

# CHAPTER 1

## Purpose and Need for an Amendment

### Introduction

This programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) proposes to change the Flathead National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) by amending the objectives, standards, and guidelines that address winter motorized recreation, primarily snowmobile use. For the purposes of this amendment, the terms "snowmobile," "over-the-snow vehicle" and "winter motorized use" refer to use by snowmobiles and similar tracked vehicles during winter months. This document presents an analysis of the environmental effects of six alternatives (including no action) for management of winter motorized recreational use of the Flathead National Forest.

Land use planning for National Forest System (NFS) lands involves two levels of decision-making. The first level, referred to as programmatic planning, is the development, revision or amendment of Forest Plans that provide management direction for resource programs, uses, and protection measures. Forest Plans and associated amendments are intended to set out Management Area prescriptions or decisions with goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines for future decision-making through site-specific planning. The environmental analysis accomplished at the Plan Amendment level guides resource management decisions and aids the next level of site-specific planning.

The second level of planning involves the analysis and implementation of management practices designed to achieve goals and objectives of the Forest Plan. This is commonly referred to as site-specific or project-level planning. It requires relatively detailed information that includes the location, condition, and current uses of individual areas, roads and trails, and the identification of when and where individual areas, roads and trails will be open or closed to various types of use. This step is most often accomplished at the Ranger District level.

The Record of Decision, when issued, will identify and select a programmatic action which sets standards for implementation of site-specific proposals.

This amendment will be in effect until it is replaced by new direction through future Forest Plan amendment or revision. The Flathead Forest Plan is currently being revised, with completion expected in 2006 or 2007. Winter motorized recreation direction resulting from this amendment will be reviewed during the revision process to determine whether there is a "need for change."

The deciding official for the Forest Plan revision effort may decide to modify the existing direction if new information becomes available, or may determine that there is no need for change and retain existing direction in the Forest Plan.

