

In Reply Refer to  
1950 (0110)

Date: August 5, 2020

**Dear Interested Party:**

The USDA Forest Service (USFS) Swan Lake Ranger District (SLRD) is proposing the March Madness Blowdown Salvage project to address hazardous fuel conditions and potential forest health concerns created by blown over trees from winter/spring (2019/2020) wind events.

The Responsible Official, District Ranger Chris Dowling, is soliciting comments, concerns, or issues specific to the **March Madness Blowdown Salvage project** not already identified during the collaborative process used in project development. You are receiving this notice because you have either expressed interest in this project or because of your proximity to the project area. We invite your participation by providing written comments, concerns, or issues to assist us in the development. Comments specific to the proposed activities identifying a cause-effect relationship are most helpful.

District Ranger Chris Dowling and his staff would like to thank all those who participated in the collaborative process by attending the field trips or those who took the time to call/email/mail their valuable input. Field trip discussions and received suggestions assisted resource specialists with issue identification, treatment areas, and refined management options for the March Madness project.

Based on a preliminary assessment, intentions are to categorically exclude the proposed project from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment under Section 605 of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (16 U.S.C. 6591d; 2018 amendment). Section 605 of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act establishes a categorical exclusion (CE) for qualifying wildfire resilience projects in wildland-urban interface and designated areas of National Forest System lands. A hazardous fuels reduction project categorically excluded under this authority is a project designed to reduce the risk or extent of, or increase the resilience to, wildfires.

There would be no additional period where written comments are solicited for the project under this CE. The purpose and need and proposed activities were developed through a collaborative process. Based on comments received during scoping, proposed activities may be altered prior to a decision being signed.

**Introduction:**

Several storms during the winter/spring (2019/2020) brought about snow, heavy rain, and damaging high winds. Specifically, in March, a strong cold front hit the region with wind gusts of up to 40 miles per hour and localized microbursts. These wind events caused extensive tree damage on both private and National Forest System (NFS) lands within the following areas: Bear Creek east of Bigfork, Patterson Creek, east-shore of Flathead Lake, east and southeast of Swan Lake, and Krause Basin/Strawberry Lake. Across these geographic areas, stands contain patches of trees blown down and residual standing trees damaged by these storms. Damage includes entire trees blown over (uprooted), tree stems snapped in half, and branch failure or canopy damage from other trees intersecting during fall. Tree failure damaged powerlines and structures on private lands. On NFS lands, this damage resulted in well over 1000 acres and up to 100 tons per acre of blown down trees jackstraw on the forest floor.

Much of the blown over trees (i.e. blowdown) occur within an identified wildland-urban interface (WUI) area of Lake and Flathead counties. This blowdown on NFS created an immediate fire hazard adjacent to private lands. The March Madness Blowdown Salvage project is being proposed to mitigate this risk within the WUI. Blowdown in areas outside of the designated WUI would remain for natural processes to address.

**Project Area Description:**

The March Madness Blowdown Salvage project is located in the following locations (Map 1): North end of the Swan Valley (Patterson Creek: T25N R18W Sec PB42), southeast of Swan Lake (Six Mile: T25N R17W Sec PB39, PB43 & T25N R18W Sec 12,13,24,36), and along the east shore of Flathead Lake south of Woods Bay (Eastshore: T25N R19W Sec 4,9,16,28,33). The 1027 acre project area is comprised of NFS lands.

**Purpose and Need for Action:**

The purpose of the March Madness Blowdown Salvage (hereafter referred to as March Madness or MMBS) project is to reduce wildfire risk within the wildland-urban interface created by the blowdown. Wildland-urban interface (WUI) is defined as an area where structures and other human development meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildland or “forested” vegetation. March Madness is designed to reduce wildland fire behavior and reduce risk to people, property, and critical infrastructure from wildfire hazards. An increased potential for unacceptable public and private property loss exists under the current situation, therefore this project is designed to mitigate that risk.

The need for fuel reduction along federal/private boundaries within Patterson Creek, along the east-shore of Flathead Lake, and east of Swan Lake was initially established and prioritized in both the Flathead County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) and Lake County CWPP. Fuel reduction necessity, particularly pertaining to the blowdown fuel loading fire hazard, was further validated through an onsite meeting between private landowners, Swan Lake Volunteer Fire Department, and the US Forest Service (USFS) on May 30th, 2020.

