

# Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Project

## Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact

Flathead National Forest  
Swan Lake Ranger District  
Missoula County, Montana

May 2009

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USDA Forest Service

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# Table of Contents

I.	Summary of Decision .....	DN-1
II.	Project Area .....	DN-2
III.	Purpose of and Need for Action .....	DN-2
IV.	Public Involvement .....	DN-3
V.	Issues .....	DN-4
VI.	Brief Description of Alternatives .....	DN-6
	Alternatives Considered in Detail .....	DN-6
	Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study.....	DN-7
VII.	Decision .....	DN-8
VIII.	Rationale for the Decision .....	DN-8
	Meeting the Purpose and Need.....	DN-9
	Comparison of Alternatives .....	DN-10
	Consideration of the Issues and Public Comments.....	DN-11
IX.	Finding of No Significant Impact.....	DN-13
X.	Findings Required by Law, Regulation, and Agency Policy.....	DN-19
XI.	Appeal Provisions and Implementation .....	DN-23

## Appendices

1	Selected Alternative Summary .....	1-1
	Project Vicinity Map .....	Map 1
	Selected Alternative Map.....	Map 2
2	Design Criteria for the Selection Action .....	2-1
3	Monitoring Plan .....	3-1
4	Best Management Practices.....	4-1
5	Response to Public Comments Received on the Environmental Assessment .....	5-1

## Tables

1	Comparison of Alternatives – How They Respond to the Purpose and Need .....	DN-11
2	Comparison of Alternatives - How They Respond To the Key Issues .....	DN-13
3	Threatened & Endangered Species Determinations.....	DN-18
A1-1	Proposed Treatment Activities for the Selected Alternative .....	1-2
A1-2	Roads Needed for the Selected Alternative .....	1-3
A1-3	Summary of Proposed Treatment Activities for the Selected Alternative.....	1-3

# MID SWAN SALVAGE BLOWDOWN PROJECT

## Decision Notice

and

## Finding of No Significant Impact

### I. Summary of Decision

After careful consideration of the potential impacts of the management activities analyzed and documented in the Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment (EA) issued in February of 2009, I have decided to implement a combination of Alternatives B, C, and D as my Selected Alternative.

The decision implements salvage harvest treatments from the EA Alternatives B, C, and D with some changes. The Selected Alternative defers treatment entirely in 4 units (Units 2, 5, 13, and 18), which are designated Old Growth Stands and defers portions of three harvest units (Units 4, 6, and 8) located within the floodplain of Lion Creek. Because of these deferments, no new temporary road construction will occur. Salvage harvest units will be accessed by **0.5 miles** of historic road templates and **0.5 miles** of skid trails in the Selected Alternative. These changes are based on the resource concerns displayed in the EA and in response to public comments.

A summary of the actions in my decision includes:

- Salvaging **605 acres** of blowdown timber with commercial harvest prescriptions (tractor and cable systems). An estimated 8648 CCF (cubic hundred feet) or 4700 MBF (thousand board feet) of commercial timber products will be produced.
- Hand planting of **65 acres** of desired species within salvage units.
- Utilizing two segments of historic road templates totaling **0.5 miles** in order to implement prescriptions using mechanized treatment and to provide for product removal. These roads will be reclaimed following their use.
- Using **0.5 miles** of skid trails for forwarding logs with a tractor from the felled location to a landing, where they are loaded on trucks and hauled away. In some instances, it may be necessary to have a designated skid trail outside of the unit boundary a short distance to a nearby landing location adjacent to the haul route. Skid trails will be reclaimed following their use using drain dips, outsloping, scarifying, seeding, and recontouring.
- Applying BMPs to all roads temporarily opened, as well as all system roads as requirements of the timber sale. Approximately **15.3 miles** of system roads will have BMPs applied to reduce sediment yields.

Management actions are described in detail in this Decision Notice (DN) (pages 8 through 11) and in Appendix 2 (Design Criteria of the Selected Action). My decision authorizes salvage harvest of forest stands to **recover merchantable timber from areas affected by wind damage and provide wood products for the local economies.**

# Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and FONSI

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## II. Project Area

These activities will occur in the Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Project Area, which is located in the Swan Valley near Condon, Montana. The Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Project Area lies in the Swan Valley, extending from Goat Creek on the north to Lion Creek on the south. National Forest System (NFS) lands occupy approximately 4000 acres of the project area (89 percent) and other private landowners own approximately 480 acres (11 percent). Elevation within the project area ranges from 3300 feet to 4140 feet (See Vicinity Map 1).

The legal description for the project area includes T21N, R18W Sections 3-9; T22N, R16W Sections 1-34; T22N, R17W Sections 1-4, 7-19, 21-22, and 30-31; T22N, R18W Sections 23-29, 31-36; T22N, R19W Section 36; T23N, R16W Sections 4-9, 16-21, 25-36; and T23N, R17W Sections 1-4, 8-18, 20-36, Principal Montana Meridian, Lake County, Montana.

A portion of project area lies within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), the highest priority area for hazardous fuels treatment in the National Fire Plan and is within the WUI described by the Seeley Swan Fire Plan.

## III. Purpose and Need for Action

The need for the Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Project is a result of two recent stand altering, large-scale wind events occurring within the project area. The earlier wind event affecting the project area occurred during the month of June 2008 in the Goat Creek Area as high winds moved from west to east. Most of the tree damage associated with this storm affected stands in the Swan River State Forest. However, some damage to NFS lands occurred. Proposed Salvage Unit 1 represents the largest concentration of wind damage on NFS lands associated with this storm.

The later and larger event occurred on the evening of July 4, 2008. The storm moved from west to east across the Swan Valley and appeared to be a straight-line wind. On the west side of the valley, the storm centered around the Piper Creek Drainage; and on the east side of the valley, it focused along the Lion Creek Drainage. Estimates of areas containing concentrations of wind-damaged trees on NFS lands considered economically viable for salvage were proposed as Salvage Units 2 through 26. Assessments revealed variability in damage severity, type, and distribution. Small groups of trees were commonly affected. A limited number of areas greater than a few acres in size were severely affected. In those areas, the majority of the overstory trees were damaged. Damage to individual trees includes uprooting, stem breakage, and severe bending. Some areas have abundant trees with intact roots and no stem breakage, but contain trees that are severely bent. It appears that dominant and co-dominant trees with large crowns were damaged more frequently than smaller crowned trees. The species affected also varied and includes ponderosa pine, western larch, Douglas-fir, lodgepole pine, Engelmann spruce and scattered other species.

Aerial and ground surveys observed four major insect agents within the project area: mountain pine beetle, Douglas-fir beetle, spruce beetle, and fir engraver. Pine engraver beetles were observed in some wind-damaged ponderosa pine. Low numbers of Douglas-fir beetle, spruce beetle, western balsam bark beetle, and Douglas-fir pine beetle were observed in wind damaged trees. Bark beetle activity seemed to be widespread and relatively frequent. In 65 percent of the units, bark beetle evidence was observed in wind-damaged trees. Almost all observations were Douglas-fir beetle in wind thrown Douglas-fir trees, with some mountain pine beetle seen in wind-damaged ponderosa pine.

This project was derived from the differences between desired landscape conditions and these current ecological conditions related to fuels, forest health, and forest products on NFS lands in the Mid Swan Blowdown Project Area. The Flathead National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) sets forth in detail the direction for managing the land and resources of the Flathead National Forest. The Purpose and Need for Action is discussed in Chapter 1 of the EA.

## Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and FONSI

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Based upon the existing condition of the project area and consistent with Forest Plan direction, the Swan Lake Ranger District Interdisciplinary (ID) Team and I identified the following management activities:

- **Recover merchantable timber from areas affected by wind damage;**
  - Meet Forest Plan guidance for the management areas where the wind damage has occurred;
  - Reduce forest fuels buildup adjacent to public and private lands;
  - Improve the general health, resiliency, and sustainability of forested communities; and
  - Reduce the risk of insect epidemics and disease infestations with the project area.
- **Provide wood products for the local economies**
  - Contribute to short-term forest products for the local timber industry and provide for long-term sustainability of timber on NFS lands.

