



Wildfire Adapted Missoula: Recreation Effects Analysis

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Effects Addressed

1. *Temporary area, road and trail closures may cause short-term impacts to recreation activities and displace use.*

Recreation activities in the project area, including permitted recreation special uses, occur year-round with active use in all seasons. Temporary closures needed to safely implement project activities, may delay, halt, and/or displace recreation access and opportunities in the project area for a short-term duration.

2. *Mechanized harvest, haul, non-mechanized fuel treatment, and other project activities may modify the expectations and experiences of recreationists.*

Recreationists visiting the project area primarily seek experiences in a Roaded Natural setting with a mostly natural appearing environment as viewed from sensitive roads and trails and with an equal opportunity of encountering other recreationists or not. Mechanized timber harvest, haul, non-mechanized fuel treatment, and other project activities may reduce the expectations and experiences of recreationists visiting the area.

3. *Use of temporary roads and skid trails may increase the potential for illegal off-road motorized use.*

Non-winter motorized recreation use in the project area is currently restricted to designated motorized trails and seasonally-open National Forest System (NFS) roads. Use of temporary roads and skid trails adjacent to existing motorized trails and/or open roads during project implementation may increase the likelihood of illegal off-road motorized use both short-term and long-term.

4. *Openings in vegetation created by project activities may increase the potential for development and use of non-system, user-created trails.*

There is an established system of trails in the project area that is used for recreation management particularly in areas of high concentrated use such as the Blue Mountain Recreation Area, Pattee Canyon Recreation Area and the Rattlesnake National Recreation Area (NRA). Openings in vegetation created adjacent to existing system trails due to project activities may increase the likelihood of the development and use of non-system, user-created trails.

5. *Decommissioning roads could impact dispersed recreation access.*

Recreationists and special use permittees depend on NFS roads in the project area to access dispersed recreation opportunities, such as hiking, hunting, fishing, viewing scenery, horseback riding, berry picking

and firewood collection. The project’s proposed decommissioning of roads could have effects on future recreation access and opportunities in the project area.

6. *Smoke from prescribed burning and burning of slash piles may cause short-term impacts to recreation activities.*

Recreation areas around Missoula such as the Blue Mountain Recreation Area, Pattee Canyon Recreation Area and the Rattlesnake NRA are used daily by local community members. Smoke from prescribed burning and burning of slash piles could temporarily impact recreation use patterns in these high use areas.

Methodology

This analysis utilized on the ground knowledge, pertinent land management plan review, and information derived from ArcMap and geographic information system (GIS) data layers.

A geospatial analysis of treatment units and recreation infrastructure considering slope, treatment type, and proximity to NFS routes was completed to determine location and scale of proposed actions in relation to key recreation assets. In addition, an analysis of treatment units located within the Rattlesnake NRA Opportunity Class structure was completed to ensure the project would comply with site-specific management direction.

Miles of trail, locations of recreation facilities, proposed miles of road constructed, proposed miles of road decommissioned, and number of acres of proposed treatment types were used to quantify the potential impact to the recreation resource.

Issue	Indicator
Impact on recreation activities due to temporary area, road and trail closures	Temporary area, road and trail closures used to safely implement project activities (i.e., Mechanized and non-mechanized treatments, hauling of materials, and prescribed burning)
Effects on recreation expectations and experiences due to project activities	Acres treated Changes to ROS designation
Increased off-road motorized use due to temporary roads and skid trails	Temporary roads adjacent to open roads Treatment units adjacent to open roads
Increased development and use of non-system, user-created trails due to vegetative openings created by project activities	Treatment units adjacent to system trails
Decreased access for dispersed recreation due to road decommissioning	Miles of road decommissioned
Impact on recreation activities due to smoke from prescribed burning and burning of slash piles	Number of planned burn units within or near developed or dispersed recreation areas

Consistency with Relevant Laws, Regulations, and Policy

Forest Plan Direction

Lolo National Forest Plan provides management direction for determining the desired condition on the Forest for the recreation resource. Listed below are excerpts from the Forest Plan that have application to this project (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1986).

“Provide for a broad spectrum of dispersed recreation involving sufficient acreage to maintain a low user density compatible with public expectations” (page II-1).

Forest Wide Goal

Mechanized and non-mechanized treatments, hauling of materials, staging of equipment, road and area closures

The project would be consistent with this goal as project implementation would not occur over a large amount of the greater project area at the same time and the public would be adequately informed of project activities. By geographically focusing treatments, users would be able to utilize other nearby dispersed recreation areas and maintain tolerable levels of user density.

“The rich variety of recreation experiences available on the Forest will continue” (page II-1).

Forest Wide Objective

Mechanized and non-mechanized treatments

The project would not reduce the variety of recreation experiences available over a significant amount of space and time. Managed recreation infrastructure would not be reduced in the long term by this project. Dispersed recreation opportunities could be altered by the removal of some existing road templates, but additional opportunities for similar dispersed recreation activities would be created. A rich variety of recreation experiences would continue to be available on the Forest.

