

I. DECISION SUMMARY

After careful consideration of the potential impact of the management activities analyzed and documented in the Belton Fuels Reduction Project Environmental Assessment (EA) issued in August 2008, I have decided to implement management actions as outlined below. Specific management actions are detailed in “Section V. Decision” found in this document. My decision allows for mechanical and/or hand treatments and for prescribed burning to reduce the intensity and severity of future wildland fires and to improve wildlife habitat. These activities will occur in the Belton Fuels Reduction Project (Belton Project) area on the Hungry Horse Ranger District, Flathead National Forest. The project area is generally located between the towns of Hungry Horse and West Glacier, and from the Middle Fork Flathead River east to the Belton Point/Desert Mountain ridgeline (Map 1).

Summary of Management Activities in this Decision

- Harvesting/Thinning approximately 908 acres in 44 units. The majority of the units will be thinned (684 acres) with the remaining 224 acres receiving a regeneration harvest treatment (seedtree or shelterwood harvest).
- Planting approximately 197 acres with western larch, Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, and/or western white pine.
- Prescribed burning approximately 916 acres to improve wildlife habitat and reduce fuels.
- Treating slash (removal from site, chipping/masticating, or piling and burning) to reduce the intensity of future wildfires.
- Removal of about 3 million board feet (mmbf) of merchantable material from the treatment units.

II. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

The need for the Belton Project is based upon the differences between the desired landscape conditions and the current conditions related to fuels and wildlife habitat. The purpose and need for action are discussed in-depth in the EA on pages 1 through 3.

The purpose of the proposed management actions is to:

- Create forest stand conditions that lower the risk of future high-intensity and severity wildfire (i.e. reduce the probability of a crown fire).
- Improve our ability to initial attack and control fires.
- Reduce the risk to wildland firefighters and residents of the wildland urban interface (WUI) should a fire occur.
- Facilitate protection of human and natural resource values in the event of a fire.
- Increase the diversity of tree composition to include more fire-tolerant species.
- Create a mosaic of vegetation conditions across the landscape to benefit wildlife.

III. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Extensive public involvement was conducted for this project. A variety of public outreach methods were used including on-site visits with adjacent landowners, an open house which

allowed people to learn and provide early feedback about the project, letters sent to a large mailing list with more specifics of the project, a variety of phone call conversations, and several newspaper articles were written about the project. Key public involvement activities are described below, additional details can be found in the Project File.

The Flathead National Forest has undertaken collaborative efforts, beginning in 2001, with various state and federal agencies (e.g. Montana Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation, and the National Park Service), and other partners to investigate ways to lower the risk of wildfires. The focus of these efforts was how to best collaborate on reducing risk to communities through fire prevention, staffing, preparedness, fuels treatments, wildland-urban interface projects, and grant opportunities. The Belton Fuels Reduction Project analysis area was identified as one of the priority fuels reduction projects on the Hungry Horse Ranger District based upon these criteria.

Feedback received through subsequent collaboration efforts of the Forest Service with local agencies and interested parties indicated that most respondents supported some kind of fuels reduction project in the Belton area (refer to Public Involvement section of the Project File). We also met with numerous landowners near their homes to discuss specific areas and concerns related to fire risk and fuel reduction.

The project was first listed in the Flathead National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA), in the January – March 2007 issue and has appeared quarterly to date. This listing informed the public of our plan to analyze the Belton Project area for fuels/fire risk. Using input we received from the collaborative effort described above, we proposed site-specific fuel reduction activities in the Belton Project area. Throughout the planning phase of this project, various interdisciplinary team members met with individuals and groups of people in the field regarding questions or concerns they had on particular treatment areas.

The Belton Project was initially proposed as a project that fit within a hazardous fuels categorical exclusion (CE) which had been adopted by the Forest Service in June 2003 as part of the President's Healthy Forests Initiative. On December 5, 2007, the Ninth Circuit invalidated the use of this categorical exclusion, holding that the Forest Service's adoption of the Fuels CE violated NEPA because the agency "failed to assess properly the significance of the hazardous fuels reduction categorical exclusion and thus it failed to demonstrate that it made a 'reasoned decision' to promulgate the Fuels CE based on relevant factors and information." Following the invalidation of the CE, the Flathead National Forest took the Proposed Action and environmental effects analysis used to support the CE and developed an EA. The following information documents the public involvement efforts that were utilized to support the EA and this decision.

On January 25, 2007, a letter was sent to over 130 interested parties and landowners inviting their collaboration in the planning of the Belton Fuels Reduction Project. The fire and fuels specialist had made a preliminary identification of broad areas with vegetation conditions that could sustain a high-severity crown fire with the potential to threaten to private homes and land. At this early stage of planning, no specific treatment sites had been selected, and the public was invited to give their input regarding treatment areas and methods.

On February 12, 2007, an Open House was held at the Hungry Horse Ranger District office to collaborate with individuals and groups regarding the upcoming Belton Project. The purpose was to come up with a Proposed Action following the collaboration efforts.

Twenty-one letters, phone calls, and/or visits were received because of this letter and/or the Open House; 15 individuals attended the Open House. The collaborative comments were used to help design this project. The comments and Forest Service responses to them can be found in the Project File. Several media stories about the project were published in area newspapers in January and February 2007.

On April 4, 2007, a legal notice requesting comments on the project was published in *The Daily Inter Lake*. A letter outlining the Proposed Action and requesting comments was sent out on April 2, 2007 to nearly 140 groups and individuals who either owned property or lived in the Belton Fuels Reduction Project area, or who had otherwise expressed interest in activities on National Forest System (NFS) lands in the area. Approximately 18 individuals or groups submitted written, telephone, or personal visit comments because of the scoping letter. These scoping comments were considered and helped to define the Proposed Action. Scoping comments are contained in the Project File.

The Belton Fuels Reduction Project Environmental Assessment was published and made available for public comment on August 1, 2008. Copies of the EA were mailed to interested people, and letters were sent to the remainder of the mailing list informing them of the EA availability. The EA was also posted on the Flathead National Forest website at www.fs.fed.us/r1/flathead/nepa.

A legal notice was published in *The Daily Inter Lake* on August 6, 2008 announcing the completion and availability of the Belton Fuels Reduction Project EA. The public was provided 30 days to comment on the Belton EA. We received about 12 letters, phone calls, and/or e-mails commenting on the EA. A summary of these comments and our responses to them are attached to this decision as Appendix B. These comments were fully considered in my decision.

IV. ALTERNATIVES

Alternatives Considered in Detail

Alternative 1 (No-Action Alternative)

The emphasis of this alternative is to represent the existing condition against which the other alternative is compared. Alternative 1 proposed no vegetation treatments, fuels reduction, or prescribed burning within the Belton Project area at this time. It does include ongoing and foreseeable activities as indicated in the cumulative effects discussion for each resource in the EA, and in the Cumulative Effects Worksheet for each resource (Project File). It does not preclude activities in other areas at this time, nor does it preclude activities in the Belton Project area in the future. Refer to page 2 in the Belton Project EA for the full text of this alternative.

Alternative 2 (Proposed Action)

Alternative 2 was developed to respond specifically to the purpose and need for action. It focuses on fuel reduction treatments and wildlife habitat improvements.

To reduce fuels, harvesting and thinning will occur on approximately 908 acres in 44 units (Map 1). The majority of units (684 acres) will be thinned, with the remaining 224 acres receiving seedtree or shelterwood treatments. Mechanized equipment would be used to cut and remove trees in most stands, although some sapling stands may be hand treated. Planting will occur on about 197 acres in the seedtree and shelterwood units (Tables 1 & 2). Slash and downed wood will be removed to a relatively low level, generally <12 tons/acre, to reduce fuels and lower the potential surface fire intensity.

