



File Code: 1950-3

Date: December 17, 2001

Dear Neighbor and Concerned Citizen,

More than sixteen months have passed since the July 31, 2000 lightning storms hit the Bitterroot. Over 200 lightning strikes created a firestorm unlike any other experienced over several generations. Our differences were set aside and together we faced tremendous challenges. First and foremost was that of protecting the safety of our firefighters and residents as we worked to fight the fires that eventually grew beyond 350,000 acres on National Forest, state and private lands. It took nearly two months of heroic efforts and the arrival of cooler weather to control the fires. As we reached that point, we immediately began addressing emergency rehabilitation needs, working across boundaries and land ownerships to accomplish the most critical stabilization work before the winter snow and the ensuing spring runoff tested our efforts. As spring unfolded, we continued the rehabilitation work, and as a community, we responded to the mudslides when hard July rains hit the sparsely vegetated slopes.

During these past 16 months we made good decisions together, listening carefully to each other's concerns and favoring thoughtful decisions over drawn out debates.

Conducting the environmental analysis to determine the best course of action following the historic 2000 fire season has followed a similar pattern. I appreciate each person who participated in the community meetings and public surveys we conducted last fall, in which we explored what participants felt were priorities for the Forest Service to tackle in the next few years.

Integrating the priorities expressed by the Bitterroot community with multi-agency natural resource managers, we initiated a Burned Area Recovery Environmental Impact Statement in January 2001. Since then, we have heard from over 4,400 people around our country and abroad. Their insightful comments regarding opportunities and concerns associated with our proposed actions have contributed to the quality of the final decision.

I realize the significance of this decision both in terms of scale and conflicting social expectations. While I realize some people will not support this decision, I am confident that it has been guided by the experience of some of the nation's best natural resource professionals coupled with local knowledge and science.



With the recently signed Record of Decision, we are authorizing the following activities to be conducted in portions of the Bitterroot National Forest burned by the fires of 2000:

- * Fuel reduction activities, including activities within two pre-existing timber sale areas
- * Watershed improvement and aquatic habitat enhancement activities
- * Reforestation
- * Management requirements, mitigation measures, and monitoring, and
- * A site-specific amendment to the Bitterroot Forest Plan

The Decision includes no activities in inventoried roadless areas, no new permanent roads, no harvest in old growth, and wider stream buffers.

Alternative F, as presented in the FEIS, was modified in the decision to better protect watershed and fisheries in the burned drainages. These actions are the foundation of a conservative, yet balanced approach for burned area recovery for the Bitterroot National Forest. Our decision will:

- * Reduce fuels on approximately 44,000 acres, or 15% of the lands burned by the fires of 2000,
- * Improve watershed conditions in key drainages, and protect water and fish by requiring wider than normal streamside buffers in areas where fuel reduction activities occur,
- * Provide for accelerated recovery of forested conditions in some of the Forest's suitable timberlands,
- * Provide economic opportunities both locally and regionally, and reduce costs to taxpayers,
- * Maintain existing roads so they meet standards that protect water quality,
- * Harvest an estimated volume of 176 MMBF,
- * Provide for extensive monitoring to ensure that both implementation and results are consistent with the Record of Decision, and
- * Position the Forest and adjoining neighborhoods and communities in the Bitterroot Valley to better live with fire in the future.

The Record of Decision is available at all Bitterroot National Forest offices either as hard copy or on compact disk. It will also be available for viewing at all Bitterroot Valley libraries and posted on the Internet at www.fs.fed.us/r1/bitterroot under "Fire Recovery".

Sincerely,

RODD RICHARDSON
Forest Supervisor