

Gallatin National Forest

Lonesome Wood Vegetation Management 2 Project Executive Summary of the Record of Decision

Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Background	1
3. Purpose and Need for Action	2
4. Decision, Issues, and Alternatives Considered	2
4.1 Selected Alternative.....	2
4.2 Description of the Decision.....	2
4.3 Reasons for the Decision.....	3
4.4 Consideration of Issues	4
4.5 Alternatives Studied in Detail	4
4.6 Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study.....	4
5. Public Involvement	5
6. Findings Required by Other Laws, Regulations, and Policies	6
7. Implementation	6
8. Contact Person.....	6

1. Introduction

The project area is located in Gallatin County, Montana approximately 12 miles west and north of West Yellowstone, Montana along the Hebgen Lake Road (FSR #167) and the west shore of Hebgen Lake. The proposed treatments are focused in the wildland urban interface on National Forest System (NFS) land including the evacuation route along the Hebgen Lake Road (FSR #167). The Hebgen Lake Ranger District, Gallatin National Forest, West Yellowstone, Montana administers the lands within the project area.

2. Background

The Lonesome Wood Vegetation Management 2 proposal is an outcome of the Hebgen Watershed Risk Assessment completed in November 2005. The Risk Assessment was a landscape level assessment of the risk of wildfire to a variety of resources if no management actions were taken in this area. The watershed assessment evaluated approximately 68,000 acres north, west and southwest of Hebgen Lake. The interdisciplinary team that conducted the analysis considered existing, historical, and projected future landscape conditions, then weighed these considerations against current Forest Plan management direction, as well as the current and projected social setting. Generally speaking, the main concern for this area is wildland fuel buildup since there is a high degree of recreational and urban development. Wildland fuel includes live and dead vegetation on the ground and in the tree canopy that in turn creates a high fire risk, which can threaten lives and property. In 2009 the mountain pine beetle and spruce budworm populations increased, so there is a concern with increased mortality of trees in key areas. There are also opportunities to reinvigorate aspen habitats.

The chronology of events for this project is as follows: an EA for this project was released in December 2007. In April 2008 a decision and finding of no significant impact was published. The decision was appealed. The Forest Service decision was upheld by the appeal deciding officer in July 2008. In January 2009, a lawsuit was filed in the District Court of Montana challenging various aspects of this project. At the same time, a different court case resulted in the “relisting” of the grizzly bear as a threatened species, resulting in a different set of habitat management and consultation requirements than were in place when the Lonesome Wood EA and DN were published. Consequently, the DN and FONSI (2008) for Lonesome Wood were withdrawn on November 5, 2009. The case against the Lonesome Wood Vegetation Treatment Project decision in District Court was closed without prejudice. A Notice of Intent to Prepare an Environmental Impact Statement was published in the Federal Register on June 9, 2010. The Draft EIS was available of comment in September 2011. The EIS supercedes the EA (2007) in its’ entirety. The FEIS was published in October 2012 and incorporates responses to comments on the DEIS and updated information related to the Roadless Rule 2001 due to recent court action.

3. Purpose and Need for Action

This forest vegetation management project is designed to increase firefighter and public safety and to reduce wildland fire risks to private and NFS improvements in the WUI. In addition, the treatments will reinvigorate aspen forest. The goals would be achieved through removal of conifer encroachment and crown, ladder and surface fuels using forest thinning, both mechanized and hand thinning, along with prescribed burning.

Treatments are designed to reduce fire behavior, including flame length, fire intensity, spotting potential and potential crown fire in the WUI and evacuation route while creating conditions for lower fire risk. Reducing tree density and dead material on the forest floor along the evacuation routes would allow safer ingress for emergency vehicles and egress for evacuation. The treatment is designed to lower flame lengths and fire intensity along the FSR 167 and access roads for home groups. Prescribed burning is proposed in areas that are currently low fire risk in order to maintain those conditions and as a secondary treatment in some thinning units to remove residual fuels. In addition, treatment on areas in and adjacent to WUI, are designed to reinvigorate aspen communities, which in turn would maintain low fire risk areas and benefit some wildlife species.