To improve wildlife habitat and reduce fuels, prescribed burns will occur on approximately 916 acres in 6 units (refer to Table 3 and Map 1).

V. DECISION

As the responsible official for this project, I have selected Alternative 2 (Proposed Action) to be implemented. I have also incorporated design criteria items from the EA (found in the “Other Details of the Proposed Action” section) into my decision.

Mechanical/Hand Treatments

Approximately 908 acres of NFS lands will have fuels reduced across 44 units (refer to Tables 1 and 2). This will be accomplished primarily by ground-based mechanized equipment such as feller-bunchers, rubber-tired skidders, excavators, log processors, and chippers. Thinning in sapling stands may be done by hand, and hand treatments will be required in some units to reduce detrimental soil disturbance (Table 2). Treatment units are focused near private lands and are (where possible) strategically located to take advantage of existing fuels breaks (e.g. roads, previously treated areas). Unit location (Map 1) and treatment prescriptions were designed to reduce the probability of intense fire behavior from future fires, not to mimic past fire events. Thinning treatments will remove the smaller, poorly formed, or diseased trees first, favoring the more vigorous western larch, Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, and lodgepole pine for leave trees. The resulting tree spacing will be variable, averaging 15-25 feet or more between stems. This treatment will leave approximately 70-200 trees per acre (TPA) of overstory trees, and will look like a semi-open forest.

Seedtree or shelterwood harvests will occur in most stands dominated by mature lodgepole pine. Most of the lodgepole pine will be removed (unless needed to meet leave tree density targets), and all of the western larch and Douglas-fir will be left unless in very poor condition or if removal is required for operational reasons. Scattered trees and small patches of untreated forest will remain within the units, leaving 20-50 TPA at a >30-foot spacing. Conifer seedlings will be planted in these units to initiate a new stand of long-lived, fire-resistant trees; approximately 197 acres will be planted with western larch, Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, and western white pine.

Private contractors and Forest Service crews will be used for tree removal, prescribed burning, and slash disposal work. Small sawlogs, posts, poles, pulpwood, firewood, and biomass fuels, resulting from harvesting, are potential commercial materials that may be removed from the mechanical treatment units.

Current forest conditions within the mechanical/hand treatment units are displayed in Table 1. Because of differing forest stand conditions, different treatments (prescriptions) will occur within these groups. Tables 1 and 2 below display the current forest conditions, treatments, and operational information for each stand that will be mechanically or hand treated.

Table 1. Current Forest Condition and Proposed Treatments by Unit

Unit	Est. Acres	Current Forest Condition	Treatments
4, 10, 11, 15, 27, 36	72	Well stocked to very dense stands where lodgepole pine is dominant (>75% of stocking). Trees are about 70 years old (1929 fire origin), 4"-9+" diameter breast height (dbh), and 40-70 feet tall. Douglas-fir and larch occur as a minor component in some stands. Usually understory trees are sparse and low shrubs and forbs characterize the undergrowth. Downed wood amount tends to be light, with some heavier concentrations of downfall in spots where past tree mortality has occurred.	THINNING, leaving all western larch and Douglas-fir, and removing lodgepole pine to reach a final tree density from 50 to 200 trees per acre. The average spacing will be about 15-30 feet between trees.
1, 5, 7, 9, 13, 14, 17, 19, 28, 29, 30, 31, 50	224	Well-stocked stands of mixed species, (mainly lodgepole pine, Douglas-fir and larch) about 70 years old (1929 fire origin), 5-10+" dbh, 50-75 feet tall. An understory of Douglas-fir and/or spruce exists in some stands. Part of Unit 25 is ponderosa pine planted in the 1950s. Downed wood and fuel are variable, mostly light to moderate amounts.	SEEDTREE or SHELTERWOOD harvest will occur, leaving all western larch and Douglas-fir, and removing lodgepole pine to achieve an average leave tree density of 15-30 TPA (<30 ft spacing), while providing some visual screening and structural diversity. In some units, leave trees will be left in patches of variable size and shape; other units will have leave trees more evenly scattered. The open stand conditions created by this treatment will allow planting of more desirable long-lived and fire-resistant conifer seedlings (larch, Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, and western white pine).
2, 3, 6, 12, 16, 18A, 20, 25C, 26, 33	223	Well-stocked stands of mixed species, (mainly lodgepole pine, Douglas-fir and larch) about 70 years old (1929 fire origin), 5-10+" dbh, 50-75 feet tall. An understory of Douglas-fir and/or spruce exists in some stands. Part of Unit 25 is ponderosa pine planted in the 1950s. Downed wood and fuel are variable, mostly light to moderate amounts.	THINNING, resulting in spacing between trees from 18-25 feet (70-130 TPA). Smaller trees, deformed, or diseased trees will be selected for removal first, leaving the larger and more vigorous trees. Larch, Douglas-fir, and ponderosa pine will be favored for leave trees, followed by lodgepole pine and other species. Leave trees will be irregularly distributed.

Unit	Est. Acres	Current Forest Condition	Treatments
37, 38, 49	133	These stands are well stocked with a variable mix of tree species, sizes, and ages: from smaller understory sapling trees to scattered older (140+ year) overstory trees. Douglas-fir and spruce are common; subalpine fir, lodgepole pine, and larch also occur.	THINNING will occur, generally removing the smaller or less vigorous understory trees first, and leaving healthy overstory trees. Larch and Douglas-fir will be favored for leave trees if available. Minimum leave tree density about 70 TPA (25' spacing), but will vary widely depending on the current pattern of the desirable trees and site-specific objectives (e.g. Unit 49 is adjacent to the Hungry Horse Ranger District office and thinning densities will differ across this unit depending on varying needs for improved security and visual screening).
41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46,	117	These stands are well-stocked stands of mixed species, Douglas-fir, spruce, subalpine fir, lodgepole pine and larch all represented. Stands were all harvested (partial cutting) nearly 40 years ago; tree sizes are mostly ≤10" dbh, with scattered larger, older trees.	THINNING, resulting in spacing between trees from 17 to 20 feet (110-150 trees per acre) will occur. Less vigorous, poorly formed, or diseased trees will be selected for removal first, leaving the healthier and/or more vigorous trees. Larch and Douglas-fir will be favored for leave trees, followed by lodgepole pine and other species.
8, 18B, 23, 24A&B, 25B, 34, 39, 40	139	These areas have experienced past harvesting (20-40 years ago), and are composed of mostly sapling sized trees (1-4" dbh; 10-30 feet tall) with light to moderate stocking of older, larger trees in some units (70 years old, 5-9" dbh; 30-60 feet tall). Stands range from nearly 100% lodgepole pine to more mixed species with Douglas-fir, larch and spruce present.	THINNING, resulting in variable tree spacing, typically 15 to 25 feet apart. Leave trees will generally be the healthiest and best growing trees, favoring larch and Douglas-fir where available. Older, less vigorous overstory trees (primarily lodgepole pine) will be removed to favor the younger, thrifty trees.
Total	908		

Table 2. Mechanical or Hand Treatment Units and Activities in Decision

Unit	Acres Treated	Treatment	Logging System	Operations from Skid Trail or by Hand Only?	Seasonal Restrictions ¹	Acres to be Planted
Mechanical/Hand Vegetation Treatments						
1	2	ST/SW ²	Mechanical	No	None	None
2	24	Thinning	Mechanical	Yes	Winter logging	None
3	18	Thinning	Mechanical	No	None	None
4	10	Thinning	Mechanical	No	None	None
5	20	ST/SW	Mechanical	No	None	15
6	28	Thinning	Mechanical	No	None	None
7	5	ST/SW	Mechanical	No	None	4
8	23	Thinning	Mech./Hand	No	None	None
9	8	ST/SW	Mechanical	No	None	7
10	5	Thinning	Mechanical	No	None	None
11	19	Thinning	Mechanical	Yes	Winter logging	None