Tree stress is also prevalent in the project area and further exacerbated by moderate to severe western spruce budworm defoliation, fungus (*Armillaria ostoyae*), and Douglas-fir dwarf mistletoe. Competitive stress and poor tree vigor provide opportunities for insects and diseases to establish and spread; and for insects such as Douglas-fir beetle and mountain pine beetle to expand their populations beyond endemic levels. This disease and insect caused mortality adds to the fuel load, making fire suppression activities more difficult.

**Proposed Activities:**

The Swan Lake Ranger District is proposing to reduce the blowdown fuel loading from upwards of 100 tons per acre to 8 to 12 tons per acre to reduce fire behavior on approximately 1027 acres. In order to reduce fuel loading, the district proposes to salvage blowdown/heavily damaged standing trees and treat stands with a high incidence of disease. The proposed implementation schedule would begin in the fall of 2020 and take up to 2 years to complete.

Vegetation Management

*Fuel Reduction Treatments:* Treatments proposed are designed to reduce fuel loading and reduce natural/activity generated fuels within the proposed treatment areas. The proposed treatments are Salvage or Salvage/Sanitation Driven Regeneration. Both treatments would whole-tree skid to

designated landings, where the tree would be processed and slash piled. Salvage, or Salvage/Sanitation Driven Regeneration would occur through commercial treatment during fall/winter/spring.

- **Salvage (potential for reforestation):** Salvage refers to blowdown and standing damaged removal. Only removal of down windthrown trees would occur on 43 acres (0.013% of the entire IRA) of inventoried roadless area (IRA). Standing damaged or diseased trees would be left in the IRA for wildlife. No temporary roads would be constructed in the IRA. Reforestation would occur if removal of downed or severely damaged trees would leave the stand understocked.
- **Salvage/Sanitation Driven Regeneration:** A combination of diseases created conditions for the high winds to blow over these weakened trees. In addition to removing blowdown and standing damaged, this treatment would remove trees to improve stand health by stopping or reducing actual or anticipated spread of insects and disease. These areas would be regenerated/planted with disease tolerant tree species (e.g. Western larch [*Larix occidentalis*], western white pine [*Pinus monticola*], or ponderosa pine [*Pinus ponderosa*]).

Mechanical ground-based logging systems (tractor and shovel yarding) would be used to extract material and reduce logging slash/fuel loadings. Some incidental live or dead, non-wind damaged trees may need to be felled to facilitate skid trails, yarding corridors, and/or landings.

Slash would be piled and burned.

Portions of the project are immediately adjacent to private or state lands. These areas may be implemented through a Good Neighbor Authority agreement with the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation to provide for treatment (across jurisdictional boundaries) on private, state, and NFS lands.

*Site Preparation and Reforestation:* Depending on wind damage severity, existing vegetation, and ground conditions, site preparation may be prescribed to help create favorable conditions to help ensure adequate regeneration. Site preparation would be accomplished through hand or mechanical methods. Hand methods involve using hand tools. Mechanical methods involves scarification and seed bed preparation using tracked mechanized equipment. Reforestation is only proposed in areas where wind damage resulted in an unstocked condition. Regeneration would likely result from a combination of natural seeding and planted tree seedlings.

*Skid Trails:* Skid trails would be used for forwarding logs with a tractor from the felled location to a landing, where they are loaded on trucks and hauled away. In some instances, it may be necessary to have a designated skid trail outside of the unit boundary a short distance to a nearby landing location adjacent to the haul route. Skid trails would be reclaimed following their use using drain dips, outsloping, scarifying, seeding, slash covered, and recontouring.

#### Road Management

Road management activities include temporary road construction and road maintenance. No new permanent roads would be constructed.

*Road Maintenance:* Maintenance work may include culvert installation, replacement of existing culverts, installation of drainage dips and surface water deflectors, placement of rip-rap to armor

drainage structures, aggregate surface cleaning where needed, and surface blading to restore drainage efficiency of the road surface. These actions would bring the roads up to current standards, better accommodate traffic and reduce deferred maintenance. Best Management Practices are required under Timber Sale Contracts prior to haul timber over these roads.