“The Lolo National Forest will provide for a wide spectrum of Forest-related dispersed recreation activities and range of skill levels available to Forest visitors including the elderly and handicapped. The program will provide for use of the Forest on a year-round basis in areas that will minimize conflicts between user groups and other Forest resources” (page II-9).

Forest Wide Standard

Mechanized and non-mechanized treatments, hauling of materials, staging of equipment, road and area closures

The project would be consistent with this standard as project implementation would not occur over a large amount of the greater project area at the same time and the public would be adequately informed of project activities. By geographically focusing treatments, users would be able to utilize other nearby dispersed recreation areas and maintain tolerable levels of user density. By informing the public of implementation activities and maintaining year round dispersed recreation opportunities within the majority of the project area, the project would meet this standard.

“The following items will be emphasized on the Forest to increase communication and service to the public:

Inform public of Forest activities through use of the media (page II-9);

Modify timber sale contracts to avoid disturbance to Forest visitors during key periods (page II-10).

Increase frequency of road maintenance on popular recreation routes” (page II-10).

Forest Wide Standard

Mechanized and non-mechanized treatments, hauling of materials, staging of equipment, road and area closures

Resource Protection Measures pertaining to public notification, coordination with special-use permittees, treatment timing, and protection of recreation infrastructure protection are incorporated into the project, consistent with this standard.

“Provide for quality hunting and fishing opportunities on the Forest by means of habitat manipulation, transportation management and planning, and by coordinating and cooperating with the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks to provide for a wide diversity of hunting and fishing opportunities” (page II-10).

Forest Wide Standard

Mechanized and non-mechanized treatments, hauling of materials, staging of equipment, road and area closures

The project would be consistent with this standard by creating a diversity in wildlife habitat, opening up lines of sight, and by increasing big game forage. Project activities and associated closures would be communicated and timed to minimize disruption to hunting and fishing recreationists. The Forest would continue to provide quality opportunities for these activities.

“Trees with a high potential for physical failure or susceptibility to insects and disease will be periodically evaluated. Hazardous conditions should be reduced by using acceptable methods such as selective removal or thinning of trees” (page III-21).

Management Area 7 – Campgrounds and/or Picnic Areas

Mechanized and non-mechanized treatments

The project would be consistent with this standard. Construction of shaded fuelbreaks, thinning and prescribed burning implemented in this area would reduce stand susceptibility to insects and disease and reduce hazardous conditions by felling and removing or burning dead and dying trees and associated slash.

“Tree Removal will be limited to that required to eliminate safety hazards or permit construction or expansion of facilities. The Management Area is classified as unsuitable for timber production” (pages III-21, III-24).

Management Areas 7, 8 – Campgrounds and/or Picnic Areas, Ski Areas

Mechanized and non-mechanized treatments

If mechanized treatment is used in MA7 for fuelbreak construction, trees would be removed from the landscape for biomass. This action would be consistent with this standard as tree removal would be for the purpose of eliminating safety hazards. Proposed non-mechanized treatments would not remove any trees from the landscape. Small diameter trees would be cut and pile burned and larger diameter live trees would be generally retained with the exception of those heavily infected with dwarf mistletoe. These trees would either be girdled or removed through prescribed burning activities.

“Wildfires will be controlled to safeguard life and property. To achieve management goals and objectives, prescribed burning may be planned and executed to maintain or restore the composition and structure of plant communities, or for hazard reduction purposes” (Page III-21).

Management Area 7 – Campgrounds and/or Picnic Areas

Non-mechanized treatments

The project would be consistent with this standard. The purpose and need of the project is well aligned with the intent of this Management Area standard.

“Wildfire Suppression methods will be applicable to Fire Management Unit 2, described in Appendix X. To achieve management goals and objectives, prescribed burning may be planned and executed to maintain or restore the composition and structure of plant communities, or for hazard reduction purposes” (page III-24).

Management Area 8 – Ski Areas

Non-mechanized treatments

The project would be consistent with this standard. The purpose and need of the project is well aligned with the intent of this Management Area standard.

“Trees with a high potential for physical failure or susceptibility to insects and disease will be periodically evaluated. Hazardous conditions will be reduced by using acceptable methods such as single tree removal or thinning” (page III-24).

Management Area 8 – Ski Areas

Non-mechanized treatments

The project would be consistent with this standard. Thinning and prescribed burning implemented in this area would reduce stand susceptibility to insects and disease and reduce hazardous conditions by burning or felling dead and dying trees.

“Provide for a wide variety of dispersed recreation opportunities in a forest setting available to wide segment of society” (pages III-26, III-144).