### IV. Public Involvement

Public participation helps the Forest Service identify concerns with possible effects of its proposals. It is also a means of disclosing to the public the nature and consequences of actions proposed for NFS lands.

A public involvement strategy was developed to ensure that potentially interested members of the public and other government agencies received timely information about the upcoming analysis so they would be able to participate in the process (Project File Exhibit A-6). The Forest Service developed a list of public individuals, organizations, and agencies that would likely be interested in the Mid Swan Project. This included members of the public within these general categories:

- Adjacent landowners
- County governments
- Advocacy or user-group organizations
- Tribal governments
- Adjacent Ranger Districts
- Other Federal agencies
- Montana State agencies
- Timber industry groups
- Local news media

On October 10, 2008, information on the Mid Swan Project (Vicinity Map and Map of the Proposal) was mailed out (Project File Exhibit B-2). This information was mailed to approximately 70 individuals, agencies, and groups.

A request for comments on the Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Project was published in *The Daily Inter Lake* on October 16, 2008 (Project File Exhibit B-3). Notification of this project proposal appeared in the January 1, 2009, USDA Forest Service's Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) (Project File Exhibit B-7).

The Swan Lake Ranger District received approximately 33 responses on the Mid Swan Project, either in the form of letters, e-mails, or telephone contacts.

On October 30, 2008, a Field Trip to the Mid Swan Project Area was held. In addition to Forest Service Representatives, 10 members of the public participated in the Field Trip. A second Field Trip was held on November 4, 2008, to visit Units 6 and 8 where blowdown material removal was proposed within RHCAs; seven members of the public attended this Field Trip.

Participation with the Salish and Kootenai Tribe was conducted during quarterly meetings between Tribal Representatives and the Flathead National Forest Heritage Resource Specialists. Discussions with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) did identify some sites of concern that had the potential to be affected by this project. More detailed discussion of these sites is located in the Finding of No Significant Impact on page 17 of this document.

# Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and FONSI

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A Legal Notice was published in *The Daily Inter Lake* on February 15, 2009, announcing the completion and availability of the Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Project EA and a 30-day public comment period on the EA. Letters and copies of the EA were sent to the mailing list informing them of the availability of the EA. In addition, the EA was made available on the Flathead National Forest's website at <http://fs.fed.us/r1/flathead/nepa/nepa.htm>.

We received three letters commenting on the EA. These comments from the public and our responses are included in Appendix 5 of the DN. I considered these comments in my decision and used them to help shape the Selected Alternative.

In arriving at a decision for this project, I recognized that I would not be able to satisfy all public concerns, as many of them are mutually exclusive. I made a decision that is based upon sound analytical and ecological principles and that I feel appropriately balances concerns expressed while striving to meet the Purpose and Need of the project.

## V. Issues

The ID Team reviewed and compiled a list of potential issues based upon comments from the public, organizations, and government agencies. These issues were then evaluated against the following criteria to determine the appropriate methodology for resolution:

- Is the issue relevant to, and within the scope of the Purpose and Need, the decisions being made, and does it pertain directly to the Proposed Action?
- Is the issue already decided by law, regulation, or existing plans, or not supported by scientific or factual evidence?
- Could the issue be resolved through design and location of activities in the Proposed Action or mitigated by avoiding the impact by not taking action, minimizing the impact by limiting the action, rectifying the impact by rehabilitation, reducing the impact by maintenance, or compensating for the impact by replacement?

Issues representing an unresolved conflict with the Proposed Action were brought forward as "Major Issues" and were used to help formulate the alternatives to the Proposed Action. Project File Exhibit D-7 provides a detailed description of the issues identified during the scoping process and describes how those issues were accounted for during the analysis process.

## Key Issues Used For Alternative Development

External comments revealed the desire to explore alternatives to the Proposed Action (Alternative B). Alternative C was developed to address the concerns associated with removal of blowdown trees in old growth stands, and Alternative D proposed no blowdown removal in Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCA) in response to concerns expressed on this issue. More details relative to these issues follow:

### A. Blowdown Removal in Old Growth

The statements below are examples of comments received during scoping which articulated issues or concerns relative to removal of blowdown in old growth stands.

- "Down woody recruitment is particularly critical in existing stands of old-growth forest, which you indicate would have downed wood removed in Units 2, 5, 13, and 18. As we recall, the Forest Plan standards requiring the retention of down woody "debris" (a term we are loath to use due to the wood's essential contribution to old-growth and other forest functions) are insufficient and err on the side of logging rather than ecosystem function and resiliency. Therefore, we especially urge you to not salvage log in these old-growth stands." (Project File Exhibit BB-34)

## Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and FONSI

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- “Old-growth forests are pretty scarce in this area due to the checkerboard ownership, past logging and road building. How much old-growth forest habitat is there in this area? Where is it? What is next to it? How connected is it? Where are mature stands that can be recruited as replacement old growth? What old-growth dependent wildlife are using it? We believe there should be an effort by the Flathead to connect rather than fragment old-growth forest habitat.” (Project File Exhibit BB-35)
- “We request that the FNF also develop an alternative that does not propose harvest in any old growth or previously unlogged stands.” (Project File Exhibit BB-34)

Issue Indicator: Acres of treatment within old growth stands.

### **B. Blowdown Removal in Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas**

There were concerns with the proposed removal of blowdown within Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCAs). The following statements from the scoping comments are examples of concerns about removal of blowdown trees in riparian habitat:

- “In order to deviate from the INFISH standards the District must perform an Ecosystem Analysis at the Watershed Scale. Lion Creek is a key bull trout spawning stream that needs to be protected and INFISH maintains degraded conditions. The US Fish and Wildlife Service’s (USFWS) Biological Opinion of the Effects to Bull Trout and Bull Trout Critical Habitat from Road Management Activities on National Forest System and Bureau of Land Management Lands in Western Montana (April 29, 2008) summarized the baseline condition in the Swan as:
  - “The current status of the species in this core area is amongst the strongest in the entire range, though numerically redd counts are down about 30% since the peak level recorded in 1998, so the trend is no longer considered increasing.” (BiOp at pg 36)
  - At a minimum Lion Creek needs the INFISH buffers, it’s not worth gambling with such an important bull trout spawning stream.
  - How will this project protect and restore native fish habitat?” (Project File Exhibit BB-35)
- “Downed wood is also a critical component of riparian habitats, both within and outside the stream channel. We urge you to not salvage downed wood in formally designated Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas and less formal riparian areas (Project File Exhibit BB-34).”
- “Unit 8 is adjacent to Lion Creek that requires a temporary road. The proposal plans to deviate from INFISH 300 foot buffers and place only ~100 foot buffers on Lion Creek. The riparian buffers are necessary not only to protect the stream but they also serve as travel corridors and connectivity for wildlife. For that reason it is prudent to stay at least 300 feet from Lion Creek.” (Project File Exhibit BB-35).
- “Lion Creek is not a ‘timber basket,’ it is one of the most ecologically sensitive watersheds in the Swan Valley. Priority should be given to watershed values, including game and non-game wildlife species, bull trout, cutthroat trout, and water quality.” (Project File Exhibit BB-36)

Issue Indicator: Acres of treatment within RHCAs.

**Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment  
Decision Notice and FONSI**

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## **VI. Brief Description of Alternatives**

This section describes and compares the alternatives considered by the Forest Service for the Mid Swan Project. The ID Team grouped the alternatives into two categories: 1) Alternatives Considered in Detail and 2) Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study.

### **1. Alternatives Considered in Detail**

The EA considered the Proposed Action (Alternative B) and two alternatives in detail, Alternatives C and D. Alternative A, the No Action Alternative required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), served as a baseline to compare action alternatives.

#### **Alternative A - No Action**

This alternative represents the existing condition in the Mid Swan Salvage Blowdown Project Area. Under this alternative, none of the activities proposed for the Mid Swan Project would occur. No salvage activities, temporary road and access management, and planting activities to aid in vegetation recovery, or other activities associated with the proposed action would occur at this time. Ongoing activities such as recreation, public firewood gathering, fire suppression, and normal road maintenance would continue. Activities identified in Chapter 3 as current and foreseeable actions would occur.

