Geographic Area Desired Conditions Component

Introduction

While the forest-wide desired conditions indicate broad trends which we would expect to see over the next 10 to 15 years, we recognize that individual places across the Flathead National Forest have their own unique characteristics and conditions. These places, referred to as "geographic areas," define a landscape that people associate with on the Forest. Identifying these areas gives us the opportunity to fine-tune our forest-wide management to better respond to more local conditions and situations. The Flathead National Forest has been divided into the following six geographic areas (see vicinity map available at the end of this introduction):

Plan Components

Desired Conditions
Objectives
Suitability of Areas
Special Areas
Guidelines

- Hungry Horse
- Middle Fork Flathead
- North Fork Flathead
- Salish Mountains
- South Fork Flathead
- Swan Valley

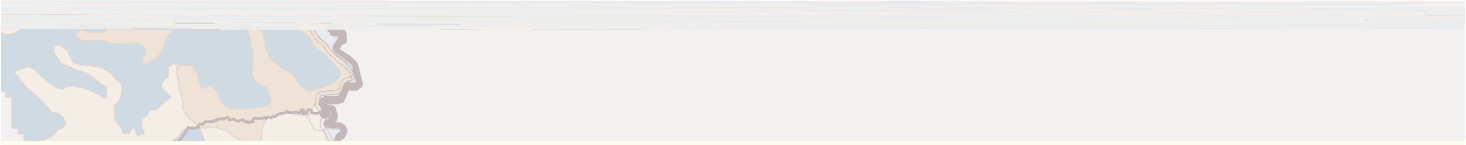
Geographic Areas

Each geographic area description provides the following:

Geographic area map shows management areas (defined in Chapter 2), and acres of each, location of unique features, primary population centers, and major rivers and roads.

Unique characteristics and general overview provides a brief characterization of the area such as landscape features, primary land uses and ownership patterns, resource and recreational uses, and an indication of social and economic factors.

Geographic area desired conditions describe what we want to achieve in specific geographic areas that are not necessarily covered by forest-wide desired conditions. While all resources have been considered, the only desired conditions specified here are those that are not adequately addressed by forest-wide desired conditions.



Hungry Horse Geographic Area

Unique Characteristics

- Hungry Horse Dam and Reservoir on the South Fork Flathead River. The dam impounds a reservoir, which is 35 miles long and covers over 23,000 acres.
- There is a popular 110-mile-long driving loop around the Hungry Horse Reservoir that provides access to areas of the reservoir.
- The area has a high quality fishery with a healthy bull trout population.
- The 15,000 acre Jewel Basin Hiking Area, designated in 1970, contains 38 miles of hiking trails without motorized, mechanized, or stock use.
- The Coram Experimental Forest has been set aside for forest/ecological research purposes. This 8,000-acre area also contains a Research Natural Area (RNA). Coram Experimental Forest and RNA has been designated as a Biosphere Reserve within the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Man and Biosphere Program.

General Overview

This geographic area provides for a wide variety of recreational opportunities, from the primitive experiences in the wilderness to driving for pleasure on the open loop roads that surround the Hungry Horse Reservoir. Approximately 46 percent of the geographic area is within designated/recommended wilderness or other primitive settings. Fifty-four percent of the geographic area offers opportunities for higher intensities of resource management.

Lands on the west side of the Hungry Horse Reservoir are some of the most productive timber lands on the Flathead National Forest. The crest of the Swan Range runs north-south and provides limited motorized recreation in a semi-primitive setting.

The section of Highway 2 between Hungry Horse and West Glacier provides the gateway to Glacier National Park. This corridor has high use during the summer. There is a growing number of sub-divisions and developments occurring along this corridor.

Aeneas Creek has been found eligible for further study for potential designation into the Wild and Scenic River System[1].

[1] Information on the outstanding remarkable value (ORV), for which the river was found eligible and its potential classification, is in the Plan Set of Documents.

Desired Conditions

Watershed, Fisheries, and Aquatic Habitat

- Non-native fish (primarily rainbow trout and brook trout) and hybridized fish are absent in high mountain lakes. These lakes would only contain native fish species such as bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout. Handkerchief Lake would contain the only non-native fish population (artic grayling).
- Above Hungry Horse Dam, human-created fish migration barriers would not exist within the South Fork watershed.
- Angling opportunities for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout in the South Fork Flathead River and Hungry Horse Reservoir would exist.

Wildlife and Plant Species Diversity

- Elk habitat would be sufficient to maintain thriving herds. Priority winter range areas would include Firefighter/Hungry Horse Mountains and the Dry Park/Crossover Mountain, and other areas identified through coordination with Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (MT FWP). Periodic habitat improvement projects would be developed to insure that suitable conditions persist.
- Known active bald eagle nesting site(s) along the Hungry Horse Reservoir would persist and the population would expand to other areas in the South Fork Flathead River drainage.