Unit	Acres Treated	Treatment	Logging System	Operations from Skid Trail or by Hand Only?	Seasonal Restrictions ¹	Acres to be Planted
12	61	Thinning	Mechanical	Yes	Winter logging	None
13	20	ST/SW	Mechanical	Yes	Winter logging	15
14	11	ST/SW	Mechanical	No	None	9
15	9	Thinning	Mechanical	No	None	None
16	6	Thinning	Mechanical	No	None	None
17	27	ST/SW	Mechanical	No	None	20
18a	21	Thinning	Mechanical	No	None	None
18b	51	Thinning	Mech./Hand	No	None	None
19	17	ST/SW	Mechanical	No	None	15
20	41	Thinning	Mechanical	No	None	None
23	12	Thinning	Hand thin	No	None	None
24a	19	Thinning	Hand thin	No	None	None
24b	11	Thinning	Mech./Hand	No	None	None
25b	4	Thinning	Mechanical	No	None	None
25c	9	Thinning	Mechanical	No	None	None
26	6	Thinning	Hand thin	Hand piling only	None	None
27	13	Thinning	Mechanical	No	None	10
28	19	ST/SW	Mechanical	No	Winter logging	17
29	61	ST/SW	Mechanical	No	Winter logging	50
30	11	ST/SW	Mechanical	No	None	11
31	15	ST/SW	Mechanical	No	None	14
33	9	Thinning	Mechanical	No	None	None
34	11	Thinning	Mechanical	No	None	None
36	16	Thinning	Mechanical	No	None	None
37	17	Thinning	Mechanical	No	Winter logging	None
38	10	Thinning	Mechanical	No	Winter logging	None
39	5	Thinning	Mech./Hand	No	Winter logging	None
40	3	Thinning	Mech./Hand	No	None	None
41	32	Thinning	Mechanical	No	None	None
42	8	Thinning	Mechanical	No	Winter Logging	None
43	23	Thinning	Mechanical	No	Winter logging	None
44	5	Thinning	Mechanical	Yes	Winter logging	None
45	10	Thinning	Mechanical	Yes – also, no piling/burning	Winter logging	None
46	39	Thinning	Mechanical	No	None	None
49	106	Thinning	Mechanical	No	None	None
50	8	ST/SW	Mechanical	No	None	10
Total	908	--	-	-	-	197

¹ Mechanized fuel treatments would not occur between April 1 and June 30 (all units).²ST=Seedtree harvest, SW=Shelterwood harvest.

Access

Most treatment units will be accessed using existing local, county, state, or NFS roads; no new permanent roads will be constructed. Several NFS roads that will be used are either currently closed to motorized use or are historic roads. Public access will remain restricted on these closed/historic roads on NFS land during administrative use. Approximately 1 mile of temporary roads will be constructed (nine different segments using historic templates or new construction) to provide access to some of the thinning units (refer to “Temporary roads and closed roads needed during implementation” in the Access section of the Project File). There will be no change in motorized access density due to project activities.

All temporary roads will be rehabilitated after use. Snow roads (roads constructed on top of the snow pack or on frozen ground) may be used in some mechanized units if they are winter treated. Access to Units 1, 10, 16, 17, 29, 30, 31, 33, and 34 may require the use of private roads because access routes through NFS lands have concerns related to grizzly bear security core, soils, wetlands, or terrain limitations. Permission from landowners will be necessary before using these roads, and will be pursued during the implementation phase of this project if permission has not already been secured. Roads used on private lands will be left in the same or better condition than before Forest Service use.

Approximately 12 miles of haul route roads will need improvements in the road surface/stream drainage systems to meet Montana State Best Management Practices (BMP) and INFISH standards. These improvements could include additional cross-drains, culverts, drive-through-dips, flappers, filter windrows, sediment traps, etc. Refer to the Access/Roads section of the Project File for the “Belton BMP” spreadsheet that identifies roads needing improvement work.

Snags and Down Wood Treatment

All western larch and Douglas-fir snags >18" dbh will be left for wildlife habitat unless felling is necessary for operational reasons. Hardwood trees will not be targeted for removal and will be left intact to the extent possible, considering operational feasibility.

Downed wood and slash will be treated to reduce the intensity of any future wildfire by reducing the availability of surface fuels. Existing down wood and slash created by the tree cutting activities in this project will be reduced to a relatively low level (generally <12 tons/acre) to reduce potential surface-fire intensity. Some larger diameter wood (>12") will be left, if available, to provide for long-term soil productivity and wildlife needs, unless removal is necessary for operational reasons or to reduce fuels to an acceptable level.

Downed wood and slash will be removed using one of the following methods, in order of preference: physical removal from the site; chipping and mastication; or piling and burning with an excavator (or by hand in the hand treated units). A combination of these methods may be used depending upon site-specific conditions.

Prescribed Burning

Approximately 916 acres in six units would be prescribed burned to reduce fuels and improve wildlife habitat (Table 3). All of the burn units occur in Forest Plan Management Area (MA) 13A, designated as non-timber management lands capable of providing winter habitat for elk and mule deer. The units are located west of, and adjacent to, the northernmost portion of the Great Bear Wilderness (Map 1). They occur on west to southwest aspects and range from about 4,000' elevation near the bottom of the units to nearly 7,000' at the ridgetop. Units have been located to take advantage of natural barriers to prevent undesired fire spread, including rocky areas near the ridgetops and north aspects that are less prone to burning.

The burns will be designed to be low to moderate intensity, and only a portion of the total acreage is likely to be directly affected by fire. To maintain whitebark pine as a component of suitable habitat, fire will not be applied to stands of healthy whitebark pine (if any exist) located in the burn units. The prescribed burn units are a mix of forested areas, open forest areas, and shrub-dominated openings where prescribed burning could reduce dead and down fuels, and cause mortality in understory trees and patches of overstory trees. The prescribed fire treatments will be designed to target the shrub-dominated areas with the objective of reducing conifer encroachment, rejuvenating wildlife browse, creating a diverse mosaic of vegetation conditions and wildlife habitat across the landscape, and reducing down fuel accumulations. A mix of vegetation conditions will occur in the treated area after burning, with up to 50% of the area in an open-forest condition dominated by native shrubs, grasses, and forbs.

Implementation of the prescribed burns may extend for several years into the future depending on desirable burning weather opportunities. Implementation strategies and desired weather conditions for burning will be described in a site-specific burn plan. This plan will include an analysis of risks, will identify mitigation methods to avoid an escaped fire, and will include contingency actions should an escape occur. While there is always some risk of escaped fire due to ongoing drought and close proximity to private lands, strict adherence to the burn plan will ensure this risk remains low.