*Temporary Road Construction:* Temporary roads would be constructed to the minimum standards necessary for log hauling on Forest Development Roads. Temporary road surface width would be limited to truck bunk width plus 4 feet. Temporary roads would be reclaimed following their use using drain dips, outsloping, scarifying, seeding, and re-contouring. Temporary road construction is estimated at 1.6 miles.

Two log structures cross Patterson Creek (a fish bearing stream) within the road prisms of the Lower and Upper Peterson Creek Roads (NFS Roads #10320 and #10321). Neither log structure is suitable for salvage activities and would require removal. Culverts or bridges on NFS Roads #10320 and #10321 would be installed to access the area along Patterson Creek.

A temporary log corduroy structure would be used to cross Howsley Creek, No-See-Um Creek and a ditch.

Treatment of noxious weeds would occur two weeks prior to road rehabilitation activities and post proposed activities.

#### Recreation

*Hiking Trails:* NFS designated hiking trails (Hall Lake [Trail #61] and Bond Creek [Trail #21] trails) would be temporarily impacted by salvage activities. These trails would be closed for public safety, during these activities. Any trail damage incurred would be repaired post activities.

All proposed project activities would meet the 2018 Forest Plan direction for resource protections.

### **How to Submit Comments During Scoping**

Comments on the project will be accepted are **due by August 17, 2020**. Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project and will be available for public inspection. A comment form is included with this letter.

The following options are available for submitting comments:

1. **Electronic comments** must be sent to [comments-northern-flathead-swan-lake@usda.gov](mailto:comments-northern-flathead-swan-lake@usda.gov). Please be sure to include “March Madness” in the email subject line. An automated response should confirm your electronic submission was received. Acceptable formats for electronic submission are text or html email, Adobe portable document format (PDF), and formats viewable in Microsoft Office applications (e.g. Word).
2. **Hardcopy comments** can be mailed or hand-delivered:

#### **Mail or Hand Deliver**

U.S. Forest Service, Swan Lake Ranger District  
Attn: Shelli Mavor (March Madness)  
200 Ranger Station Road  
Bigfork, MT 59911

3. **Fax comments** to (406) 837-7522. Cover page needs to include “Comments for March Madness, Attn: Shelli Mavor.”

Information about the project may also be found at  
<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=58128>.