Management Areas 9, 28 – Concentrated Public Use, Rattlesnake NRA

Mechanized and non-mechanized treatments

Resource protection measures would be used to ensure implementation is coordinated to reduce impacts over a large amount of the greater project area occurring at the same time and so public is adequately informed of project activities. By geographically focusing treatments, recreation users should be able to utilize other nearby dispersed recreation areas and maintain tolerable levels of user density. By informing the public of implementation activities and maintaining year-round dispersed recreation opportunities within the majority of the project area, the project would meet this standard.

“Provide for management of other resources in a manner consistent with the recreation objectives” (page III-26).

Management Area 9 – Concentrated Public Use

Mechanized and non-mechanized treatments

Resource protection measures would be used to ensure project implementation would be consistent with recreation objectives. By protecting existing developed and dispersed recreation opportunities and ensuring the project does not close an unacceptable number of recreation opportunities at one time, this standard would be met.

“Provide for acceptable levels of water quality and fisheries habitat and improve opportunities for dispersed recreation” (page III-26).

Management Area 9 – Concentrated Public Use

Mechanized and non-mechanized treatments

By effectively implementing resource protection measures pertaining to temporary road decommissioning and retention of visual and physical barriers to unauthorized wheeled cross-country use, the project would be consistent with this standard. If road templates with established existing foot paths are decommissioned, access for dispersed recreation use could be impacted. A resource protection measure would be used to preserve this access and use where it has traditionally occurred.

“Tree Removal will be limited to that required to eliminate safety hazard or permit road or trail construction or meet other management objectives. The Management Area is classified as unsuitable for timber production” (page III-27).

Management Area 9 – Concentrated Public Use

Mechanized treatments

In all areas designated as MA9, other than the Blue Mountain Recreation Area, there would be no commercial timber removed from the project area. Mechanized treatments would be consistent with tree

removal required to meet other management objectives. In the Blue Mountain Recreation Area an Environmental Assessment was completed to produce the Blue Mountain Recreation Plan. The following excerpt from the Decision Notice pertaining to vegetation management states:

Decision -The Maclay Flat ponderosa pine will be managed to obtain large diameter open understory stand using thinning and fire. On lower Blue Mountain and upper elevation south aspects will be maintained as an open pine forest using fire and timber harvesting. Upper Blue Mountain and aspects with fir, larch, and lodgepole pine stands will be managed for longer than normal rotations to achieve visually pleasing stands. Cutting of trees and fire will be used to achieve various objectives including the maintaining of healthy trees, remove woody accumulations, creating browse and openings for wildlife and maintain huckleberry areas.

Rationale – Harvesting activities will require an environmental assessment and must be compatible with recreation use described in this plan. Potential exists for improving wildlife habitat and wildlife viewing by timber harvesting. I anticipate little timber harvesting during the first decade” (U. S. Department of Agriculture 1986, page 5).

Given this direction, which refined “the management area 9 standards for the Blue Mountain Area” (U. S. Department of Agriculture 1986, page 1), the project would be in compliance with plan direction having resource protection measures in place to ensure that project activities are compatible with recreation uses.

“Wildfire suppression methods will be applicable to Fire Management Unit 2, described is Appendix X. To achieve management goals and objectives, prescribed burning may be planned and executed to maintain or restore the composition and structure of plant communities, or for hazard reduction purposes” (page III-27).

Management Area 9 – Concentrated Public Use

Prescribed burning

The project would be consistent with this standard for Management Area 9. This standard closely aligns with the project’s purpose and need.

“Road Access will be provided to meet recreation objectives. Trails may be constructed to provide for a variety of recreation activities and experiences” (page III-28).

Management Area 9 – Concentrated Public Use

Temporary closures

The project would be consistent with this standard. Road closures would be restricted to those necessary to provide for public safety during project implementation. There would be no new trails constructed with this project, however, the existing system of trails would be retained and adequately provide for a variety of recreation activities and experiences.

“Provide for management of wildlife habitat, historical, scientific, ecological, and other values in a manner consistent with the recreational objectives.”

Management Area 28 – Rattlesnake NRA

Non-mechanized treatments

The project would be consistent with this standard. Proposed thinning and use of prescribed fire would provide for management of ecological and other values and resource protection measures would ensure these management actions are consistent with recreation objectives.

“Tree Removal will be limited to that required to eliminate safety hazards or permit construction or expansion of facilities. The Management Area is classified as unsuitable for timber production” (page III-145).

Management Area 28 – Rattlesnake NRA

Non-mechanized treatments

The project would not include removal of any commercial timber from lands within this management area. Proposed treatments would reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire, which would increase the safety of recreation infrastructure and improvements on Federal land as well as the adjacent landscape.

“Wildfires will be confined, contained, or controlled as provided for by criteria and guidelines for each management unit in the Fire Management Plan, described in Appendix X. To achieve management goals and objectives prescribed burning may be planned and executed to maintain or restore composition and structure of plant communities, or for hazard reduction purposes” (page III-145).

Management Area 28 – Rattlesnake NRA

Non-mechanized treatments, prescribed burning

The project is well aligned with this standard for the Rattlesnake NRA. Prescribed burning would be implemented for maintenance of composition and structure of plant communities and hazard reduction purposes.

