

CHAPTER 1

PURPOSE AND NEED

I. INTRODUCTION

Organization of this Environmental Assessment (EA)

The Forest Service has prepared this Environmental Assessment (EA) in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations. This EA discloses the direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental impacts that would potentially result from the proposed action (Alternative 2) and the other alternatives.

The document is organized into three chapters and supporting information:

Chapter 1 outlines the project area, the purpose of and need for the proposed project, how the *Red Whale Project* relates to the Forest Plan and the scope of the proposed action and analysis.

Chapter 2 presents detailed descriptions of the *proposed action* (the Forest Service initial proposal) and public involvement, identifies significant issues and describes alternatives to the proposal (including taking no action). The alternatives were developed to address or resolve environmental issues related to the proposal that were identified through public and agency comment on the proposed action.

Chapter 3 describes the natural and human environments potentially affected by the proposed action and alternatives, and discloses what potential effects are anticipated.

Following Chapter 3 is an appendix on Best Management Practices; a list of preparers of the EA; a list of agencies, organizations, and persons involved in public scoping; a list of literature cited; and a glossary of terms.

The EA is supported by information in the project file. It includes field investigations and notes, public involvement information, and other documents used for developing alternatives and background for the resource specialist's analysis. These records are available for public review.

Copies of this EA are available from the Flathead National Forest Supervisor's Office (1935 3rd Avenue East, Kalispell, MT 59901), and at the Hungry Horse Ranger Station (8975 Hwy 2 East, P.O. Box 190340, Hungry Horse, MT 59919). Copies may also be requested by calling (406) 758-5200, or (406) 387-3800. The project file is located at the Hungry Horse Ranger District Office in Hungry Horse.

II. PROJECT AREA

The Red Whale Project area is located in Flathead County and is approximately 25 air miles north of Columbia Falls, Montana (refer to Map1-1). Major drainages included in this area are Tepee Creek, Whale Creek, Red Meadow Creek, Hay Creek and Moran Creek. For proposed mechanized fuel reduction treatments and prescribed burning, three grizzly bear subunits entirely contain these treatment areas: Lower Whale, Red Meadow Moose, and Hay Creek. This area is approximately 86,128 total acres with the vast majority (87%) managed by the Glacier View Ranger District (headquartered in Hungry Horse, Montana). The rest of the ownership in this area is private (9%) or state lands managed by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (4%).

For proposed road/trail access management activities, two of the three above mentioned grizzly bear subunits entirely contain these activities: Red Meadow Moose and Hay Creek Grizzly Bear Subunits.

