

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**Forest Service****Knox-Brooks Timber Sales and Road Rehabilitation; Superior Ranger District, Lolo National Forest; Mineral County, Montana**

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice; intent to prepare environmental impact statement.

AUTHORITY: 40 CFR 1508.22.

SUMMARY: The Forest Service will prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) for timber harvesting, prescribed burning, road access changes, and watershed rehabilitation in a 38,000-acre area near St. Regis, Montana.

DATES: Initial comments concerning the scope of the analysis should be received in writing within 30 days following publication of this notice. Comments received during the initial scoping will be considered in the analysis and do not need to be resubmitted during this comment time period.

ADDRESSES: Send written comments to Cindy Chapman Enstrom, District Ranger, Superior Ranger District, Box 460, Superior, MT 59872.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Bruce Erickson, Knox-Brooks Interdisciplinary Team Leader, Superior Ranger District, as above, or phone: (406) 822-4233.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The responsible official who will make decisions based on this EIS is Charles C. Wildes, Forest Supervisor, Lolo National Forest, Building 24 Fort Missoula, Missoula, MT 59804. He will decide on this proposal after considering comments and responses, environmental consequences discussed in the Final EIS, and applicable laws, regulations, and policies. The decision and reasons for the decision will be documented in a Record of Decision.

The Forest Service proposes to harvest approximately 51,000 hundred cubic feet of timber from about 3180 acres, (about 1050 of those acres to be burned after harvest), to reconstruct or recondition about 50 miles of road and stabilize and/or obliterate about 37 miles of existing road (primarily to mitigate existing water quality and fish habitat impacts), and to add new yearlong road closures to about 4 miles of currently open roads. New road construction would be limited to about 2 miles of permanent road and about 5 miles of temporary road.

Lands affected are within the Twelvemile Creek and Twin Creek

drainages, tributary to the St. Regis River, between DeBorgia and St. Regis, Montana. The project area is bounded by Interstate 90 to the south and the divide between Plains/Thompson Falls and Superior Ranger Districts to the north.

The purpose of this proposal is to carry out the goals and direction given in the Lolo National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan with ecosystem management principles. Key elements of the purpose and need are:

(1) Treat pine stands considering the mountain pine beetle epidemic moving through the area by altering timber stands to reduce mountain pine beetle hazard and by providing a mix of age classes so the continuity of susceptible stands is reduced for future outbreaks;

(2) Rehabilitate water quality and fisheries habitat through improving channel stability, reducing sources of sediment, reducing erosion and improving drainage on existing roads that are needed for long-term management, and reclaiming roads that are not needed; and

(3) Contribute to the short-term output goals and long-term forest plan expectations for timber production.

The decision to be made is to what extent, if at all, the Forest Service should conduct timber harvest, prescribed burning, road construction or reconstruction, road reclamation, and road closures in the Twelvemile Creek and Twin Creek drainages, given the above purpose and need. This is a site-specific project decision, not a general management plan nor a programmatic analysis.

Public scoping has been conducted on most elements of this proposal both with this proposal and an earlier version of this proposal.

While quite a number of issues have been identified for environmental effects analysis, the following issues have been found significant enough to guide alternative development and provide focus for the EIS:

(1) Water quality and fisheries habitat effects resulting from timber harvest and road construction and rehabilitation activities;

(2) Wildlife habitat effects (including hunting season bull elk security) resulting from timber harvest and road construction and rehabilitation activities; and

(3) Economic effect on local communities resulting from different access methods and resulting timber values.

The proposed action could have both beneficial and adverse effects on these resources. In addition to the proposed action, a range of alternatives will be

developed in response to issues identified during scoping. Other alternatives planned for detailed study are:

(1) No action;

(2) Harvest only from existing roads (no new roads or temporary roads) with no harvesting in bull elk security areas; and add year-round road closures to three existing roads; and

(3) Harvest from existing roads and from short-term and temporary roads on gentle ridgetops and upper sideslopes, harvest with no regeneration cuts in bull elk security areas, and add year-round road closures to three existing roads.

Public participation is important to the analysis. People may visit with Forest Service officials at any time during the analysis and prior to the decision. No formal scoping meetings are planned. However, two periods are specifically designated for comments on the analysis:

(1) During this scoping process and

(2) During the draft EIS comment period.

During the scoping process, the Forest Service is seeking information and comments from Federal, State, and local agencies and other individuals or organizations who may be interested in or affected by the proposed action. A scoping document will be mailed to parties known to be interested in the proposed action. The agency invites written comments and suggestions on this action, particularly in terms of issues and alternatives.

The Forest Service will continue to involve the public and will inform interested and affected parties as to how they may participate and contribute to the final decision. Another formal opportunity for response will be provided following completion of a draft EIS.

The draft EIS should be available for review in November, 1998. The final EIS is scheduled for completion in February, 1999.

The comment period on the draft EIS will be 45 days from the date the Environmental Protection Agency publishes the notice of availability in the **Federal Register**.

The Forest Service believes it is important, at this early stage, to give reviewers notice of several court rulings related to public participation in the environmental review process. First, reviewers of draft environmental impact statements must structure their participation in the environmental review of the proposal so it is meaningful and alerts the agency to the reviewer's position and contentions.

Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corp. v. NRDC, 435 U.S. 519, 553 (1978). Also,

environmental objections that could be raised at the draft environmental impact statement stage but are not raised until after completion of the final environmental impact statement may be waived or dismissed by the courts. *City of Angoon v. Hodel*, 803 F.2d 1016, 1022 (9th Cir. 1986) and *Wisconsin Heritages v. Harris*, 490 F. Supp. 1334, 1338 (E.D. Wis. 1980). Because of these court rulings, it is very important those interested in this proposed action participate by the close of the 45-day comment period so substantive comments and objections are made available to the Forest Service at a time when it can meaningfully consider them and respond to them in the final environmental impact statement.

To assist the Forest Service in identifying and considering issues and concerns on the proposed action, comments on the draft environmental impact statement should be as specific as possible. It is also helpful if comments refer to specific pages or chapters of the draft statement. Comments may also address the adequacy of the draft environmental impact statement or the merits of the alternatives formulated and discussed in the statement. Reviewers may wish to refer to the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act at 40 CFR 1503.3 in addressing these points.

I am the responsible official for this environmental impact statement. My address is Lolo National Forest, Building 24, Fort Missoula, Missoula MT 59804.

Dated: June 18, 1998.

Charles C. Wildes,
Forest Supervisor.

[FR Doc. 98-17665 Filed 7-1-98; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3410-11-M

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Clearwater Ecosystem Management and Timber Sale Projects; Seeley Lake Ranger District, Lolo National Forest, Missoula County, Montana

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice; intent to prepare an environmental impact statement.

SUMMARY: The USDA, Forest Service, will prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) to disclose the environmental effects of timber harvest, reforestation, temporary road construction, road access changes including closures, and prescribed and

ecosystem management burning in a 7,000 acre project area approximately 12 miles northeast of Seeley Lake, Montana.

DATE: Written comments and suggestions should be received on or before August 3, 1998.

ADDRESSES: Submit written comments and suggestions on the proposed management activities or a request to be placed on the project mailing list to Timothy G. Love, Ranger District, Lolo National Forest, HC 31, Box 3200, Seeley Lake, MT 59868.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Sharon Klinkhammer, EIS Team Leader, District Silviculturist, Lolo National Forest, Phone (406) 677-3925.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The responsible official who will make decisions based on this EIS is Charles Wildes, Forest Supervisor, Lolo National Forest, Building 24, Fort Missoula, Missoula, MT, 59804. He will decide on this proposal after considering comments and responses, environmental consequences, applicable laws, regulations, and policies. The decision and rationale for the decision will be documented in a Record of Decision.

The Forest Service proposes to harvest 3 million board feet of timber from 550 acres. Approximately 300 acres will be in openings ranging from 5-100 acres. Openings will retain approximately one-third of the trees growing on the site. Trees in these openings will then be burned to create fire-killed dead and the areas regenerated. To accomplish this, approximately 2 miles of temporary road will be built. An estimated 6.5 miles of road will be obliterated after harvest and additional road closures put into effect. In addition, ecosystem management burning on approximately 250 acres to improve wildlife habitat is planned. Area affected is within the Upper and East For Clearwater River Drainages approximately 12 miles northeast of Seeley Lake, MT.

The purpose of this proposal is to carry out the goals and direction stated in the Lolo National Forest Plan using ecosystem management principles. The objectives are to:

- Reduce road densities in order to meet inter-agency access standards for grizzly bear.
- Reduce the risk of mature lodgepole stands to mountain pine beetle mortality, to maintain the health and vigor of seral species stands, and to contribute to the forest plan expectations for timber production through harvesting.

- Reduce existing sources of sediment to water and fisheries resources caused by existing roads.

- Reintroduce and simulate low and moderate intensity fires in fire-dependent ecosystems in order to create fire-killed dead trees on the landscape and improve wildlife habitat.

- Treat noxious weeds.
- Create vistas of Swan mountains along the Clearwater Loop Road
- Precommercially thin young stands to achieve desired species composition and density.

Public scoping was conducted on most elements of this proposal during June, 1997. Since then the proposal has been reduced in scale and modified. Issues and comments identified during this earlier scoping process will be carried forward and addressed in this analysis.

The following key issues were identified and will be used to develop alternatives and assess environmental consequences:

1. The project area has high value grizzly bear habitat, important bull trout spawning habitat, sensitive soils, and high value water quality. The current density of roads is high enough to result in adverse effects on those resources. The density of open and closed roads exceeds the inter-agency standard for grizzly bears. Culverts and drainage features on many of the roads in the project area are inadequate for the high volume run-off typical to the area. To meet current resource standards, roads in the project area need: (1) an overall reduction in density; (2) removal or upgrade of roads or culverts most at risk of failing during high run-off events; and (3) an upgrade of drainage features to reduce sediment during run-off events.

2. Management of the project area is subject to a number of laws, standards, interim regulations, and special allocations. The area is within occupied, essential grizzly bear habitat (USDI, 1993). Road densities exceed the standard for grizzly bear habitat. While the Clearwater River is not a "Water Quality Limited" segment as determined by Montana State in the current 305(b) Report, Seeley Lake, approximately 12 miles down-stream is identified as Water Quality Limited. The USDI Fish, Wildlife Service made a decision to list bulltrout as a threatened species within the Columbia River Basin in early June, 1998. Current road densities and past management activities have resulted in a decrease in large woody debris and an increase in sediment within streams of the analysis area.