

# Scenery Resource

## Introduction

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The Cooney McKay Project area lies generally between Lion Creek to the north and Cooney Creek to the south within the Swan Valley. The Swan River borders the western side of the project area with the crest of the Swan Range bordering to the east. The project area is part of the much larger Swan Geographic Unit on the southern part of the forest.

National Forest System lands occupy 21,800 acres of the project area (57 percent); PCTC owns 10,068 acres (27 percent); and other private landowners own 6,163 acres (16 percent). Elevation within the project area ranges from 3400 feet along the Swan River to nearly 8900 feet near Cooney Mountain on the Swan Crest (Map 1-1).

This project area is used by a variety of people – landowners, hunters or anglers, floaters on the Swan River, snowmobilers, firewood gathers, hikers, campers, etc. Most of these people are interested in viewing scenery while pursuing whatever interests they have for being in the Swan Valley.

## Analysis Area Description

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The Cooney McKay Project Area is part of the much larger Swan Geographic Unit on the southern part of the Forest. The primary viewing opportunities for the project are from Highway 83, which provides access to the Swan Valley to the south and north to the Flathead Valley. Many of the travelers are recreationists interested in driving for viewing scenery. This road extends from Bigfork to Clearwater Junction at Highway 200 and provides access for both visitors and landowners to the Swan Valley. Most of the scenic views from this road come from viewing the dramatic peaks of Swan Range, which is located east of the project area. Approximately 10 miles of this road is included within the project area.

One viewpoint was chosen based on the opportunity to view some of the area from Highway 83. Viewpoint 1 from Highway 83 will be the basis for analysis and the modeling of the various alternatives. This viewpoint will be used for further analysis of the effects of proposed management activities on the area's scenery.

**Viewpoint #1 - Highway #83:** This viewpoint is located 25 miles south of the town of Swan Lake on Highway 83 (Section 14) at Condon Work Center. The view is mostly limited to the immediate foreground along the highway providing a view of an open airstrip and background views of the Swan Range. Along the remainder of Highway 83, thick stands of vegetation and trees along both sides of the highway screen views of the Mission Mountains and Swan Range in the middle-ground and background views. The area presently viewed from this viewpoint meets the scenic integrity levels shown in the Forest Plan. The existing visual conditions of the areas viewed from Highway 83 are unaltered or appear unaltered.

The time frames for this analysis are from the beginning of implementation of activities to a point in the future when grass, shrubs, and small trees are established in areas disturbed by treatments, approximately 2030.

## Affected Environment

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### Regulatory Framework

The analysis for this project uses the Scenery Management System (SMS) developed by the U.S. Forest Service in: [Landscape Aesthetics - A Handbook for Scenery Management Number 701\(1995\)](#). It is used to analyze and evaluate the visual resource. This system replaces The Visual Management System (VMS) (USDA Forest Service 1974). This new system provides for the evaluation of physical features of the landscape called "scenic attractiveness classes" together with the levels of concern people have regarding scenery. This information is synthesized to develop "Scenic Integrity Objectives" (SIOs); formerly referred to as Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs).

Until the Flathead Forest Plan is updated, it is necessary to continue to incorporate the VMS terms with the SMS for clarity of the effects on the desired levels specific to management areas. Scenic integrity is a measure of the degree to which a landscape is visually perceived to be "complete" (USDA Forest Service 1995, 2-1). Within the Scenic Management System, scenic integrity ranges from very high to very low. Scenic integrity can be compared to Visual Quality Objectives in the Visual Management System. A crosswalk between the two systems is shown in Table 3-51.

**TABLE 3-51.  
SCENIC MANAGEMENT SYSTEM / VISUAL MANAGEMENT SYSTEM CROSSWALK**

Scenic Integrity Levels (SMS)	VQO	Description
Very High	Preservation	The valued landscape character "is" intact with only minute deviations.
High	Retention	The valued landscape character "appears" intact. Deviations may be present but must repeat form, line, color, texture, and pattern common to the character so completely that they are not evident.
Moderate	Partial Retention	The valued landscape character "appears slightly altered." Noticeable deviations must remain visually subordinate to the landscape character being viewed.
Low	Modification	The valued landscape character "appears moderately altered." Deviations begin to dominate the valued landscape character being viewed but they borrow valued attributes such as size, shape, edge effect, and pattern of natural openings, vegetative type changes outside the landscape being viewed. They should be compatible or complementary to the landscape character.
Very Low	Maximum Modification	The valued landscape character "appears heavily altered." Deviations may strongly dominate the landscape character. They may not be appropriate in shape, edge effect, or patterns. However, deviations must be shaped and blended with landforms so that elements such as unnatural edges or landings do not dominate the composition.