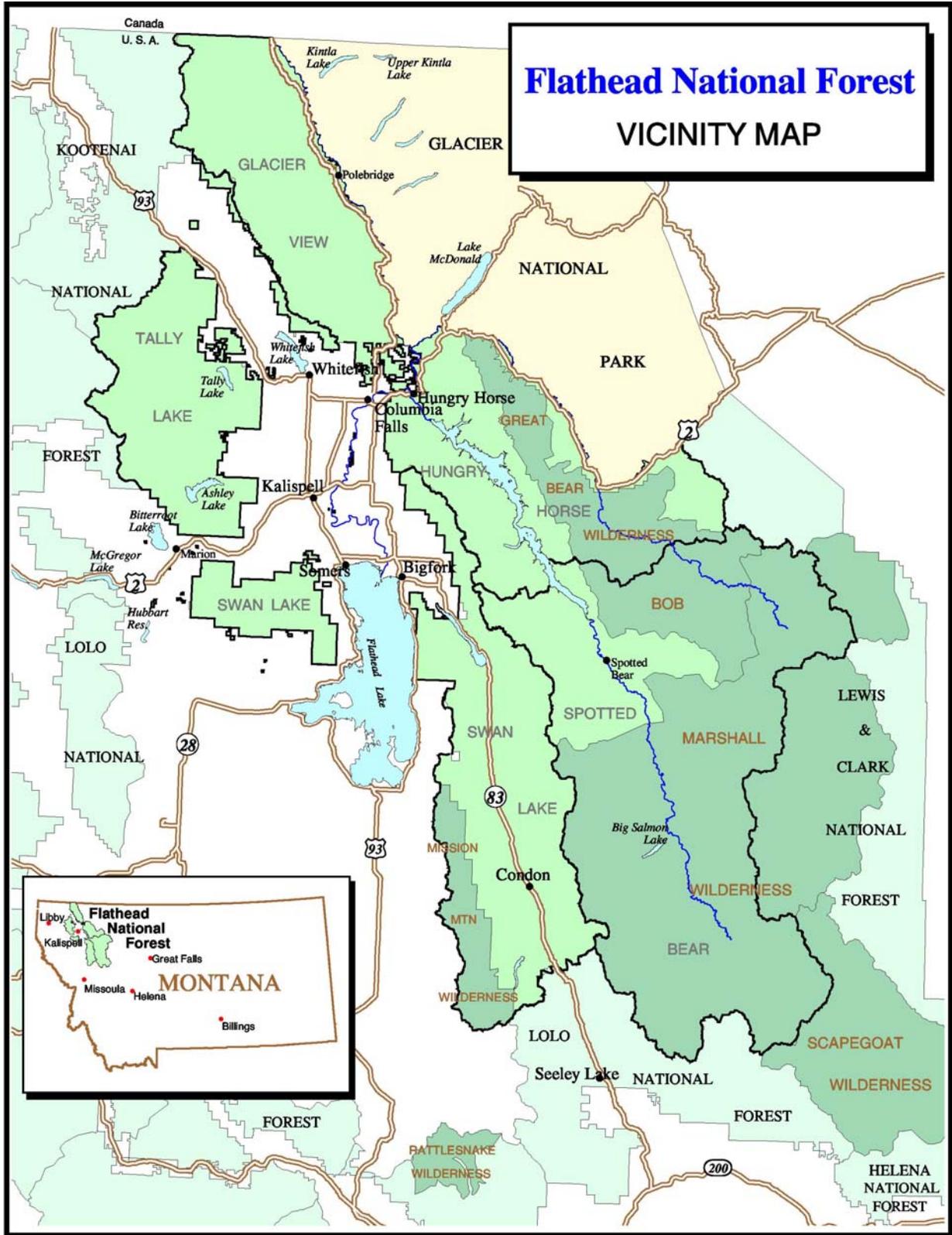


Figure 1.1. Vicinity Map

This chapter introduces information such as the location, purpose and need, connected and cumulative actions, decision to be made, and the scope of the decision. It also discusses the format for the rest of the document, and how and where to find additional information.

## **Location**

The Flathead National Forest encompasses more than 2.3 million acres in northwestern Montana. The National Forest shares boundaries with Glacier National Park to the east, and the international border with Canada to the north (Figure 1-1).

Within the Flathead National Forest, nearly 1.1 million acres are designated as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System, where motorized use is prohibited. The 1986 Forest Plan currently prohibits snowmobile use on an additional 194,000 acres. Snowmobile use is programmatically allowed on the remainder of the Forest, approximately 1,141,500 acres, including the 46,000-acre Island Unit of the Swan Lake District. These acreages are based on conditions prior to the "Settlement Agreement" (see below at Purpose and Need).

## **Forest Plan Management Direction**

The Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974, the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, and their implementing regulations, provide direction for the development of Forest Plans. As part of the forest planning process, an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was developed, which considered alternatives for the future management of land and resources managed by the Flathead National Forest. The EIS identified a preferred alternative which served as the basis for development of the the Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). The Record of Decision implementing the Flathead Forest Plan was signed in January 1986. Revision of the Flathead Forest Plan began in 2002, with completion expected in 2006 or 2007. The Forest Plan can be changed at any time to reflect new information.

## **Authority to Manage Motorized Use**

Executive Order 11644 (as amended by E.O. 11989, 1977) – Use of off-road vehicles on the public lands, authorizes public land management agencies to regulate the use of off road vehicles, enforce such regulations, and monitor the effects of the use of off-road vehicles. This agency may amend or rescind designations if necessary to protect natural resources.

Title 16 of US Code Section 551 authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to regulate the occupancy and use and to preserve forests from destruction.

## Purpose of and Need for Action

The Purpose of and Need for this amendment is to:

1. Clarify Forest Plan management direction to eliminate any confusion about motorized use in MA-2A areas (as per August 31, 1988, Associate Chief final decision for Forest Plan Appeal #1467).
2. Meet the requirements of a settlement agreement resulting from a lawsuit challenging the Flathead Forest Plan.
3. Determine long-term winter recreation management direction related to motorized over-the-snow use.

The existing Forest Plan does not adequately address winter motorized access. In response to administrative appeals of the Forest Plan, the Associate Chief of the Forest Service directed the Regional Forester "to clarify the LRMP management direction to eliminate any confusion about motorized use in MA-2A areas" (Associate Chief final decision for Forest Plan Appeal #1467). For various reasons that clarification of the Forest Plan did not occur.

