



File Code: 1950

Date: October 6, 2008

Dear Forest User,

The Draft Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Beartooth Front Storm Damage Clean-up and Fuels Reduction Healthy Forests Restoration Act Project – Main Fork Rock Creek and Benbow Area are enclosed. You are receiving this information since you previously provided comment or expressed interest during the public comment period for this project.

A November 2007 wind event resulted in widespread damage across the Beartooth Front and created heavy concentrations of snapped and fallen trees on Beartooth Ranger District lands and private lands. The Beartooth Ranger District initially proposed fuels reduction and storm damage clean-up in the Main Fork, Benbow, and West Fork areas. Concentrations of wind damaged and fallen trees in combination with fuels conditions that existed before the wind event created potentially hazardous fuel loads. In July and August of 2008, the Cascade Fire burned 10,200 acres in the West Fork Rock Creek drainage, fueled, in part by several thousand acres of wind thrown trees, in a year with remarkably little fire activity elsewhere in Montana. Due to the 2008 Cascade Fire in the West Fork Rock Creek, the Custer National Forest is currently re-assessing treatment and clean-up needs in the West Fork. Other specific modifications to this project are detailed in the enclosed draft EA.

I am the Responsible Official for this project. Based on review of the draft EA and findings in the draft FONSI, I anticipate deciding to select the Proposed Action presented in the draft EA.

Project Background

The 2007 Stillwater County Wildfire Protection Plan identified much of the Benbow area as Wildland Urban Interface. A specific objectives of this plan is to “Pursue WUI fuel reduction projects in high-risk areas around the county” and to “Jointly develop a fuels reduction project for the major subdivision area (BLM, FS, RFD, private landowners).” The Benbow area is in a high-risk area near subdivided private lands and is therefore a high Stillwater County priority for fuels treatment. A majority of the storm damage from the wind event occurred in the Benbow area. Much of it is in designated Wilderness, inaccessible terrain, or areas where the Forest Service does not have access. The focus for this proposed action was to reduce fuel loads and fuel continuity and improve overall defensible space around the communities of Red Lodge, Dean and associated development on private and public lands.

The 2005 Carbon County Community Wildfire Protection Plan and Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plan states that “the most extreme situation with respect to fuel conditions and values at risk occurs south and west of Red Lodge where there are numerous high-value individual homes and subdivisions located in the wildland urban interface area in close proximity to the National Forest boundary.” This includes the Main Fork of Rock Creek.

This project consists of specific proposals to reduce fuels and clean up storm damage. It is important to note that these proposals are not intended to nor can completely prevent wildfires in the Main Fork, and Benbow/Little Rocky Creek areas. These are fire-dependent ecosystems comprised primarily of even-aged



timber stands. Many of these stands are at an age when they would, under natural conditions, burn in a high severity stand-replacing wildfire. The project areas have few access roads to facilitate management activities, such as widespread prescribed burning. The lack of roads, tendency for high winds, and short burning condition windows can make fuels treatments using prescribed broadcast burning or wildland fire use very expensive and difficult.

There will be additional human-caused and lightning-caused wildfires in the project area. Dependent upon weather and other conditions, wildfires in these areas could grow large and suppression may not be immediately possible. Rather than attempt to treat fuels across large landscapes, proposed activities are focused on treatments in specific and strategic areas where such treatments would likely be most effective at improving public and firefighter safety. Given that a high percentage of recent fires in the area have been started due to human activities, fuels reduction is focused on the areas most used by the public, such as near roads and developed recreation facilities. When (not “if”) wildfires start in the project areas, proposed fuels treatments are designed to improve the ability of firefighting personnel to suppress wildfires, protect infrastructure, use existing roads as fire control lines, and increase effectiveness of aerial fire retardant use. Proposed fuels treatments are also designed to improve the ability of the public to safely leave the areas in the event of a wildfire.

Objection process

The Beartooth Front Storm Damage Clean-up and Fuels Reduction Healthy Forests Restoration Act Project – Main Fork Rock Creek and Benbow Area is an authorized fuel reduction project as defined by the Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003, section 101(2). This project is subject to the Predecisional Administrative Review Process (referred to as the ‘objection process’) pursuant to the interim final rule for 36 CFR 218, subpart A, published January 9, 2004 (available online at: <http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2004/pdf/04-473.pdf>). This process is not subject to notice, comment, and appeal provisions pursuant to 36 CFR 215 (see 36 CFR 218.3).

Objections must be filed with the Reviewing Officer in writing. The Reviewing Officer is the next higher level supervisor of the Responsible Official. Objections must be submitted by mail at: USDA Forest Service, Northern Region, P.O. Box 7669, Missoula, MT 59807; by FAX at: (406) 329-3411; or by Email at: appeals-northern-regional-office@fs.fed.us. The acceptable formats for submitting an electronic objection are: MS Word, Word Perfect, or RTF. Please type “Beartooth Front Objection” in the Email subject line. Hand-delivered objections will be accepted at the Regional Forester’s Office, 200 E. Broadway, Missoula, MT, between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. All objections shall be open to public inspection during the objection process (36 CFR 218.7(a)). Objections will be accepted only from those who submitted written comments specific to the proposed project during the 30 day comment period for an environmental assessment (36 CFR 218.6).

The publication date of a legal notice in the Billings Gazette is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an objection (36 CFR 218.9(a)). Those wishing to object should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. An objection, including any attachments, must be filed (regular mail, fax, Email, hand-delivery, express delivery, or messenger service) as stated above within 30 days of the date of publication of this legal notice for the objection process (36 CFR 218.9(a)). Incorporation of documents by reference shall not be allowed in the objection (36 CFR 218.7(c)).

At a minimum, an objection must include the following (36 CFR 218.7(d)): 1) The objector’s name and address, with a telephone number, if available; 2) a signature or other verification of authorship upon request (a

scanned signature for Email may be filed with the objection); 3) when multiple names are listed on an objection, identification of the lead objector (verification of the identity of the lead objector shall be provided upon request); 4) the name of the proposed authorized hazardous fuel reduction project, the name and title of the Responsible Official, and the name(s) of the National Forest(s) and/or Ranger District(s) on which the proposed authorized hazardous fuel reduction project will be implemented; and 5) provide sufficient narrative description of those aspects of the project that are objected to (36 CFR 218.7(b)) by identifying specific issues and suggested remedies which would resolve the objection.

If an objection is received on this project, the Reviewing Officer and objector may meet and/or converse by telephone to discuss issues raised in the objection and potential resolution. The Reviewing Officer has the discretion to determine whether or not adequate time remains in the review period to make a meeting with the objector practical. These meetings would take place soon after the closing date for filing an objection. All meetings are open to the public. If you are interested in attending any resolution discussions, please contact the Responsible Official or monitor the following website for postings about current objections in the Northern Region of the Forest Service: http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/projects/appeal_index.shtml.

For Additional Information

Additional copies of the draft FONSI and draft EA may be obtained by writing or calling the Beartooth Ranger District office, (6811 Highway 212 Red Lodge, Montana, or by phone at (406) 446-2103), or may be viewed on the Internet at www.fs.fed.us/r1/custer/. Additional information about the proposed project may also be obtained from the project leader, Dan Seifert, at the Beartooth Ranger District, or viewed at www.fs.fed.us/r1/custer/.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Traute Parrie".

TRAUTE PARRIE
District Ranger

Attachments