4. Decision, Issues, and Alternatives Considered

4.1 Selected Alternative

Based upon my review of all alternatives, I have decided to implement Alternative 2 (Proposed Action) which would reduce the wildland fire risk to life and property in the units in wildland urban interface and evacuation routes and reinvigorate aspen forest.

4.2 Description of the Decision

Forest thinning to reduce stand density. Generally, treatment would remove about 50 to 60% of the existing trees per acre in all diameter classes. Approximately 40-50% of trees (all size classes) would remain with an objective of maintaining approximately 13 feet between tree crowns. The healthiest and best formed trees would be left. Depending on the diameters of the tree and the size of tree crowns, spacing between tree boles or tree trunks could vary from between 15-35 feet. When available onsite, seral species such as Douglas fir are the preferred leave species.

Approximately 1,700 acres of forest thinning would utilize a ground based harvest method to facilitate removal of larger trees. In these forest stands, the majority of biomass to be removed would be greater than six inches in diameter, but all size classes would be thinned. Trees over six inches in diameter that are removed would be skidded to landings and hauled offsite for use as a commercial product such as sawlogs or firewood.

The remaining forest thin units, approximately 825 acres, would be implemented using mechanized or manual slashing of trees that are generally six inches or less in diameter to reduce ladder and canopy fuels.

Conifer slashing in aspen. Units with aspen enhancement objectives will be designed to meet both aspen and fuel reduction objectives. Slashing of conifer encroachment is planned along with prescribed broadcast or pile burning, as needed, to ensure sprouting

Prescribed burning. Areas with conditions that are currently at low risk of severe fire will be maintained with broadcast burning, which reduces conifer in-growth and surface fuels. Some slashing may be needed in preparation for burning.

Associated activities - Activities will include, thinning through logging, slashing small trees, whole tree yarding, yarding unmerchantable material, hand and machine piling, pile and broadcast burning, hauling of commercial material, firewood removal, biomass reduction such as chipping, erosion control, construction of and rehabilitation of skid trails, landings and temporary roads. These or similar activities will help to achieve project objectives. Specific design features are listed in “Design Feature Mitigation and Monitoring Common to Action Alternatives” in the Record of Decision.

Temporary road construction and rehabilitation - An estimated 6 miles of temporary road will be needed to implement the proposed action. Temporary roads will be constructed to minimum standards to accommodate log trucks with no public traffic. Upon project completion, roads will be fully drained, ripped, slashed, and seeded to meet vegetation management goals.

4.3 Reasons for the Decision

Alternative 2 will help to improve safety for the public and firefighters and will reinvigorate aspen forest while minimizing the amount of short term impacts. I am very concerned for the safety of the fire fighters and public especially considering the limited access to the west side of Hebgen Lake. The Lake and the Lionhead Inventoried Roadless Area/ proposed wilderness are near to the lake shore upslope of the project area resulting in very limited access. While the setting creates a desirable recreation destination it is also presents major concerns for the safety of fire fighters and the public. I believe Alternative 2 most effectively reduces fuels along a majority of the Hebgen Lake Road reducing risk to human safety considerably while also offering reduced risk to properties and infrastructure in the wildland urban interface (homes, cabins, Forest Service developments). My concerns and prioritization of this area is echoed in national priorities for the agency to reduce wildfire risk to lives and property.

Alternative 2 was selected over alternative 3 because mitigation and project design effectively address environmental and social issues raised by the public and agency specialists both in the Forest Service and partner agencies. The primary difference between the alternatives is that the evacuation route beyond Cozy Corner (unit14) is not treated in Alternative 3, which is a great concern to me. Further, the environmental effects that alternative 3 were designed to address, moose winter habitat, are minimal in both alternatives. Biologists from the Forest Service and Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) agree that this small reduction in conifer habitat will have little overall impact to the current moose population.