In the years since the Forest Plan was approved, both motorized and non-motorized winter recreation use and technology have increased. Some forest users have expressed concern for wildlife and other resources in light of increasing numbers of snowmobiles in the backcountry, or felt their opportunities for a quiet winter recreation experience were diminishing.

This concern was evidenced in 1999 when litigation was brought against the Flathead National Forest by the Montana Wilderness Association for allowing snowmobiling to occur in areas where the Forest Plan assigns a Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) of primitive and semi-primitive non-motorized recreation. Monitoring indicates about 5300 acres in Management Area 2A were being used by winter motorized recreationists.

In response to this lawsuit, a Federal Magistrate recommended to the deciding Judge that the Flathead National Forest be ordered to close all Management Area (MA) 2A to motorized use. See Appendix B. These MA 2A areas include many popular snowmobile play areas, as well as groomed snowmobile trails. Not wishing to give up MA 2A areas they had been traditionally using, the Montana Snowmobile Association intervened. The parties to the lawsuit (plaintiff Montana Wilderness Association, defendant Flathead National Forest, and intervenor Montana Snowmobile Association) agreed to settle the case (Project Record A-1). They agreed to a compromise that would leave most of the MA 2A areas open for snowmobiling and close many other roadless areas. Some MA 2B lands, classified as open to motorized recreation in the Forest Plan, became closed to snowmobiling in the agreement. As part of the settlement agreement, the parties created maps, and a temporary closure order for certain areas of the forest was put into place. The court-approved settlement agreement includes direction to prepare a Forest Plan amendment in an open public forum to develop Forest-wide winter motorized recreation direction, with the settlement agreement maps as one alternative. To expedite the process, the Forest chose to present the settlement agreement as the proposed action.

## **Decision to be Made**

The decision to be made by the Forest Supervisor regarding access management within the Flathead National Forest is two-fold:

1. Whether to change the existing forest plan direction;
2. If so, what new goals, objectives and standards should be established to guide management of winter motorized access

## **Proposed Action**

The Forest Supervisor is proposing to amend the Flathead Forest Plan Forest-wide and Management Area goals, objectives, and standards regarding winter motorized recreation management.

The maps displayed in Figures 1-2, 1-4, and 1-6 on the enclosed compact disc reflect the Proposed Action for the Winter Motorized Recreation Amendment. These are the maps agreed to by the parties of the settlement agreement. Due to the fact that six maps were required for each alternative, creating a total of thirty-six color maps, printing large paper versions for every FEIS requested was cost-prohibitive. A limited number of map packets are available upon request. The FEIS and accompanying maps are available at local libraries and on the Internet. Figures 1-2, 1-4, and 1-6 display direction by management area. Figures 1-3, 1-5, and 1-7 are for display purposes only to depict what a winter travel map would look like with the proposed amendment, along with prior site-specific area or road closure decisions applied. No changes from existing conditions are proposed for areas of the Forest not included on the maps (the Island Unit area west of Flathead Lake on the Swan Lake Ranger District).

The season of use, in accordance with Amendment 19 to the Forest Plan, would allow snowmobiling in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem grizzly bear recovery area during the denning season, generally from November 15 to March 15. Roads open yearround to motorized use may accommodate snowmobiles as conditions allow, unless passable to conventional vehicles. Exceptions are the Trail Creek Road west of the junction with 114A (Frozen Lake Road), and Whale Creek Road 318 west of the junction with Road 10832; snowmobile use would be prohibited on those two sections of road otherwise open yearround. Challenge cost-share agreements for grooming until April 1 would still continue in Canyon Creek and Skyland. The Proposed Action would change the language for goals, objectives and standards in the Forest Plan for Management Areas 2, 2A, 2B, 11, 11A, 11C, and 15C as shown in Table 1-1.

