

Chapter 1: Purpose and Need for Action

1.1 Organization of this Document

The Forest Service has prepared this draft Environmental Impact Statement in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations. This Environmental Impact Statement discloses the direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental impacts that would result from the proposed action and the no action alternative.

The document is organized into three chapters and subsequent addenda:

Chapter 1. Purpose and Need for Action: This chapter includes information on the history of the project proposal, the purpose of and need for the project, and the agency's proposal for achieving that purpose and need. This section also details how the Forest Service informed the public of the proposal and how the public responded. Issues are included as well as decisions to be made.

Chapter 2. Alternatives, including the Proposed Action: This chapter provides a more detailed description of the agency's proposed action. This discussion includes project design measures and a summary table of the environmental consequences associated with each alternative.

Chapter 3. Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences: This chapter describes the affected environment or current conditions of the project areas and focuses on the condition of resources which could be affected by the proposed action. Resource discussions include expected environmental consequences and any effects on resources within the project area as a result of the proposed action. Direct, indirect, and cumulative effects are disclosed. The relationship of short term uses and long term productivity is discussed.

Lists, including: a list of preparers, a list of agencies, organizations, and persons involved in public scoping, list of literature cited, and a glossary of terms.

Appendices: The appendices provide more detailed information to support the analyses presented in the environmental impact statement.

1.2 Background

Wedge Canyon Fire

The Wedge Canyon Fire started on the Glacier View Ranger District of the Flathead National Forest on July 18, 2003 as a result of a lightening storm. The origin of the lightening strike was on a ridge north of the headwaters of Teepee Creek, located approximately 40 miles north of Columbia Falls, Montana and six miles south of Canada.

High gusty winds, low humidity, and high temperatures created extreme fire behavior and the fire rapidly progressed in an easterly direction towards the North Fork Flathead River for the remainder of the month of July.

On July 24, 2003, driven by 30 mph winds, the fire jumped a 130 foot fuel break, the North Fork Road (Road 486) and the North Fork Flathead River, and spread into Glacier National Park south of Kintla Lake. During the month of August the fire continued to progress west

within Glacier National Park and progressed north/northwest on the Flathead National Forest towards Trail Creek. The fire was declared 100% contained in October of 2003.

Results of the fire:

54,404 acres burned within the Wedge Canyon Fire, 30,316 acres (55%) burned on Glacier National Park Lands, 21,526 acres (40%) burned on Flathead National Forest Lands, 1,094 (2%) burned on State of Montana Lands, and 1,467 (3%) burned on private lands. Seven homes and 29 outbuildings were destroyed and one home was damaged.

Robert Fire

The human caused Robert Fire was discovered on the Glacier View Ranger District of the Flathead National Forest on July 23, 2004. The origin was approximately two miles west of the Glacier Rim Boat Ramp on the North Fork Flathead River, located approximately eight miles north of Columbia Fall, Montana.

By evening, the fire spotted across the North Fork Flathead River into the Glacier National Park and as a result of extreme fire behavior, the fire consumed over 3,000 acres the first day. The fire continued to burn in a north to northwest direction for the next several days. Four days of burnouts occurred to direct the fire away from adjacent towns, residences, summer homes and National Park facilities and resources. The fire was declared 100% contained in October of 2003.

Results of the fire:

52,874 acres burned within the Robert Fire, 39,395 acres (75%) burned on Glacier National Park Lands, 13,123 acres (25%) burned on Flathead National Forest Lands, and 355 acres (<1%) burned on private lands. No residences or structures were lost.

1.2.1 Post Fire Rehabilitation Actions

Rehabilitation actions related to fire suppression tactics were initiated on both the Robert and Wedge Canyon Fires while the fires still burned. Work included cutting down burned trees in areas that could pose a hazard to firefighters, rehabilitating constructed fire lines and other clearings by placing wood debris and other vegetation back onto the bare areas, and constructing water bars or ditches to redirect surface water runoff to prevent soil erosion and grass seeding.