#### **Alternative B - Proposed Action**

**Intent:** Alternative B was developed to respond to the Purpose and Need for the Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Project.

The Proposed Action focuses on salvaging blown down trees resulting from the wind events of the summer of 2008 using commercial vegetation treatments. Features associated with this alternative include the following:

- Treatments that would salvage blown down trees on a total of about **690 acres**.
- Fuels Treatment on **322 acres** within the Wildland Urban Interface.
- Fuels Treatment on **358 acres** outside of the Wildland Urban Interface.
- Road maintenance to meet BMP standards on approximately **16.8 miles** of haul roads as required for the Timber Sale Contract.
- An estimated **0.3 miles** of temporary road construction to access harvest units as shown in Table 2-3 below.
- Use of an estimated **1.0 mile** of historic road templates.
- Use of an estimated **0.5 miles** of skid trails.

#### **Alternative C**

**Intent:** Alternative C was developed to respond to Issue #1, Blowdown Removal in Old Growth Stands.

Under this alternative, no treatments would be proposed in old growth forest habitat. This alternative was developed based upon concerns from the public that treatments within old growth stands could destroy old growth attributes and adversely impact wildlife species associated with old growth communities. Features associated with this alternative include the following:

- Treatments would salvage blown down trees on a total of about **622 acres**.
- No treatment in stands possessing old growth attributes. **Units 2, 5, 13, and 18**, totaling **61 acres** are dropped from this alternative.
- A portion of **Unit 8**, totaling **7 acres**, was dropped due to additional field validation indicating a non-viable salvage unit.

## Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and FONSI

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- Fuels Treatment on **298 acres** within the Wildland Urban Interface.
- Fuels Treatment on **324 acres** outside of the Wildland Urban Interface.
- Road maintenance to meet BMP standards on approximately **15.3 miles** of haul roads as required for the Timber Sale Contract.
- No temporary road construction is needed to access harvest units.
- Use of an estimated **0.5 miles** of historic templates to access **Units 3 and 8**.
- Approximately **0.5 miles** of skid trails to access **Units 16 and 19**.

Alternative C salvage harvest and associated activities are summarized in the tables below.

### Alternative D

**Intent:** Alternative D was developed to respond to Issue #2, Blowdown Removal within RHCAs.

This alternative was developed to address the concern about the removal of blowdown within RHCAs. Features associated with this alternative include the following:

- **Units 24 and 25** are dropped, totaling **3 acres**, as they are located within RHCAs.
- **Units 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 14, 16, 18, 23, and 26** are modified, removing portions of these units from the RHCAs resulting in **51 acres** less of blowdown removal.
- Treatments would salvage blowdown trees on a total of about **636 acres**.
- Fuels Treatment on **321 acres** within the Wildland Urban Interface.
- Fuels Treatment on **315 acres** outside of the Wildland Urban Interface.
- Road maintenance to meet BMP standards on approximately **16.2 miles** of haul roads as required for the Timber Sale Contract.
- Approximately **0.1 miles** of temporary road construction would be needed to access harvest units.
- Approximately **1.0 mile** of use of historic templates would be needed to access harvest units.
- Approximately **0.5 miles** of skid trails would be needed to access harvest units.

## 2. Alternatives Considered but Eliminated in Detailed Study

This section discusses an additional alternative that was considered, but not given detailed study. This alternative was initially proposed to address issues identified during the public scoping and ID Team process, but was not considered further for the reasons explained in the following narrative.

**Maximize Salvage Opportunities:** Under this alternative, additional salvage activities were considered in Units 7 and 12. Salvage activities in Unit 7 were deferred because the area exhibited moist soils with a high water table and potential orchid habitat. Unit 12 was deferred as the unit is located within a floodplain, has potential orchid habitat, provides Canada lynx habitat, and is known for frequent use by grizzly bears. It was felt that the issues associated with these units could not be addressed with Design Criteria to protect the resources and retain a viable salvage unit. Unit 25 was significantly reduced in size to avoid the effects of removing blowdown in wet areas and addressing the presence of water howellia, cedar, and spruce in the stand.

Similarly, other stands in the area were considered for blowdown salvage. Section 22 also received considerable tree damage from the wind events of June and July 2008. These areas of blowdown trees in Section 22 are located within active sale units and removal of the material would be accomplished through existing timber sale contracts. For these reasons, an alternative to treat more extensively and intensively within the blowdown areas was not considered in detail.

# Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and FONSI

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## VII. Decision

As the Responsible Official for the Flathead National Forest, I have selected a combination of Alternatives B, C, and D as my Selected Alternative. My decision incorporates the changes listed below. Appendix 1 of this DN contains a detailed description of the features of the Selected Alternative.

The Selected Alternative defers treatment in four units (Units 2, 5, 13, and 18) and decreases the size of three harvest units (Units 4, 6, and 8). These changes are based on resource concerns displayed in the EA and in response to public comments (See Appendix 5 for comments received on the EA and our agency's responses to those comments). Units deferred will need to undergo future site-specific analysis and decision.

The **Selected Alternative** does the following:

- **Unit 2** – Defers treatment of this unit based on field surveys determining that this stand meets the criteria for old growth. No activities will occur in old growth stands with this Mid Swan Project Decision. Deferment of this stand will result in no potential displacement of old growth associated wildlife species, no reduction of snags and down woody debris resulting from the wind event, and will not result in any ground disturbance in old growth forest stands.
- **Unit 5** – Defers treatment of this unit based on field surveys determining that this stand meets the criteria for old growth. Deferment of this stand will result in those actions listed above for Unit 2.
- **Unit 13** – Defers treatment of this unit based on field surveys determining that this stand meets the criteria for old growth. Deferment of this stand will result in those actions listed above for Unit 2.
- **Unit 18** – Defers treatment of this unit based on field surveys determining that this stand meets the criteria for old growth. Deferment of this stand will result in no potential displacement of old growth associated wildlife species, no reduction of snags and down woody debris resulting from the wind event, not result in any ground disturbance, and not construct new temporary road in old growth forest stands.
- **Units 4, 6, and 8** – Defers treatment in portions of these units located within the floodplain of Lion Creek. The effects analysis in the EA (pages 3-152 through 3-157) concluded that if the stream wanders across the floodplain into these units, it could have a small-localized impact to bull trout. Though the likelihood of impact to this important bull trout stream is small, the relative importance of the bull trout habitat provided by this stream is high. For this reason, I have decided to defer any salvage in the Lion Creek floodplain in Units 4, 6, and 8. I do not think the economic recovery of blowdown in these areas outweighs the potential impact to bull trout. Outside of the floodplain for Lion Creek, limited salvage harvest is allowed where the potential for any adverse affects is extremely limited. The analysis in the EA and in the Biological Evaluation (BE) determined salvage harvest outside of the floodplain would have no impact to native fish. The Biological Assessment (BA) found that the proposed action is not likely to adversely affect bull trout. The US Fish and Wildlife Service concurred with this determination. More details on the rationale to defer treatment on these portions of Units 4, 6, and 8 is presented below.

## VIII. Rationale for the Decision

In finalizing the Selected Alternative, I have determined that my decision is consistent with all laws, regulations, and agency policy. I have considered the potential cumulative effects and reasonably foreseeable activities. I believe my decision provides the best balance of management activities to respond to the Purpose and Need, issues, and public comments while complying with all applicable laws and regulations. My decision seeks to balance public interests and ecological desired conditions. These interests include managing forest vegetation through recovery of merchantable products that provide

## **Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and FONSI**

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economic opportunities to local economies and reducing the fuels buildup adjacent to public and private lands. While meeting these interests, the decision provides for a diverse and healthy ecosystem, meeting threatened, endangered, sensitive plant and animal habitat needs, and minimizing water quality effects to streams, riparian areas, and wetlands.