“Timber removal will be limited to that needed to maintain or improve recreation values” (page III-146).

Management Area 28 – Rattlesnake NRA

Non-mechanized treatments

No merchantable timber or biomass would be removed from the Rattlesnake NRA. Vegetation that is lost through thinning or burning activities would maintain a naturally appearing landscape.

“Prescribed burning may be used to improve big-game forage and reduce hazards. Suppression activities will generally utilize hand tools rather than heavy equipment” (page III-146).

Management are 28 – Rattlesnake NRA

Prescribed burning

The project is well aligned with this standard as prescribed burning activities would reduce hazards created by heavy fuel loading.

“The Homestead Meadows will be treated by burning, hand piling, and/or cutting to remove invading trees and noxious weeds to retain the typical cleared homestead appearance” (page III-148).

Management Area 28 – Rattlesnake NRA

Non-mechanized treatments, prescribed burning

The project is well aligned with this standard. Implementation of fuel treatments in this Management Area would retain the cleared appearance of Homestead Meadows.

“The ponderosa pine flat between Spring Creek and Poe Meadow bordered by Strawberry Ridge and Rattlesnake Creek will be treated by cutting and/or prescribed fire to encourage a mosaic of old-growth pine with interspersed openings and thickets” (page III-148).

Management Area 28 – Rattlesnake NRA

Non-mechanized treatments, prescribed burning

The project is well aligned with this standard. Implementation of fuel treatments would encourage a mosaic of old-growth pine with interspersed openings and thickets.

Blue Mountain Recreation Area Plan- Vegetative Management Decision:

“The Maclay Flat ponderosa pine will be managed to obtain large diameter open understory stand using thinning and fire. On lower Blue Mountain and upper elevation south aspect will be maintained as an open pine forest using fire and timber harvesting. Upper Blue Mountain and aspects with fir, larch, and lodgepole pine stands will be managed for longer than normal

rotations to achieve visually pleasing stands. Cutting of trees and fire will be used to achieve various objectives including maintaining healthy trees, removing woody accumulations, creating browse and openings for wildlife and maintaining huckleberry areas.

Rationale- Harvesting activities will require an environmental assessment and must be compatible with recreation use described in this plan. Potential exists for improving wildlife habitat and wildlife viewing by timber harvesting. I anticipate little timber harvesting during the first decade.” (U. S. Department of Agriculture 1986, page 5).

Blue Mountain Recreation Area

Mechanized and non-mechanized treatments

The project is consistent with the management direction contained in the Blue Mountain Recreation Area Plan. As noted above, harvesting activities would require an environmental assessment and must be compatible with recreation uses described in the plan. This analysis would serve as the required environmental assessment and resource protection measures would be used to ensure the project would be compatible with recreation uses. Timber harvested from this area would accomplish the objectives noted above and are not proposed for commercial purposes.

Special Area Designations

Rattlesnake National Recreation Area

The Rattlesnake NRA was established by congress on October 19, 1980 with the passage of the Rattlesnake National Recreation Area and Wilderness Act of 1980 (RNRAW Act). The project area does not extend into designated Wilderness, but does encompass 18,370 acres of the Rattlesnake NRA. With passage of this Act congress was clear in their intention to “promote the watershed, recreational, wildlife, and educational values” of the lands outside of the Wilderness boundary (RNRAW Act).

The management of this area was further refined with the enactment of the Limits of Acceptable Change based Management Direction - Rattlesnake National Recreation Area and Wilderness. “LAC is a framework for establishing acceptable and appropriate resource and social conditions in recreation settings” (U. S. Department of Agriculture 1992, page 2). This document separated the Rattlesnake NRA and Wilderness (RNRAW) into six different Opportunity Classes, which provide desired conditions for social, resource, and managerial settings. This project proposes prescribed burning and other non-mechanized treatments (~6,040 acres) in portions of all six of the Opportunity Classes.

Opportunity Classes provide direction for acceptable management actions within the RNRAW. Opportunity Class 1 notes that in the managerial setting “Prescribed fire will be used for ecosystem and wildlife habitat management in the national recreation area, but not the wilderness” (U. S. Department of Agriculture 1992, page 17). While in Opportunity Classes 3,4,5, and 6 it is noted that ladder fuels in high use areas be used as an indicator for the need for management. The standard for this indicator states: “Tree cutting will be allowed to reduce high hazard ladder fuels and to facilitate prescribed burning. Cut designation will be by individual tree evaluation. Tree cutting will be allowed to meet resource objectives other than timber management” (U. S. Department of Agriculture 1992, page 30).

The Fire Management policy established by the RNRAW LAC direction is clear. “Aggressive suppression of wildfires is necessary in the non-wilderness portion of the RNRAW because of proximity to residences, subdivisions, other private land values, such as investments for timber production, ranching and recreation, and municipal watershed. Wildfires will have immediate fires suppression action taken, including the use of mechanized equipment where warranted” (U. S. Department of Agriculture 1992, page 15).

