

Frequently Asked Questions for Montana Tri-Forest Federal Sustained-Yield Unit

Updated March 30, 2026

Which land is included in the sustained-yield unit?

The Sustained-Yield Unit (the unit) includes National Forest System lands identified on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge and Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forests. In addition, the unit includes the National Forest System lands of the Custer Gallatin National Forest on the Hebgen Lake, Bozeman, Yellowstone, Gardiner, and Beartooth Ranger Districts.

Why is only a portion of the Custer Gallatin included?

Eastern districts —Ashland and Sioux Ranger Districts—were excluded due to a difference in forest product mix, industry and market area.

How will this affect smaller mills within your geographic area?

Smaller mills will still be able to bid for wood within the geographic area. In addition, the Forest Service will continue to provide non-sawtimber to local industry as part of our timber outputs.

Is this just a way to harvest more timber without following current laws?

No. The intent of this plan is rooted in responsible stewardship—not expanding harvest levels. Every project carried out under the Montana Tri-Forest Federal Sustained-Yield Unit will continue to fully comply with the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, and all other environmental protections that safeguard wildlife habitat, clean water, and forest health.

The three forests are not increasing the volume of timber they produce; we are operating at the levels already analyzed and disclosed in our forest plans. That remains unchanged under this proposal. The goal is to create predictability, not expansion. A stable and transparent supply allows local mills to invest in cleaner, more efficient technologies—advances that ultimately reduce waste and improve the use of every tree harvested. The SYU will ensure that local timber produced within the boundary, stays within the boundary, supporting local industry.

How does this work sustain and stabilize local economies?

Healthy forests and healthy communities go hand-in-hand. A functioning local mill system supports rural economies through stable jobs, tax revenue, and the ability for families to remain in their communities. This year alone, approximately 417 jobs in central Montana are tied to this infrastructure. Those wages support local schools, small businesses, and essential public services.

Just as importantly, maintaining local processing capacity helps the Forest Service meet land-stewardship goals that matter to everyone—such as reducing the severity of wildfires, restoring forests, and improving watershed health. Without nearby mills, these ecological restoration projects become far more costly and difficult to implement, slowing progress on wildlife habitat improvement.

Will this allow the Forest Service to skip normal planning processes?

No. The timber volumes identified in the proposal reflect our ongoing program of work. All activities would continue to require project-specific planning on each of the three forests, and each project would be designed and implemented in full compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, and each forest's land management plan. These requirements remain the foundation for all project decisions.

What percentage of timber does 35 million board feet represent for the three forests and their annual program of work?

Based on forest plans, the estimated production of timber across these three forests is approximately 40 million to 50 million board feet, annually. Of that, 35 million board feet represents roughly three-fourths of the total program of work.

How much timber volume is offered across the three forests in an average year? How will this management plan change what is already taking place?

In the past three years, the three forests' sold timber volume has averaged approximately 41 million board feet a year. The Montana Tri-Forest Sustained-Yield Unit helps maintain a consistent supply of forest products to the local processing/manufacturing industry within the unit. This supports longer-term investments in new technologies that make use of all products and residues, e.g. biomass utilization, co-generation, biochar production, etc.

Have you demonstrated that there is a real need for this Sustained-Yield Unit given current timber outputs?

Yes. The Sustained-Yield Unit directly supports the Sustained-Yield Act's intent—maintaining a continuous, predictable supply of forest products to stabilize communities and local manufacturing. The manufacturing and processing area is dependent on National Forest System lands—28% of the unit's land base compared to 8% nationwide—and several of the counties within the unit which rely on timber infrastructure, which directly ties to economic stability. The unit's 35 million board feet planned annual offer is consistent with each forest's allowable sale quantities and would maintain existing local processing infrastructure and the jobs that depend on it.

How will this help reduce wildfire risk and benefit watersheds?

Without local processing infrastructure, the already high cost of proactive fuels reduction will skyrocket, significantly reducing the amount of hazardous fuels reduction work the forests can complete. This means there is more to burn when wildfires occur, creating larger and more intense wildfires that are far more likely to kill large areas of forest. This in turn would impact municipal watersheds and other drinking water sources from erosion and run-off that typically occur following a severe wildfire event.

Will you be conducting a full Environmental Impact Statement for the Sustained-Yield Unit?

The management plan itself does not authorize any specific ground disturbing actions. Every individual timber sale or vegetation management project authorized within the unit still requires the appropriate environmental analysis—an environmental impact statement, environmental assessment or categorical exclusion.

How will you protect roadless characteristics during management activities? If the expected rescission of the 2001 Roadless Rule occurs will that change where you are considering timber sales for this project?

Inventoried Roadless Areas are not included in the timber emphasis lands and remain protected under the 2001 Roadless Rule. Any vegetation management in inventoried roadless areas must maintain roadless characteristics and can only occur under the limited exceptions outlined in the 2001 Roadless Rule. Should any statutory or regulatory changes occur, we will re-evaluate the unit's management plan and determine if modifications are necessary.

Will the public have an opportunity to provide testimony to the Montana Tri- Forest Sustained-Yield Unit management plan?

Yes. A formal public hearing on the Sustained-Yield Unit is scheduled on April 1, from 5 – 7 p.m. at the Delta Hotels Helena Colonial.

If litigation delays a timber sale or a natural disaster reduces harvestable volume, will you replace the lost volume?

The Forest Service will not be required to replace volume not offered or lost due to litigation, wildfire, insects, or other natural events. While not required, the Forest Service will work to re-offer timber impacted by these events.

Is the Sustained-Yield Unit permanent, or could it be undone by future leadership?

The Sustained-Yield Unit states that the Chief of the Forest Service may terminate the Sustained-Yield Unit at any time, if it is no longer serving the purpose and goals listed in the management plan. Contracts issued to support the volume offered to the Sustained-Yield Unit will continue until completion of the contract even if the SYU is terminated. The management plan will remain in place as long as the purposes of the Sustained Yield Act are being met.