Table 3. Prescribed Burn Treatments

Unit	Estimated Acres	Current Condition	Treatment
A	109	Units will be located on westerly and southwesterly aspects, where a mix of open, semi-open, and densely forested areas exists in various amounts. Douglas-fir, larch, spruce, subalpine fir, and lodgepole pine are present. Most stands are <80 years old. Whitebark pine may occur above 6,000' elevation.	PRESCRIBED BURNING will be applied in the spring, summer, or fall, and will target the treatment of the existing shrub/grass dominated openings. Fire will be of low to moderate intensity, and will result in a mix of openings, semi-open forest, and dense forest patches. Douglas-fir, larch, lodgepole pine, spruce, subalpine fir and Whitebark pine will all be present in various amounts.
B	101		
C	451		
D	104		
E	94		
F	57		
TOTAL	916		

Other Details of My Decision

Implementation Methods

Fuel reduction activities will be accomplished primarily by ground-based mechanized equipment such as feller-bunchers, rubber tired skidders, excavators, log processors, and chippers, with some work carried out by hand. Prescribed burns will generally be ignited using helicopters and will occur in the spring, summer, or fall when suitable burn and air quality conditions exist. Private contractors and Forest Service crews will be used for tree removal, prescribed burning, and slash disposal work. Small sawlogs, posts, poles, pulpwood, firewood, and biomass fuel are potential commercial materials that may be removed from the mechanical treatment units because of the fuel reduction treatments.

Duration and Season of Activities

Mechanized and hand-treated fuel reduction treatments are expected to occur over approximately 3 years; portions of this project could begin as early as summer 2009, but more likely may begin in 2010 or 2011. Fuel reduction activities may take place during both the summer and winter months; several units will only be logged in the winter to avoid soil damage (Table 2).

Prescribed burning could begin as early as fall 2009. The specific timing of the burns will be based on prescription parameters for weather and fuel moistures determined in a prescribed fire burn plan. Suitable burning conditions typically occur in the spring, summer, or fall seasons, however, it may be several years before the right burning conditions actually occur. Burning parameters will be designed to allow fire to accomplish the resource objective of reducing the encroaching conifer trees, removing dead and dying surface fuels, and rejuvenating shrub/grass/forb dominated openings. Most burn units will be ignited by helicopter and take several days to complete; some units may be hand ignited (Fire/Fuels section of the Project File)

In order to minimize disturbance to grizzly bears during the critical spring use period, fuel reduction activities will not occur between April 1 and June 30 with the exception of 1-2 days worth of helicopter use for implementing the prescribed burning units (and other prescribed burning activities), planting, and noxious weed spraying. Road treatments (Best Management Practices), burning of slash or landing piles, and thinning of saplings may occur during the spring period if they are located along open roads (Wildlife section of the Project File).

Slash and Woody Debris Disposal

Slash and woody debris removal methods will minimize visual impacts. Additional efforts will be made to dispose of any slash piles clearly visible from homes. If pile remnants occur after the first treatment and continue to have visual impacts, further efforts will be made to dispose of this material. These efforts could include re-piling and burning, chipping, shredding, or hauling the material away. The utilization of wood (for firewood, etc) in slash piles prior to disposal will be considered on a site-specific basis. All landings will be rehabilitated to a natural appearing condition, which will include adequate slash and woody debris disposal, and recontouring and revegetation where necessary (refer to "Possible Log Landing Sites" map in the Soils section of the Project File).

Pile burning is dependent on the weather and fuel conditions identified in a prescribed fire burn plan. These weather and fuel conditions are pre-determined to allow for slash consumption while reducing the risk of an escaped fire. Generally, slash and woody debris will be disposed of within one year following treatment.

Soil Productivity

Effects to soils and soil productivity will be avoided or minimized in part by following Best Management Practices (BMPs) incorporated here as design criteria. Refer to the “Soils Specialist Report” in the Soils section of the Project File for more information on soils and the following design criteria; additional references are provided following some of the design criteria. All contractors and other project implementers will be required to comply with the following design criteria.

- All mechanized units will be logged using designated skid trails. Equipment will occasionally leave the trails to access trees or accomplish other activities.
- Due to soil concerns, Units 2, 11, 12, 13, 28, 29, 37, 38, 39, 42, 43, 44, and 45 will be winter logged only.
- In Units 2, 11, 12, 13, 44, and 45, after harvest, all fuels reduction and site preparation equipment will be required to remain on skid trails; alternatively, the fuels may be treated by hand. This design feature, in tandem with the requirement to winter log these units, will minimize impacts to soils.
- Unit 26 will be treated by hand to prevent detrimental soil impacts.
- There will be no piling and burning except at landing areas in Unit 45.
- To minimize the loss of nutrients in seedtree units where material will be piled and burned, the piling will be delayed for one wet season.
- Skid trails must be spaced on average 75-100 feet apart. The goal being to occupy less than 15% of the harvest area; this includes soil disturbance from skid trails, temporary roads, and landings associated with either past activities or proposed activities. Refer to skid trail spacing information contained in the “Monitoring Report – Hunger Henry Timber Sale” in the Soils section, the “Temporary Roads and Closed Roads Needed during Implementation” map in the Access section, and the “Possible Log Landing sites” map in the Soils section of the Project File.
- All existing roads and skid trails will be reused to the extent feasible unless doing so will adversely affect soil, water, or other resources. If roads or trails cannot be reused, their extent must be considered when laying out additional skid trails.
- To the extent possible, logging in summer will occur when the soils are drier than field capacity as determined by the hand-feel method described in the “Estimating Soil Moisture by Feel and Appearance” document in the Soils section of the Project File.
- Winter logging will only occur when settled snow and/or frozen ground will protect the soil from detrimental disturbance. If equipment does not mix soil into the snow or cause muddy water to bleed into the snow, then conditions are right for winter logging.
- Sale administrators will monitor soil moisture conditions prior to allowing equipment to begin operations in summer, and will monitor snow and temperature conditions prior to winter logging. This monitoring must be documented in the Timber Sale Daily Report.
- All prescribed burn units will be ignited when burning conditions will maintain soil organic matter and nutrient levels within the range of historic burns.

- To reduce soil erosion in mechanically treated units, management activities will include constructing water bars or placing slash on skid trails as necessary (refer to the “Belton Erosion Control Effectiveness” document in the Soils section of the Project File for more information).
- If monitoring after project implementation indicates that detrimental soil disturbances for a given treatment unit exceed or equal 15%, then all or a portion of the following actions will be used to begin the restoration of soil quality. The site conditions after implementation will be used to determine which of the mitigations are used. These mitigations will not result in instant restoration of detrimentally disturbed soils; rather they begin the restoration process.
 - Scarify heavily used skid trails and landings with the teeth on an excavator bucket to a depth of 2 – 4 inches.
 - Plant Montana-certified weed-free native grasses on the scarified soils as recommended by the Forest Botanist.
 - Plant native shrubs where needed to augment natural vegetation and scarification.

Access/Roads

Amendment 19 (A19) to the Flathead National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) contains standards and objectives related to grizzly bear management. This fuels reduction project occurs entirely within the Coram Lake Five grizzly bear subunit. This subunit contains less than 75% National Forest ownership and therefore the numerical standards from A19 for open motorized access (OMAD), total motorized access (TMAD), and security core do not apply (19/19/68 percent, respectively).

Most treatment units will be accessed using existing local, county, state, or NFS roads; no new permanent roads will be constructed. Several NFS roads to be used are either currently closed to motorized use or are historic roads. Public access will remain restricted on these closed roads on NFS lands during administrative use. In addition, approximately 1 mile of temporary roads (nine different segments, using historic templates or new) will be constructed to provide access to some of the thinning units (refer to map titled “Temporary Roads and Closed Roads Needed During Implementation” in the Access section of the Project File). Due to winter logging requirements or areas located in grizzly bear management situation 3 habitat, there will be no change in motorized access density because of project activities (refer to “Temporary and Closed Road Discussion” in the Access section of the Project File).

Access to Units 1, 10, 16, 17, 29, 30, 31, 33, and 34 may require the use of private land/roads because access routes through NFS lands have concerns related to grizzly bear security core, soils, wetlands, or terrain limitations. Some landowners have already been contacted for permission to use private means of access; landowners will continue to be contacted during the implementation phase of the project. Roads used on private lands will be left in the same or better condition than prior to use.