The successful implementation of this necessary policy has resulted in the heavy fuel loading and dense vegetation that currently exists in the area and speaks directly to the purpose and need of this project.

The proposed non-mechanized treatments would result in a landscape that is closer to its natural range of variability and reduce fuel loading within the Wildland Urban Interface. There would be no commercial timber or merchantable product removed from the landscape in the Rattlesnake NRA. Resource protection measures would be used to minimize the effect of proposed treatments to the recreating public. The project aligns well with the managerial intent of suppressing wildfire ignitions while maintaining natural ecological processes.

Other Relevant Law, Regulation, and Policy Consistency

National Forest Roads and Trails Act (16 U.S.C. 532-538)

This Act recognizes that construction and maintenance of an adequate system of roads and trails within and near the National Forests are essential to meeting the increasing demands for timber, recreation, and other uses.

The project will be consistent with this Act. The designated system of trails would not be reduced by the project and Resource Protection Measures are in place to ensure trail features are not adversely affected. The project fully acknowledges the importance of a transportation system and proposes adding 164 miles of road to the system for management of recently acquired lands.

National Trail System Act (16 U.S.C. Ch. 27)

This Act was created in order to “promote the preservation of, public access to, travel within, and enjoyment and appreciation of the open-air, outdoor areas and historic resources of the Nation.” The Act, as amended, designated National Historic Trails and National Recreation Trails. There are two designated National Historic Trails in the project area, the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail and the Nez Perce National Historic Trail (Nee-Me-Poo). There are also two designated National Recreation Trails in the project area – Blue Mountain and Sam Braxton.

The project will be consistent with the intent of this Act. All trails in the project area will have Resource Protection Measures in place to ensure there is no long-term harm to the recreational experience they provide. There may be short-term impacts to recreation users created by project implementation as outlined in further detail below, however there will be no reduction in miles of system trails or change in trail access posed by the project.

Environmental Impacts

Potentially Affected Environment

This section describes the current recreation environment which would continue into the future if no action were to be implemented.

A variety of recreation activities occur within the project area, including hiking, bicycling, dog walking, trail running, disc golfing, hunting, fishing, horseback riding, dispersed camping, picnicking, OHV riding, snowmobiling, Nordic skiing, downhill skiing, backcountry skiing, snowshoeing, hang gliding, paragliding, berry picking, firewood gathering and driving for pleasure. These recreational activities occur year-round with active use in all seasons. Seasonally-closed roads in the project area are highly valued for non-motorized recreation, particularly for hunting in the fall and over snow use in the winter. Recreation activities are highly dependent upon the network of NFS roads and trails and designated recreation areas within the larger project area.

There are 169.5 miles of maintained Forest Service system trails within the project area. The majority of these trails are non-motorized, however, there are 20.7 miles of motorized trail that are located in the Blue Mountain Recreation Area.

The majority of land in the project area has a Roaded Natural designation in the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS). In a Roaded Natural setting the “*Area is characterized by predominantly natural-appearing environments with moderate evidences of the sights and sounds of man. Such evidences usually harmonize with the natural environment. Interaction between users may be low to moderate, but with evidence of other users prevalent. Resource modification and utilization practices are evident, but*

harmonize with the natural environment. Conventional motorized use is provided for in construction standards and design of facilities.” The Roaded Natural experience is characterized as, *“About an equal probability to experience affiliation with other user groups and for isolation from sights and sounds of humans. Opportunity to have a high degree of interaction with the natural environment. Opportunities for both motorized and non-motorized forms of recreation are possible”* (McConnel and Bacon 1986).

One National Recreation Area (Rattlesnake) and two Forest Plan designated recreation areas (Pattee Canyon and Blue Mountain) are located in the project area. The Rattlesnake NRA encompasses 28,000 acres, 73 miles of trail, and lies adjacent to the Rattlesnake Wilderness Area which is outside the project boundary. There are six trailheads associated with the Rattlesnake NRA: Rattlesnake Main, Rattlesnake Horse, Sawmill Gulch, Woods Gulch, Ravine, and Sheep Mountain. The Rattlesnake Main and Sawmill Gulch Trailheads are the most heavily used. All recreation use in the Rattlesnake NRA is non-motorized. The Pattee Canyon Recreation Area encompasses 3,200 acres and 27 miles of trail, including the Sam Braxton National Recreation Trail. There are two main trailheads associated with this recreation area: Pattee Canyon Main and Crazy Canyon. The area also includes a picnic area with single use sites as well as three group use sites that require a fee and are reservable July 1st through Labor Day annually. Adjacent to the picnic area is an 18-hole disc golf course that is maintained in partnership with the Garden City Flyers, the local disc golf club, and is open for use July 1st through October 31st annually. All recreation use in the Pattee Canyon Recreation Area is non-motorized. The Blue Mountain Recreation Area encompasses approximately 4,900 acres and 41 miles of trail, including the Blue Mountain National Recreation Trail. There are three primary trailheads associated with this recreation area: Blue Mountain Main (includes stock facilities), Maclay Flat, and a motorized trailhead. There are additional parking pullouts along the Blue Mountain Road #365. The area includes both motorized and non-motorized trails and an 18-hole disc golf course open year-round that is also maintained in partnership with the Garden City Flyers. Due to their proximity to the City of Missoula, these three recreation areas collectively account for the greatest amount of concentrated recreation use in the project area.