Fire

- The use of wildland fire and appropriate management response including suppression is an available tool across the entire geographic area. This will help maintain and/or enhance ecological function to the extent that fuel and weather conditions permit an acceptable risk to recreation and other resource values.

Developed and Dispersed Recreation

Jewel Basin Hiking Area

- The Jewel Basin Hiking Area would continue as a hiking-only area.
- Camp Misery and Clayton Creek would continue to be the primary access points into the Jewel Basin Hiking Area, with Wheeler and Graves Creek as secondary access.
- Historic institutional outfitting and guiding use would be authorized under special use permits. New commercial and institutional uses would not be entertained. Recreation events would not occur.

Hungry Horse Reservoir Area

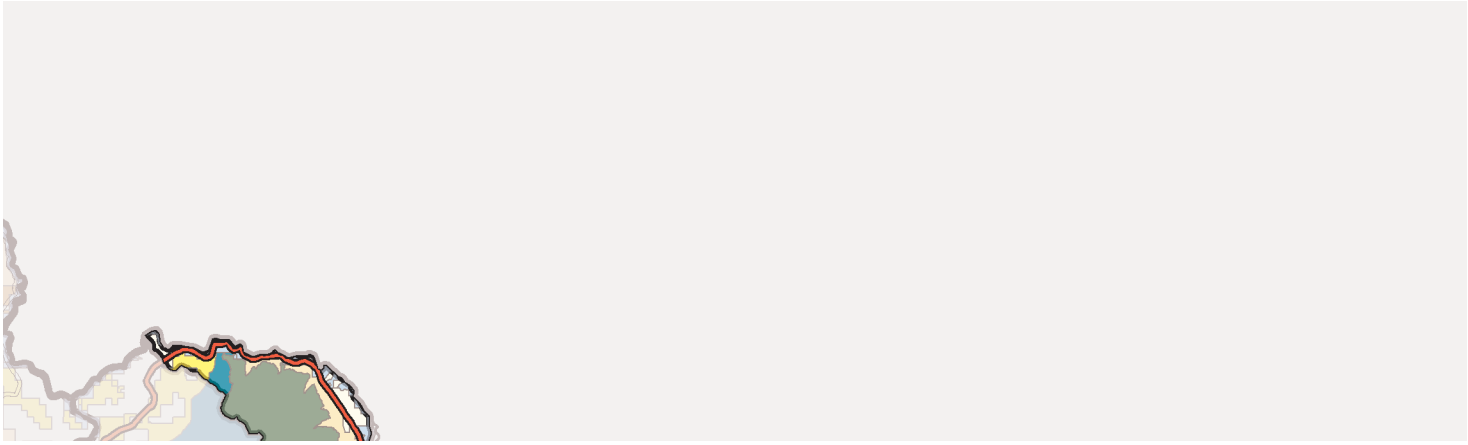
- The north end of the Hungry Horse reservoir has more recreational development and use than the south end of the reservoir.
- New developed or dispersed recreation sites would be limited, and existing sites would be expanded or reconstructed before new development.
- The loop road around the Hungry Horse Reservoir has numerous vistas to view the reservoir and surrounding landscape and allows for passenger vehicles to travel in a moderate degree of user comfort and conveniences.

