

The Darby-Sula Ranger District of the Bitterroot National Forest is seeking public comments on a proposal to create a defensible space to protect the historic McCart Lookout and enhance the view shed from the lookout. McCart Lookout is located on the Sula Ranger District (T. 2 N., R. 17 W., Section 33).

The purpose of this project is to reduce the threat of wildfire and restore the viewshed around the lookout by creating a 500' buffer (approximately 10 acres). The project proposes to mechanically remove dead and dying trees around the lookout. The lookout is to the north and east of the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness. All vegetation outside of the wilderness boundary will be removed to create the buffer. There will be no mechanical treatment within the wilderness, however, hand thinning by cross-cut saws of select individual trees may occur within the wilderness to achieve the mission of creating a defensible space and protecting the historic structure. The trailhead would be used as the landing and some vegetation around the trailhead may need to be removed depending on the size of the landing. An excavated skid trail will be constructed to access the area around the lookout and will be used to haul material to the landing.

McCart Lookout, listed on the National Historic Lookout Register, is available for the public to rent through the National Recreation Reservation System and provides the public with the unique opportunity and experience of staying in a historic lookout. Fire crews also use McCart Lookout as needed for administrative use. The tentative timeline for the proposed project is to conduct the treatments in the fall of 2019 and piles would be burned in the spring of 2020. Publics wanting to rent the lookout during the rental period should not be impacted by project activities. Publics recreating in this area in the fall may be impacted, however, due to trail and area closures.

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations (40 CFR 1508.4) provide for categorical exclusions to implement the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). I believe this project meets a category of action that may be excluded from documentation in either an environmental assessment (EA) or an environmental impact statement (EIS). This project is proposed under the categorical exclusion 6 CFR 220.6(e)(13): Salvage of dead and/or dying trees not to exceed 250 acres, requiring no more than ½ mile of temporary road construction. The proposed action may include incidental removal of live or dead trees for landings, skid trails, and road clearing.

This scoping period provides those interested in or affected by this proposal an opportunity to make their concerns known prior to a decision being made by the Responsible Official. I am interested in any specific information you believe I should consider about this proposal; particularly any environmental affects you think the project may have and reasonable mitigations you think might help limit those effects. I will use your specific comments to: 1) improve the proposed project, 2) determine whether there are extraordinary circumstances that would preclude me from categorically excluding the project from documentation in an EA or EIS and, 3) help decide whether or not to authorize the project.

Please review the proposed activities and submit any comments and information you may have by May 3, 2019.

Submit written comments to: Responsible Official: Eric Winthers, District Ranger, Darby/Sula Ranger District, P.O. Box 388, Darby, MT 59829. Electronic comments must be submitted to comments-northern-bitterroot@fs.fed.us (Please put "Comments on McCart Lookout Project" in the subject line). For electronically mailed comments, the sender should normally receive an automated electronic acknowledgement from the agency as confirmation of receipt. If the sender does not receive an automated acknowledgement of the receipt of comments, it is the sender's responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other means. Names and contact information (including addresses and e-mail addresses) submitted with comments will become part of the public record and may be released under the Freedom of Information Act.

To learn more about the project and to view maps visit:

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/bitterroot/landmanagement/projects>

For further information on this project please contact Erica Strayer, Recreation Program Manager at (406) 821-4252.