Approximately 12 miles of haul route roads will need road drainage improvement work to meet current Montana State Best Management Practices and INFISH standards. Refer to the “Belton BMP” spreadsheet in the Access section of the Project File for more information on roads needing BMP work. Improvements could include additional cross-drains, culverts, drive-

through-dips, flappers, filter windrows, sediment traps, or other devices (Hydrology report in the Project File). Forest Service Soil and Water Conservation Practices (FSH2509.22) will be combined with Montana State BMPs to ensure that soil and water resources are protected. Dust abatement using non-petroleum based products on open roads and blading will occur as needed on the main haul routes.

Due to soil drainage problems in several areas, the access road associated with the pipeline adjacent to Unit 6 will require road fill material in order to make the road passable for machinery and trucks (Hydrology report in the Project File).

Contractors will be made aware of the location of the authorized occupancies (e.g. NorthWestern Energy's permitted buried gas line corridor) so that the permitted improvements are not damaged during project activities. Coordination with NorthWestern Energy is required prior to access and hauling operations (Recreation/Lands report in the Project File).

Minimize harvest equipment traveling on the permitted trails; equipment should cross at a 90° angle. All damage and/or disturbance caused by the harvest operations will be repaired to the trail's original condition or better (Recreation/Lands report in the Project File).

Coordinate with the horse outfitter (Flying Eagle Ranch) to reduce the impacts to the permitted public's experience and to provide for safety (Recreation/Lands report in the Project File).

To protect the safety of the public using the area, contractors will be required to post signs warning the public of activities and traffic associated with the treatments.

Air Quality

On the Flathead National Forest, prescribed burning is generally accomplished when dilution, dispersal, and mixing conditions are considered fair to excellent. Prescribed burning requires a permit from the Montana/Idaho Airshed Group and the burn must be implemented within the regulatory framework. This includes daily approval from the Flathead County Air Quality hotline and the Montana/Idaho Airshed Group.

Noxious Weeds

Noxious and non-native weeds occur along some access routes and adjacent to fuels reduction units within the Belton Project area. Many of the BMPs designed to protect soils and water quality (operating machinery in the winter, utilizing skid trails, etc) will help avoid or minimize the spread of noxious weeds. Refer to the "Invasive Plant Species-Noxious Weeds report" in the Botany section of the Project File for more information on design criteria and weed treatments. All contractors and others implementing the project must comply with the following project design criteria.

- Equipment use associated with fuels reduction treatments and temporary road construction (excluding pickups and trucks used to remove forest products) will be power scrubbed or steam cleaned on the undercarriage and chassis before transport to the project area.

- Skid trails, landings, burn piles, temporary roads, and roadsides with soil disturbance will be seeded with a Montana-certified, weed-free grass ground cover as soon as practical after disturbance to provide for site protection until native species are established.
- During construction of temporary roads, the topsoil will be left to the side and replaced on the temporary road to the best of our ability when project use of the temporary road is completed. Seeding of temporary roads will occur after topsoil is replaced.

Prior to project implementation, some haul routes will be treated for weeds. Additionally, some units will have areas spot-treated for localized weed populations prior to equipment entering the unit. These treatments will reduce the potential for weeds to expand throughout the new areas opened and disturbed by the project vegetation treatments. Areas to be pre-treated have been verified with field surveys; refer to the “Weed Treatment Needs” document in the Botany section of the Project File for specific areas/roads to be treated.

In and adjacent to all project activity areas, on other disturbed ground (e.g. temporary roads, skid trails, log landings), and along all NFS roads used to transport forest products, annual surveys will be conducted for three years following the start of sale activities to identify any invasion of noxious weeds. Should weeds be discovered, treatment will be consistent with the strategy outlined in the Flathead National Forest Noxious and Invasive Weed Control Decision Notice (May 2001). Typically, treatments will occur in areas with known weed occurrences during the spring months, before weed flowers bloom, for the first two years of project implementation. Treatments will reoccur when all hauling and project activity halts. Factors that influence treatment decisions include the category of weed (i.e. new invader, widespread invader), the relative invasive nature of the weed and its potential to displace native vegetation, the potential for off-site movement of seeds, the relative ecological importance or rarity of the site that could be damaged by the invader species, and available funding. For additional information on the methods and effectiveness of weed control on the Flathead National Forest, please refer to the Botany section of the Project File.

The above treatments and design criteria would not eliminate the potential for new weed populations, but would reduce that potential. Implementation of the above weed treatments depends on sufficient availability of funds from implementing the contract. Should there be insufficient funds available from this contract, treatments will compete for funding with other Forest-wide stewardship resource conservation projects, or will be prioritized with other Forest weed sites-of-concern using the Forest annual weed budget.

Heritage

If previously unknown heritage resources are encountered during implementation of the project, activities at the site will be halted and the Forest Archaeologist notified immediately. Activities will not resume until adequate protective measures are developed and implemented in the field as necessary.

Recreation/Scenic Values and Public Safety

The following project design features have been developed to ensure that the existing conditions related to recreational values were maintained, and to maintain public safety. Refer to the

“Recreation/Lands Report” in the Recreation section and the “Visual Resource Report” in the Visuals section of the Project File for more information.

- To protect the safety of the public using the area, contractors will be required to post signs warning the public of activities and traffic associated with the treatments.
- Skid trails and temporary roads within treatment units will be closed in a manner that discourages future off-road motorized use (e.g. slash and down-woody material scattered on trail surfaces, or recontouring if necessary). Adequate signing and barriers will be a part of this effort. Refer to the “Temporary Roads and Closed Roads Needed during Implementation” map in the Access section of the Project File.
- Any reports of illegal off-highway vehicle (OHV) use within the project area will be investigated by Forest Service law enforcement personnel and appropriate action taken to prevent such use.
- All damage and/or disturbance caused to trails by the harvest operations will be repaired to meet Forest Service trail standards.
- Slash adjacent to non-system trails will be managed to provide for aesthetics and to ensure slash does not impede non-motorized travel on these routes.
- Vegetation management within the Wild and Scenic River corridor will appear natural and blend well with existing vegetation patterns. In Unit 16, vegetation management will be restricted to above the existing topographical break above the riverbank.

Water, Riparian Areas, and Fish

All treatments will comply with Montana Stream Management Zone (SMZ) laws and Inland Native Fish Strategy (INFISH) direction. This includes retaining INFISH buffers along stream channels as follows:

Fish-bearing Streams	300 ft
Permanently Flowing, Non-fish Bearing Streams	150 ft
Seasonally flowing or Intermittent Streams	50 ft
Ponds, Lakes, or Wetlands >1 Acre	150 ft
Ponds, Lakes, or Wetlands <1 Acre (non-priority bull trout watershed)	50 ft
Landslide Prone Areas (non-priority bull trout watershed)	50 ft

Implementation of BMPs as described in the Soils section of this document will also serve to protect fisheries by substantially reducing risk of sediment reaching any water. All landings will be rehabilitated and revegetated once the mechanical operations are completed (refer to “Possible Log Landing Sites” map in the Soils section of the Project File).

Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive Species

The Proposed Action includes specific design features (e.g. timing, location, duration), and specific implementation requirements to minimize effects to wildlife, including threatened and endangered species (refer to Duration and Season of Activities above).

If a den, nest site, or other important habitat feature for any sensitive, threatened, or endangered species is discovered within or in close proximity to any treatment unit, project activities will be suspended until the District Wildlife Biologist approves a resumption of activities.