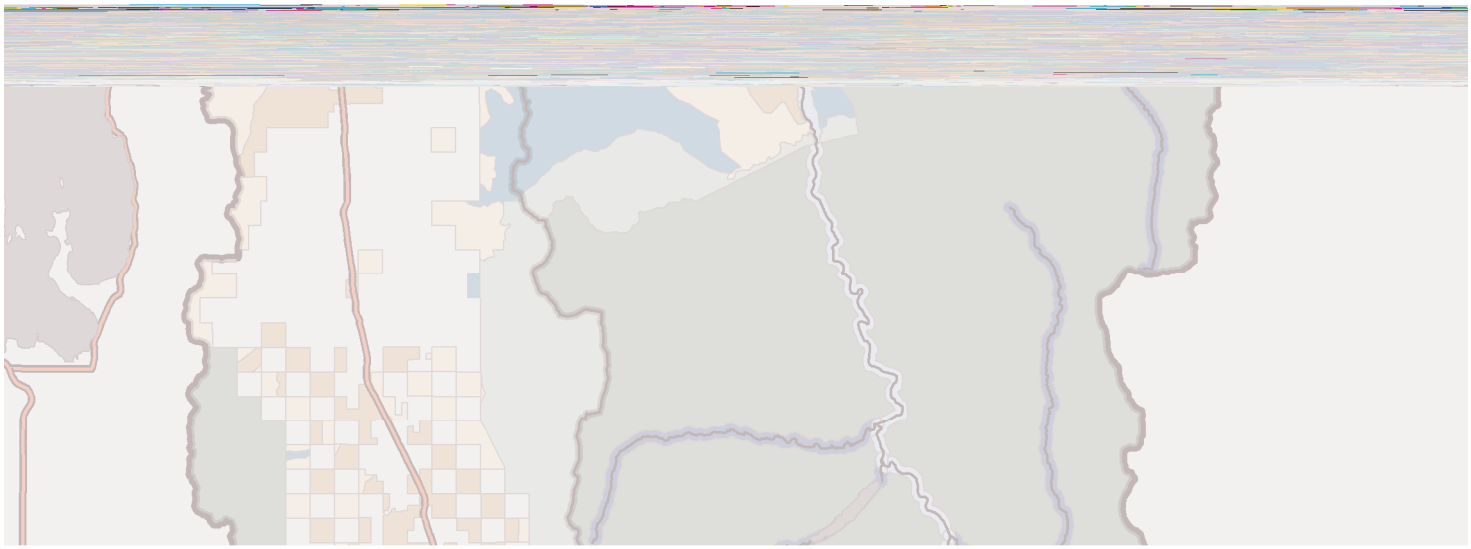
Access and Travel Management

- Portions of this geographic area are within backcountry management areas (MA 2.2) which provides primarily non-motorized recreation opportunities. However, the following motorized trails currently exist, are suitable, and still provide a semi-primitive recreation experience (table 5 below).

Table 5: Motorized trails in the Hungry Horse GA MA 2.2.

Trail Name and Number	Type of Use Allowed





Middle Fork Flathead Geographic Area

Unique Characteristics

- Over 75 percent of the geographic area is in the Great Bear Wilderness and Bob Marshall Wilderness, and is part of the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex (BMWC).
- The Shaffer Meadows Airstrip is the only open airstrip within the BMWC.
- The area has a high quality fishery with a healthy bull trout population.
- The Middle Fork Flathead River, a designated Wild and Scenic River, is a free-flowing river which originates in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. The river provides a wide range of floating experiences.
- The area has some of the highest densities of grizzly bears in the lower 48 states and is key grizzly bear habitat.
- The Nyaak Flats floodplain on the Middle Fork hosts a globally significant research effort by the University of Montana.
- The State Highway 2 corridor is an important transportation, communication, and utility corridor.
- The Schafer Meadows Ranger Station are seasonally operating historical facilities. These, along with several backcountry guard stations, and an intricate trail system for hiking, backpacking, horseback riding, and wilderness management, offer a view and preservation of a lifestyle from the past.

General Overview

The Great Bear Wilderness and a portion of the Bob Marshall Wilderness, make up the vast majority of this geographic area and contain world-class wilderness and wild and scenic rivers. This area is largely wild and undeveloped due to the Bob Marshall Wilderness and Badger Two Medicine area to the south and east, Glacier National Park to the north, and the vast steep terrain. This area is popular for recreational use. It is a focal point for hiking, horseback riding, hunting, fishing, and for river float trips on the Wild and Scenic Middle Fork Flathead River.

Approximately 93 percent of the geographic area is within designated/recommended wilderness or other primitive settings. Seven percent of the geographic area offers opportunities for higher intensities or resource management.

The Montana State Highway 2 corridor, on the northern boundary of this geographic area, is a busy area separating Glacier National Park on the north and the Great Bear Wilderness to the south. This corridor includes heavy recreational use on the Middle Fork River, heavy recreational and general traffic on the state highway, the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe railroad line, a natural gas line, electrical transmission lines, and other utility and communications facilities.

Gateway Creek has been found eligible for further study for potential designation to the Wild and Scenic River System[1].

The Nyaak Flats floodplain, located on the Middle Fork River on private land, national forest land, and within Glacier National Park, is one of the most studied floodplains in the world. It is the focus of continuing research by the University of Montana.

Desired Conditions

Watershed, Fisheries, and Aquatic Habitat

- Bear Creek, Granite Creek, Lodgepole Creek, Morrison Creek, Dolly Varden Creek, Shafer Creek, Clack Creek, Bowl Creek, Strawberry Creek, and Long Creek provide high quality bull trout habitat and production. Native fish production, stream channel conditions and water quality are in excellent condition.
- Adfluvial populations of bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout remain steady or improve despite changed ecological conditions in Flathead Lake. Cooperative efforts reduce non-native fish within the Flathead River System.
- Non-native fish (primarily rainbow trout and brook trout) and hybridized fish are absent in high mountain lakes and very scarce in the lower river system.

Fire

- The use of wildland fire and appropriate management response including suppression is an available tool across the entire geographic area. This will help maintain and/or enhance ecological function to the extent that fuel and weather conditions permit an acceptable risk to recreation and other resource values.

