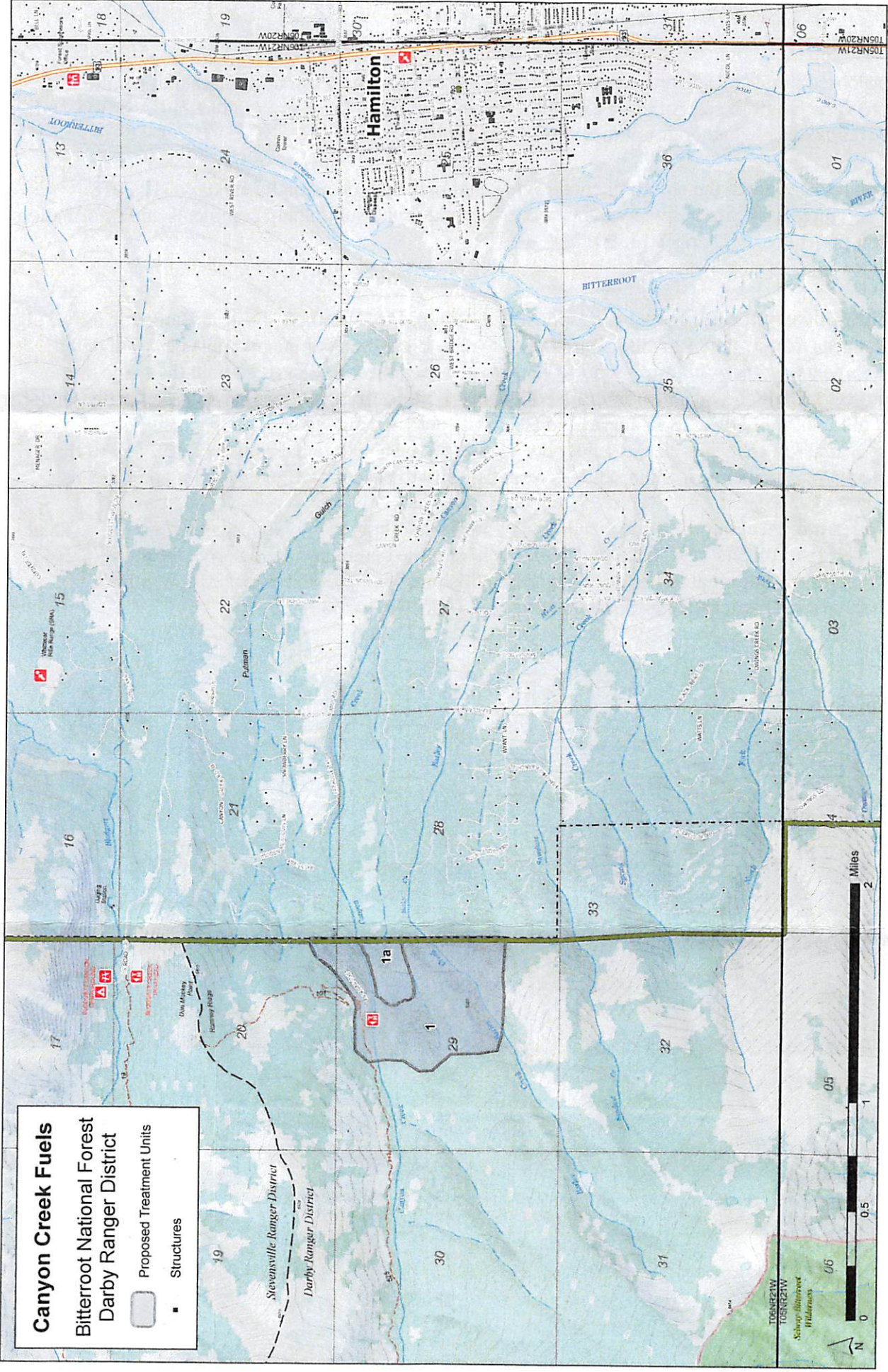
Sincerely,



ERIC WINTHERS
District Ranger

Canyon Creek Fuels
Bitterroot National Forest
Darby Ranger District

- Proposed Treatment Units
- Structures



Miles



Canyon Creek Fuels

Darby Ranger District, Bitterroot National Forest