Documentation of a discussion between the contractor/purchaser and a Forest Service representative (e.g. Sale Administrator) regarding the requirement/responsibilities relative to the NCDE Food Storage Order will be provided to the Wildlife Biologist.

Any sightings or sign of grizzly bear use of the project area will be documented and a copy of this documentation provided to the Wildlife Biologist.

Any population of sensitive plants found during project implementation will be evaluated and protected.

Old-Growth Forest

No old-growth forest will be treated. All live, large (>20" dbh), older (>150 years old) western larch or Douglas-fir trees, and all dead western larch and Douglas-fir >18" dbh, will be left standing unless they create a safety hazard. If felled for safety reasons, these trees will be left on site to preserve the more valuable snag and large downed wood habitat for wildlife (refer to "Vegetation Existing Condition and Effects Analysis," Vegetation section of the Project File).

Monitoring

The Contract Administrator monitors all treatment units during implementation to ensure that contract specifications and applicable treatment objectives are being met. Contract specifications will be included to ensure resource protection during implementation. Refer to the "Other Details of the Proposed Action" section of this document for detailed information regarding individual resource treatment specifications.

To ensure the regeneration units are adequately stocked, monitoring the establishment and survival of planted or naturally regenerated conifer and shrub seedlings will be required. Additional monitoring will likely occur (depending upon funding sources) to assess the result of treatments on specific resources. This additional monitoring could include:

- Evaluation of post-treatment forest conditions (tree density, down woody debris, etc).
- Determining post-project soil disturbance levels in Units 2, 11, 12, 44, and 45, to verify compliance with Regional Soil Quality Guidelines.
- Monitoring noxious weed establishment and spread.
- Monitoring quality of forage vegetation in prescribed burn units.

Insert Map 1 – Treatment Units in Decision

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VI. RATIONALE FOR THE DECISION

I have selected the management activities from Alternative 2 based on information consolidated in the Environmental Assessment (EA), and supported by project file documents, and our interactions with the general public, adjacent landowners, and other government agencies through a broad range of public outreach methods. Using the Flathead National Forest Plan for guidance, I have come to a decision on this project that I believe meets the purpose of the project while balancing this need with competing resource values, takes into account values of the public, and is consistent with applicable laws, regulations, and policies. In addition, I have considered and evaluated the effects of this project, including the cumulative effects, and determined that this project will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (refer to the *Finding of No Significant Impact*, which is Appendix A).

The remaining portion of this rationale will discuss how the decision specifically meets the purpose and need of the project and how public comments and concerns were considered in making this decision.

Meeting the Purpose and Need

The purpose and need was centered around the concern of hazardous fuel concentrations located on National Forest System (NFS) lands near private or other non-federal areas and how they may affect or influence a wildland fire. This buildup of forest fuel and changes in vegetation composition are some of the main factors influencing the increase of severe wildland fires across the nation. Televised pictures of wildland fires, evacuated communities, burned homes, and blackened forests have heightened many local residents concerns about wildland fires in their own neighborhoods. These concerns have become very real in our area after the fire seasons of 2001 and 2003, which affected large portions of land on the Flathead National Forest and neighboring Glacier National Park.

Following these severe wildland fire seasons, Congress emphasized the need for federal land managers to better respond to severe wildland fires by various approaches; one of these approaches was through the National Fire Plan which directed the Forest Service to identify high risk wildland urban interface (WUI) areas. The Belton area between the towns of Hungry Horse and West Glacier was identified as one of the high risk hazardous fuel areas in the Flathead Valley proper. The Belton area has grown in the number of people living in close proximity to NFS lands due to the general growth in the nearby communities of Kalispell, Columbia Falls, and Whitefish. Additionally, the Belton area is a draw to new residents because of its proximity to Glacier National Park.

This is the second fuel reduction project we have initiated between the towns of Hungry Horse and West Glacier. Standing and down hazardous fuels were recently removed on about 200 acres in a project known as the Hungry Horse-West Glacier Fuels Reduction Project. This particular project was intentionally designed on a small scale to sense how local residents would receive a fuel reduction project located in their backyard. We generally received very positive feedback from surrounding landowners and local visitors. In fact, after the Hungry Horse-West

Glacier Fuels Reduction Project was completed, residents asked us to look into additional hazardous fuels reduction work in the same area and continue to do so even after the EA was released on the Belton Project. As a result of this public response, and the identification of other hazardous fuels in the area, the Belton Fuels Reduction Project was initiated.

My decision includes about 908 acres of fuel reduction treatments in a variety of stand conditions, including dense sapling stands, past harvested stands, and dense stands of older, 75-year-old trees. In general, all treatments will open up the forest canopy considerably, and reduce the amount of woody material on the ground. Some of the trees will be removed for commercial uses while the leftover branches, foliage, and smaller-sized tree boles will be burned or otherwise treated to reduce ground fuels to acceptable levels. Trees will be removed that most contribute to ladder fuels and continuous forest cover. Ladder fuels provide an avenue for a fire to move from the ground to the forest canopy. Once a fire gets into a dense forest canopy it is capable of spreading rapidly through the tree tops if high risk weather patterns develop. Crown fires also tend to cause spotting and firebrands ahead of the main fire, increasing the ignition risk to downwind structures.

Opening up of the forest canopy will occur through a thinning in some units, creating a semi-open stand condition with spacing between tree crowns of 15 or more feet. Most of the mature, 75-year-old lodgepole stands will be harvested with a seedtree or shelterwood cut. This treatment opens up the forest canopy even more than a thinning, leaving from 15-30 trees per acre. Natural regeneration of lodgepole pine and planting of long-lived, more fire-resistant species (such as western larch, ponderosa pine, and western white pine) will occur in these regenerated stands. The abundant light reaching the forest floor will allow the seedlings to establish and grow rapidly. Planting of these species will increase diversity of tree composition within the area, and in particular the proportion of more fire-tolerant species, which is another objective of this project.

I believe these treatments will substantially reduce the risk of a future high-severity crown fire and high-intensity surface fire in the Belton area. These changes in fire behavior (i.e. reduction in the rate of spread, flame length, and crown fire potential) should give firefighters a better chance of protecting human and natural resource values. In addition, this situation provides a safer environment for our firefighters when helping to protect these values.

I recognize that reducing fuels and tree densities will not necessarily prevent fires or increase our ability to control every fire. The elements of weather, drought, and topography that influence fire behavior will always have a role to play and may, on any given day or acre, override the effects of any management action. While it is not always possible to always prevent a wildfire from occurring, it is possible to reduce the fire hazard in a particular area such as Belton and increase the probability that future wildfires will be less severe and intense.

Another important aspect of this project is to increase the abundance and diversity of wildlife forage. Approximately 916 acres will be prescribed burned to reduce conifer encroachment, rejuvenate wildlife browse, create a diverse mosaic of vegetation conditions and wildlife habitat across the landscape, and reduce down fuel accumulations. A mix of vegetation conditions will occur in the treated area following burning, with up to 50% of the area in an open-forest

condition dominated by native shrubs, grasses, and forbs. It is also likely that spring food production (grasses/forbs/shrubs), utilized by ungulates and bears in particular, could increase in response to the more open forest canopy created by the thinning and regeneration cuts, because more sunlight will reach the forest floor.

Most of the units identified for prescribed burning have not burned since the 1929 Halfmoon Fire, and heavily forested conditions exist across most of the area on the northern aspects near the prescribed burn units. The careful application of prescribed fire to these units will reduce the risk of a future high-severity wildland fire burning through the area while providing habitat benefits to many species of wildlife.