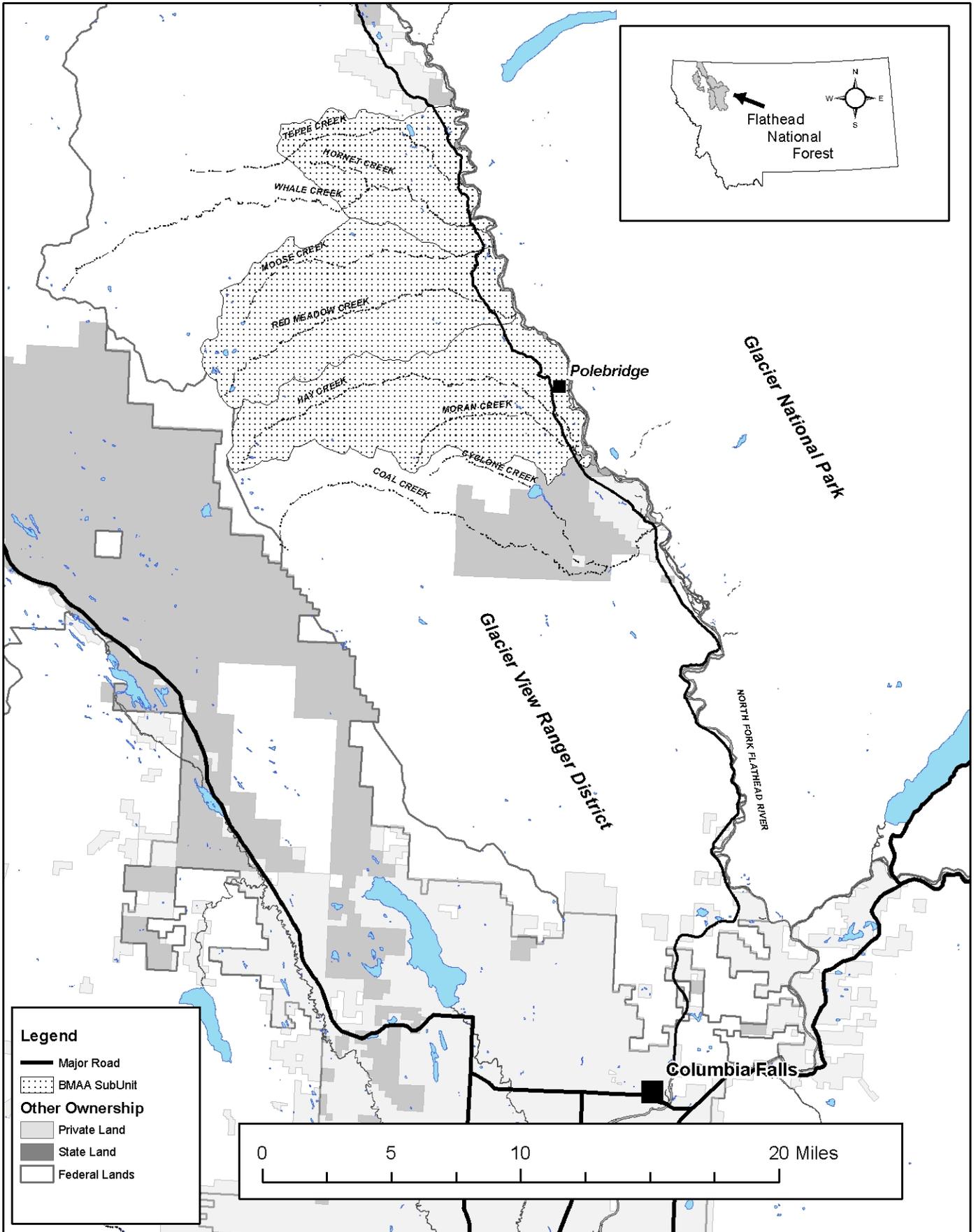
III. PURPOSE AND NEED

The need for the Red Whale Project was derived from the differences between desired landscape conditions and current conditions related to fuels, wildlife habitat and security, and State of Montana access to a parcel of state land. Several plans and other regulations provide management direction related to the goals/desired future conditions of these resources; these include the National Fire Plan, the Flathead County Community Wildfire Fuels Reduction/Mitigation Plan, the Healthy Forests Initiative, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act and the Flathead National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (also known as the Forest Plan).

Fuels

An important purpose of this project is to address wildland fuel levels within the wildland-urban interface (WUI). The National Fire Plan states that the highest priority for reducing hazardous fuels is within the WUI due to the concentration of private dwellings adjacent to National Forest System (NFS) lands and the risk of fires starting in or spreading from these forested areas. Flathead County recently identified WUIs throughout the county in their Flathead County Community Wildfire Fuels Reduction/Mitigation Plan (March 2005). This fuels reduction/mitigation plan was prompted by the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (enacted by Congress in 2003) which gave communities the ability to interact more fully with land management agencies as they developed forest management and hazardous fuel reduction projects across the landscape.

Map 1-1 Project Vicinity Map



This county plan defined the WUI within Flathead County as being the area immediately adjacent to wildland or forest fuels within 1.5 miles of residential structures, developments or private properties suitable for development or for residential use. This plan also established county-wide priorities for funding fuels mitigation projects based on fire district input. The North Fork Valley does not have a designated fire district, but concerned citizens did form a Fire Mitigation Committee to determine what can and should be done to mitigate risk from wildfire on private property. They also identified priority fuel reduction areas within the North Fork Valley including areas from Whale Creek south to Moose Creek, from Hawk Creek south to the Red Bench Fire area, and the Hay Creek area. These priority areas correspond with the Red Whale Project area.