[1] Information on the outstanding remarkable value (ORV), for which the river was found eligible and its potential classification is in the Plan Set of Documents.

Wilderness

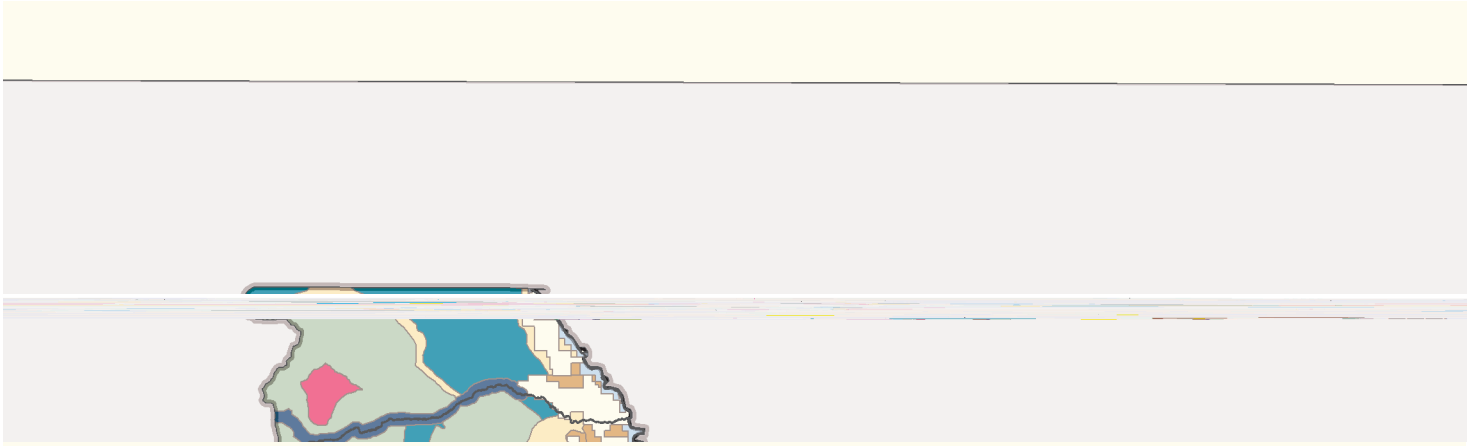
- Work centers and guard stations within the wilderness would continue to be used for wilderness management and help interpret the history of wilderness management.
- Impacts from recreational use would be managed by the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex Wilderness Plan "Limits of Acceptable Change" (LAC).

Wild and Scenic Rivers

- The Middle Fork of the Flathead would be managed per the Flathead River Wild and Scenic River Recreation Direction. Commercial outfitted river use, at levels determined in the River Recreation Direction, would continue to be a key element in providing public access to the river.
- Recreational river use, such as rafting or kayaking, on the Middle Fork is compatible with streamside angling.

Access and Travel Management

- Trailheads and other recreation facilities would provide for user safety and public information and education.
- The area provides opportunities for winter motorized use consistent with the winter motorized recreation map, located in the Plan Set of Documents.
- The Shaffer Meadows Airstrip would continue to provide public and administrative access for small aircraft at current use levels.



North Fork Flathead Geographic Area

Unique Characteristics

- The North Fork Flathead River is a free-flowing, designated Wild and Scenic River that originates in Canada and is co-managed with Glacier National Park.
- Contains seven significant wetland complexes; some of the least impacted wetlands in the Flathead River watersheds.
- The Big Creek Work Center is currently occupied by Glacier Institute, which provides quality environmental education in cooperation with the Forest Service and other resource management agencies.
- The area has some of the highest densities of grizzly bears in the lower 48 states and is key grizzly bear habitat.
- Shares a border with Glacier National Park and an international border with Canada.
- Tuchuck RNA which is a reference habitat for a subalpine larch/subalpine fir habitat type.

General Overview

All of the National Forest System Lands are on the west side of the North Fork Flathead River. Land on the east side of the river is managed by Glacier National Park. The combination of numerous inventoried roadless areas and its proximity to Glacier National Park make this geographic area a wild and undeveloped place. Fire has played a major role in the area since 1910, and its effects are clearly visible.

Approximately 52 percent of the geographic area is within designated/recommended wilderness or other primitive settings. Forty-eight percent of the geographic area offers opportunities for higher intensities of resource management activities.

The North Fork valley bottom is a large portion of private lands that are being subdivided. More and more people are building homes here with the unintended effects of habitat fragmentation and loss of wildness and potential effects on grizzly bear and wolf. Significant amounts of industrial private and state lands occur on the western, southern, and eastern perimeters of the area. The small community of Polebridge is within the geographic area. Other nearby communities include Hungry Horse and Columbia Falls.