Interagency Burned Area Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation Actions (BAER)

A multi-agency team of USDA Forest Service and USDI Park Service resource specialists was assembled in August of 2003 to conduct an analysis of fire effects throughout the lands impacted by the fires. The team provided emergency treatments to areas within and adjacent to burned areas and prescribed post-fire monitoring treatments. The following activities on Forest Service lands were undertaken during the fall of 2003:

- Seed was aerially broadcasted on approximately 1,120 acres (678 acres on the Robert Fire and 442 acres on the Wedge Canyon Fire)
- Straw mulch was aerially applied on 10 acres in the Robert Fire

- Culvert cleaning was done throughout both fire areas. Approximately 140 culverts were stabilized in the Robert Fire, and four culverts in the Wedge Canyon Fire. Three culverts were replaced and one culvert was removed in the Robert Fire area.
- Approximately 18 diversion dips were installed on stream/road crossings in the Robert Fire areas and one in the Wedge Canyon Fire area
- Hazard warning signs were installed on roads and other locations at the burn perimeter and high risk areas
- Hazard trees were felled at the Great Northern Flats recreation site and 1,000 feet of fence was installed for public safety

The following fire rehabilitation treatments and monitoring are planned for 2004:

- Remove one culvert in the Wedge Canyon Fire area and replace four culverts in the Robert Fire area
- Trail Creek Slide re-vegetation
- Herbicide treatments on known noxious weed infestation sites
- Monitor seeding/re-vegetation effectiveness on both fires
- Monitor for Bull Trout habitat use downstream of hillslope treatments implemented to reduce sediment delivery to critical spawning reaches in the Wedge Fire
- Monitor effectiveness of noxious weed control treatments and map new populations for both fires
- Collect whitebark pine cones for future reforestation within fire areas
- Monitor whitebark pine and its habitat in both fires to determine fire effects on tree survival, cone production and potential for natural regeneration
- Monitor grizzly bear conflict management
- Hazard tree assessment/removal on trails
- Trail waterbars/maintenance assessment and treatment
- Road hazard tree assessment/treatment
- Storm Patrol monitoring

1.2.2 Post Fire Assessments

Forest Service resource specialists began evaluating conditions in the fire project areas immediately following the fires. The BAER analyses mentioned above compiled resource assessments on fire effects to soils, watersheds, vegetation, fisheries, and wildlife. Post fire inventories of the transportation system and recreation facilities occurred to obtain condition status. Field crews conducted surveys on forested stands to collect data on stand mortality and salvage viability. Using post fire aerial photography and landsat data, soil burn severities and vegetation burn severities were mapped to determine the changed conditions. The post fire assessments were completed by January of 2004, and the data was provided to the resource specialists for additional analysis in order to identify post fire conditions and provide rationale and recommendations for developing the proposed action.

In September of 2003, the Flathead National Forest began looking at the possibility of salvaging timber from certain burned areas of the Robert and Wedge Canyon Fires. Due to the workload associated with addressing other post fire projects on the Forest, a Forest Service Enterprise Team (T.E.A.M.S) was retained to assist the Flathead National Forest in completing the environmental analysis and developing the Environmental Impact Statement for the Robert-Wedge Post Fire Project.

1.2.3 The Flathead and Kootenai National Forest Rehabilitation Act

On November 10, 2003, President Bush approved special legislation attached to the Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act of 2004 identified under *Title IV – The Flathead and Kootenai National Forest Rehabilitation Act Public Law 108-108, HR 2691* (see Appendix A). The purpose of the Rehabilitation Act is to accomplish in a collaborative environment, the planning and rehabilitation of the Robert and Wedge Canyon Fires.

The procedures include:

- Except as otherwise provided by this title, the Secretary shall conduct projects under this title in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act and other applicable laws
- Conduct projects necessary to rehabilitate and restore lands, and may conduct salvage harvests in the North Fork Drainage of the Flathead National Forest
- If an Environmental Impact Statement is required for a project under this title, the Secretary of Agriculture shall not be required to study, develop, or describe any alternative to the proposed agency action
- To encourage meaningful participation during preparation of a project under this title, the Secretary shall facilitate collaboration among the State of Montana, local governments, Indian Tribes, and participation of interested persons, during the preparation of each project in a manner consistent with the Implementation Plan for the 10-year Comprehensive Strategy of a Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildfire Risks to Communities and the Environment (May 2002)
- Consistent with the Clean Water Act and Montana Code, the Secretary is not prohibited from implementing projects under this title due to a Total Maximum Daily Load as provided under section 303(d). The Secretary shall comply with any best management practices required by the State of Montana.
- If consultation is required under section 7 of the Endangered Species Act for a project under this title, the Secretary of Interior shall expedite and give precedence to such consultation over any similar requests
- Administrative Appeals (36CFR 215) shall apply to projects under this title

1.2.4 Project Area

The Robert-Wedge Post Fire Project area includes all National Forest System lands affected by the Robert and Wedge Canyon Fires, in addition to private and State inholdings within the fire areas. Management activities described in the proposed action would occur on specified National Forest System lands within the boundaries of these two project areas. For proposed

road access management activities, the project area will include the Canyon-McGinnis Grizzly Bear Subunit for the Robert Fire area, and the Lower Whale Grizzly Bear Subunit for the Wedge Canyon Fire area. These subunits are located within the Grizzly Bear Management Situation 1 identified as areas necessary for survival and recovery of the species (Forest Plan, pgs II-37-42). Cumulative effects areas may differ from the project areas for various resources. Refer to Figure 1. Project Vicinity Map. and Figure 2. Grizzly Bear Subunits.