This proposal creates exceptions to the concept of management area direction and a corresponding recreation opportunity spectrum designation for a given management area. This proposal would create a mixture of non-motorized and motorized opportunities within a given management area, especially on the Glacier View District. These are defined by the areas shown on the maps. The majority of the area previously open to snowmobiling in the North Fork (Glacier View Ranger District) would be closed with the proposed action; snowmobiling would be restricted to designated routes and play areas. Terrain features and heavy timber limited the actual areas being used by snowmobiles prior to the settlement agreement, and approximately 91 percent of the area traditionally used for winter

motorized recreation in the North Fork remains open with this proposal. An area in the Swan Range that was previously designated for motorized recreational use would also be closed. Other areas designated as non-motorized recreation areas along the Whitefish Divide would allow winter motorized recreation during the grizzly bear denning season, but would not allow motorized recreation during the non-denning season.

A monitoring plan was developed as part of the settlement agreement and is included as Appendix C. Monitoring will be conducted based on available funding. Law enforcement will monitor compliance with winter travel restrictions on the Forest.

**Recreation Opportunity Spectrum**

Recreation opportunity is the availability of a real choice for a user to participate in a preferred activity within a preferred setting, in order to realize those satisfying experiences which are desired (USDA Forest Service 1982). The Recreation Opportunity Spectrum is based on the principle that the national forests should provide a range of recreational opportunities. It provides a framework for stratifying and defining classes of outdoor opportunity environments, regardless of ownership or jurisdiction. The continuum is divided into six classes, ranging from primitive to urban, but subclasses may also be established to reflect local or regional conditions.



The USDA Forest Service is a multiple use agency for recreation as well as other natural resources. Snowmobiling as a recreational activity falls within the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum and is recognized as a legitimate use of the Flathead National Forest lands, in the areas where its use is approved.

Forest Plan direction does not restrict non-motorized recreational use on any part of the Flathead National Forest. This provides users with 2.3 million acres, 1,204,500 acres of which is sanctioned for non-motorized recreational uses only.

Table 1-1

Existing Forest Plan Direction	Forest Plan Direction Under The Proposed Action
<b>Forest Wide Recreation Standard</b>	
<p><sup>1</sup>Recreation Standards 1 – 13 (p. II-21) - No change</p>	<p>Add the following:                      14. <i>The winter motorized recreation maps located in Forest Plan Appendix WW provide direction on where winter motorized use may and may not occur. The direction displayed on these maps supercedes any conflicting direction in the Forest Plan. Restrictions to winter motorized access may be implemented on a case-by-case basis for areas that would otherwise allow winter motorized use and where resource conflicts are identified.</i></p>
<b>Management Areas 2 - 2F</b>	
<p><b><i>Description</i></b> (p. III-5)</p> <p>Management Area 2A (107,203 acres) consists of unroaded lands suited for dispersed recreation that meet the ROS classification of semi-primitive nonmotorized. This Management Area occurs throughout the Forest and includes the Whitefish Divide and several other alpine ridges. It also includes Glacier Slough on the Swan Lake Ranger District.</p> <p>Management Area 2B (118,079 acres) consists of unroaded lands suited for dispersed recreation that meet the ROS classification of semi-primitive motorized. This Management Area occurs throughout the Forest. It includes portions of high elevation lands of the Swan Range north of the Lion Creek drainage.</p>	<p>Change to:</p> <p>Management Area 2A (107,203 acres) consists of unroaded lands suited for dispersed recreation that meet the ROS classification of semi-primitive nonmotorized. <i>Portions of this Management Area where winter motorized recreation is allowed have an ROS of semi-primitive motorized during the period of time that motorized use is allowed (see Appendix WW).</i> This Management Area occurs throughout the Forest and includes the Whitefish Divide and several other alpine ridges. It also includes Glacier Slough on the Swan Lake Ranger District.</p> <p>Management Area 2B (118,079 acres) consists of unroaded lands suited for dispersed recreation that meet the ROS classification of semi-primitive motorized. <i>Portions of this Management Area where winter motorized recreation is prohibited have an ROS of semi-primitive non-motorized during the period of time that motorized use is not allowed (see Appendix WW).</i> This Management Area occurs throughout the Forest. It includes portions of high elevation lands of the Swan Range north of the Lion Creek drainage. <i>The Bond Creek Trail is closed to winter motorized use.</i></p>
<p><b><i>Goals</i></b> (p. III-6)</p> <p>MA2: Dispersed recreation opportunities will be managed to meet the primitive ROS classification.</p> <p>MA 2A: Dispersed recreation opportunities will be managed to meet the semi-primitive nonmotorized ROS classification.</p>	<p>Change to:</p> <p>MA2: Dispersed recreation opportunities will be managed to meet the primitive <i>nonmotorized</i> ROS classification. <i>Motorized vehicle use is not compatible with the goals of this management area.</i></p> <p>MA 2A: <i>Other than areas where winter motorized use is specifically allowed by the Forest Plan,</i> dispersed recreation opportunities will be managed to meet the semi-primitive</p>

<sup>1</sup> Changes are in italics.