My criteria for making a decision on this project was based on:

- Achievement of the project's Purpose and Need,
- Relationship to environmental and social issues and public comments received.

### **Meeting the Purpose and Need**

The Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Project Area was selected for this project because of the condition of the area as a result of two stand altering, large scale wind events which occurred during June 2008 (in the vicinity of Goat Creek) and on July 4, 2008 (in the vicinity of Piper and Lion Creek Drainages). Salvage of blowdown trees present an opportunity to recover merchantable timber from areas affected by wind damage. Such harvest follows Forest Plan guidance for management areas within the suitable timber base where wind damage has occurred. Such harvest also serves to reduce forest fuels buildup adjacent to public and private lands. Such treatments can improve the general health, resiliency, and sustainability of forest stands, and reduce the risk of insect epidemics and disease infestations within the project area. Salvage harvest also presents an opportunity to contribute to short-term forest products for the local timber industry and provide for long-term sustainability of timber on NFS lands.

Recovery of merchantable timber from areas affected by wind damage will occur within the suitable timber base under the Flathead Forest Plan within Management Areas (MA) 5 and 9. These management areas emphasize timber management in concert with providing cover and forage winter habitat areas for white-tailed deer and maintaining a natural appearing landscape along Highway 83. Given that wind-damaged trees are primarily large diameter dominant and co-dominant trees, sawlog material will be the primary product removed. Based on the variability of wind damage areas, each acre offers a unique quantity of salvageable material.

Because of the wind events, fuel loadings have increased in the blowdown areas. The down timber is suspended in some cases where it significantly adds to existing local fuels. Current estimates of fuel loadings range between 9 tons per acre in sparse blowdown to 66 tons per acre in heavy blowdown areas. There are also isolated concentrations that have been estimated by District Fuel Personnel to be 80 to 100 tons per acre. Lightning strikes in the blowdown areas may be more successful in initiating wildlife fires than in past conditions. Fire intensities in these heavy fuels can be considerably higher than in previous surface fuels and could exceed the capabilities of hand crews. Resistance to control of fires in blowdown fuels is very high due to the amount of handwork required to separate the abundance of large fuels. The presence of blowdown in any fuel horizon adds complexity to management and to fire suppression scenarios. I believe that reducing these fuel conditions in specific areas will protect human and resource values in the event of a future wildfire on NFS lands within and near the project area.

Blowdown events can create ideal conditions for rapid bark beetle population growth and the potential for subsequent outbreaks of certain bark beetle species. Mountain pine beetle was observed in numerous stands within the analysis area. Douglas-fir beetle was observed in wind-damaged trees in many of the salvage units. Surveys conducted within salvage units identified pine engraver infesting wind-damaged ponderosa pine. Observations of bark beetle infested wind damaged trees and the presence of suitable breeding environments (windthrown and bent trees and logs), place affected stands at risk to bark beetle mortality. Suitable conditions include phloem moist enough to create an ideal breeding environment. Although observations of beetle numbers are relatively low, they have been observed in 65 percent of proposed salvage areas, with attractive breeding conditions existing in all wind-damaged areas, which could remain viable for at least another season.

Salvage operations are expected to begin in early summer 2009. It is hoped that this timely removal of downed material will be accomplished before beetle emergence. In a report documenting a Field Visit by the Regional Entomologist, it was suggested that if salvage occurred in this time period, threats from bark beetles would be reduced and even undetected beetle populations should be of little concern.

# Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment

## Decision Notice and FONSI

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I believe that the Selected Alternative authorizing removal of wind-damaged trees will generally improve the health, resiliency, and sustainability of forest vegetative communities, and will reduce the risk of bark beetle mortality in residual and adjacent stands within the project area.

Relative to the Purpose and Need to provide wood products to local economies, the Selected Alternative makes reasonable use of such products from the suitable timber base. In weighing the various combinations of alternatives, the Selected Alternative defers salvage removal within old growth stands and in the floodplain of Lion Creek to meet resource concerns. Though the Selected Alternative does not provide as much wood products as Alternative B, it does allow for the use of a large portion of the blowdown while balancing ecological values provided by the down wood in the floodplain of Lion Creek and within old growth stands.

### Comparison of Alternatives

I did not select the **No Action Alternative** because this alternative does not address the concern of the recovering merchantable timber from suitable timberlands and providing wood products to local economies. The No Action Alternative will not provide the opportunity for sawlog material to be brought to the market and not be responsive to the needs of the local economy.

No action would mean bark beetle mortality would continue in a variety of tree species due to the presence of beetles. It is possible that this alternative would have effects on the risk of additional disturbances within proposed salvage areas. Both fine and coarse fuel loadings in wind-damaged areas have increased. Increases in fuel loadings are consistent with variability of wind damage. Small and large down woody fuels contribute to fire hazard and resistance to control. Large fuels can contribute to the development of large fires and high severity fires. Research has shown that torching, crowning, and spotting are also greater where large woody fuels have accumulated under a forest canopy. As time goes on and large woody material begins to decay and break up, its contribution to fire hazard is greater due to production of firebrands and receptivity to ignition. This increase in fuel loading and potential fire severity, place forest stands at some degree of increased risk. Based on the environmental analysis, the long-term effect of selection of the No Action Alternative would likely yield greater adverse social and environmental affects than would the Selected Alternative.

I did not select **Alternatives B, C, or D** in their entirety, but rather selected a combination of portions of each alternative to be incorporated into the Selected Alternative. Units 1, 3, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, and 25 from Alternative B will be retained in the Selected Alternative. These units will recover merchantable wind-damaged timber from the suitable timber base, reduce fuels, and improve forest health without causing a significant offsetting impacts.

In **Alternative C**, Units 2, 5, 13, and 18 were deferred due to the resource issues of removing blowdown trees in old growth stands. I have decided these four units will be deferred in the Selected Alternative due to resource impacts associated with the temporary displacement of old growth habitat associated wildlife species and ground disturbance in old growth stands. Though the original Design Criteria for these units included retention of a significant portion of the blowdown within old growth units, I decided that the overall purpose and need of the project could still be met without harvest within these units. The bulk of the large standing trees in these units are species (larch and ponderosa pine) that are not normally highly susceptible to insect mortality. Though harvest in Unit 13 is deferred, this decision will authorize placement of funnel traps to target potential build-up in the down wood of insects most likely to target Douglas-fir and spruce, which remain in this stand. With treatments in other nearby units to reduce fuel loading from the windthrown trees, I felt that the retention of the down woody debris within these stands, as well as the avoidance of ground disturbance through harvest, struck a reasoned balance. This decision will maintain the overall integrity of these old growth stands, while, in these specific circumstances, not unduly leading to significantly adverse fuel/fire or insect problems.

In **Alternative D**, the floodplain areas of Lion Creek located within Units 4, 6, and 8 were deferred from salvage harvest. Those portions of units within the floodplain of Lion Creek were deferred, primarily as additional Design Criteria to insure that, in the long term, Lion Creek would continue to provide quality habitat for bull trout, even if unknown future events were to cause the creek to move within its floodplain.

# Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and FONSI

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Several comments were received during the scoping of the project, which asked that we strongly consider the bull trout values of Lion Creek in weighing options for salvage. In balancing these considerations, I have decided to defer these portions of Units 4, 6, and 8 from the Selected Alternative.

Where unit boundaries were not within the floodplain of Lion Creek, some degree of harvest is allowed within RHCA's in Units 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, 14, and 23. This only occurs where stream function will not be impaired and where, due to terrain features, there is no chance of sediment introduction into the streams. Units 24 and 25 are very small units adjacent to the Swan River at the Piper Creek road crossing. The removal of blowdown at these sites will be limited to that which will clear down trees near the boat launch site on the east side of the bridge (Unit 24) and will remove down trees on the east side of the river that were likely to move downstream into the bridge (Unit 25).