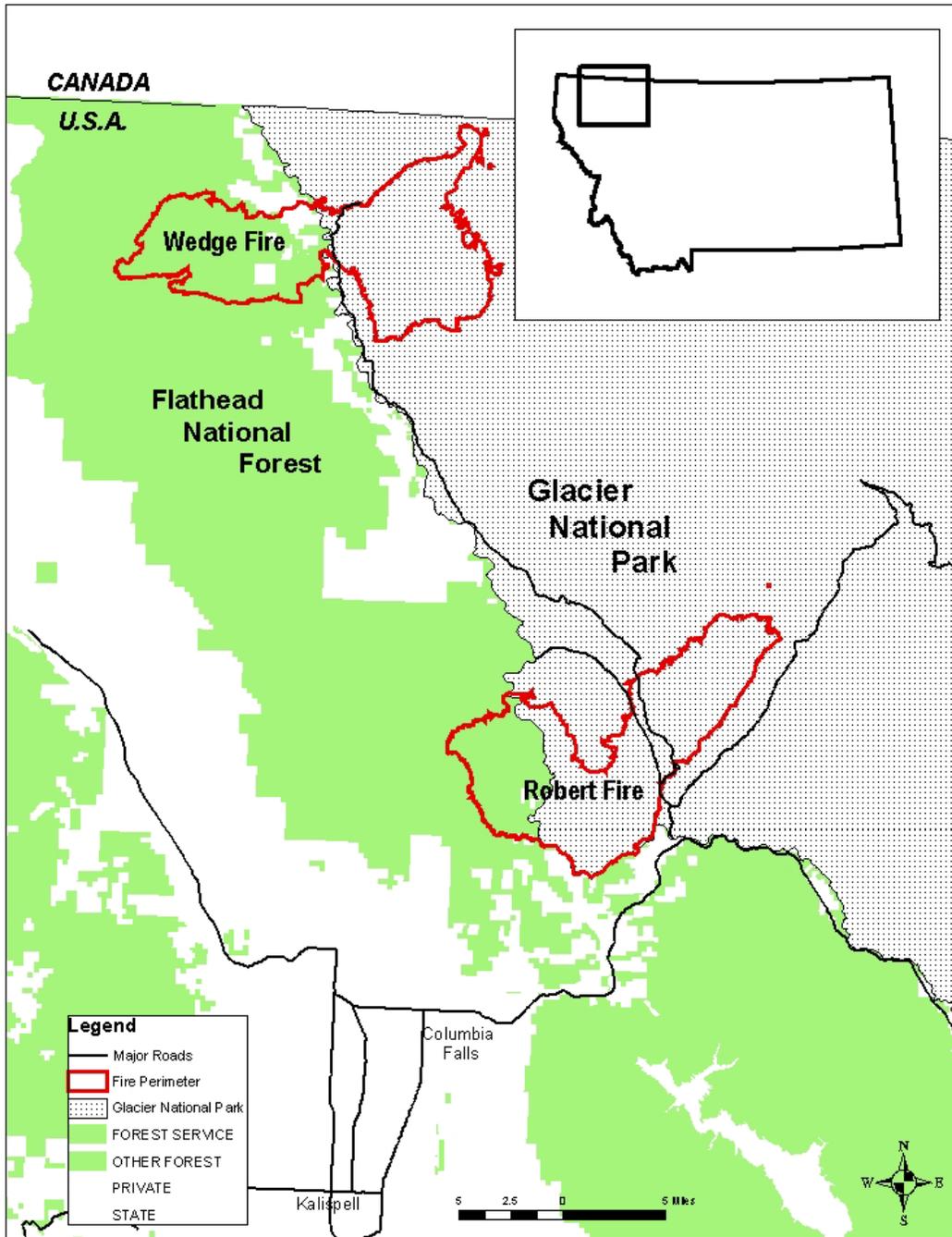


Figure 1. Project Vicinity Map.