Yakinikak, Trail, and Nokio creeks have been found eligible for further study for potential designation into the Wild and Scenic River System[1].

Desired Conditions

Watershed, Fisheries, and Aquatic Habitat

- Trail Creek, Whale Creek, Red Meadow Creek, Coal Creek, and Big Creek provide high quality bull trout habitat and production.
- Watershed conditions are improved in Coal Creek and Big Creek based upon recommendations in the Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) Watershed Restoration Plan.
- Adfluvial populations of bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout remain steady or improve despite changed ecological conditions in Flathead Lake.

Wildlife and Plant Species Diversity

- Mud Lake, Teepee Lake, and Hay Creek Wetland Complexes, which possess significant wetland and botanical values, would be evaluated for "Special Interest Area" designation.

Access and Travel Management

- Red Meadow and Trail Creek roads would continue to provide access to the North Fork for a variety of uses including recreation opportunities and escape routes in the event of large wildfires.
- Portions of this geographic area are within backcountry management areas (MA 2.2) which provides primarily non-motorized recreation opportunities. However, the following motorized trails currently exist, are suitable, and still provide a semi-primitive recreation experience (table 6 below).

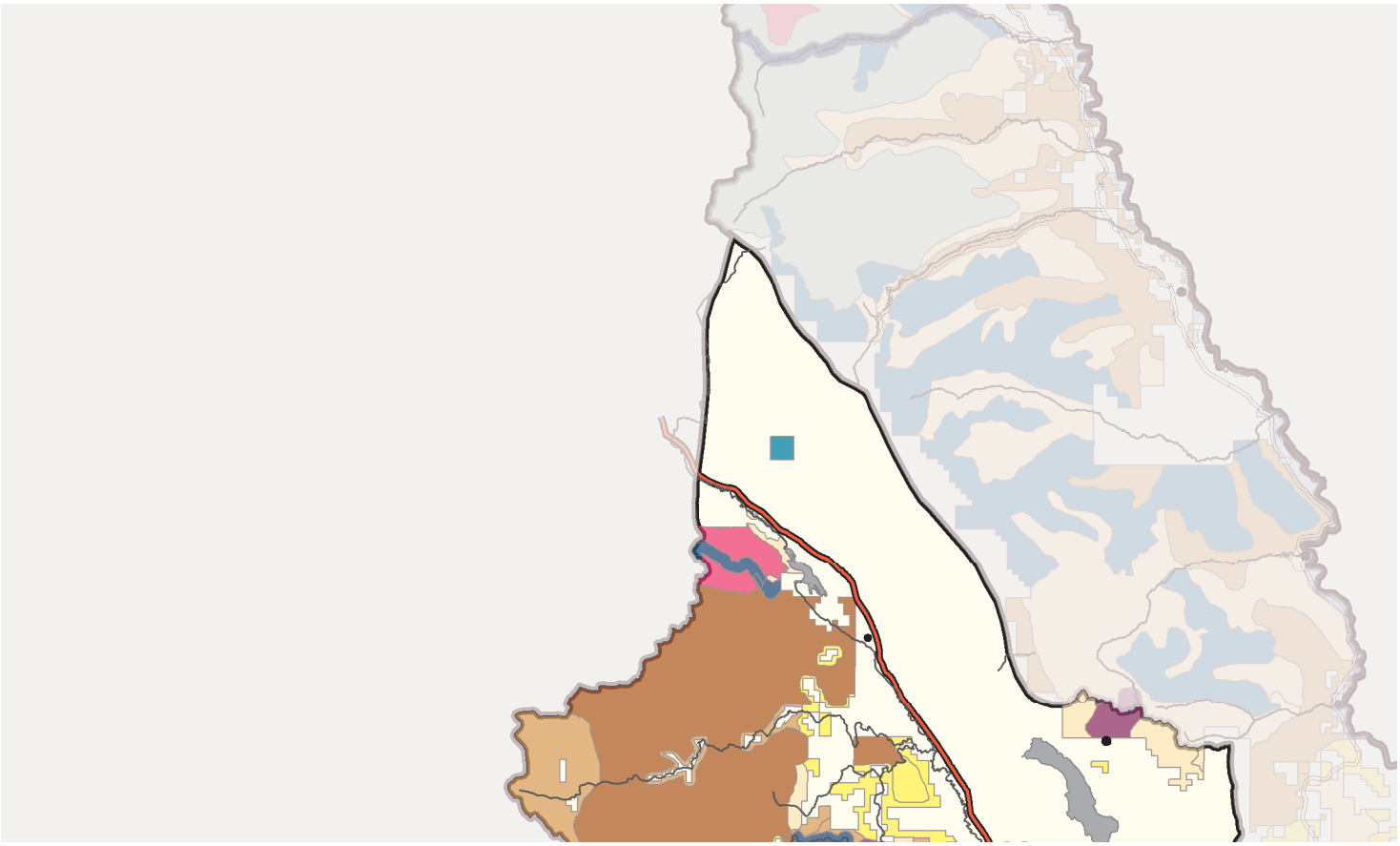
Table 6: Motorized trails in the North Fork Flathead GA MA 2.2.