Existing Forest Plan Direction	Forest Plan Direction Under The Proposed Action
<p>MA 2B. Dispersed recreation opportunities will be managed to meet the semi-primitive motorized ROS classification.</p>	<p>nonmotorized ROS classification. <i>Portions of this Management Area identified in Appendix WW as open for winter motorized use will be managed to meet the semi-primitive motorized ROS classification during the time period that motorized use is allowed.</i></p> <p>MA 2B. Dispersed recreation opportunities will be managed to meet the semi-primitive motorized ROS classification, <i>except where winter motorized use is prohibited as described in Appendix WW.</i></p>
<p><i>Standards (p. III-7)</i></p> <p><u>Recreation</u></p> <p>MA 2A: 1. Maintain trails for nonmotorized use.</p> <p>MA 2B. 2. While providing motorized access opportunities, some trails will be maintained for nonmotorized use. Permit but do not encourage motorized use of trails.</p>	<p>Add the following:</p> <p>MA2: 5. <i>Motorized access is not allowed off of existing forest system roads.</i></p> <p>Change to:</p> <p>MA 2A: 1. Maintain <i>hiking</i> trails for nonmotorized use.</p> <p>Add:</p> <p>MA 2A: 3. <i>Winter motorized use is allowed in those portions of this Management Area depicted as open to winter motorized use in Appendix WW. Winter motorized use is prohibited in all other portions of this Management Area.</i></p> <p>Change to:</p> <p>MA 2B. 2. While providing motorized access opportunities, some trails will be maintained for nonmotorized use. Permit but do not encourage motorized use of trails. <i>The trail to Bond and Trinkus Lakes on the Swan Lake District is closed to winter motorized use.</i><sup>2</sup></p>

<sup>2</sup> Changes are in italics.

Existing Forest Plan Direction	Forest Plan Direction Under The Proposed Action
<b>Management Area 11 - 11C</b>	
<b><i>Standards (p. III-46 &amp; III-49)</i></b>	
<p><u>Recreation</u></p> <p>MA 11, 11A, 11C. 5. Nonmotorized recreation opportunities are provided in accordance with Recreation Opportunity Spectrum classification of the areas.</p> <p><u>Facilities – Roads</u></p> <p>MA 11: 1. Local roads may be constructed for habitat improvement purposes and will be closed to motorized public use except to allow snowmobile access during the winter.</p>	<p>Change to:</p> <p>MA 11, 11A, 11C: Nonmotorized recreation opportunities are provided in accordance with Recreation Opportunity Spectrum classification of the areas. <i>Winter motorized use is allowed in those portions of these Management Areas depicted as open to motorized use in Appendix WW, and prohibited in the remainder of these MAs.</i></p> <p>Change to:</p> <p>MA11: 1. Local roads may be constructed for habitat improvement purposes and <i>motorized public use will be restricted yearlong unless winter motorized use is expressly allowed in Appendix WW.</i></p>
<b>Management Area 15 - 15E</b>	
<b><i>Standards (p. III-74)</i></b>	
<p><u>Facilities</u></p> <p>MA 15C: To allow white-tailed deer optimum dispersal and use of summer range, apply motorized road access restrictions to local roads; however, snowmobile use is permitted.</p>	<p>Change to:</p> <p>MA 15C: To allow white-tailed deer optimum dispersal and use of summer range, apply motorized road access restrictions to local roads; however, snowmobile use is permitted <i>if allowed in Appendix WW.</i></p>

## Appendix WW

Unbound Appendix WW would be added to the Forest Plan. Appendix WW would contain maps from the Selected Alternative showing where winter motorized use is programmatically allowed or prohibited across the Forest. For the Proposed Action, these maps would be identical to the Programmatic Direction Maps for Alternative 2 (Figures 1-2, 1-4, 1-6 on the attached CD-Rom).