Figure 2. Grizzly Bear Subunits.

1.3 Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is to salvage trees and rehabilitate lands within the Flathead National Forest administered portion of the Robert and Wedge Canyon fire areas as specified within the Flathead and Kootenai National Forest Rehabilitation Act. The need for action is to:

1. Recover merchantable wood fiber affected by the Robert and Wedge Canyon Fires in a timely manner to support local communities and contribute to the long term yield of forest products

This need for action is driven by management direction or more specifically goals/desired future conditions, as defined by the Flathead National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, hereafter known as the Forest Plan. According to the Forest Plan, one of these desired conditions is to provide a predictable and sustainable supply of timber products that is responsive to local industry and economies, consistent with other Forest management goals, objectives and standards (p. II-5, Forest Plan).

Merchantable timber is located within the two fire areas. However, due to expected rapid decay rates of fire-affected trees, timely harvest is essential to ensure their merchantability. Trees killed by the fire or by subsequent beetle outbreaks will lose a portion of their economic value as sawlogs each year following the fires. As a result, sawlog volume will decrease steadily over the next four years, with much of the small sawlog volume losing its value in one to two years following the fire. Larger trees and stands that experienced less intense or severe fire will likely remain merchantable longer, but they will also lose economic value over time as significant defects develop, resulting in substantial loss of value.

Some of the merchantable timber within the fire areas is included in Management Areas the Forest Plan has deemed as suitable for long-term timber management or where salvage can occur as long as specific resource values can be protected, enhanced, or maintained. The majority of proposed salvage areas are located in management area (MA) 15 which emphasizes timber management where economical and feasible as its primary goal. Other proposed salvage areas are located in MAs which allow for long-term timber management or allow for salvage logging. More detailed information regarding MAs and proposed salvage areas is provided in Chapter 2.

The proposed action contains the following specific activities designed to meet the purpose and need for this project:

- Salvage trees on approximately 5,800 acres for forest products.

2. Implement activities within the fire areas that will aid in the recovery of desired vegetation and site conditions

There is a need to accelerate the recovery of habitats that were eliminated or altered by the Robert and Wedge Canyon Fires. There is a high degree of concern that areas are restored to meet multiple objectives after a wildfire. Section 402 of the Flathead and Kootenai National Forest Rehabilitation Act, states that the Robert and Wedge Fires of 2003 caused extensive resource damage and the rehabilitation and recovery of burned areas needs to be completed in a timely manner in order to reduce long-term environmental impacts.

As a result, there is a need to plant native tree seedlings such as whitebark pine, western white pine, western larch, and Engelmann spruce and native shrubs in areas that are too far from seed sources and where natural regeneration may be slower than desired. There is also a

need to plant native species such as western larch in areas where lodgepole pine may out compete or is in overabundance, thus preventing desired species diversity.

In addition, there is a need to study the effects of vegetation recovery/huckleberry production by light soil scarification and slashing of unmerchantable woody material.

There is a need to reduce the spread of Douglas-fir bark beetle and spruce beetle in areas where live green trees remain within the fire areas that are vulnerable to infestation and mortality. Reducing the potential spread of beetles to green stands outside the fire areas is also a concern. Bark beetles will emerge from infested trees in the spring of 2004 and 2005. Both would search for the nearest source of food and breeding habitat. There is an estimated 2,000 acres of live green trees in the Robert Fire area and 2,500 acres in the Wedge Canyon Fire area, in addition to scattered live trees throughout the rest of the burned areas. These remaining live trees are of high value, providing wildlife habitat, forest structural diversity, seed sources, and site protection.

The proposed action contains the following specific activities designed to meet the above purpose and need for this project:

- After salvage, plant conifer seedlings in an estimated 1,300 acres of harvested areas to promote rapid reforestation and supplement natural regeneration with desired species.
- Plant conifer tree seedlings or shrubs on approximately 2,200 acres (outside of salvage units).
- 30-100 acres of treatments to promote huckleberry production
- Approximately 14 sites for application of spruce beetle pheromone traps or trap trees. In addition, an anti-attractant pheromone (MCH) may be used in scattered locations to discourage Douglas-fir beetle attacks.
- Salvage of about 1,900 acres of moderate to high spruce beetle susceptible areas and 445 acres of medium to high Douglas-fir beetle susceptible areas

Road management actions associated with this project

The proposed action also includes road closures and road decommissioning to provide for more secure habitat for grizzly bears. In February of 1995, Forest Plan Amendment 19 established forest wide objectives and standards for grizzly bear security to meet long term conservation needs of this threatened species. Standards were established for open motorized access density, total motorized access density and security core area in designated grizzly bear subunits.

