



File Code: 1570-1 (218)

#06-01-00-0021

Date: November 23, 2005

Julia Altemus
Resource Specialist
Montana Logging Association
P.O. Box 1716
Kalispell, MT 59903

Dear Ms. Altemus:

This letter is in response to your objection to the Middle East Fork Hazardous Fuel Reduction project located on the Bitterroot National Forest. First, I want to thank you for your ongoing interest in the Middle East Fork project. You are one of many who have strongly held opinions about this project. From the initial community conversations and continuing through today, there has been significant public involvement in discussing what actions should be included in this project. This public input is a key component of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (HFRA).

The objection review process is an opportunity for me to review remaining issues and suggested remedies, prior to the issuance of a Record of Decision by Forest Supervisor Dave Bull, the Responsible Official. I debated whether to meet with objectors during the 30-day objection review period. One objector invited the Forest Service to meet to resolve his objection. Other objectors expressed a willingness to meet, but did not request a meeting. The regulations at 36 CFR 218.10(a) state: "Prior to the issuance of the Reviewing Officer's written response, either the Reviewing Officer or the objector may request to meet to discuss issues raised in the objection and potential resolution. The Reviewing Officer has the discretion to determine whether or not adequate time remains in the review period to make a meeting with the objector practical. All meetings are open to the public." Fortunately, the objectors provided clearly stated issues. The few who provided suggested remedies also clearly explained their ideas. As a result, I decided I needed no clarification of what was submitted in the objections for my review and consideration in the 30-day review process set forth in the regulations implementing HFRA.

Several of the objectors did suggest the involvement of an independent mediator/facilitator during the process. During the past 3 weeks, the Forest Service contracted with a private consultant to explore the likelihood of success in resolving the remaining concerns related to the project. The outcome of discussions with the objectors and other parties interested in the project indicated that there are indeed deeply held diverse opinions and feelings related to this project. It is my opinion that a public meeting during the 30-day review process would simply reiterate those diverse feelings and not necessarily provide new information to consider while reviewing the objections. As a result, I have decided not to have a public meeting prior to my review of the objections.



In accordance with HFRA and the 30-day time frame required by regulation, I have reviewed the project in light of the information you presented in your objection letter. Attached to this letter you will find a summary response to the issues and suggested remedies you raised. I find that your issues have been addressed in the EIS and/or project record and that the project is in compliance with existing laws, regulations, and policy.

In closing, I again want to express my appreciation for your involvement in the public process and for the information you provided in your objection. The Forest Supervisor will make a decision within the next 2 months.

This response is not subject to further administrative review by the Forest Service or the Department of Agriculture [36 CFR 218.10(b)(2)].

Sincerely,

/s/ Abigail R. Kimbell
ABIGAIL R. KIMBELL
Reviewing Officer

Attachment

cc:
Responsible Official
Forest Coordinator