Within the Lolo Creek corridor in the southwest area of the project is the historic Lolo Trail and Fort Fizzle. The Lolo Trail encompasses the Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail and the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail. These two trails are managed for their historic and cultural significance. The Fort Fizzle historic site is managed as a picnic area and interpretive site Memorial Day through Labor Day annually.

Seasonally-closed roads in the project area also provide non-motorized access to most drainages and their headwaters for non-winter recreation activities. There are no developed campgrounds in the project area, however, there are numerous roadside locations where dispersed car camping occurs both in the summer and fall seasons.

The Missoula Ranger District issues several Recreation Event Special Use permits within the project area annually. These permits are issued primarily for summer events such as disc golf tournaments, trail running races, and mountain bike races. Events occur on a combination of NFS roads, trails, and disc golf courses in the Blue Mountain and Pattee Canyon Recreation Areas, as well as NFS portions of Mt. Sentinel and University Mountain.

There is a small network (~7 miles) of designated winter use (snowmobile and Nordic ski) trails within the project area. The District has an Agreement with the Missoula Nordic Ski Club to groom Nordic ski trails in the Pattee Canyon Recreation Area and up the main trail corridor (Trail #99) in the Rattlesnake NRA. Road #365 in the Blue Mountain Recreation Area is closed seasonally one mile up the road to allow for snowmobile use. Other non-motorized winter activities such as backcountry skiing, snowshoeing, and fat tire bicycling occur at various locations within the project area both on and off trail, typically in the general forest area.

The Montana Snowbowl ski resort provides downhill skiing opportunities in the northern portion of the project area. Approximately 2,243 acres of the ski resort are managed under Special Use Permit by the District. The ski resort serves thousands of visitors annually and is currently conducting an expansion of the ski area on T.V. Mountain. A portion of the previous Marshall Mountain Ski Area is also located in the project area, however, due to lack of snow this is not an active ski area.

There are six primary special-use permittees for outfitting and guiding that operate within the project area. Five of the permittees, including Missoula Parks and Recreation, Missoula Outdoor Learning Adventures, Missoula YMCA, Montana Natural History Center, and The University of Montana Campus Recreation are permitted for miscellaneous day use such as hiking, backpacking, bicycling, environmental education, Nordic skiing, and snowshoeing. Within the project area, these permittees primarily operate in the Pattee Canyon and Blue Mountain Recreation Areas and in the Lolo Creek corridor. Dunrovin Ranch and Research provides guided horseback trips in the Blue Mountain Recreation Area and the Lolo Creek corridor.

Environmental Impacts of Alternative B

The effects of Alternative B that were identified for analysis due to the potential for significant effects to this resource are:

1. Temporary area, road and trail closures may cause short-term impacts to recreation activities and displace use.

The project area is heavily-used for a variety of recreation activities as outlined above. While dispersed recreation may occur across the entire project area, the most noteworthy impact to recreation activities during project implementation would be in areas of concentrated public use (MA9 and MA28), specifically the Blue Mountain and Pattee Canyon Recreation Areas, and the Rattlesnake NRA. Temporary area, road, and trail closures would be necessary to ensure public safety while implementing project activities (i.e., mechanized and non-mechanized treatments, hauling of materials, and prescribed burning).

Due to temporary closures, the impact to recreation activities during project implementation would be noticeable, but the need to manage other resources within the project area, and specifically areas of high concentrated use, is clear and accounted for in applicable Forest and Recreation Area plans. The scale of impact to the availability of recreation activities and access caused by closures would be tempered by ensuring coordination with the District Recreation Staff when implementing closures in the Blue Mountain and Pattee Canyon Recreation Areas, the Rattlesnake NRA, and other MA9 locations. In considering recreation opportunities in the larger project area and limiting the geographic bounds of temporary closures in areas of concentrated public use, the impact to the recreating public would be minimized and there would be sufficient overflow capacity for displaced users within the larger project area.

2. Mechanized harvest, haul, non-mechanized fuel treatment, and other project activities may modify the expectations and experience of recreationists.

As much of the NFS land within the project area boundary would be authorized for some form of treatment, it is expected that recreationists may be affected throughout the project area, but to varying degrees. User experiences would be most directly impacted during project implementation as the sights, sounds, and smells of the various treatment types would be immediately noticeable and differ from the norm for their relationship with these landscapes.

