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Hello:

The staff of the Flathead National Forest is pleased to announce the release of its proposed action for the revised Flathead National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (forest plan) for your review and input. This document reflects the extensive public participation that the Flathead NF facilitated over the past 1 ½ years through collaborative working group meetings, e-collaboration, and other public input. We really appreciate the commitment of interested participants who've provided important contributions toward the development of this proposed action. The document also reflects a truly interdisciplinary team approach in the consideration of the input received as well as a consideration of the directives associated with the 2012 planning rule. The planning team and I feel strongly that this proposed action presents an excellent start at portraying the "greatest good" for the Flathead National Forest.

Background

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 requires every national forest to develop a plan to provide broad direction for managing forest resources. The NFMA also requires national forests revise their management plans every 10 to 15 years or when conditions within the plan area have changed significantly. The Flathead NF forest plan was signed in 1986 so it goes without saying that conditions in the plan area had changed significantly over the nearly 30 years. The Forest began this revision effort under the Forest Service's 2012 planning rule in the fall of 2013.

Purpose and Need for Action

The Flathead NF planning team, in addition to conducting the plan revision, is coordinating the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) effort for an amendment to incorporate relevant direction from the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy (GBCS) into the forest plans for the Helena, Kootenai, Lewis and Clark, and Lolo National Forests. The Flathead NF is concurrently proposing to incorporate the relevant portions of the NCDE GBCS as part of its plan revision process. The Forest Service will prepare a single environmental impact statement (EIS) for the revised forest plan and amendment.

The need for the proposed action is twofold: 1) significant changes have occurred in conditions and demands since the Flathead's 1986 Forest Plan and 2) to ensure the adequacy of regulatory mechanisms regarding habitat protection across the national forests in the NCDE in support of the de-listing of the grizzly bear.

Flathead National Forest proposed action for the revised forest plan

The proposed action describes the Flathead National Forest's distinctive roles and contributions within the broader landscape and details forest-wide, management area, and geographic area desired conditions, objectives, standards, and guidelines. The management direction in the proposed action focuses on maintaining and restoring ecosystem and species diversity, and managing for forests that are resilient to disturbances and stressors, including climate change. The purpose is to provide for long-term sustainability of ecosystem values and desired ecosystem services. The proposed action identifies suitable uses of National Forest System lands and estimates of the planned timber sale quantity for the Forest. The proposed action identifies priority watersheds for restoration, and includes the evaluation of wilderness inventory areas and eligible wild and scenic rivers. You can review the proposed action, maps, and other relevant documents on the Flathead NF plan revision webpage: www.fs.usda.gov/goto/flathead/fpr.



Purpose of the Amendment

Under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973, federal agencies are directed to use their authorities to seek to conserve endangered and threatened species. The amendment forests' associated plans (Helena National Forest, approved by the Regional Forester in 1986; Kootenai National Forest, approved by the Regional Forester in 2015, Lewis and Clark National Forest, approved by the Regional Forester in 1986; and Lolo National Forest, approved by the Regional Forester in 1986), have management direction related to grizzly bear habitat, to support recovery of the threatened grizzly bear.

Since the development of this planning direction, the grizzly bear population in the NCDE has met and exceeded recovery goals. In particular, habitat conditions and management on the national forests have contributed importantly to the increased population size and improved status of the grizzly bear across the NCDE. To support a healthy, recovered grizzly population the Forest Services' continued, effective management of the NCDE grizzly bear's habitat is necessary.

In 2013, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) announced the availability of a draft GBCS for the NCDE population for public review and input. When finalized, the GBCS would become the post-delisting management plan for the NCDE grizzly bears and their habitat. By incorporating the relevant habitat-related direction from the NCDE GBCS into forest plans, the proposed amendments will demonstrate to the USFWS that adequate regulatory mechanisms exist on national forests within the NCDE to support delisting this grizzly population. Thus, the amendment forests need to amend their forest plans and incorporate the relevant desired conditions, standards, guidelines, and monitoring items related to habitat management on NFS lands in the NCDE to show that the amendment forests have adequate regulatory mechanisms in place to contribute to sustaining a recovered grizzly bear population. For information about the amendment go to www.fs.usda.gov/goto/flathead/gbamend.

Future Public Meetings

I would like to invite you to public open house meetings we have scheduled to answer your questions and to solicit your input for refining the proposed action, including identifying issues for developing possible alternatives. The following community meetings are planned to provide additional information and address questions related to the revision and amendment proposed action:

- March 17, 2015, 5:30–7:30 p.m., Flathead National Forest Supervisors Office, 650 Wolfpack Way, Kalispell MT 59901
- March 19, 2015, 5:30–7:30 p.m., Riverstone Family Lodge, 6370 US Hwy 93N, Eureka, MT 59917
- April 7, 2015, 5:30–7:30 p.m., Seeley Lake Community Center, Seeley Lake, MT 59868
- April 8*, 2015, 5:30–7:30 p.m., Northern Rockies Mtn. Heritage Center (Ft. Missoula), 3255 Fort Missoula Road, Missoula, MT 59804
- April 9*, 2015, 5:30–7:30 p.m., Superior Ranger Station Conference Room, Superior, MT 59872
- April 14*, 2015, 5:30–7:30 p.m., Lincoln Community Hall, 404 Main St., Lincoln, MT 59639
- April 15*, 2015, 5:30–7:30 p.m., Stage Stop Inn, 1005 Main Ave. North, Choteau, MT 59422

*Meetings in Missoula, Superior, Lincoln and Choteau will primarily address the amendment proposed action.

Please check the Flathead NF plan revision webpage: www.fs.usda.gov/goto/flathead/fpr for updates to the schedule.

Comments on the Proposed Action

The release of the proposed action initiates the formal 60-day scoping period under the provisions of the NEPA. I value your input and encourage you to submit your comments as we modify the proposed action, develop alternatives for environmental analysis, and prepare an environmental impact statement. Comments must be received by May 5 (within the 60-day comment period commencing with the publication of the notice of intent in the Federal Register). The notice of intent is posted on the website (www.fs.usda.gov/goto/flathead/fpr).

The decision to approve the revised forest plan for the Flathead National Forest and the amendment for the Helena, Lewis and Clark, Kootenai, and Lolo National Forests will be subject to the objection process identified in 36 CFR Part 219 Subpart B (219.50 to 219.62). Only those individuals and entities who have submitted substantive formal comments related to the Flathead NF plan revision and the four amendments during the opportunities provided for public comment (beginning with this comment period), will be eligible to file an objection (36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 219.53(a)). You can submit comments via email at flatheadplanrevision@fs.fed.us, mail them to Forest Plan Revision, Flathead National Forest, 650 Wolfpack Way, Kalispell, MT 59901, or provide site-specific input using the collaborative mapping website at that can be accessed from the Flathead NF Plan revision website.

Please don't hesitate to call with questions or comments. And again, thank you for your continued interest in the management of your public lands.

Sincerely,

/s/

Sharon LaBrecque
Acting Forest Supervisor

cc: Joe Krueger