I believe both mechanical and prescribed burning treatments are necessary to successfully achieve the purpose and need for action. Removal of trees, both large and small, is an important and necessary tool that will help to safely and effectively achieve the goals of this project. My decision is not intended to mitigate the effects in all fire scenarios or to prevent fire in the project area. The proposed treatments for Lonesome Wood 2 are designed to lower fire behavior and enhance safety for the public and wildland firefighter.

Alternative 2 is consistent with the 2001 Roadless Rule. I included mitigation to maintain roadless characteristics in unit 2 in consideration of the Rule. Although there will be impacts to moose winter habitat, I believe that this small reduction in conifer habitat should have little overall impact to the current

moose population. I included operating restrictions in my decision that will minimize disturbance to moose during the winter which addressed MFWP primary concern. The revised grizzly bear analysis and consultation process with the USFWS brings this decision into compliance with all applicable grizzly bear standards and requirements for the Grizzly bear as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.

The Lonesome Wood2 Project area is important to homeowners, permittees, recreationists, other forest users, the community of West Yellowstone, and to the many species of wildlife that occupy the area. I considered public comments expressing support of the purpose and need, concern for possible impacts such as user conflicts on the roadway and concern that the project may not be consistent with laws and direction. I incorporated extensive protections for species, habitat and social concerns. As a result, there are several time constraints on the implementation activity which is also a concern to me. On balance, I believe my decision is feasible to implement in the timeframe available while satisfying social conflicts with neighbors and forest users, maintaining habitat requirements for terrestrial and aquatic species and providing for resource protection. My decision is consistent with all applicable law, policy and direction.

4.4 Consideration of Issues

Implementing Alternative 2 represents a balance between the purpose and need of the project, an evaluation of short-term and long-term risks, and the need to protect resources. Below is a list of the issues analyzed in the EIS.

- Fire and Fuels
- Invenoried Roadless
- Grizzly Bear
- Moose Winter Habitat
- Air Quality
- Economics
- Fish & Amphibian Species and Habitat
- Vegetation Old Growth, Successional Stages and Insect and Disease Activity
- Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat – Canada Lynx, MIS, Migratory Birds, Sensitive Species, Other
- Invasive Weeds
- Range
- Recreation, Outfitting and Special Uses
- Scenery
- Sensitive Plants
- Soils
- Transportation
- Water Quality

4.5 Alternatives Studied in Detail

Activity	Alternative 1 No Action	Alternative 2 Proposed Action	Alternative 3 Mitigated Alternative *
Thinning - Mechanized	0	1750	1500
Small Tree thinning	0	825	750
Prescribed Burning	0	325 acres	325acres
Temporary Road	0	6 miles	5 miles

* Alternative 2 and 3 were designed to achieve the purpose and need for action. In addition, Alternative 3 was designed to reduce impacts to moose winter habitat compared to Alternative 2.

4.6 Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study

- Alternative 4: Prescribed burn only. An alternative that considered only prescribed burning was requested during scoping.
- Alternative 5: No temporary roads. An alternative that required no temporary roads was requested during scoping.

- Alternative 6: No fuel breaks or forest health units. A request was made to include an alternative that eliminated fuel breaks and units identified for forest health reasons. However, no units were identified solely for forest health reasons in Alternatives 2 or 3.
- Alternative 7: Evacuation route treatment limited to 200 feet. The interdisciplinary team considered an alternative that limited the size of the evacuation routes treatment to 200 feet either side of the road.
- Alternative 8: Evacuation Routes treatment of ½ mile. In the initial proposal the IDT considered, treatments extended ½ mile either direction from the Hebgen Lake Road or to the nearest break in fuels, such as the Hebgen Lake or a large clearing.
- Alternative 9: No mechanized harvest in the Inventoried Roadless Area (IRA). This alternative was requested during scoping in June 2010 in response to the Notice of Intent to prepare an EIS. This alternative would replace the 50 acres (estimated) of mechanized thinning in unit 14 with hand thinning in the understory.
- Alternative 10: No Treatment in Units with Noxious Weeds on Roads within Units. This alternative was requested during comment period for the DEIS in January 2012. This alternative would remove all units that have weeds either adjacent to or within proposed treatment units.
- Alternative 11: Climate Change Alternative. Consideration of this alternative is in response to comments requesting evaluation of the impacts of this activity on global climate change.
- Alternative 12. Build a road across Hebgen Dam for better access. During the comment period for the EA, we received a request to consider an alternative that would construct a road across Hebgen Dam to the end of the Hebgen Lake Road to improve access to the area.