While implementation activities would be the most direct impact they would be relatively short term in a given geographic area. The change in vegetative cover and sight lines on the landscape would be a lesser effect, but would persist for a longer time period. Most of the project area (200,902 acres) is classified as Roded Natural in the Recreational Opportunity Spectrum which is characterized by predominantly natural-appearing environments with moderate evidences of the sights and sounds of man. The environment may appear less natural in some areas and as vegetation is removed the opportunity for visual encounters with other users will increase.

The degree of this effect would likely be subjective to individual user's expectations and experience with Forest management activities. The effect would likely also vary by treatment type.

It is expected that mechanized harvest units in the Blue Mountain Focal Treatment (FTA) would have the largest effect to visitor expectation and experiences and would result in a longer term duration of change to the vegetative cover. The northern most portions of the Blue Mountain Recreation Area, within the Blue Mountain FTA, have a relatively dense trail system and areas of focused use, such as the disc golf course. Visitors would be displaced from these area during portions of implementation and removal of

vegetation would change user experiences in the short term, by increasing sight lines and evidence of management actions.

Biomass removal would also have an impact to visitor's experiences, but the duration of noticeable change to the landscape would be less than units proposed for mechanical harvest activities. Thinning and prescribed burning would have short-term impacts to visitor's experiences, however it not expected that these treatments would negatively impact visitor's experiences for the long term as vegetation should recover quickly and the treatment would more closely mimic what a recreationist might encounter in the general forest area where fire has more recently played an active role in the ecosystem.

The effects to recreation expectations and experiences are important, especially in such a heavily-used area, however these effects do not supersede the purpose and need of the project to implement fuel treatments to reduce wildfire hazard. It should also be noted that not all recreationists would be negatively affected by implementation of the project. It is expected that many visitors understand the importance of Forest and fire management on their public lands and embrace the proactive measures the project would take. If wildland fire were to occur in the project area before fuels are reduced and dense stands with close crown spacing and heavy mortality are thinned, visitor experiences may be more impacted than they would be by planned project activities.

3. Use of temporary roads and skid trails may increase the potential for illegal off-road motorized use.

New road construction is proposed in the Blue Mountain FTA. Four permanent roads are proposed ranging from approximately 0.5 to 4.2 miles in length (6 miles total). The location, design, and construction of these roads would follow Best Management Practices to minimize potential environmental impacts. Following use for the project, approximately 1.2 miles of these roads would be stored, 0.8 miles of road would return to the current status as a motorized trail, and the rest of the roads (5.4 miles) would be restricted to public motorized use yearlong. Storage treatments would include decompacting, slashing, and water barring the road surface, and removing drainage structures.

Approximately eight temporary road segments are proposed ranging from approximately 0.1 to 0.8 miles in length (about 3.6 miles total). They would be constructed to a minimum standard for safe transport of timber harvesting equipment and log trucks. After use for the project, temporary roads would be decommissioned by removing drainage features and recontouring the road prism as much as feasible and placing slash and grass seed on disturbed areas.

Currently the Blue Mountain FTA has 17.8 miles of undetermined roads that were never added to the official NF road system and are a legacy of past management activities. This project would add 13 miles of these undetermined roads to the NF road system to aid in long-term resource management in the area. About 5.5 miles of these roads would be used for treatments including shaded fuelbreaks, and following use for this project, approximately 3 miles would be stored. Storage treatments would include decompacting, slashing, and water barring the road surface, and removing drainage structures. These roads would remain restricted to public motorized use yearlong.

The potential for illegal motorized use is highest in the Blue Mountain Recreation Area, within the Blue Mountain FTA, but there is a risk of this unauthorized motorized use in areas designated for biomass removal as well. Equipment used in biomass removal may leave noticeable routes on the landscape that could encourage unauthorized motorized use when located near an open motorized route.

The timeframe for the impact would be short in nature as routes would be blocked or decommissioned before cessation of project activities. If motorized routes in the project area are left open during project implementation there would be a short duration, limited opportunity for unauthorized travel along temporary roads and skid trails.

With Resource Protection Measures in place to ensure that access is blocked to these routes, this is not expected to be a significant impact to the recreation resource. A strong monitoring program and an ability to curtail use before a user pattern emerges would be important to long-term success of vehicle restriction devices.

4. Openings in vegetation created by project activities may increase the potential for development and use of non-system, user-created trails.

With the large amount of people using the project area for recreation, there is a possibility of new user created trails and routes developing on the landscape. As vegetation is removed to accomplish project goals it would decrease the amount of visual and physical barriers to unauthorized trail development. Vegetation recovery would vary by treatment type, but it is expected that the escalated risk of unauthorized trail development would be most acute during the first few years after treatment.

Units that are treated exclusively through the use of prescribed fire are at a relatively low risk for unauthorized trail development due to the amount of physical barriers that would still remain on the landscape after implementation.