### Scope of the Proposed Action

The Flathead Forest Plan provides broad direction for management activities through identified goals, standards, guidelines, and designation of Management Areas. This amendment will not establish new Management Areas. Reconsideration of land allocations will be part of the analysis of a longer-term strategy considered when the Forest Plan is revised. The direction contained in this amendment would supercede any conflicting Forest Plan direction not specifically identified.

The proposal to amend certain Forest-wide objectives, standards, and guidelines is limited to those related to management of winter motorized recreation use access on NFS lands administered by the Flathead National Forest.

This amendment will guide implementation of site-specific projects that tier to the Forest Plan. Additional NEPA compliance will focus on site-specific projects and environmental impacts of implementing the new direction incorporated into the Forest Plan.

Consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) will be completed on the programmatic effects of this amendment.

### Connected and Cumulative Actions

The analysis of effects disclosed in this document include those occurring from the entire scope of the decision. Scope is defined in 40 CFR 1508.25 as the range of actions, alternatives and impacts to be considered in an environmental assessment. Any new information that develops after the decision is made would be considered prior to implementation.

#### Types of Actions Analyzed

**Connected Actions** are those actions which are closely related and therefore should be discussed in the same environmental assessment. Actions are connected if they:

- automatically trigger other actions which may require environmental analysis,
- cannot or will not proceed unless other actions are taken previously or simultaneously, or
- are independent parts of a larger action and depend on the larger actions for their justification.

The Proposed Action includes those activities necessary to fulfill the identified Purpose and Need. There are no connected actions identified in this proposal.

**Cumulative Actions** are those actions, which when viewed with past actions, other present actions, and reasonably foreseeable actions, may have cumulatively significant impacts and therefore should be discussed in the same environmental analysis.

Examples of other programmatic past and present actions could include programmatic activities on Forest Service lands, State, and private industrial and non-industrial lands.

Reasonably foreseeable programmatic actions which are identifiable or scheduled actions which may take effect during the implementation of access management activities include actions from the Canada Lynx Conservation Assessment and Strategy, (USDA Forest Service, USDI Bureau of Land Management and USDI Fish and Wildlife Service, January 2000), and revision of the Flathead National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan.

Similar actions are actions that have enough similarity in timing or geographic proximity as the Proposed Action that the effects of these similar actions should be considered in the same environmental analysis as the Proposed Action and its alternatives. This Proposed Action does not have any similar actions.

## Presentation of Information

**Chapter 1** discusses the Purpose and Need for the environmental impact statement as well as the scope of the decision.

**Chapter 2** presents the social and environmental issues and describes alternatives to the proposed activity that respond to issues brought up during scoping and the public comment period on the Draft EIS.

**Chapter 3** presents the affected environment and the environmental effects of the alternatives.

**Chapter 4** presents public comment on the DEIS and agency response.

Supporting information, including literature cited in the document, and a list of those who prepared this document follow Chapter 4.

**The Project Record** is referenced frequently throughout this document. It is available for review at the Flathead National Forest Supervisor's Office, 1935 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave. East, Kalispell, MT.

## Changes between the DEIS and FEIS

The most significant difference between the Draft EIS and this Final EIS is the creation and analysis of a sixth alternative. Alternative 6 was created to respond to public comment received on the Draft EIS and to incorporate continuing discussions with members of the group that drafted the Settlement Agreement. The basis of the alternative remains the settlement agreement, which is embodied in Alternative 2. A description of Alternative 6 is in Chapter 2, and the effects of the alternative are analyzed in Chapter 3. Alternative 6 is the new "preferred alternative".

The Island Unit of the Swan Lake Ranger District was included in the analysis in the FEIS to give a more accurate portrayal of areas available for snowmobiling on the Forest. It does not appear on FEIS maps because no changes are proposed there.

This FEIS will be available for review for at least 30 days before a decision will be made. A Record of Decision will be published upon receipt of a Biological Opinion on Threatened and Endangered Species from the US Fish and Wildlife Service.