The Robert Fire affected three grizzly bear subunits (Canyon McGinnis, Cedar-Teakettle, and Lower Big Creek), of which Canyon McGinnis does not currently meet or have decisions that would address Forest Plan standards. The Wedge Canyon Fire affected four grizzly bear subunits (Ketchikan, Upper Trail, Upper Whale Shorty, and Lower Whale) of which Lower Whale does not meet Forest Plan standards.

Proposed changes to road access in this project includes:

- Reducing the number of roads open to seasonal or yearlong wheeled motorized use (approximately 5 miles)
- Decommissioning roads (approximately 15 miles)

The proposed changes to road access do not meet current Forest Plan standards related to Amendment 19. As a result, project-specific amendments are proposed for both the Canyon McGinnis and Lower Whale grizzly bear subunits. Chapter 2 describes in detail the road access actions proposed within this project as well as the project-specific amendments.

1.4 Project Scope

Scope of Proposed Action

The Robert – Wedge Post Fire Project is a project level analysis. The scope is confined to addressing the issues and possible environmental consequences of the proposed action. This project will not address decisions made at higher levels, but could implement direction identified and provided at higher levels.

Scope of the Analysis

The Council of Environmental Quality regulations implementing the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) require that all federal agencies consider the following three types of actions to determine the scope of an EIS (40 CFR 1508.25).

Connected Actions include closely related actions that automatically trigger other actions that may require NEPA analysis; cannot or would not proceed unless other actions are taken previously or simultaneously; or are interdependent parts of a larger action and depend on the larger action for their justification. These actions are part of the proposed action and include all activities needed to complete the proposed project and provide for resource protection during and after project completion. Connected actions in the proposed action include:

- Temporary road construction, maintenance, rehabilitation, and monitoring associated with salvage activities
- Road access management, maintenance, rehabilitation, and monitoring associated with salvage activities and open road density objectives
- Tree harvest/removal and monitoring associated with salvage activities
- Soil recovery and site preparation activities including slashing, soil scarification, pile burning, and monitoring
- Tree and shrub planting, natural regeneration, and monitoring of revegetation success

Similar Actions are actions with similarities to other actions that provide a basis for evaluating their environmental consequences together, such as similar timing or geography. A number of these actions are identified and evaluated in Chapters 2 and 3. These are identified as current and reasonably foreseeable actions.

Cumulative Actions are past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions that may have cumulatively significant impacts when considered with the proposed action. Actions considered in the cumulative effects analysis are presented in Chapter 3.

1.5 Flathead National Forest Plan Direction

The Forest Plan and associated amendments embodies provisions of the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), its implementing regulations, and other guiding documents. The Forest Plan established long-term management direction for the Forest and specifies Forest-

wide and Management Areas (MA) goals, objectives, and standards that define desired conditions and provide for land uses and resource outputs. This Draft EIS tiers to the Forest Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision (1986) and the Plan update to include Amendments 1-23 (2001). The Robert and Wedge Canyon project areas are located in the following Management Areas:

Table 1. Total Acres by Management Area (MA) in the Robert Project Area and (%) proposed for treatment.

Management Area	Acres
2A	336 (3%)
3	1,137 (9%)
9	30 (<1%)
12	1,061 (8%)
15	8,538 (65%)
17	422 (3%)
18	1,493 (11%)
TOTAL	13,123 (100%)

Proposed Treatments for the Robert project area affect six of the Management Areas listed in Table 1. The goals and objectives are summarized below:

MA 2A – Unroaded lands suited for dispersed recreation that meet the Recreation Opportunity Classification of semiprimitive motorized. Allow removal of timber salvage, firewood, and other forest products from existing open roads when recreation values can be protected (approximately 123 acres proposed for salvage, eight acres proposed for planting outside salvage).

MA 3 – Nonforested lands and timberlands where timber management is uneconomical and/or the area is more suited for amenity value resources. Allow removal of timber salvage, firewood, and other forest products from existing open roads when amenity values can be protected or enhanced (approximately 386 acres proposed for salvage, 97 acres proposed for planting outside salvage).

MA 9 – Timberlands capable of providing white-tailed deer winter habitat. Implement the full range of wildlife habitat improvements (approximately 19 acres proposed for planting outside salvage).