Fire has been a dominant disturbance in the North Fork Flathead River drainage, including the Red Whale Project area. Fires between 1910 and 1926 had a major impact; existing forest vegetation communities in much of the Red Whale area were established following these events. Some of these communities include 70 to 90 year-old dense lodgepole pine stands, while other stand conditions include more mixed species such as larch, lodgepole pine, and some Douglas-fir, spruce and subalpine fir. The density of these mixed stands varies, but the understory is often moderately dense. Typically, ground fuels are also moderate with some isolated concentrations of heavier fuels.

Following the 1926 fire, there was limited fire disturbance in the area for approximately the next sixty years. Major fires that have affected NFS lands in the North Fork Flathead River drainage over the past twenty years include the Robert Fire and the Wedge Canyon Fire in 2003, the Moose Fire in 2001, and the Red Bench Fire in 1988. Of these fires, the Red Bench Fire was the primary fire that directly affected the Red Whale Project area. This fire resulted in many dense young sapling stands of lodgepole pine and larch, particularly in the Hay Creek, Red Meadow Creek, Spruce and Spring Creek drainages.

Forest conditions within the WUI often have closely interlocking tree canopies that could allow a fire to become established in the tree crowns if dry, windy weather conditions exist. Once a fire crowns it becomes very difficult or impossible to effectively suppress, and persons and property in its path are in extreme jeopardy. Heavier ground fuels can also enable a fire to increase its intensity and severity.

The desired forest condition within these WUI areas would have tree crowns separated or spaced far enough away from each other so that most fires would not be carried in the upper forest canopy. Additionally, ground fuels would be relatively light so they generally would not contribute to higher intensity fires. Some stands with less fire-resistant trees (e.g. lodgepole pine) would be treated to favor stands dominated by larch and Douglas-fir, which are longer-lived and more fire-resistant tree species.

In order to achieve these desired stand conditions, this project would be designed to:

- Lower the risk of severe and intense wildfire, should a fire occur in the future (i.e., reduce the probability of a crown fire);
- Improve our ability to initial attack and control fires;

- Help protect human life by providing a safer environment for firefighters and the public should a fire occur;
- Help protect identified human and natural resource values in the event of a future wildfire;
- Increase the diversity of tree composition to more fire tolerant species.

Wildlife Habitat and Security

Another purpose of this project is to address habitat quality and security for a variety of wildlife species. The Forest Plan, which guides natural resource management on the Flathead National Forest, includes provisions to provide sufficient habitat and security to promote the recovery of threatened and endangered species such as the grizzly bear. In addition, the Forest Plan also provides direction to manage habitat and security for big game species.

Many of the south and west facing slopes of the project area are relatively dry and include a mix of open, semi-open and densely forested areas. These drier slopes have not burned in a wildland fire for at least 70 to 90 years. Due to this lack of fire, some of the historically more open areas have filled in with dense lodgepole pine and multi-age Douglas-fir. These open areas once provided good quality forage for grizzly bears, elk, deer and moose, particularly in the spring when these slopes were the first to become snow-free. The desired situation for these slopes would restore the role of fire to reduce tree density and allow shrubs and forbs to become a more significant component of the vegetation community.

Habitat security for grizzly bears is also of concern. Motorized access has been shown to displace grizzly bears and other wildlife. Therefore, the desired situation is to improve habitat security for grizzly bears by reducing the density of motorized access in the Red Whale area.

To achieve these desired conditions, this project would be designed to:

- Use prescribed fire to create more favorable growing conditions for forbs, shrubs, and grasses and improve habitat quality for a variety of wildlife species;
- Improve security for grizzly bears by reducing motorized access.

State Access

The final purpose of the project is to address a Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) request for access across NFS lands to a parcel of state land. Since the DNRC and the Forest Service have intermixed lands within the North Fork area, it is desirable to share road maintenance costs and to provide long term access to each other's jurisdictional lands.

To achieve this desired condition, this project would be designed to:

- Provide a road easement for long-term access to the DNRC to a state-owned parcel north of Polebridge.

IV. PROJECT SCOPE

Scope of the Proposed Action

Forest planning takes place at several levels: national, regional, forest and project. The *Red Whale Project* is a project-level analysis; its scope is confined to addressing the significant issues and possible environmental consequences of the proposed action. It does not attempt to address decisions made at higher levels. It does, however, implement direction provided at those higher levels.