Trail Name and Number	Type of Use Allowed
Cyclone Lookout #40	Motorcycle
Coal Ridge #14	Motorcycle
Moran Creek Trail #2	Motorcycle

[1] Information on the outstanding remarkable value (ORV), for which the river was found eligible and its potential classification, is in the Plan Set of Documents.

GA Desired Conditions Plan Component

- MA 2.2 lands within this geographic area may also have additional existing motorized road and trail routes that may or may not be suitable with the overall direction of MA 2.2. These routes would be evaluated later, when site-specific travel management planning is done.
- Groomed snowmobile routes would continue to provide recreation opportunities and access to the groomed trails on Big Mountain and to the Montana state lands to the west.



Salish Mountains Geographic Area

Unique Characteristics

- Many large lakes such as Tally Lake, Little Bitterroot Lake, Upper and Lower Stillwater lakes, Ashley Lake, and Whitefish Lake, provide a variety of water-based recreational opportunities.
- Big Mountain and Blacktail ski areas are popular destinations for both local residents and tourists from around the region.
- The Pete Ridge area is one of the most important white-tailed deer winter ranges in Montana.
- Lebeau and Little Bitterroot RNAs and Johnson Terrace are unique topographic features that harbor a diversity of plants unique among the forested landscape.
- Seven ecologically significant wetland complexes with a diversity of plants and features.
- The Miller Creek Demonstration Forest is an important active fire research area on the Flathead National Forest.

General Overview

The Salish Mountain Geographic Area includes most of the Tally Lake Ranger District and a portion of the Swan Lake Ranger District. These lands have a network of roads to access private ownership and federal lands that have been managed primarily for timber production during the last several decades. Elevation is relatively low compared to the rest of the forest and is unique because of the rolling nature of the topography. Other large forested areas adjacent to this geographic area include the Stillwater State Forest, Kootenai National Forest, and a checkerboard of industrial-managed forest lands. Communities near this area include Whitefish, Kalispell, Olney, Lakeside, Marion, Kila and Somers.

Approximately three percent of this geographic area is within designated/recommended wilderness or other primitive settings. Ninety-seven percent of the geographic area offers opportunities for higher intensities of resource management activities.

The major use of National Forest System lands in this geographic area has been timber management and recreation. This area is roaded, allowing easy access to the rolling terrain. Popular recreation activities include hiking, hunting, mountain biking, motorized trail riding, horseback riding, and winter recreation.

Within the Miller Creek drainage, 6,000 acres have been identified as a "demonstration forest." Management objectives for the area have historically been to maximize growth and yield.

Lebeau and Logan creeks have been found eligible for further study for potential designation into the Wild and Scenic River System[1].

Desired Conditions

Watershed, Fisheries, and Aquatic Habitat

- Both Good Creek and Sheppard Creek continue to support a stable population of genetically pure cutthroat trout. These populations would be protected by barriers that would prevent invasion of non-native fish species.
- For the headwaters of Sheppard and Good creeks, moderate levels of dispersed recreation would exist.

Wildlife and Plant Species Diversity

- Suitable cover and foraging areas for wintering deer and elk would persist, particularly in the Pete Ridge area.
- The scenic, geological, botanical, and ephemeral special characteristics of Johnson Terrace, a proposed Special Interest Area, would be protected.

Developed and Dispersed Recreation

- Campgrounds on the Tally Lake Ranger District area would be expanded and/or reconstructed as needed to accommodate an increase in use and to protect resources. Vegetation management plans for campgrounds exist would be up-to-date.
- The Blacktail and Round Meadows cross country ski areas would be continue to operate on the existing system of roads and trails.

Big Mountain Resort

- Facilities at the ski area would be expanded and/or reconstructed for both summer and winter recreation.
- In the summer, recreation opportunities would be concentrated on south facing slopes. Use would be very restricted on the north slope and Hellroaring Basin in order to limit grizzly bear and human interactions.

[1] Information on the outstanding remarkable value (ORV), for which the river was found eligible and its potential classification is in the Plan Set of Documents.

Blacktail Mountain Ski Area

- Facilities at the ski area would be developed in accordance with the approved portions of the Master Development Plan for both winter and summer operations.

Access and Travel Management

- Management and possible expansion of the Wild Bill National Off-highway Vehicle (OHV) trail would be consistent with environmental considerations for the area.