MA 12 – Riparian areas consisting of aquatic, riparian, and a portion of terrestrial ecosystems along most perennial streams, lakes, ponds, marshlands, bogs, and some important seasonal flow streams.. Harvest timber only if riparian wildlife and fish habitat values can be maintained or improved (approximately 24 acres proposed for salvage, 154 proposed for planting outside salvage).

MA 15 – Timberlands where timber management with roads is economical and feasible. A variety of special wood products will be also made available through salvage sales, small sales and permits (approximately 2,567 acres proposed for salvage, 17 acres proposed for planting outside salvage).

MA 18 – Lands designated for wild, scenic, and recreation river management under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Manage the vegetative cover in this segment for visual quality, wildlife protection, and water quality (approximately 201 acres are proposed for planting).

Table 2. Total Acres by Management Area (MA) in the Wedge Canyon Project Area and (%) proposed for treatment.

Management Area	Acres
2A	2,083 (10%)
2B	215 (1%)
3	834 (4%)
7	382 (2%)
11	7,809 (36%)
12	592 (3%)
15	9,069 (42%)
18	426 (2%)
TOTAL	21,526 (100%)

Proposed Treatments for the Wedge Canyon project area affect all of the Management Areas listed in Table 2. The goals and objectives are summarized below:

MA 2A – Unroaded lands suited for dispersed recreation that meet the Recreation Opportunity Classification of semiprimitive nonmotorized. Allow removal of timber salvage, firewood, and other forest products from existing open roads when recreation values can be protected (approximately 73 acres proposed for salvage, 100 acres proposed for planting outside salvage).

MA 2B - Unroaded lands suited for dispersed recreation that meet the Recreation Opportunity Classification of semiprimitive motorized. Allow removal of timber salvage, firewood, and other forest products from existing open roads when recreation values can be protected (approximately 58 acres proposed for salvage, 80 acres proposed for planting outside salvage).

MA 3 – Nonforest lands and timberlands where timber management is uneconomical and/or the area is more suited for amenity value resources. Allow removal of timber salvage, firewood, and other forest products from existing open roads when amenity values can be

protected or enhanced (approximately 196 acres proposed for salvage, 379 acres proposed for planting outside salvage).

MA 7 – Timberlands in areas of high scenic value. For timber harvest, use appropriate mitigation measures to achieve or maintain the Partial Retention Visual Quality Objective as defined by the appropriate Visual Absorption Capability (approximately 123 acres proposed for salvage, 91 acres proposed for planting outside salvage).

MA 11 – Lands providing good grizzly bear habitat which consists of natural, relatively open, undisturbed (by humans) areas with good cover and an abundance of perennial succulent herbs and/or fruit bearing shrubs. Provide the full range of habitat improvement practices, including shrub planting to maintain and enhance habitat components for grizzly bear (approximately 142 acres proposed for planting).

MA 12 – Riparian areas consisting of aquatic, riparian, and a portion of terrestrial ecosystems along most perennial streams, lakes, ponds, marshlands, bogs, and some important seasonal flow streams. Harvest timber only if riparian wildlife and fish habitat values can be maintained or improved (approximately 18 acres proposed for salvage, 107 acres proposed for planting outside salvage).

MA 15 – Timberlands where timber management with roads is economical and feasible. A variety of special wood products will be also made available through salvage sales, small sales and permits (approximately 2,260 acres proposed for salvage, 750 acres proposed for planting outside of salvage).

MA 18 - Lands designated for wild, scenic, and recreation river management under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Manage the vegetative cover in this segment for visual quality, wildlife protection, and water quality (approximately 2 acres are proposed for planting).

1.6 Public Involvement

On January 30, 2004, a scoping letter detailing a proposed action for an Environmental Impact Statement was mailed to approximately 260 individuals, organizations and government agencies that have previously indicated an interest in receiving notification of proposed activities on the Hungry Horse and Glacier View Ranger Districts. A legal notice soliciting public comments was published in the Daily Inter Lake Newspaper on January 30, 2004. A second legal notice soliciting public comments was published in the Daily Inter Lake Newspaper on February 4, 2004, and a corrected Legal Notice was published in the Daily Inter Lake Newspaper on February 10, 2004. A Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was published in the Federal Register on January 30, 2004. Concurrently, several news releases pertaining to the proposed action as well as ongoing fire rehabilitation activities independent of this proposed action were sent to the local news media for publication and broadcasting throughout Northwest Montana. Numerous articles were published in the Daily Inter Lake, Hungry Horse News, and the Missoulian newspapers. Local television and radio stations also aired several stories about the proposed project as well as ongoing post fire activities.