I believe the **Selected Alternative**, as described in this decision, best meets the Purpose and Need for the Mid Swan Salvage Project, while also being responsive to resource issues and public input identified through the analysis process. The Selected Alternative will create sustainable forest conditions by recovering merchantable timber from wind-damaged areas, reducing forest fuel conditions, and reducing the risk of insect epidemics within the project area. In addition to creating sustainable forest conditions, I believe my decision will reduce potential fire intensities and improve the opportunity for fire suppression, and lessen the potential for fires on Federal land to ignite private structures. The estimated 4.7 million board feet of timber resulting from these management activities will provide economic opportunities to the local communities.

As summarized in the following table, the **Selected Alternative** is responsive to the Purpose and Need statements for the Mid Swan Blowdown Project.

**TABLE 1  
COMPARISON OF ALTERNATIVES – HOW THEY RESPOND TO THE PURPOSE AND NEED**

Purpose and Need Statement	Indicator	Alt. A	Alt. B	Alt. C	Alt. D	Selected Alt.
Recover merchantable timber from areas affected by wind damage	Acres Treated	0	690	622	636	605
Provide wood products for local economies	MMBF*	0	5.2	4.9	4.8	4.7

\*As stated in the EA salvage volume estimates are based on preliminary cruise data collected for this project and represented the best available information at the time. The sample error for these estimates is approximately 50 percent. Subsequent preliminary sale preparation information suggests that these estimates are higher than the volume that will be offered in any timber sale contract associated with this project. A more detailed volume determination and cruise will be conducted prior to implementation that will meet all Forest Service standards.

## Consideration of the Issues and Public Comments

In addition to the Purpose and Need, I also considered how well each alternative responds to the issues: blowdown removal in old growth areas and blowdown removal in RHCAs. The following section summarizes how I believe my decision responds to the issues identified in the EA and how it responds to more comments and concerns I received on the project. Individual comments received on other specific issues on the project are addressed in the Response to Comments Received on the Environmental Assessment in Appendix 5 of this Decision.

### Blowdown Removal in Old Growth Areas

One commenter on the EA expressed concern with the removal of blowdown trees within old growth forest stands. They feel old growth forest habitat is scarce and fragmented in the project area so every effort should be made not to impact existing old-growth habitat, to allow stands to progress towards old-growth forest, both in age as well as attributes, and to ensure that stands are connected.

## **Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and FONSI**

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As stated above, I have decided to defer blowdown removal in old growth Units 2, 5, 13, and 18 in response to this concern. The decision to do so was not an easy one. Leaving the blowdown unaltered in these units will maintain these old growth stands as they are. This means that the stands will have a slightly increased risk of impact due to fire and insects. However, this risk is balanced by the condition of the surrounding stands, where fuel loadings and insect risk will be reduced. To some extent, the species mix of the bulk of the remaining standing trees also helps to mitigate for future fire and insect effects. The majority of the large standing trees are larch and ponderosa pine, which are relatively resilient to ground fire and to most insects. In these particular stands, large amounts of ladder fuels (which can lead to crown fire susceptibility) have not yet developed. The overall conditions, both within these stands and in the surrounding forest, is such that I believe that the stands are likely to maintain their long-term character as old growth stands without additional treatment.

Snags and coarse woody debris will be retained within salvage units as described in the Design Criteria (Appendix 2) of this document. Numbers of snags per acre and amount and kind of coarse woody debris material specified in these Design Criteria and will meet or exceed standards in the Forest Plan. These criteria were developed by the Project Silviculturist and Wildlife Biologist to balance habitat needs, ecological contributions, and fire hazard. I recognize that the wind events that occurred in the project area are natural disturbance processes, which are responsible for contributing a pulse of snags and coarse woody debris into the system. Design Criteria specified in this blowdown situation will ensure that portions of this chance wind event are retained as ecological legacies, while still allowing for utilization of some of the blowdown that has occurred within the Forest's suitable timber base.

### **Blowdown Removal in RHCAs**

One commentor expressed concern with blowdown removal within Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCAs). They feel that we should not decrease the INFISH stream buffers (RHCAs) in order to salvage log. They feel we should leave the down wood in the riparian areas where they feel it provides multiple benefits to both aquatic and terrestrial wildlife. The RHCAs are defined as 300 feet from a fish-bearing stream, or to the outer edge of a 100-year floodplain, or to the outer edge of riparian vegetation, or to the distance of two-site potential trees, whichever is greater.

As displayed in the EA, salvage activities are not proposed within the RHCAs of Goat Creek and Piper Creeks. Salvage activities are proposed in some portions of the RHCAs of the Swan River and Lion Creek as further described below. No bull trout spawning takes place in the Swan River. Lion Creek is a key bull trout spawning and rearing stream and considered an INFISH priority watershed.

Under this decision, no harvest will be authorized within the floodplain of Lion Creek. This will reduce the size of Units 4, 6, and 8, which had been designed under Alternatives B and C to allow some harvest if blowdown trees were located more than one site potential tree length (about 100 to 125 feet) from the stream banks.

Some portions of Units 4, 6, and 8 are in the floodplain beyond the 100 to 125-foot site potential tree length. The limited potential for impact under that prescription was in the portions of Units 4, 6, and 8 that are within Lion Creek's floodplain (pages 3-152 through 3-157). The potential for limited impact relates to the potential for the stream to, at some future date migrate across the floodplain and scour new channels beyond the 100 to 125-foot buffer. In such a case, the stream movement could have small-localized impacts to bull trout habitat. For these reasons, I have decided to defer salvage removal from the floodplain areas in Units 4, 6, and 8.

Salvage harvest will be allowed in other portions of the RHCA adjacent to Lion Creek that are out of the floodplain and where no chance of interference exists with the future movement of Lion Creek and where terrain limits the potential for sediment introduction into the creek. These situations occur primarily where the creek has a relatively confined channel and the minimum 300-foot RHCA extends beyond the floodplain, normally onto small flats well above the stream and floodplain. When such situations occur more than one site potential tree distance from the stream, salvage harvest will be allowed. As discussed in the EA, in such situations the removal of down wood will have no effect on future stream migration and will not cause sediment to enter the stream. This prescription will apply to Units 3, 9, 10, and 14.

## Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and FONSI

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Along the Swan River, blowdown will be removed within the RHCA in Units 23, 24, and 25. Unit 23 is in a situation where the portion of the unit within the RHCA is well removed from the floodplain on a flat above the river, but within 300 feet of the river. Units 24 and 25 are very small units adjacent to the Swan River at the Piper Creek road/bridge crossing. The removal of blowdown at these sites will be limited to that which will clear down trees on top of and adjacent to the boat launch site on the east side of the bridge (Unit 24) and will utilize down trees on the east side of the river, which were likely to move downstream into the bridge (Unit 25).

The Selected Alternative balances the features of Alternative D and Alternative B in allowing some blowdown removal in select portions of the RHCA where environmental affects of such removal were benign, while further protecting the floodplain area of Lion Creek.

**TABLE 2  
COMPARISON OF ALTERNATIVES – HOW THEY RESPOND TO THE KEY ISSUES**

Issue	Indicator	Alt. A	Alt. B	Alt. C	Alt. D	Selected Alt.
Blowdown removal in Old Growth Areas	Acres of removal in old growth areas	0	59	0	54	0
Blowdown removal in RHCAs	Acres of removal in RHCAs	0	54	31	0	25

### Summary

The Selected Alternative (a combination of Alternatives B, C and D) best meets Forest Plan direction while meeting the Purpose and Need for action. At the same time, it responds to public comments and desires and implements direction from the Forest Plan. It seeks to balance the site-specific stand conditions of salvageable merchantable timber that varies from one treatment unit to the next with the overall wildlife, fisheries, and other values that add to the complexity and value of the project area.

Current fuels and forest health conditions in the Mid Swan Project Area can move towards historical conditions by applying appropriate management actions. The most cost efficient method of meeting the Purpose and Need objectives involves the salvage of merchantable timber. A significant amount of mechanical treatments will occur within the WUI, helping to reduce the risk of fire adjacent to private property. The Timber Sales are expected to be sold in **2009**. It is hoped that timber harvest would be completed within one season to maximize the value after the sale date, but economic conditions, timing of the offer, and other factors may lead to the project requiring 1 to 2 more years for harvest to be completed. Implementation of roadwork associated with timber sales should begin once the project is awarded. Reforestation activities will be completed no more than 5 years after logging is completed. Management activities will be completed by 2019.