The Forest Plan established the Scenic Integrity Levels for each of the Management Areas within the project area as shown in Table 3-52.

**TABLE 3-52.**  
**SCENIC INTEGRITY LEVEL BY MANAGEMENT AREA**

Management Area	Emphasis	Scenic Integrity Level
MA 2	Semi-primitive non-motorized	High
MA 9	White-tailed Deer Habitat	Low
MA 13	Mule Deer and Elk Habitat	Low

## **Existing Condition**

Since the early 1900s, interruption of frequent fire cycles, logging activity since the 1950s, and private land development has lead to changes in the historic vegetative composition and pattern of Swan Valley forests.

Approximately 72 percent of the project area had fires that acted as a natural thinning agent, reducing the encroachment of Douglas-fir, alpine fir and spruce. In lower elevations, fire regenerated and maintained open park-like stands of larch with Douglas-fir and ponderosa pine. In higher elevations, the present timber stand conditions of even aged trees with more of a lodgepole pine component suggests that fires were more intense but less frequent. These stand replacing fires have left less than 10 percent of the forested canopy cover remaining after the fire. This fire history has led to a mosaic of different aged groups of trees in the project area. Currently, patterns or modifications to the landscape due to fire are not evident to the average visitor since no large wildland fires have occurred in the project area for well over 100 years. (Please refer to the Fire Section of this Chapter for more details on Fire History of the area).

The first logging began in the early 1900s due to the Northern Pacific railroad grants and homesteading. More intensive timber management activities and associated road building began after World War II and increased through the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Road construction and timber harvesting has taken place since then in most drainages, with the majority occurring in the 1980s and 1990s on non-federal ownership. Timber harvesting has created some obvious alterations to the landscape. A variety of silvicultural practices from clearcuts to partial cuts have been implemented throughout the project area.

Timber harvesting and fire related changes meet the intent for scenery of the Forest Plan. The Scenic Attractiveness Class is rated as typical (common) to the Forest. Based upon review of the Forest Plan, the concern or sensitivity level for scenery rates as high to moderate.

# **Environmental Consequences**

The Cumulative Effects Worksheet, located in the Scenery Project File (Project File Exhibit N-6) considers and describes proposed activities in addition to the past, current, and reasonably foreseeable activities listed at the beginning of this chapter in Tables 3-1 and 3-2. Please refer to these worksheets for more detailed discussion on cumulative effects.

Each of the action alternatives involves prescriptions and management activities that would result in a change from the existing character of the area. Many of the proposed treatment activities are adjacent to previously harvested units. Proposed Silviculture treatments range from Seed Tree

Harvest to Commercial Thinning. All of the activities of the proposed alternatives are designed to meet the scenery levels as designated in the Flathead Forest Plan.

The following effects indicators were used to qualitatively analyze impacts of the alternatives on scenic quality.

A high impact would have these outcomes:

- A large number of people highly sensitive to their surroundings see the vegetation changes in foreground and middle ground views; or
- The proposed changes dominate the view and/or appear un-natural or chaotic. Vegetation clearing presents obvious line contrasts from adjoining forested areas.
- The area is officially recognized for its scenic or recreational values.

A moderate impact would have these outcomes:

- The modifications would be visible to large numbers of people but it is not a dominant element in the landscape because forest management activities are commonplace in the area, or views are partially screened, or large segments of the changes may be visible but only for a short time, and/or most views are in middle ground or background viewing distance.
- The modifications would change the prevailing land/vegetation patterns but be visible to few people or for short periods of time.

A low impact would have the following outcome:

- Few viewers would see the area because it is isolated, screened, or seen at a background distance; existing conditions have already established impacts.
- If road construction is planned the road cuts, fills and clearing would not significantly detract from the setting.
- Views would be short-lived or of short duration and the visually sensitive resource would be minimally affected.

