USDA Forest Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Bitterroot National Forest |Spring 2026

Bitterroot Front Project at a Glance: Treatments geared to reduce wildfire risks

What does the Bitterroot Front Project entail?

The Bitterroot Front Project features a wide range of targeted treatments including tree thinning, harvesting, and prescribed burning to reduce current and future extreme wildfire risks and promote forest health and resilience. The project area includes approximately 144,000 acres of land along the west side of the Bitterroot Valley in southwest Montana of which about 19% would include commercial harvesting. The Bitterroot Front Project is a collaborative project that has been years in the making between the community, the Forest Service, its state, local and Tribal partners; its aim is to protect communities, firefighters, and sensitive natural resources.

The Observation Point Fire (July 2025) is an example of how treatments helped prevent a disastrous wildfire.

The Observation Point Fire quickly spread after a lightning strike on July 24, 2025. The fire quickly spread towards homes and businesses. However, firefighters were able to suppress this fire within days due to the West Side Collaborative Vegetation Management Project of 2018 which thinned over 2,300 acres in the Lost Horse area of the Bitterroot National Forest. Similar treatments are planned. (Photo by Jessica Abell)

Some of the reasons for the project

- Protect communities in the Community Protection Zone including 7,000 homes and structures, critical recreation infrastructure (cabins, campgrounds, pavilions) and other values at risk (watersheds, power lines, etc.).
- The Bitterroot Front Project area has four of the highest ranked firesheds in the Region, ranked first, second, fourth and sixth for values at risk.
- Promote safety of firefighters.
- Reduce risk of wildfires on a Forest that is at risk of uncharacteristic wildfires that are larger, more intense and more complex to suppress than they were historically.
- Increase tree health and resilience to insects and disease. The project area has dense pockets of dead and dying trees impacted by mountain pine beetle, Douglas-fir bark beetle, western spruce budworm, dwarf mistletoe, and root diseases. These stressors increase wildfire risk and decrease forest health.
- Better allow for fire to play its natural role in fire adapted ecosystems.
- Improve forage and habitat for numerous wildlife species.
- Save taxpayer dollars in proactive management as opposed to the high cost of managing wildfires.

Examples of diseased trees and hazardous fuels

Douglas-fir dwarf mistletoe overgrowth shown here is a fire hazard and leads to an unhealthy forest. The dense witches' brooms are highly flammable, increasing the intensity and spread of fire. The Bitterroot Front Project plans to reduce diseased trees to improve forest health and reduce the associated fire hazard.

When would work be implemented?

Work is anticipated to start in the Summer/Fall of 2026.

Where would the project work take place?

The planning area extends the length of the main Bitterroot Valley along the front of the mountains from McClain Creek on the northern end of the forest north of Florence to Trapper Creek on the southern end south of Darby

To see the notice decision, including Appendix E, for a summary of authorized treatments, please visit https://www.fs.usda.gov/r01/bitterroot/projects/57341

Check out the Bitterroot Front Project webpage for Frequently Asked Questions, project updates, a video & more!
https://www.fs.usda.gov/r01/bitterroot/newsroom/stories/bitterroot-front-project-0

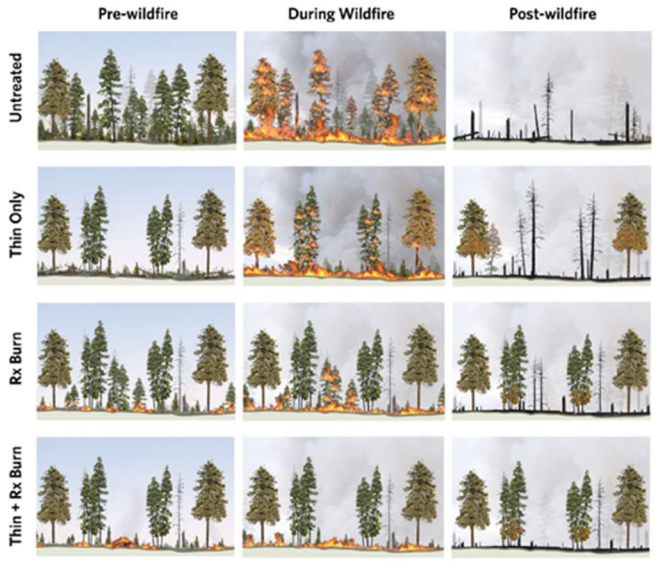
Authorized Treatments

Planned vegetation treatments are mapped in the Bitterroot Front Decision Notice Appendix C. The project will be implemented over a period of 20 years and is designed with adaptive management principles to facilitate adjusting treatments, if necessary, based on conditions on the ground.