Consideration of Public Comments

In addition to evaluating the purpose and need, I also carefully considered all public comments, including those that did not support the project or that had specific concerns regarding certain aspects of the project. While the majority of comments indicated support for the project, there were comments that expressed concerns related to weed spread, wildlife disturbance, snags, illegal ATV use, post-treatment appearance, Wild and Scenic River corridor impacts, and impacts to soils. I have considered all of these concerns, and many of them have been addressed with specific design criteria included in this decision to address and mitigate these concerns. Our responses to these concerns can be found in Appendix B of this document.

There were concerns with a few individual treatment areas from some adjacent landowners who did not want to see any treatment conducted. I considered their concerns in evaluating the decision for this project but decided the treatment areas were necessary to help meet the purpose of the project. I felt the benefit of the treatment areas not only benefit adjacent landowners, they can also benefit nearby landowners, residents, business owners, etc, by lowering potential hazardous fire conditions in the general area. This is dependant upon the placement of units on the landscape, and other factors such as forest stand condition, climate, etc. I also believe we properly mitigated for most of the concerns the individual landowners brought up. In some cases, unit boundaries were pulled away from the property line of those concerned landowners, but most of the unit was left intact.

Treatment areas included in my decision are the same as displayed in the EA. However, several treatment areas were dropped or modified after we first approached the public with this project due to landowner concerns, to buffer riparian areas, to accommodate terrain issues, or because we further evaluated forest fuel conditions and did not see the need to reduce fuels further. Additionally, we did not propose any treatments in old growth, riparian habitats, or within grizzly bear security core areas in order to reduce complexities those issues bring to the analysis.

I have been very pleased with our collaboration with the residents and others of the area. They have provided us information about resource conditions and commonly used areas within the project area, and many have indicated their willingness to allow the use of their lands to facilitate fuel reduction treatments on NFS land.

VII. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY LAWS, REGULATIONS, AND POLICIES

I have determined that my decision is consistent with the laws, regulations, and agency policies related to this project. The following summarizes the findings required by major environmental laws.

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA)

Consistency with Forest Plan Standards, Goals, and Objectives

The Forest Plan establishes management direction for the Flathead National Forest. This management direction is achieved through the establishment of Forest goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines, and Management Area goals and accompanying standards and guidelines. Project implementation consistent with this direction is the process through which desired conditions described by the Forest Plan are achieved.

The National Forest Management Act requires that all resource plans are to be consistent with the Forest Plan (16 USC 1604(i)). The EA displays the Forest Plan Management Area goals and objectives applicable to the Belton Project area. The environmental consequences of the alternatives in relation to the Forest Plan standards and guidelines are described in the EA.

After reviewing the EA, I find that my decision is consistent with Forest Plan standards, goals, and objectives as amended.

Suitability for Timber Production

Most of the fuel reduction treatments (41 units), including some commercial tree harvesting, are located in management areas suitable for long-term timber production (MA 7, 9, 10, and 15). According to the Forest Plan, four units occur in MA 10, designated administrative sites. One unit is in MA 14, the Coram Experimental Forest, and two units occur in MA 18 (Wild and Scenic River). Tree harvesting can take place in these management areas as long as they meet the objectives and standards of the management areas as specified in the Forest Plan. Based on the analysis provided in the EA and Project File, the fuel treatments identified in these areas meet these objectives/standards.

Clearcutting and Even-aged Management

The National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA) directs that clearcutting be used only where “it is determined to be the optimum method.” Other methods could be used where “determined to be appropriate.”

Thinning is proposed for most of the treatment areas. This is not a regeneration method of harvest, but is an intermediate treatment under an even-aged management system. In the stands dominated by lodgepole pine, thinning would do poorly at increasing tree species diversity and conversion to more fire-tolerant species. The desired species (specifically larch) require

abundant light to establish on a site and grow well. The more shaded conditions in the thinned areas do not provide good or even acceptable growing conditions for this species.

Regeneration harvests (seedtree and shelterwood harvests) will occur on 224 acres of dense lodgepole pine dominated forests. Approximately 15-30 TPA would be left, providing some visual screening and structural diversity. In some units, leave trees would be left in patches of variable size and shape; other units would have leave trees more evenly scattered. Long-lived, fire-resistant species (larch, Douglas-fir, western white pine, and ponderosa pine) will be planted in the open stand conditions created by this treatment. This treatment is intended to begin the conversion of the stand from a dense, mature lodgepole pine stand (short-lived and susceptible to fire and mountain pine beetle attack) to long-lived, vigorous, fire-tolerant species suited to this site. Larch in particular requires full, or nearly full, light to survive and grow well. The seedtree/shelterwood treatments not only meet the purpose and need of the project by reducing the potential for future high-intensity fire, they create the desired diverse species composition in the stand and across the landscape. This regeneration method is determined to be the optimum method by which to achieve these objectives.

Vegetative Manipulation

All proposals involving vegetative manipulation of tree cover for any purpose must comply with the seven requirements found in 36 CFR 219.27(b).

1. Management prescriptions shall be best suited to the multiple-use goals established for the area with impacts considered in the determination.
 - All treatments meet a portion of the goals and objectives in the Forest Plan for designated Management Areas, and meet the purpose and need for action.
2. Management prescriptions shall ensure that the lands can be adequately restocked as provided in 36 CFR 219.27(c)(3) "...assure that the technology and knowledge exist to adequately restock the lands within 5 years after final harvest" (16 USC 1604(g)(E)(ii)).
 - Adequate stocking of the units to be thinned will be accomplished by planting tree seedlings if needed. An estimated 197 acres will be planted in treated units. Site conditions in these units lead me to believe that adequate stocking will be achieved on these sites.
3. Management prescriptions shall not be chosen primarily because they would give the greatest dollar return or the greatest output of timber.
 - The Economics section in Project File describes the economic effects of each alternative.
4. Management prescriptions shall consider the effects on residual trees and adjacent stands.
 - Management prescriptions were chosen primarily because they would result in desired environmental and social effects, as defined by the Purpose and Need for Action.

- The analysis considered the effects of management activities and practices on residual trees and adjacent stands as shown the EA and Forest Vegetation section of the Project File. I find the stand treatments and the design criteria are adequate to protect the residual trees and adjacent stands.

5. Management prescriptions shall avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and ensure conservation of soil and water resources.

- The effects of each alternative and its modifications on soil and water resources are disclosed in the Belton EA, with more details in the Project File. I find the unit locations, silvicultural systems, riparian protection, use of BMPs, logging technology, and post-harvest activities, in relationship with the soil and water conservation practices planned, will minimize impairment of site productivity and ensure conservation of soil and water resources.

6. Management prescriptions shall provide the desired effect on water quantity and quality, wildlife and fish habitat, regeneration of desired tree species, forage production, recreation use, and aesthetic values.

- The information provided in the Project File documents that the vegetation management treatments included in my decision would achieve the desired forest vegetation conditions described in the EA. After reviewing the social and environmental effects of the alternatives, I have determined that my decision is consistent with Forest Plan direction for the management of natural resources, including water quality/quantity, wildlife and fish habitat, recreation uses, aesthetic values, and other resource yields.

7. Management prescriptions shall be practical in terms of transportation and harvesting requirements, and total cost of preparing, logging, and administration.

- The specified transportation and harvesting systems to be used in the implementation of this decision have been analyzed in combination with the other requirements of the management prescriptions. Equipment and technology that are commonly available are prescribed. The preparation, logging, and administration are practical for achieving the resource objectives and progress toward the desired future condition in the project area. The economic analysis included in the Project File demonstrates this finding.