5. Public Involvement

Public scoping and comment periods, and meetings were conducted for the Lonesome Wood Vegetation Management Environmental Assessment and Decision in 2007 and 2008 followed by an administrative appeal period. The feedback received throughout those processes was the starting point for the environmental impact statement (EIS).

The mailing list for this project includes around 125 names. The Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an EIS was published in the Federal Register on June 9, 2010. Comments were taken until July 12, 2010. A notice of availability of the Draft EIS was published in the Federal Register on 9/23/2011 and in the Bozeman Daily Chronicle on 9/28/2011. All persons that provided substantive comment during the earlier analysis received an electronic copy of the DEIS.

The extensive public involvement effort for the 2006-2008 effort led to the resolution of virtually all issues that neighbors, permittees and other forest users expressed. This was evident by the focused comments received on the EA (2007) and support letters received for the DN/FONSI (2008). This is important to mention because there has been very little participation in the ongoing EIS effort which is likely attributable to the fact that most issues and concerns were addressed in the initial public involvement. We interpreted that to mean the local stakeholders are satisfied with how the issues were dealt with in the 2008 decision. Six letters were received during the NOI comment period and six individuals attended the open house. We received comments from eight individuals, group or agency on the Draft EIS some supportive letters and some in opposition. Appendix C of the FEIS addresses the comments received on the DEIS. Three commenters provided requests for substantially more information. The nature of the comments was varied but concentrated on climate change, fire science, old growth and snags and dependent species, roads, scenery, water quality, weeds, management indicator species, moose and big game, sensitive species, threatened and endangered species and habitat. The FEIS was published in October 2012 and has been available for review since that time. The decision was signed on 12/11/2012. The legal notice is expected to be in the Bozeman Daily Chronicle on 12/17/2012 which will initiate an administrative appeal period. See section 7 for more information.

6. Findings Required by Other Laws, Regulations, and Policies

This decision is in compliance with all applicable federal laws and Forest Service regulations. The primary laws and executive orders are listed below.

- National Forest Management Act of 1976
- National Environmental Policy Act of 1969
- Endangered Species Act of 1973
- Federal Cave Resources Protection Act
- Migratory Bird Treaty Act
- Environmental Justice (E.O. 12898)
- Effects of Alternatives on Floodplains and Wetlands (E.O. 11988)
- National Historic Preservation Act
- Clean Air Act
- Clean Water Act
- Gallatin National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan), as amended

7. Implementation and Appeal

This decision is subject to Administrative Appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215. Only individuals or organizations who submitted comments or otherwise expressed interest by the close of the specified comment period may appeal this project (36 CFR 215.13). A written appeal of the decision, including attachments must be submitted within 45 days following the publication date of this legal notice in the Bozeman Daily Chronicle of Bozeman, MT. It is the responsibility of the appellant to ensure their appeal is received in a timely manner. The publication date of this legal notice in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Appellants should not rely on date or timeframe information provided by any other source (36 CFR 215.15). At a minimum, the appeal must meet the content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14. The appeal deciding officer is the Regional Forester.

Implementation of the project is expected to begin in 2013 and take 3-5 years to complete major activity and a total of 6-9 years to complete all associated activity. If no appeal is filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of the decision may begin on, but not before, the 5th business day following the close of the appeal-filing period. If an appeal is filed, implementation may occur on, but not before, the 15th business day following the date of appeal disposition.

8. Contact Person

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, refer to the Gallatin National Forest Webpage: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/land/gallatin/landmanagement> then go to Projects / Lonesome Wood Vegetation Management 2

Or, you may contact Teri Seth, Team Leader, Gallatin National Forest, Bozeman Ranger District, 3710 Fallon St. Ste. C, Bozeman, MT, 59718, (406) 522-2520.