The Robert Wedge Post Fire Project proposal was included in the Flathead Forest's Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) that was published in the Daily Inter Lake on February 4, 2004. The Flathead National Forest hosted an open house on February 17, 2004 in Kalispell, Montana to share information, answer questions and accept comments for this proposed action and the proposed action for Westside Reservoir Post-Fire Project. Approximately 80 individuals attended. Forest Service personnel met with representatives of the following

interest groups; Flathead Forestry Project, Swan View Coalition, and the Montana Logging Association. In addition, Forest Service personnel attended a biannual meeting with the North Fork Interlocal group in 2004 to discuss activities in the North Fork, including this proposed action. Forest Service personnel have also responded to specific information requests by individuals on the Proposed Action in various forms (letters, email, phone calls).

Approximately 80 responses were received. Comments pertinent to the project proposal have been included for consideration for the proposed action. Comments not related to this project proposal were deemed outside the project scope and are not included in this analysis. During the month of February 2004, an independent questionnaire/survey developed by Rep. Verdell Jackson was sent to the participants of the collaboration workshop held in January of 2004 (*Refer to Other Related Efforts below*). Of the 88 participants, 51 returned the survey of which the results were tabulated by the Flathead Chamber of Commerce.

Comments not related to this project proposal were deemed outside the project scope and are not included in this analysis (*Summary of the Content Analysis derived from comment response letters is available in the project records*). The Forest Service responded to everyone who commented with a letter of appreciation.

Other Related Efforts

The Flathead and Kootenai National Forest Rehabilitation Act directs the Flathead National Forest officials to complete the environmental analysis for the Robert and Wedge Canyon Fires through a collaborative community process. The Flathead National Forest submitted notices on November 30, December 1, and 2, of 2003 in the Daily Inter Lake Newspaper and local radio/television stations requesting individuals to participate in work group meetings during the period of January 5-10 of 2004 to develop management options for restoration and timber salvage projects in the Robert and Wedge Fires. Concurrently, several news releases discussing the development and progress of the collaboration process were sent to the local news media for publication and broadcast in northwest Montana throughout January and February of 2004.

One hundred and eight individuals signed up to participate. Participants were encouraged to commit to attending the four work group meetings during the week of January 5. A total of 88 individuals representing diverse interests committed and were randomly divided amongst eight smaller working groups. The goal for each working group was to first develop ideas for restoration, salvage, and road management activities within the two fire areas, then consolidate their ideas with those of the other working groups, and eventually as an entire group identify what all could agree upon through the consensus process defined in the introduction letter mailed out to participants on December 23, 2003 (*Refer to Project Records*).

As a result, the following statements guided the development of the proposed action:

- Coordinate salvage entries with other rehabilitation treatments
- Protect sites as necessary with horizontal placement and retention of wood debris
- Complete salvage harvest in a timely manner to maximize economic return
- Use best management practices to minimize soil erosion and protect water quality
- Where Inland Native Fish Strategy rules can be met in riparian areas, allow salvage, restoration, rehabilitation, and reforestation

During the fall of 2003, Flathead National Forest and Glacier National Park provided five bus tours for the public of the Robert Fire area to provide a perspective on fires, fire management, and practical/political challenges facing fire managers, firefighters, and residents. Of 195 participants, 115 completed a one page evaluation form of the tour which included questions on what issues should the Forest Service and the Park Service concentrate on in the fire area, and a question on if participants like the idea of post fire salvage. (*Refer to Project Records for Evaluation Summaries*).

1.7 Issues

For purposes of NEPA analysis, an issue is an effect or a perceived effect, risk, or hazard on a physical, biological or economic resource. The interdisciplinary team reviewed and compiled a list of potential issues based upon comments from the public, organizations, and government agencies. These issues were then evaluated against the following criteria to determine the appropriate methodology for resolution:

1. Is the issue relevant to, and within the scope of the purpose and need, the decisions being made, and does it pertain directly to the Proposed Action?
2. Is the issue already decided by law, regulation, or existing plans, or not supported by scientific or factual evidence?
3. Could the issue be resolved through design and location of activities in the Proposed Action or mitigated by avoiding the impact by not taking action, minimizing the impact by limiting the action, rectifying the impact by rehabilitation, reducing the impact by maintenance, or compensating for the impact by replacement?