South Fork Flathead Geographic Area

Unique Characteristics

- The Bob Marshall Wilderness and a portion of the Great Bear Wilderness, part of the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex, make up the majority of this geographic area and contain world-class backcountry.
- The South Fork of the Flathead River, from Young's Creek to the Hungry Horse Reservoir, is a designated Wild and Scenic River.
- Two airstrips, Meadow Creek and Spotted Bear, are within the Wild and Scenic River Corridor.
- Bent Flat and Trail Creek, two significant, high quality fens located along the Spotted Bear River, harbor numerous rare wetland plant species.
- The Spotted Bear Ranger Station, Schafer Meadows Ranger Station, and Big Prairie Ranger Station are seasonally operating historical facilities. These, along with several backcountry guard stations, forty miles of operational historic phone line, and an intricate trail system for hiking, backpacking, horseback riding, and wilderness management, offer a view and preservation of a lifestyle from the past.

General Overview

The Bob Marshall Wilderness and Great Bear Wilderness comprise the majority of this geographic area. The Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex (BMWC) includes lands on the Flathead, Lewis and Clark, Lolo, and Helena national forests. The BMWC is part of one of the largest remaining wildland areas in the lower 48 states and is entirely in National Forest System lands ownership. This area is popular for recreational use. It is a focal point for hiking, horseback riding, hunting, fishing, and for river float trips on the Wild and Scenic South Fork of the Flathead River. Many of the visitors to the wilderness utilize outfitter services given the vastness and remoteness.

This geographic area is in the heart of the South Fork of the Flathead River within the Swan Mountains and contains world-class backcountry. This vast undeveloped area provides outstanding habitats for native fish and wildlife species such as grizzly bears, gray wolves, and bull trout. This wilderness area also contains some cultural elements including historic facilities, trails, and historic phone lines.

Approximately 96 percent of the geographic area is within designated/recommended wilderness or other primitive settings which are managed for the unique wilderness/backcountry characteristics. Four percent of the geographic area offers opportunities for higher intensities of resource management activities.

Spotted Bear River, Little Salmon Creek, Big Salomon Creek, Danaher Creek, and the White River in the South Fork Geographic Area have been found eligible for further study for potential designation to the Wild and Scenic River System[1].

Desired Conditions

Wildlife and Plant Species Diversity

- Habitat viability would be maintained to support existing wolf packs.

Fire

- The use of wildland fire and appropriate management response including suppression is an available tool across the entire geographic area. This will help maintain and/or enhance ecological function to the extent that fuel and weather conditions permit an acceptable risk to recreation and other resource values.

Wilderness

- Two airstrips, Meadow Creek and Spotted Bear, located within the South Fork River Wild and Scenic River Designation, would continue to provide air-based recreational opportunities.
- Ranger stations and guard stations within the wilderness would continue to contribute to management efforts in the wilderness and help interpret the rich history of wilderness management.
- Impacts from recreational use would be managed by the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex Wilderness Plan “Limits of Acceptable Change” (LAC).
- The South Fork of the Flathead River would be managed per the Flathead River Wild and Scenic River Recreation Direction and the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex Plan.

[1] Information on the outstanding remarkable value (ORV), for which the river was found eligible and its potential classification, is in the Plan Set of Documents.

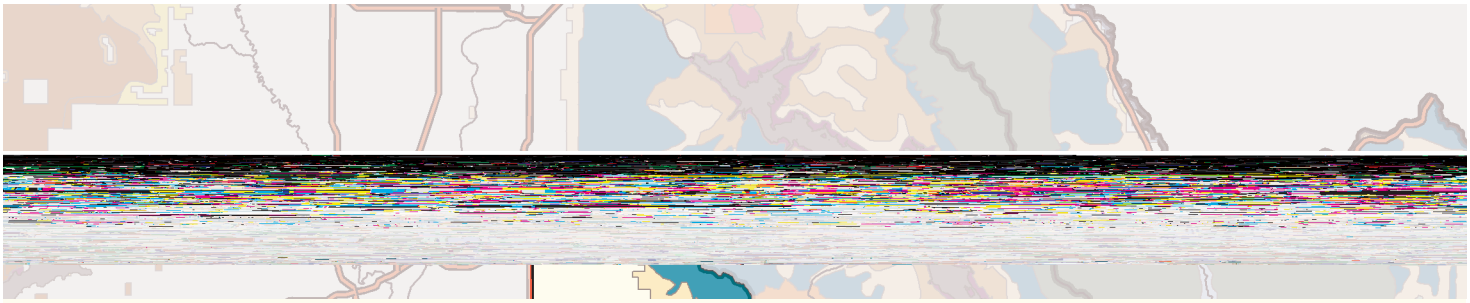
Access and Travel Management

- Portions of this geographic area are within backcountry management areas (MA 2.2) which provide primarily non-motorized recreation opportunities. However, the following motorized trails currently exist, are suitable, and still provide a semi-primitive recreation experience (table 6).