## IX. Finding of No Significant Impact

In accordance with CFR 1508.13 and direction provided in the Forest Service Handbook (FSH 1909.15, Chapter 40, Section 43.1), I have determined that the management actions included in the Selected Alternative of the Mid Swan Project do not constitute a major Federal action, and that the implementation of the Decision will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Accordingly, I have determined that an EIS need not be prepared for this project. I have followed the implementing regulation for NEPA (40 CFR 1508.27) and other criteria for determining the significance of effects.

Before making my determination, I carefully reviewed and considered the following information:

- The direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of these actions as documented in the EA for the Mid Swan Project;
- The analysis documentation in the project file for the Mid Swan Project;
- Comments received during all scoping and after the EA was published for this project;

## Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and FONSI

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- Past experiences with salvage projects on the Flathead National Forest.

The ID Team and I have “screened” the management actions included in the Mid Swan Project for “significant impact.” The results of this screen are summarized on the following pages.

**Significant**, as used in NEPA, requires consideration of both context and intensity.

**Context** means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts, such as society as a whole (human, national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the Proposed Action. For instance, in the case of a site-specific action, significance would usually depend upon the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Both short-term and long-term effects are relevant (40 CFR 1508.27).

The effects of the proposed actions are limited in context. The proposed treatments encompass a limited area (**605 acres** of mechanical treatments and **65 acres** of hand treatments) and the activities are limited in duration. The project is expected to be awarded in **2009**. It is hoped that timber harvest would be completed within one season to maximize the value after the sale date, but economic conditions, timing of the offer, and other factors may lead to the project requiring 1 to 2 more years for harvest to be completed. Implementation of road work associated with timber sales should begin once the project is awarded. Reforestation activities will be completed no more than 5 years after logging is completed. Management activities will be completed by 2019. Management activities not involving timber harvest (sale layout) could begin in 2009. Effects are local in nature and are not likely to significantly affect regional or national resources.

Some of the treatment units are located adjacent to private property. As such, the forestland surrounding these private lands will be affected by this decision. The people most affected by the project will be the local residents on the adjacent lands. This action is also a continuation of fuel reduction and forest health and projects that have occurred for many years on the Flathead National Forest and elsewhere across the Northern Region and the Nation as a whole. Short-term adverse effects will be mitigated through implementation of the Standards and Guidelines in the Flathead's Forest Plan, BMPs (Appendix 4), and the Design Criteria (Appendix 2) developed specifically for this project.

The project's Design Criteria minimize and avoid adverse impacts to the extent that such impacts are almost undetectable and immeasurable, even at the local level. These Design Criteria include, but are not limited to the following:

- Protection of the soil resource;
- Protection of leave trees,
- Control of noxious weed spread,
- Protection of sensitive or threatened plant species;
- Protection of riparian habitat;
- Retention of snags and woody debris for wildlife,
- Protection of threatened, endangered, or sensitive wildlife species,
- Seasonal and operational restrictions to avoid impacts to wildlife populations and habitat;
- Reclamation of temporary roads; and
- Protection of Heritage Resources.

Within the context of the landscape as a whole, or at the stand level, the ecological consequences are not found to be significant in the short or long term.

**Intensity** refers to the severity of impact. Responsible Officials must bear in mind that more than one agency may make decisions about partial aspects of a major action. The following 10 aspects are considered in the evaluation of intensity (40 CFR 1508.27):

# Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment

## Decision Notice and FONSI

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### **1. Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the balance of effects will be beneficial.**

Both beneficial and adverse effects have been taken into consideration when making a determination of significance. While there will be beneficial effects, this action does not rely on those effects to balance adverse environmental impacts. Detailed Specialist Reports, included in the EA and project file, contain comprehensive effects analyses and the findings from these resource specific reports form the basis for my decision.

It is my determination, based on review of these analyses and consultation with Specialists that the Selected Alternative, including timber management, fuels management, and road management activities will not have a significant impact on the environment. All effects will be small or short-lived. None is deemed irreversible or irretrievable and do not set in motion further effects. The EA, Specialist Reports, Biological Assessments (BA), and Biological Evaluations (BE) evaluated all potential direct, indirect, and cumulative effects.

### **2. The degree to which the Selected Action affects public health or safety.**

The salvage of blowdown material and associated fuel treatments are designed to increase the efficiency of fire suppression efforts and reduce risks to firefighters, local residents, the public, structures, and natural resources. The implementation of these treatments will result in improved community safety because fuel reduction will increase the chance of suppressing a fire before it reaches private property. All burning of thinning slash and natural fuels will comply with State Air Quality Standards and be coordinated through the Montana Airshed Group. Dust from timber hauling activities will be controlled using the dust abatement requirements within the Stewardship or Timber Sale Contract provisions.

Herbicide treatments of weeds will comply with label directions and in accordance with and under decision authority of the Flathead National Forest Noxious and Invasive Weed Control EA and DN (USDA May 2001), to which the Mid Swan Project EA tiers.

Project Design Criteria were developed to address public safety concerns associated with proposed harvest and association actions (See Appendix 2). I believe that the Selected Action is not likely to have any significant impact to public health or safety.

### **3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, parklands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.**

In general, the design of the Mid Swan Project avoids such areas. Specific detail in regard to that design follows.

The Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Project Area contains botanical sites that were identified through field reconnaissance. Impacts to these sites will be avoided during project layout and under contract provisions for vegetation treatments (Design Criteria, Appendix 2).

Heritage Surveys have been completed in the Mid Swan Project Area. The results of a pre-survey file search for information on known Heritage Resources in the Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Project identified one recorded heritage property in the analysis area. Forest Archeologists recommended that a portion of the harvest unit surrounding this site be deferred from harvest activity. This area has been deferred in the Selected Alternative.

Discussions with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) also identified an historic trail that may have been existing within some of the salvage units. A field review by the Forest Archeologists found this trail did not exist within any salvage harvest units.

## Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and FONSI

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The potential for influencing undiscovered sites is mitigated by compliance with Forest Plan standards and guidelines, and through the Design Criteria (Appendix 2) included as part of the Selected Action. In the event such resources are discovered during project implementation, they will be evaluated and protected.

I believe that this action will not have a significant effect on scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

The project area includes wetlands and riparian areas, but impacts to wetlands and riparian areas will be avoided during project layout and under contract provisions for vegetation treatments (See Design Criteria, Appendix 2).

Based on this information, I conclude that the Selected Alternative will have no effects on unique resources.

#### **4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.**

Based on the limited context of the project, my review of comments received during the scoping of this project, and the analysis documented in the EA and project file, I do not find any highly controversial effects to the human environment.

I conclude that the effects of the Selected Alternative are not considered highly controversial by professionals, specialists, and scientists from associated fields of forestry, wildlife biology, soils, fisheries, and hydrology.

#### **5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.**

Based on my review of comments received during the scoping of this project, the comments received after the publication of the EA, and the analysis documented in the EA and project file, I find the possible effects on the human environment that are uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks are minimal or non-existent.

Given the nature of the trees and lesser vegetation to be removed and the large proportion to be left, the effects to the quality of the human environment are not significant. The agency has considerable experience in such projects and the consequences of such actions are well established and predictable.

A technical analysis (EA and project file) that discloses potential environmental impacts (which is supportable with use of accepted techniques, reliable data, and professional opinion) has been completed, and I believe that the impacts of implementing this decision are within the limits that avoid thresholds of concern.

#### **6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.**

The Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Project represents a site-specific project that does not set precedence for future actions or present a decision in principle about future considerations. Any proposed future project must be evaluated on its own merits and effects. The Selected Action is compatible with the Forest Plan and the capabilities of the land. I believe that this action does not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration.

## Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and FONSI

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**7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulatively significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by breaking it down into small component parts.**

Connected, cumulative, and similar actions have been considered and included in the scope of the analysis. The analysis accounts for past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions of the Forest Service, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, private timber companies, and private landowners within the project area (EA, Chapter 3 and Resource Cumulative Effects Worksheets in the project file).

Based on my review of the analysis and disclosure of effects in the EA, Specialist Reports, BAs and BEs, and other analyses in the project file, I conclude that the Mid Swan Salvage Project does not represent potential cumulative adverse impacts.

**8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.**

My decision to approve this project will not have adverse effects on, nor cause the loss or destruction of, significant scientific, cultural or historic resources.

Heritage Surveys have been completed in the Mid Swan Project Area. The results of a pre-survey file search for information on known Heritage Resources in the Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Project identified one recorded heritage property in the analysis area. This area has been deferred in the Selected Alternative.

Discussions with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) also identified an historic trail that may have been existing within some of the salvage units. A field review by the Forest Archeologists found this trail did not exist within any salvage harvest units.

The potential for influencing undiscovered sites is mitigated by compliance with Forest Plan standards and guidelines, and through the Design Criteria included as part of the Selected Action (Appendix 2). In the event such resources are discovered during project implementation, they will be evaluated and protected.

I believe that this action will not have a significant effect on scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

**9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.**

The Interagency Grizzly Bear Guidelines (IGBG 1986) establish grizzly bear management situations. As described previously, most of the project area for the Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Project is located in Management Situation 1. Management direction for these lands is: "Grizzly habitat maintenance and improvement, and grizzly-human conflict minimizations will receive the highest management priority. Management decisions will favor the needs of the grizzly bear when grizzly habitat and other land use values compete."

Management decisions and Design Criteria for this project favor, and make this project compatible with, the needs of grizzly bear recovery and conservation by:

- Strict adherence to a grizzly bear subunit rotation by major landowners (USFS, DNRC, and PCTC) that leaves every subunit in the Swan Valley inactive for a minimum of 3 years;

## Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and FONSI

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- Restriction of commercial activities in spring habitats during the spring period;
- Retention of visual screening along open roads;
- Open road density restrictions;
- The maintenance of a minimum of 40 percent cover across all ownerships in the affected subunits; and
- Linkage zone designation for grizzly bears in the affected subunits.

Further strategies to manage the lands encompassing the proposed Mid Swan Blowdown Project in a manner that favors the grizzly bear include active participation in Bear Smart Community programs, a District Bear Ranger program, and land acquisition endeavors.

No threatened or endangered species or its habitat is likely to be adversely affected by the implementation of the Selected Action. Biological Assessments for threatened and endangered species have been completed for this DN and are in the project file. These BAs and supporting documentation led to the following determinations for listed species. The USFWS concurred with these determinations (Project File Exhibits E-1, E-2, and H-1).

**TABLE 3  
THREATENED & ENDANGERED SPECIES DETERMINATIONS FOR THE  
MID SWAN SALVAGE PROJECT**

Species	Determination
Grizzly Bear	May affect – not likely to adversely affect
Gray Wolf	May affect – not likely to adversely affect
Canada Lynx	May affect – not likely to adversely affect
Bull Trout	May affect – not likely to adversely affect
Westslope Cutthroat Trout	May impact individuals or habitat but will not likely result in a trend towards federal listing or reduced viability for the population or species.
Water Howellia	May affect – not likely to adversely affect
Spalding's Catchfly	No Effect

**10. Whether the action threatens a violation of federal, state, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.**

As described in the EA (Regulatory Framework and Consistency Sections for each resource area in Chapter 3), the Selected Action is consistent with all applicable Federal, state, or local laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment, including:

- The National Forest Management Act
- The National Environmental Policy Act
- The Endangered Species Act
- The Clean Water Act and Montana State Water Quality Standards
- The Clean Air Act
- The Migratory Bird Treaty Act
- The National Historic Preservation Act
- The American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act
- American Indian Religious Freedom Act

# Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment

## Decision Notice and FONSI

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- The Environmental Justice Act
- The Healthy Forests Restoration Act

The Selected Action is consistent with Forest Plan direction.

I have concluded that the Selected Action does not violate any Federal, state or local laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

## X. Findings Required by Law, Regulation, and Agency Policy

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

### A. The National Forest Management Act (NFMA)

The NFMA and accompanying regulations require that several specific findings be documented at the project level. These are:

#### Consistency with the Forest Plan

The Forest Plan establishes management direction for the Flathead National Forest. This management direction is achieved through the establishment of Forest-wide goals and objectives, standards, and guidelines. Additional goals and accompanying standards and guidelines have been established for specific MAs across the forest. Project implementation consistent with this direction is the process in which desired conditions described by the Forest Plan are achieved. The NFMA requires that all project-level resource plans, such as this DN, are to be consistent with the Forest Plan (16 USC 1604 (i)). The EA displays the Forest Plan and MA goals and objectives and the standards and guidelines applicable to the Mid Swan Project (EA, Chapters 1, 2, and 3). The alternative development process is detailed in Chapter 2 of the EA and in the project file, while the management goals and the environmental consequences of the alternatives in relation to the Forest Plan standards and guidelines are displayed in Chapter 3 of the EA. The activities authorized in the Selected Alternative are consistent with Forest-wide goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines, and specific MA goals and standards.

#### Suitability for Timber Production

The NFMA directs that no timber harvesting shall occur on lands classified as not suited for timber production pursuant to 36 CFR 219.14(a) except for salvage sales, sales necessary to protect multiple use values, or activities that meet other resource objectives on such lands if the Forest Plan establishes that such actions are appropriate [36 CFR 219.27(c)(1)].

Stands proposed for harvest treatment in the Mid Swan Project Area were examined for suitability in accordance with 36 CFR 219.14 by a Certified Silviculturist. Inclusions of non-suitable land were identified within stands proposed for harvest (such as wet areas), and no treatment will occur in these areas. I believe that the remaining portions of these stands are suitable for timber production based on the following:

- Meet the definition of forestland as described in 36 CFR 210.3.
- Technological feasibility exists to ensure soil productivity and watershed protection. All sites considered for treatment will use established harvesting and site preparation methods. Resource protection standards in the Forest Plan, Project Design Criteria (Appendix 2) and applicable BMPs (Appendix 4) will be sufficient to protect soil and water resource values.

## Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and FONSI

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- None of the stands considered for harvest have been withdrawn from timber production as specified in 36 CFR 219.14(4).
- There is reasonable assurance that all lands can be restocked within 5 years of final harvest.

### Clearcutting and Even-aged Management

When timber is to be harvested using an even-aged management system, a determination that the system is appropriate to meet the objectives and requirements of the Forest Plan must be made. Where clearcutting is to be used, it must be determined to be the optimum harvest method [16 USC 1604(g)(3)(F)(i)].

**Determination that, where used, clearcutting is the optimum method:** Clearcutting is not planned under the Selected Alternative.

**Determination that even-aged management system is appropriate to meet the objectives and requirements of the Forest Plan:** Silvicultural site-specific prescriptions for the Mid Swan Project have been prepared by a Certified Silviculturist and reviewed by the ID Team Members. Target stand conditions were developed based on management objectives and site characteristics. The prescriptions considered existing stand conditions, the target stands, and resource constraints in determining the biological and technological feasibility of all silvicultural systems and their appropriateness for the site. Even-aged treatments are not planned for the Mid Swan Project.

After reviewing the silvicultural information for the Mid Swan Project, along with the site-specific management objectives developed from Forest Plan direction, I have determined that the management practices described in the Vegetation Section of the EA and supporting documents (Project File Exhibits G1, G-3 through G-8) are appropriate methods to achieve the multiple resource objectives on the sites selected for salvage harvest.

### Vegetative Manipulation

I have determined that the management practices in the Mid Swan Project shall:

**Be best suited to the multiple-use goals stated in the Forest Plan for the area.** These goals are stated in the EA within Chapters 1 and 3. Based upon review of pertinent information from the EA, ID Team Field Review, the project file, and the comments I received, I have determined that the Selected Alternative, compared to the No Action and other action alternatives, is best suited to meet these goals. All proposed treatments comply with Forest Plan direction and meet the multiple-use goals established for the area. The vegetation treatments address the Purpose and Need for action.