Shaded fuelbreaks, hand thinning units, and biomass removal units are at the most acute risk for trail development when open routes intersect, switchback, are located nearby on the landscape, or connect an open route to a destination point such as a water source or mountain top.

In the 1,649 acres of the Blue Mountain FTA planned for mechanized harvest activities and associated temporary road and skid trail development there is a relatively high risk of user-created trail development.

In units where more than 50% of the vegetation would be removed through harvest and prescribed burning activities, sight lines would be opened up and physical barriers to cross country use would be removed from the landscape. As noted above, the risk would be higher where routes intersect, switchback, are located near each other or a destination point.

While there is a risk of this impact across the project area it most critical along currently open routes with gentle side slopes. Slopes of less than 40% are at risk to off trail use and would be given extra consideration.

Recreation, Fuels, and Silviculture Staff would flag specific areas to leave vegetation to prevent unauthorized trails from being established.

By leaving vegetation and other existing physical and visual barriers in key locations, project managers could effectively minimize risk of user-created trails developing on the landscape. There would be a need for an aggressive monitoring plan to locate and remove unauthorized trails before a user pattern develops. Land managers have several existing tools to mitigate this risk including education, enforcement, installation of barriers, and revegetation. While the risk for this unwanted use is relatively high in portions of the project area, there are established methods to minimize impact and restore affected areas and the risk does not supersede the purpose and need of this project.

5. Decommissioning roads could impact dispersed recreation access.

Roads that exist on the landscape, but are not needed for future management would be decommissioned. There are eight miles of road that would be decommissioned in this project, they are all located in the Blue Mountain FTA. Decommissioned roads may or may not be physically treated depending on condition and location. Physical treatments may be used to address impacts including illegal motorized use, sediment delivery and impact to streams and riparian areas, and soil disturbance from road prism failure. Physical treatments would range from entrance closure to full road obliteration.

Decommissioning activities have the potential to eliminate non-system routes that are currently used by the public for dispersed non-motorized recreation. This effect would be mitigated by several factors. A Resource Protection Measure would allow for paths (non-maintained, non-system trails) to be left on existing high-use routes that are slated to be decommissioned. These paths would serve as an acceptable level of access for recreationists, while acknowledging the importance of removing these routes from the landscape to improve overall ecosystem health.

In addition, in the Blue Mountain FTA, there are 13 miles of existing road that are slated to be added to the FS system, and six miles of permanent new road construction. These routes would be restricted to public motorized use yearlong and provide a similar dispersed non-motorized recreation opportunity as the roads that are planned to be decommissioned. There would also be 0.4 miles of non-motorized trail added in the Blue Mountain FTA. This trail would be used in prescribed burning activities and would be retained as an addition to the District's network of system trails.

With an additional 18,510 acres of land being added to the NFS within the project area, recreation opportunities in the project area would be significantly increased. Of the newly acquired lands, 1,913

acres would be managed for concentrated public use (MA9). These lands are located north of Highway 12 and in the Marshall Canyon area. The close proximity of these areas to existing recreation areas will help to offset the impact of displacement of recreationists and the loss of dispersed recreation caused by road decommissioning activities. There are 164 miles of road located on the acquired lands that would be added to the NF road system through the project. These roads would provide an additional source of dispersed recreation opportunities for the public into the future.

While the existing opportunities for dispersed recreation would be changed through project implementation, there would be no loss in overall opportunities for dispersed recreation on restricted routes.

6. Smoke from prescribed burning and burning of slash piles may cause short-term impacts to recreation activities.

This effect is specific to the impact on recreation experiences while on NFS lands. Smoke created by burning to accomplish project goals would affect more than people visiting the NF to engage in recreation activities and these effects are discussed in more detail in the Air Quality report in the Project File.

Recreationists seeking to use the lands in the project area during and immediately after prescribed burning would be impacted by the reduced visibility and air quality. This impact would be short term in duration and limited in scope by the amount of burning that would be occurring in the project area at one time.

Prescribed burning activities would be conducted in compliance with State, Federal, and County air quality standards. Prescribed burning activities would observe the provisions of the Forest Service Major Open Burn Permit issued annually by Montana Department of Environmental Quality and the Missoula County Outdoor Burning Permit for Major Sources issued annually by Missoula City-County Health Department.

Public notification of planned ignitions would be an important aspect of mitigating this effect. With adequate notice of planned ignitions, recreationists would be able to make an informed decision about where to plan their outdoor activities to avoid being impacted by smoke created from prescribed burning. While the impact to the public experience in the popular recreation areas surrounding Missoula is an important aspect to consider, it does not preclude the need to implement these treatments on the landscape.

In summary, this project would affect the recreation setting and experience for visitors to the Missoula Ranger District, however with Resource Protection Measures in place, the impact, both spatially and temporally, would be within an acceptable level to allow for successful management of other resources in the project area. The high density of recreationists in the project area is an important aspect of successful implementation, but does not preclude the need to manage vegetation to address high fuel loading and wildfire hazard reduction.

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