No clearcutting is authorized under this project. Commercial treatments (i.e., "intermediate harvest") are planned for about 28,000 acres (approximately 19% of the project area). These treatments will not include regeneration harvest. Also, no commercial treatments will be conducted outside of where they are mapped and planned in the analysis.

Treatment Type	Proposed Treated Acres
Commercial intermediate harvest and prescribed burning	27,967
Noncommercial stand improvement and prescribed burning	3,363
Noncommercial whitebark pine restoration and prescribed burning	35,488
Slashing and prescribed burning	17,922
Prescribed burning only	53,286
Total treatment area	138,026

Treatment effects on forest stand structure pre-wildfire, during wildfire, and post-wildfire



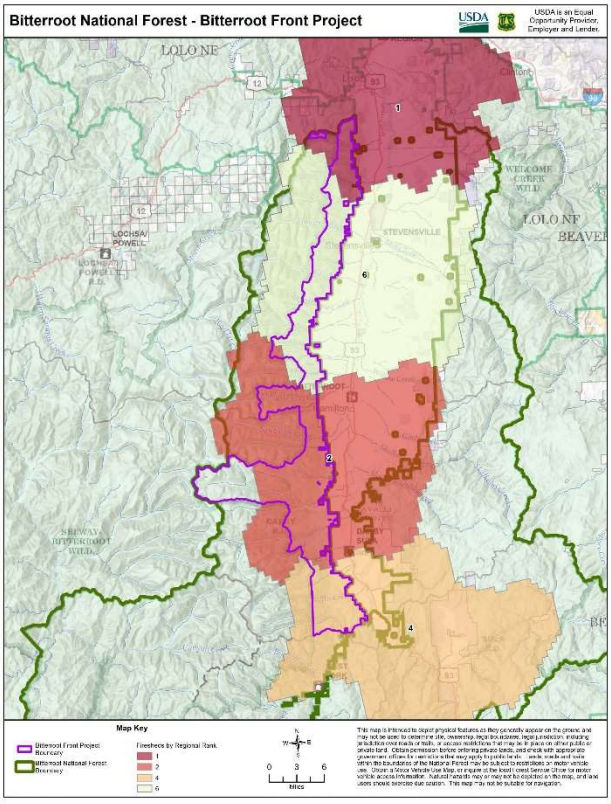
Credit: Davis et al. 2024 (see Bitterroot Front Environmental Assessment for citation)

The Sharrott Creek Fire that erupted after a lightning strike near Stevensville, MT, August 2024, spread fast due to the combination of untreated areas and severe weather conditions.

Years of missed natural fire cycles have led to overcrowded forests and a dangerous buildup of dead wood. Combined with insects, disease, and warmer, drier fire seasons, the need for action is urgent.

Wildfire risk doesn't stop at property lines or small project boundaries, so addressing it effectively requires working across the entire landscape.

Wildfire occurrences won't stop, but targeted treatments may make the area safer by lowering the chance of fast-moving wildfires that threaten homes and critical infrastructure. The project also supports local jobs and strengthens the economy. In the long run, fire-adapted forests provide cleaner air and water, better wildlife habitat, and enjoyable recreation settings.



The Bitterroot Front Project area, outlined in purple, is on the western portion of Bitterroot National Forest. Some of the highest at risk firesheds in the region are located on the Bitterroot Front Project area. Check out https://usfs.maps.arcgis.com/apps/mapviewer/index.html?layers=71b205a406d5440a895b372ee31d9d80