**Assure that the technology and knowledge exist to adequately restock the lands within 5 years after final harvest (16 USC 1604(g)(E)(ii)).** An estimated **65 acres** will be planted in Salvage Treatment Units. Previous regeneration harvests in this area have been successfully stocked within 5 years. Regional reforestation indices also support that reforestation techniques have been successful.

**Management prescriptions shall not be chosen primarily because they would give the greatest dollar return or the greatest output of timber.** My decision to implement the Mid Swan Project is based on a variety of reasons discussed elsewhere in this DN. Although timber salvage associated with this project will generate revenue, interdisciplinary resources were considered in the development of this project.

**Management prescriptions shall consider the effects on residual trees and adjacent stands.** In making my decision, I did consider the effects on residual trees and adjacent stands as discussed in the EA on pages 3-52 through 3-63. I find the selected stand treatment methods

## Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and FONSI

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and the Design Criteria as listed in Appendix 2 of this decision document are adequate to protect reserve trees and adjacent stands.

**Management prescriptions shall avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and ensure conservation of soil and water resources.** The Selected Alternative will avoid impairment of site productivity. This determination is supported by the disclosures in the EA on pages 3-9 through 3-24 and 3-121 through 3-134, the application of Design Criteria (Appendix 2) and the application of BMPs (Appendix 4) to prevent the loss of soil. Four salvage units will be monitored to see if proposed activities exceed the Region One Soil Quality Standards. If after implementing the Selected Alternative activities, there is 15 percent or more detrimental disturbance, then restoration activities described in the Design Criteria, Appendix 2, will occur to move the units back towards improved condition.

**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 will achieve the desired forest vegetation conditions described in the EA, Chapter 3 (Vegetation Section) and the Silviculturist Report (Project File Exhibit G-1). Desired conditions for other natural resources are described in the Forest Plan and in the Upper Swan Valley Landscape Assessment (Project File Exhibit R-2). After reviewing the social and environmental effects of the alternatives (EA, Chapter 3), 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, and aesthetic values.

**Management prescriptions shall be practical in terms of transportation and harvesting requirements, and total cost of preparing, logging, and administration. The Selected Alternative is a practical selection.** 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. Implementation of the project will not require significant investments in roads, since a road system is already in place. 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 EA on pages 3-275 through 3-282 along with its supporting documentation 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 [16 USC 1608(c)].

Management actions associated with the Mid Swan Project do not include the construction of specified permanent roads. An estimated **0.5 miles** of use of historic road templates and, **0.5 miles** of skid trails will be constructed and reclaimed after their use (See Design Criteria, Appendix 2) to access treatment units. I believe that we have met the requirements of 16 USC 1608 (c).

### **NFMA Diversity**

The Forest Plan contains an array of components that contribute to the wildlife/fisheries habitat capability of the Flathead National Forest. Each of these components reduces the risk to a reduction of species' diversity. Based upon consideration of these components of the Forest Plan (as amended), as well as:

- The configuration of the Selected Alternative with its Monitoring Plan and Design Criteria,

## **Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and FONSI**

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- An analysis of effects of the Mid Swan Project at the Forest and Regional Scale,
- The BAs and BEs (Project File Exhibits F-1, F-5, H-1, H-2, L-3 and L-4),

I conclude that my decision will have no impact on some species, or may impact individuals or habitat but are not likely to result in a trend toward Federal listing or reduced viability for other populations or species. In addition, my conclusion is based on a review of the project file that shows a thorough evaluation was made of relevant scientific information, a consideration of responsible opposing views, and the acknowledgement of incomplete or unavailable information, scientific uncertainty, and risk.

### **B. Clean Water Act and Montana State Water Quality Standards**

Water quality standards (Section 303(c)) established in Montana for the Clean Water Act classify all waters in the Mid Swan Area to be B-1. This means that the waters are suitable for drinking after treatment, culinary and food processing after conventional treatment; bathing, swimming, and recreation; growth and propagation of salmonid fisheries and associated aquatic life, waterfowl, and furbearers; and agricultural and industrial water supply.

The Mid Swan Project Area does not contain water quality impaired streams; however, streams in the project area are tributary to the Swan River and Swan Lake, which are on Montana's Clean Water Act Section 303(4) list of impaired waters. A Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) and Water Quality Protection Plan for the Swan Lake River Watershed have been prepared by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality. The Mid Swan Project includes specific Design Criteria and BMPs to ensure beneficial uses are protected.

Upon review of the Mid Swan Project EA and the project file, I find that activities associated with the Selected Alternative will comply with the Clean Water Act and Montana State Water Quality Standards. My decision includes project Design Criteria (Appendix 2) and BMPs (Appendix 4) to protect the water resource and achieve water quality standards.

### **C. Clean Air Act**

After reviewing Chapter 3 of the EA, I find that the activities in the Selected Alternative will be coordinated to meet the requirements of the State Implementation Plans, Smoke Management Plan, and Federal Air Quality requirements.

### **D. 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 the Selected Alternative. 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 a harvest operation had begun. This project complies with the Region One programmatic agreement (1995) with the State Historic Preservation Office and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation.

### **E. Government-to-Government Relations**

The Forest Service consulted with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes during the analysis process. The intent of this consultation has been to remain informed about the Tribal concerns regarding the American Indian Religious Freedom Act and other tribal issues. In addition, the Salish (Flathead), Kootenai and Upper Pend d'Oreilles reserved rights under the Hellgate Treaty of 1855 (July 16, 1855). These rights include the "right of taking fish at all usual and accustomed places, in common with the

## **Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and FONSI**

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citizens of the Territory, and of erecting temporary buildings for curing; together with the privilege of hunting, gathering roots and berries, and pasturing their horses and cattle upon open and unclaimed land." The Federal government has trust responsibilities to Tribes under a government-to-government relationship to insure that the Tribes reserved rights are protected. Consultation with the tribes through the project planning helps insure that these trust responsibilities are met.

### **F. 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 BAs for wildlife, plants, and fish for the Mid Swan Project (Project File Exhibits F-1, H-1, and L-3), I find the Decision meets the requirements of the ESA. The USFWS concurred with determinations as described above on page 17.

### **G. Administration of the Forest Development Transportation System – Roads Policy – 36 CFR Part 212 et al. (Published in the Federal Register on January 12, 2001)**

This project does not include any system road construction on public lands. I find that the Selected Alternative complies with the terms of this new rule and policy.

### **H. Migratory Bird Act**

On January 10, 2001, President Clinton signed an Executive Order outlining responsibilities of Federal agencies to protect migratory birds. Upon review of the information in the EA, (pages 3-247 through 3-256), I find that the Selected Alternative complies with this Executive Order.

### **I. Environmental Justice**

The action alternatives were assessed to determine whether they would disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations, in accordance with Executive Order 12898 (EA, page 3-282). No impacts to minority or low-income populations were identified during scoping or the comment period.

### **J. Compliance with Other Laws, Regulations, and Policies**

Compliance with other laws, regulations, and policies are listed in various sections of the project file, the Forest Plan, and the EA (primarily in the "Regulatory Framework and Consistency" discussions at the end of the resource sections of Chapter 3.

## **XI. Appeal Provisions and Implementation**

Copies of the Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage EA are available for review at the Swan Lake Ranger Station in Bigfork, Montana, and at the Forest Supervisor's Office in Kalispell, Montana. The supporting project file is available for review at the Swan Lake Ranger Station, 200 Ranger Station Road, Bigfork, MT 59911.

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.

## **Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and FONSI**

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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: 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.**

Electronic appeals must be submitted to:

**[appeals-northern-regional-office@fs.fed.us](mailto: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, 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 Steve Brady, District Ranger at (406-837-7500) or Sue Tebay, Assistant Project Leader at (406-837-7521).

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**CATHY BARBOULETOS**  
Forest Supervisor

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**Date**