

Draft Decision Memo

Northwest Big Snowies Openings Maintenance

USDA Forest Service
Judith Ranger District, Lewis and Clark National Forest
Fergus County, Montana
Sections 1, 6, 7, and 12, R17E, T12N

Background

With fire suppression, openings and open forest are being lost as shade tolerant tree species such as Douglas-fir continue to fill in. These are openings with high forage productivity relative to other openings in the area. Field reviews in 2007 indicated that they receive little use by cattle via the dry pole grazing allotment (likely resulting from their locations high along a ridge and their distance from water). Field reviews also indicated obvious encroachment by smaller diameter Douglas-fir into the remaining openings, as well as in the adjacent, open, older forest. This area is dominated by continuous Douglas-fir with very little understory vegetation available. Openings are a rare and limited habitat in the area. Without this action the openings will continue to fill in through encroachment, and the wildlife habitat they provide as openings will be lost.

Decision

I have decided to implement the maintenance of a complex of small openings located between Dry Pole and Rock Creek in the Big Snowy Mountains. The project is located on the Judith Ranger District within Sections 1, 6, 7, and 12, R17E, T12N. The UTM coordinates for the south boundary are 613222 E, 5186411 N, and are 613323 E, 5187779 N for the north boundary. The area treated will be approximately 114 acres. Smaller conifers under 6 inches DBH will be lopped, scattered, and left on site. These trees will not be of merchantable size. The work will be done by hand and not with heavy machinery. If areas of excessive slash occur, then limited piling and pile burning may occur. If pile burning does occur, it would happen under conditions that would minimize impacts to soils. Hand piles would be kept relatively small and burned under conditions that minimize the loss of litter layers and duff, and the heating of mineral soil surfaces.

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment because this action meets criteria identified in FSH 1909.15, 31.2, Category 6. This category includeswildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction.

The categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects which may significantly affect the environment. I considered:

- a. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species.

A biological assessment for threatened and endangered species and a biological evaluation for sensitive species were completed for this project and both are located in the project file. The biological assessment determined that this project would have NO EFFECT on the threatened grizzly bear or Canada lynx, and WOULD NOT BE LIKELY TO JEOPARDIZE THE CONTINUED EXISTENCE of the threatened gray wolf. The biological evaluation found that implementation may impact individuals or habitat for the Wolverine, Townsend's Big-Eared Bat, and Western Toad, but would not likely contribute to a trend towards federal listing or loss of viability to the population or species. The biological evaluation determined that there would be no impact on any other fish or wildlife species designated by the Northern Region as sensitive. The area will be reviewed for short-styled columbine in the spring prior to implementation. If this species is found, then the Forest Botanist will be consulted with the intent of minimizing effects on this species.

- b. Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watershed. The project area is not in a floodplain, wetland, or municipal watershed.

- c. Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study area, or national recreation areas:

The area is in the Big Snowy Mountains wilderness study area. Minimal effects to apparent naturalness and integrity may result from small diameter stumps. Flush-cutting would lessen this impact. Fire suppression has resulted in an unnatural buildup of fuels and encroachment into clearings and open forest. Forest visitors might not be cognizant of these changes, but over time long-term ecological processes may be affected to the point that forest users would notice loss of clearings and open forest, large-scale insect and disease infestations, poor health of densely grown in forest, and changes in species composition.

- d. Inventoried roadless areas.

The area is in an inventoried roadless area. Minimal effects to apparent naturalness and integrity may result from small diameter stumps. Flush-cutting would lessen this impact. Fire suppression has resulted in an unnatural buildup of fuels and encroachment into clearings and open forest. Forest visitors might not be cognizant of these changes, but over time long-term ecological processes may be affected to the point that forest users would notice loss of clearings and open forest, large-scale insect and disease infestations, poor health of densely grown in forest, and changes in species composition.

- e. Research Natural Areas:

The nearest RNA is approximately 12 miles southeast of the project area. The project is not located within a RNA, and none would be affected.

- f. American Indian and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites:

No surveys have occurred in the immediate area. An archeologist was consulted and surveys will be conducted prior to implementation. If sites are discovered during project implementation they would be reported to the archeologist, and appropriate avoidance and/or mitigation measures would be followed.

g. Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas:

No surveys have occurred in the immediate area. An archeologist was consulted and surveys will be conducted according to the Region 1 programmatic agreement prior to implementation. If sites are discovered during project implementation they would be reported to the archeologist, and appropriate avoidance and/or mitigation measures would be followed.

Public Involvement

This proposal was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions on October 1, 2007.

Findings Required by Other Laws

National Historic Preservation Act: No sites are recorded inside the proposed impact area. None of the sites in the general project area are expected to be affected by the proposed action. Completed research and consideration of effects to cultural resources, combined with planned documentation, will comply with the cultural resource Region 1 programmatic agreement and requirements of Section 106 of the NHPA.

Endangered Species Act: A biological assessment conducted for this action showed no effect to any listed species. The area is not considered occupied Grizzly bear and Canada lynx habitat by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and no detrimental effects on any wildlife species are expected.

National Forest Management Act (NFMA): The project occurs in Management Area H and would be in compliance and consistent with the goals, objectives, and management standards outlined in the Lewis and Clark National Forest Plan.

Implementation Date

Implementation may begin in June 2008, depending on what administrative review procedures are applicable.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

Reserved for final decision document.

Contact Person

Additional information concerning this project and the project file contents are available at the Judith Ranger District, 109 Central Avenue, 59479, (406) 566-2292. The project contact is Eric Tomasik, Zone Wildlife Biologist.

RON B. WISEMAN
District Ranger

Date

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