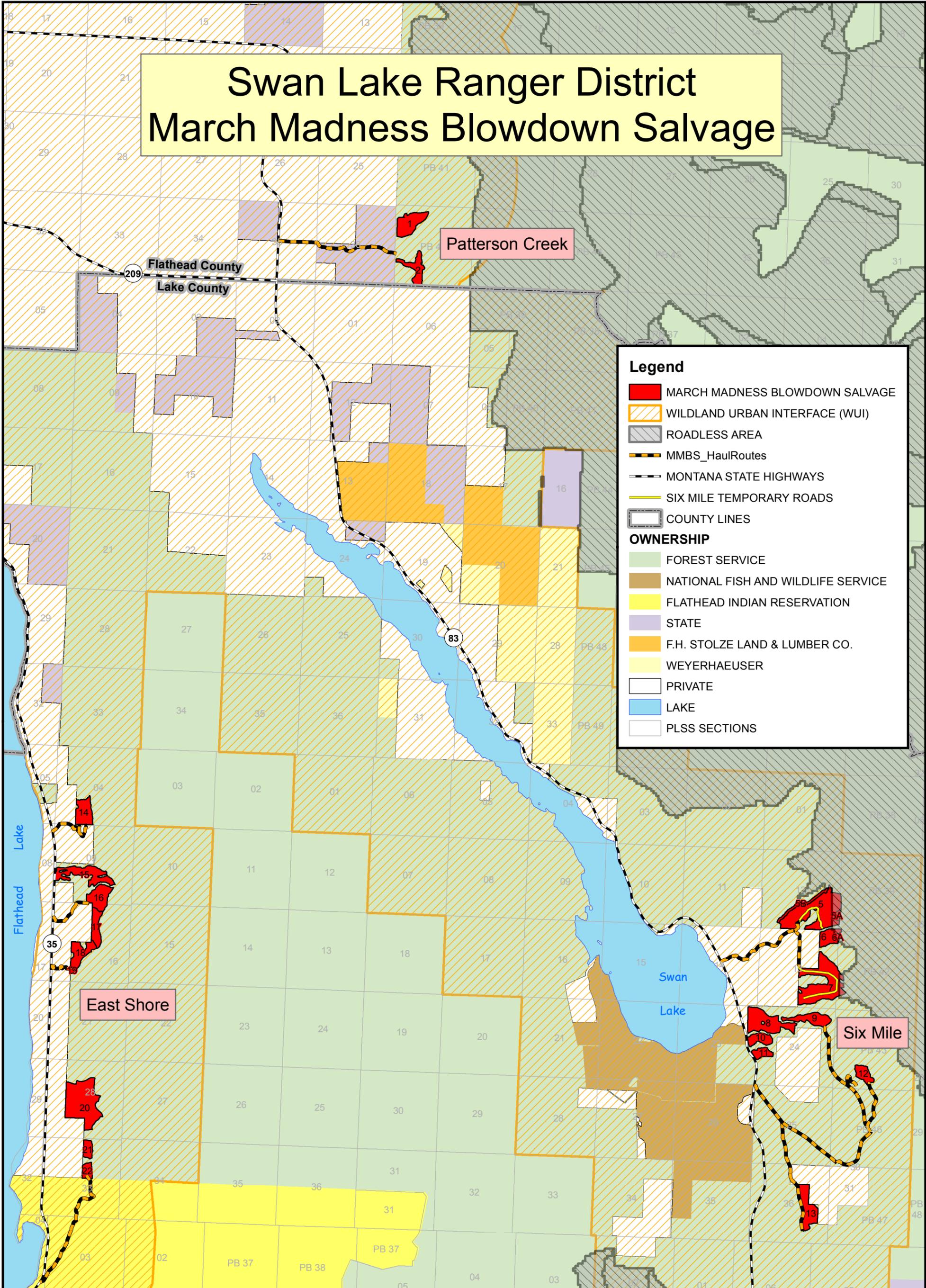
Thank you for taking the time to review the actions proposed for this project. If you have any questions, please contact Chris Dowling, District Ranger, (406) 837-7501  
[chris.dowling@usda.gov](mailto:chris.dowling@usda.gov) or Shelli Mavor, Project Lead, [michele.mavor@usda.gov](mailto:michele.mavor@usda.gov).

Sincerely,



Chris Dowling  
District Ranger

# Swan Lake Ranger District March Madness Blowdown Salvage

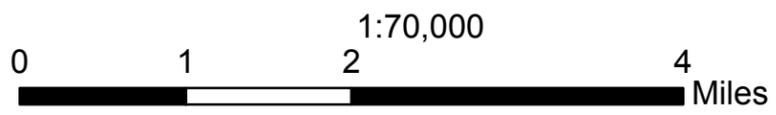


**Legend**

- MARCH MADNESS BLOWDOWN SALVAGE
- WILDLAND URBAN INTERFACE (WUI)
- ROADLESS AREA
- MMBS\_HaulRoutes
- MONTANA STATE HIGHWAYS
- SIX MILE TEMPORARY ROADS
- COUNTY LINES

**OWNERSHIP**

- FOREST SERVICE
- NATIONAL FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
- FLATHEAD INDIAN RESERVATION
- STATE
- F.H. STOLZE LAND & LUMBER CO.
- WEYERHAEUSER
- PRIVATE
- LAKE
- PLSS SECTIONS



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# Scoping Comment Form

## March Madness Blowdown Salvage Project

Please provide comments related to this project in the space provided below and return this form **by August 17th, 2020** to the USFS Swan Lake Ranger District at 200 Ranger Station Road, Bigfork, MT 59911. You may attach additional pages if needed. When submitting comments, please include your name, address, e-mail address (if applicable), telephone number, and the organization you represent (if any); and comments, concerns, and/or issues specific to this proposal. Comments received, including names and addresses, will be considered part of the public record and will be available for public inspection. If you wish to withhold your name or address from the public review or from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act, you must state this prominently at the beginning of your comments (below). Such requests will be honored to the extent allowed by law. All submissions from organizations or businesses and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses will be made available for public inspection in their entirety. The USFS will accept and consider comments submitted anonymously.

Please indicate if you would like to remain on the mailing list to receive additional information concerning this proposal. Thank you again for your interest in this project.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Organization: \_\_\_\_\_

Remain on project mailing list? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

Comments: