

United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

R-1

Reply To: 1570 (215)

Date: September 25, 1997

Subject: Bald Mountain Ecosystem Restoration Proposal
Appeal #97-01-00-0096, Beaverhead-Deerlodge NF

To: Appeal Deciding Officer

This is my recommendation on disposition of the appeal filed by Sara Jane Johnson on behalf of Native Ecosystems Council protesting the Jefferson District Ranger's Decision Notice (DN) for the Bald Mountain Ecosystem Restoration Proposal on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forests.

The District Ranger's decision implements Alternative II which will harvest approximately .81 MMBF of timber, prescribe burn approximately 1,500 acres, and plant about 40 acres of bitterbush.

My review was conducted pursuant to, and in accordance with, 36 CFR 215.19 to ensure the analysis and decision are in compliance with applicable laws, regulations, policy, and orders. The Appeal Record, including the Appellants' objections and recommended changes, has been thoroughly reviewed.

APPEAL SUMMARY

The Appellants allege violations of Forest Plan direction, the National Forest Management Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

The Appellants request the decision be remanded. If the project is pursued, the Appellants request appropriate Forest Plan amendments be provided and any NEPA violations occurring with this project be corrected.

An informal meeting was held on August 22, but no resolution was reached. No interested party comments were received.

FINDINGS

My recommendation is based upon the following evaluation:

The decision is generally easy to understand. Reasons for making the decision are well laid out by a description of each activity followed by a short description of the need. The existing condition is well described. The desired condition is consistent with the Forest plan goals, objectives and Management Area emphasis.

The DN briefly describes required mitigation and monitoring. However, the Environmental Assessment (EA) describes mitigation in more detail.

The map of the project area is adequate, but it would have been helpful to have a map of the broader analysis area.

I conclude the decision is generally easy to follow and adequately disclosed.

Purpose of the Proposal and Comprehension of Benefits

The DN/EA describes the purpose and reasons for the proposal as a restoration project to restore the forest to a more historic park-like condition through commercial timber harvest and prescribed burns. By treating vegetative communities which are not in desired condition, the Bald Mountain ecosystem restoration project will move the area toward the desired conditions, by reducing susceptibility to fire and insect attack, improve shrubs for a variety of wildlife, provide timber and contribute to the local economy.

I conclude the decision documentation may have been more clear, but it is adequate and it supports the need for the proposed action.

Consistency With Policy, Direction, and Supporting Information

The Project is consistent with Forest Plan goals, objectives, and standards, as well as goals and standards for Management Areas C-3, D-2, and E-1. However, tracking the applicable sections back to the Forest Plan would have been easier by providing references in the EA and DN.

Ecosystem management principles can be seen in the development of the purpose and need and design of the project. The selected alternative will move the area toward the desired conditions for the management areas and meets the purpose and need, as well as the objectives for the project. Though adequate, the analysis of the no-action alternative could have been strengthened in considering ecosystem processes, most notably the soils discussion, since there is associated road gravelling and obliteration proposed.

The Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) adequately explains the determination of no significance in both context and intensity, using information from the EA. The EA describes mitigation measures common to all alternatives.

I conclude the project is consistent with all legal and regulatory requirements as well as Forest Service policy.

Effectiveness of Public Participation Activities and Use of Comments

The public was notified of the proposal through use of the quarterly proposal list, legal ads, news releases, and letters to interested parties. Ten Tribal representatives; the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks; the Bureau of Land Management; and the Montana Department of State Lands were contacted.

Comments obtained from public scoping were used in issue identification and alternative development. The response to comments could have more clearly disclosed how specific scoping comments were used to identify issues and develop alternatives.

I conclude public involvement efforts were appropriate in scope for this project.

RECOMMENDATION

I recommend the District Ranger's decision be affirmed and the Appellants' requested relief be denied.

/s/ John T. Drake

JOHN T. DRAKE
Appeal Reviewing Officer
Director, Recreation, Minerals, Lands, Heritage and Wilderness