The issues determined to be associated with criteria 2 above will not be addressed in this DEIS. These issues are considered beyond the scope of this proposal or have been determined inappropriate. Issues determined as falling under criteria 3 have been incorporated in the proposed action and/or are discussed in Chapter 3.

Under the Flathead and Kootenai National Forest Rehabilitation Act, if an EIS is required, the Flathead National Forest shall not be required to study, or develop, or describe any alternative to the proposed agency action. Typically, alternatives are developed to sharply define the issues and provide a clear basis of choice among options for the decision maker and the public. With the above legislation not requiring any alternatives to the proposed action, it is imperative that the agency clearly describe and evaluate the context of the issues and their associated effects within the DEIS. This ensures that the decision maker and the public clearly understand the issues and their effects. The following issues have been determined to fall within criteria 1 above and will be addressed in the DEIS:

Unroaded areas – Proposed salvage may compromise values of these unroaded areas; creating habitat fragmentation, impacts to recreational opportunities, and the loss of unique ecological values.

Issue Indicators: acres of salvage in unroaded areas, changes to natural integrity, apparent naturalness, remoteness, solitude, primitive recreation opportunities, manageability, and boundaries in unroaded areas

Management Areas unsuitable for long-term timber production – Some of the proposed salvage occurs within Forest Plan management areas that are not designated for long term timber management. These management areas allow for salvage harvest, but only as long as resource values important in these areas are maintained, protected, or enhanced. Some of

these resource values are related to dispersed recreation (MA 2A and 2B), amenities (MA 3) such as visual quality and non-game wildlife species, and riparian (MA 12). There is concern that salvage harvest may affect these resource values.

Issue Indicators: acres salvaged in MA 2A, 2B, 3, and 12

Down wood and snag habitat – Proposed salvage may affect post fire habitat for wildlife. Because of the large numbers of trees burned within the Robert and Wedge Fire areas, there is a potential lack of both large live and dead trees critical to some wildlife species and for other ecosystem functions and recovery. There is also a concern for protecting the “structural integrity” of burned late seral/older forests that are important for wildlife as well as important functional elements in biological and physical processes.

Issue Indicators: Acres of snag habitat treated; amount of snags and down wood left within units

Economics – The logging systems proposed for salvage may affect the value of timber sale contract(s).

Issue Indicators: acres by logging system; volume harvested

Road closures and road decommissioning – Proposed road closures and decommissioning within the Lower Whale and Canyon McGinnis Grizzly Bear Subunits would not entirely meet existing Forest Plan standards (without approval of the project-specific amendments in the proposed action) and may affect grizzly bear habitat. There is also a concern that proposed road closures may affect motorized forest access for the public.

Issue Indicators: miles of road open to conventional motorized use yearlong

Site productivity – Site productivity is based on the ability of the soil to supply air, water, and nutrients needed to sustain soil micro-organisms and consequently plant growth. Proposed salvage on burned soils could result in increased surface erosion, soil displacement, and soil compaction, thus reducing infiltration rates and water holding capacity. Removal of large wood material (both standing and down) could also affect site productivity within salvage units.

Issue Indicators: Percent detrimental soil disturbance

Water quality and fisheries- Proposed salvage, rehabilitation and road access management actions may increase sediment to streams and may affect water quality and fish habitat. Removal of large wood material close to riparian areas may affect future sustainable levels of large woody debris in streams.

Issue Indicators: potential sediment yield increase; potential water yield increase; potential nutrient yield increase; amount of large woody debris within Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCA)

Noxious weeds- Proposed salvage, rehabilitation, and road access management actions may facilitate the spread of noxious weeds.

Issue Indicators: level of risk of potential noxious weed spread

1.8 Decisions to be Made

The Responsible Official for this proposal is the Forest Supervisor of the Flathead National Forest. After the close of the draft EIS review and comment period, the Forest Supervisor will consider comments submitted by the public, interested organizations, and government

agencies (federal, state, and local) and respond to these comments in the final EIS. In addition, based on the findings on the final EIS, the Forest Supervisor will make the following decisions documented in the Record of the Decision:

- The extent, if any, of commercial salvage and associated activities (e.g. planting/fuels reduction), temporary road construction, conifer and shrub plantings, use of pheromone-based management treatments, and road management access activities.
- Identify what, if any, resource protection measures will accompany the Decision
- Identify what if any, monitoring requirements will be included in the Decision
- Whether a project specific Forest Plan amendment is required, the nature of the amendment, and whether the amendment would be a significant change to the Forest Plan.