Roads

The NFMA requires that the necessity for roads be documented, and that road construction be designed to "standards appropriate for the intended uses, considering safety, cost of transportation, and impacts on land and resources" [36 CFR 219.27(10)]. NFMA also requires that "all roads are planned and designed to re-establish vegetation cover on the disturbed areas within a reasonable period of time, not to exceed 10 years....unless the road is determined a necessary permanent addition to the National Forest Transportation System" [36 CFR 219.27(11)].

Management actions associated with the Belton Project include the use of several currently closed or historic roads to access treatment units. In addition, approximately one mile of temporary roads (nine different segments) will be constructed (using historic templates or new) to access treatment units. All temporary roads will be rehabilitated after use (EA). I believe that we have met the intent of 36 CFR 219.27(10) and (11).

NFMA Diversity

The Forest Plan contains an array of components that contribute to the wildlife/fisheries habitat capability of the Flathead National Forest. Based upon consideration of these components of the Forest Plan, the monitoring and design criteria of the decision, an analysis of effects of the Belton Project at the Forest and Regional scale, and the Biological Assessments/Evaluations, I concluded that my decision poses little risk to the diversity of native species. In addition, my conclusion is based on a review of the Project File that shows a thorough review of relevant scientific information, a consideration of responsible opposing views, and the acknowledgment of incomplete or unavailable information, scientific uncertainty, and risk.

Clean Water Act and Montana State Water Quality Standards

Upon review of the Belton Project EA, I find that activities associated with the decision will comply with the Clean Water Act and Montana State Water Quality Standards, with application of the Best Management Practices and associated monitoring requirements.

Clean Air Act

Upon review of the EA, I find that the activities in my decision will be coordinated to meet the requirements of the State Implementation Plans, Smoke Management Plan, and Federal air quality requirements.

National Historic Preservation Act, American Indian Religious Freedom Act, and Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act

Cultural resource reviews have been completed on all areas to be impacted by ground-disturbing activities. No cultural resources are expected to be affected by this action. Recognizing that the potential exists for unidentified sites to be encountered or disturbed during project activity, special provisions for their protection will be included in all contracts used to implement this project. These provisions will allow the Forest Service to unilaterally modify or cancel a contract to protect cultural resources, regardless of when they are identified. This provision will be used if a site were discovered after operations have begun. This project complies with the Region 1 programmatic agreement (1995) with the State Historic Preservation Office and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation.

The Endangered Species Act (16 USC 1531 et. seq.)

Under the provisions of this Act, Federal agencies are directed to seek to conserve endangered and threatened species and to ensure that actions are not likely to jeopardize the continued

existence of any of these species. Upon review of the wildlife Biological Assessment (BA) (Project File), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on November 13, 2007 concurred with the determination that the project “may effect – but is not likely to adversely affect” the grizzly bear, gray wolf, and Canada lynx (Project File).

The Wildlife Biologist further determined that no lynx foraging habitat (snowshoe hare habitat) would be affected. Approximately 500 acres of other lynx habitat would be treated on NFS lands, all of which are within the WUI and located near private lands. The proposed activities are consistent with all applicable standards and guidelines of the Northern Rockies Lynx Amendment.

In February 2008, the USFWS proposed to revise designated critical habitat for the contiguous United States distinct population segment of the Canada lynx. The proposed revised designation would add an additional 40,193 square miles to the existing critical habitat designation of 1,841 square miles. A portion of this proposed additional habitat is found on the Flathead National Forest, which includes the Belton Project area. Conferencing with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act is required if a project would result in the adverse modification of proposed critical habitat. The Belton Fuels Reduction Project is not likely to result in the destruction of, or to adversely modify proposed critical habitat; therefore, conferencing with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on proposed critical habitat for this project is not required at this time.

The Belton Fuels Reduction Project would not result in adverse modification of proposed critical lynx habitat for the following reasons:

- The Incidental Take Statement (ITS) provided in the FWS Biological Opinion (BO) on the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction (NRMLD) (USFWS 2007), places limits on the amount of lynx habitat that could be treated on the Flathead National Forest that would result in adverse effects to lynx habitat.
- The FWS determined in the BO that the acreage that could be treated in ways that would result in adverse effects to lynx habitat would not result in jeopardy to the continued existence of lynx and that the NRMLD is compatible with recovery needs for lynx.
- This project is in compliance with the limit identified in the ITS for cumulative acres treated that would result in adverse effects to lynx for the Flathead National Forest.
- A monitoring reporting system has been established in compliance with the BO term and condition to annually report to the FWS the acres treated subject to the ITS.

Bull trout are not found in the project area; therefore, no BA was completed.

The Forest Botanist determined in a BA (Botany section of the Project File) that there would be “no effect” on the water howellia or Spaulding’s catchfly, their habitat, or potential habitat.

Upon review of the Belton Project EA, the BAs, and Biological Evaluations (BE) for wildlife, plants, and fish, and the Letter of Concurrence from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, I find the decision complies with this Act.

Environmental Justice

The Proposed Action (Alternative 2) was assessed to determine whether it would disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations, in accordance with Executive Order 12898. No impacts to minority or low-income populations were identified during scoping or the comment period. Compliance with other laws, regulations, and policies are listed in various sections of the EA, the Project File, and the Forest Plan.

IX. APPEAL PROVISIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION

Copies of the Belton Fuels Reduction EA and the supporting Project File are available for review at the Hungry Horse Ranger Station, 10 Hungry Horse Drive, P.O. Box 190340, Hungry Horse, MT, 59919.

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.11. A written appeal must be submitted within 45 days following the publication date of the legal notice of this decision in the Daily Inter Lake Newspaper, Kalispell, Montana. It is the responsibility of the appellant to ensure their appeal is received in a timely manner. The publication date of the legal notice of the decision in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Appellants should not rely on date or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Paper appeals must be submitted to:

**USDA Forest Service, Northern Region
ATTN: Appeal Deciding Officer
P.O. Box 7669
Missoula, MT 59807**

Or

**USDA Forest Service, Northern Region
ATTN: Appeal Deciding Officer
200 East Broadway
Missoula, MT 59802**

Office hours are 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Electronic appeals must be submitted to:

appeals-northern-regional-office@fs.fed.us

In electronic appeals, the subject line should contain the name of the project being appealed. An automated response would confirm your electronic appeal has been received. Electronic appeals must be submitted in MS Word, Word Perfect, Portable Document Format (PDF) or Rich Text Format (RTF).

It is the appellant's responsibility to provide sufficient project- or activity-specific evidence and rationale, focusing on the decision, to show why my decision should be reversed. The appeal must be filed with the Appeal Deciding Officer in writing. At a minimum, the appeal must meet the content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14, and include the following information:

- The appellant's name and address, with a telephone number, if available;
- A signature, or other verification of authorship upon request (a scanned signature for electronic mail may be filed with the appeal);
- When multiple names are listed on an appeal, identification of the lead appellant and verification of the identity of the lead appellant upon request;
- The name of the project or activity for which the decision was made, the name and title of the Responsible Official, and the date of the decision;
- The regulation under which the appeal is being filed, when there is an option to appeal under either 36 CFR 215 or 36 CFR 251, subpart C;
- Any specific change(s) in the decision that the appellant seeks and rationale for those changes;
- Any portion(s) of the decision with which the appellant disagrees, and explanation for the disagreement;
- Why the appellant believes the Responsible Official's decision failed to consider the substantive comments; and
- How the appellant believes the decision specifically violates law, regulation, or policy.

For further information on this decision, please contact Jimmy DeHerrera, District Ranger (406-387-3800) or Michele Draggoo, Project Leader (406-387-3827).

CATHY BARBOULETOS
Forest Supervisor

Date