No impact would have the following outcomes:

- No visual changes.

### **Alternative 1 – No Action Direct and Indirect Effects**

Since there would be no removal of vegetation or prescribed burning, the process of forest succession would continue. Alternative 1 would not improve or maintain the general health, resiliency, and sustainability of forest vegetative communities.

The one proposed Restoration Planting Unit, (Unit 3-33) located adjacent to Highway 83 in Section 3 would not occur and create some change and enhancement to the visual condition of this unit as it has been previously harvested and is marginally stocked with trees. Species diversity resulting from the planting of ponderosa pine and western larch would not occur.

Ecosystem Burn Units (Units #10, #15, Cooney #1, and Cooney #2) would not occur resulting in a short term effect of red or black coloration of the fire treated areas seen from a distance.

**Effects Common to All Action Alternatives  
Direct and Indirect Effects**

Recreationists and travelers on the Swan Highway have an opportunity to glimpse some proposed management activities from Viewpoint #1 and in Section 3, 6 miles north of Condon. When traveling on Highway 83 at an average speed of 50 to 60 miles per hour, the actual viewing time on the mile at these locations is limited. Most of the Cooney McKay Project is located on relatively flat topography and is well screened from Viewpoint 1 from most travelers and recreationists. Harvest treatment units lie on very gentle slopes, making them not visible and difficult to see.

One proposed Restoration Planting Unit, (Unit 3-33) is located adjacent to Highway 83 in Section 3. This unit is the only proposed treatment located adjacent to Highway 83. The treatment would create some change and enhancement to the visual condition of this unit as it has been previously harvested and is marginally stocked with trees. Ponderosa pine and western larch would be planted to promote species diversity.

Some of the Ecosystem Burn Units (Units #10, #15, Cooney #1, and Cooney #2) would be visually apparent from the Highway 83 at Viewpoint 1. This is because of the open foreground and views up to the ridge of the Swan Range. For those units that can be seen, a short-term effect would be a red or black coloration of the fire treated areas from a distance. Over time, those areas would green-up and revegetate back to stands of shrub and/or forest vegetation. The intent of these burns is to have a mosaic of open and semi-open areas scattered across south and west facing slopes. Patches of blackened trees are desired to create openings so that shrubs and forbs can dominate.

The following table lists the effects of Unit 3-33 located adjacent to the Highway 83 and the Ecosystem Burn Units seen from Viewpoint #1.

**TABLE 3-53.  
EFFECTS OF ALTERNATIVES 2,3, AND 4 UNITS SEEN FROM HIGHWAY 83 AND VIEWPOINT #1.**

<b>Alt.</b>	<b>Unit #</b>	<b>VQO-Prescription</b>	<b>Meets VQO</b>	<b>Scenery Comments</b>
2, 3, 4	3-33	Modification – Restoration Planting	Yes	Positive impact, View would be enhanced due to additional trees planted to provide species diversity.
2, 3, 4	10, 15, Cooney #1 Cooney #2	Retention - Ecosystem Burning	Yes	Low impact – Burns would be seen at a background distance, existing fire mosaics have already established an impact. Burns would also be of short duration visible from the viewpoint and would meet visual objectives in the long term.

**Cumulative Effects**

Actions to reduce fuels buildup and thinning may occur on surrounding State or private lands within this project area, but would not be seen from this viewpoint, resulting in no cumulative effects to the Scenery Resource. Visual conditions of the areas viewed from Highway 83 would continue to be unaltered or appear unaltered. Fuels could continue to build up from tree mortality and undergrowth creating a higher risk of catastrophic fire in the project area. In the event of such an occurrence,

visual change to the landscape would be dramatic. This change may be naturally appearing, but fires of large magnitude may be visually unappealing to some viewers, and could create vast expanses of even-aged stands with little visual diversity that would exist for many decades.

## **Regulatory Framework and Consistency**

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Regulatory Framework for the Scenery Resource was discussed on the first and second pages of this section.

Alternative 1 and the proposed activities in the action alternatives would comply with the visual resource objectives in the Forest Plan for all management areas.