Table 7: Motorized trails in the South Fork Flathead GA MA 2.2.

Route Name and Number	Type of Use Allowed
Bruce Creek Road #2827 to the junction with Meadow Creek Road #2826 to Trail #82	Motorcycle
Alpine #7 from the junction with Bunker Alpine Connector Trail #101A south to Gorge Creek Trail #218.	Motorcycle
Bruce Creek Trail #82 to the junction with Road #2827 to Bunker Creek Trail #101	Motorcycle
Bunker Creek Trail #101 from the junction with Trail #82 to Bunker-Alpine Connector Trail #101A	Motorcycle
Bunker Alpine Connector Trail #101A from the junction with 101 to the Alpine #7 trail.	Motorcycle

- MA 2.2 lands within this geographic area may also have additional existing motorized road and trail routes that may or may not be suitable with the overall direction of MA 2.2. These routes would be evaluated later, when site-specific travel management planning is done.
- Trailheads and other recreation facilities would provide for user safety and public information and education.



Swan Valley Geographic Area

Unique Characteristics

- Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex and the Mission Mountain Wilderness.
- Swan, Holland, and Lindbergh lakes.
- The most extensive, floristically diverse concentration of peatlands (fens) on the Flathead National Forest occurs on the valley floor of this geographic area.
- Swan River Research Natural Area that is managed in partnership with the Nature Conservancy to preserve rare aquatic habitats.
- The East Shore Research Natural Area (RNA) has a long-standing special-use permit which serves the communities of Shievers Creek and Woods Bay.
- Condon Creek Botanical Area supports a significant concentration of water howellia; a federally-listed, threatened plant that depends on seasonally drying ponds.

General Overview

Much of the National Forest System lands on the valley bottom are in checkerboard ownership with federal, state, and private lands. A major use in the Swan valley area over the past decades has been timber production. Private lands near the river bottom are increasingly being subdivided and developed into residences.

This geographic area links two wilderness areas, the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex and the Mission Mountains Wilderness and is an important connectivity zone for many species of wildlife including grizzly bears. The Swan Valley Grizzly Bear Conservation Agreement and Plan direction set grizzly bear guidelines for the Swan valley. The Swan Valley Grizzly Bear guidelines were mutually established between the Flathead National Forest, Swan River State Forest, Plum Creek Timber Company, and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Approximately 53 percent of the geographic area is within designated/recommended wilderness or other primitive settings. Forty-seven percent of the geographic area offers opportunities for higher intensities of resource management activities.

Desired Conditions

Watershed, Fisheries, and Aquatic Habitat

- Approximately ten genetically pure or nearly pure cutthroat trout population strongholds are in the Swan valley. These cutthroat trout strongholds are located upstream of natural or man-made barriers that provide sufficient habitat to maintain populations. Non-native fish upstream of these barriers are absent or very scarce.
- Active restoration watersheds contain no barriers that block bull trout migration.
- Non-native lake trout are absent in Swan Lake and all streams.

Wildlife and Plant Species Diversity

- Continue to maintain existing grizzly bear corridors in the upper Swan valley to maintain the connectivity between sub-populations in the Mission Mountain and Bob Marshall wilderness areas.
- Ecologically high-valued lands in the Swan valley would be protected through purchase and conservation easements.

Access and Travel Management

- Portions of this geographic area are within backcountry management areas (MA 2.2) which provide primarily non-motorized recreation opportunities. However, the following motorized trails currently exist, are suitable, and still provide a semi-primitive recreation experience (table 7).

Table 8: Motorized trails in the Swan Valley GA MA 2.2.

Trail Name and Number	Type of Use Allowed
Strawberry Lake Trail #5 to junction w/Alpine Trail #7	Motorcycle
Alpine #7 from Strawberry Lake Trail jct North	Motorcycle
Wire Trail #78 to junction with Alpine Trail #7	Motorcycle
Alpine #7 from junction with Trail #101 (Crevice Lake) north to Sixmile Mountain.	Motorcycle
Sixmile Trail #10	Motorcycle
Peterson Creek Trail #293	Motorcycle
Sixmile Sidehill Trail #27	Motorcycle
Hemler Creek Trail #20	Motorcycle

GA Desired Conditions Plan Component

- MA 2.2 lands within this geographic area may also have additional existing motorized road and trail routes that may or may not be suitable with the overall direction of MA 2.2. These routes would be evaluated later, when site-specific travel management planning is done.
- Continue to manage access relative to grizzly bear under the Swan Valley Conservation Agreement and Plan direction.

Blank Page