Scope of the Analysis

The Council of Environmental Quality regulations implementing the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) require that all federal agencies consider the following three types of actions to determine the scope of an EIS (40 CFR 1508.25):

Connected Actions are closely related actions that automatically trigger other actions that may require NEPA analysis; cannot or would not proceed unless other actions are taken previously or simultaneously; or are interdependent parts of a larger action and depend on the larger action for their justification.

Connected actions are part of the proposed action. The proposed action includes all activities that are needed to complete the proposed project and provide for resource protection during and after project completion. Connected actions contained in the proposed action include:

- Temporary road construction, maintenance and rehabilitation
- Access management on roads and trails
- Road access management associated with harvest scheduling and open road density objectives
- Tree harvest
- Site preparation and fuel reduction activities, including slashing, chipping or pile burning
- Tree planting and natural regeneration
- Monitoring of activities (e.g. reforestation success, soil impacts, weeds, contract administration monitoring, etc.)

Similar actions are actions with similarities to other actions that provide a basis for evaluating their environmental consequences together, such as similar timing or geography. A number of similar actions have been identified and evaluated in the analysis of environmental consequences (Chapter 3). These are current and reasonably foreseeable actions described in the following section.

Cumulative actions are past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions that may have cumulatively significant impacts when considered along with the proposed action. Actions considered in the cumulative effects analysis are presented in more detail in Chapter 3. Further documentation of cumulative effects are also included in the project file.

V. RELATIONSHIP TO FOREST PLAN

Forest Plan Direction

The Forest Plan embodies the provisions of the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), its implementing regulations, and other guiding documents. The Forest Plan sets forth in detail the direction for managing the land and resources of the Flathead National Forest. This EA tiers to the Forest Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision, in compliance with 40 CFR 1502.2.

Forest Plan Management Areas

The Forest Plan uses “management areas” to guide management of National Forest System lands. Each management area (MA) provides a unique combination of activities, practices, and uses. Chapter 3 of the Forest Plan contains a detailed description of each management area. Proposed treatment areas within the *Red Whale Project* affect seven management areas. See below for a short description of the MAs and which activities are proposed within the specific MAs:

MA 2A - Unroaded lands suited for dispersed recreation that meet the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) classification of semi-primitive non-motorized. Provide a variety of primitive and semi-primitive recreation opportunities. Designated as unsuitable for timber management and timber harvest will not be scheduled. Salvage is allowable as long as recreation values can be protected. **Prescribed burn unit 8 is found within this MA.**

MA 3 – Non-forested lands and timberlands where timber management is uneconomical and/or the area is more suited for amenity value resources. Manage to maintain or enhance amenity values that include non-game wildlife species, visual quality, old growth and water quality. Designated as unsuitable for timber management and timber harvest will not be scheduled. Salvage is allowable as long as amenity values can be protected. **Prescribed burn unit 7 is found within this MA.**

MA 7 - Timberlands in areas of high scenic value. Manage the timber resource with roads in a manner that compliments and protects high scenic values. Maintain or create natural-appearing, diverse patterns of vegetation, using various silvicultural systems. Designated as suitable for timber management and timber harvest will be scheduled. **Mechanized fuels treatment units P, Q, R, U, V, W, X, Z, and 4R and portions of mechanized fuels treatment units B, C, D, E, M, and Y1 are found within this MA.**

MA 11 - Lands providing good grizzly bear habitat which consists of natural, relatively open, undisturbed (by humans) areas with good cover and an abundance of perennial succulent herbs and/or fruit bearing shrubs. Maintain and enhance grizzly bear habitat by implementing appropriate management and investment activities and controlling public access. Designated as unsuitable for timber management and timber harvest will not be scheduled. **Prescribed burn units 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 are found within this MA.**

MA 12 - Riparian areas consisting of aquatic, riparian, and a portion of terrestrial ecosystems along most perennial streams, lakes, ponds, marshlands, bogs, and some important seasonal flow streams. Management of other resources must be compatible with the riparian habitat management standards. Designated as unsuitable for timber management and timber harvest will not be scheduled. **Prescribed burn unit 9 is found within this MA.**

MA 15 - Timberlands where timber management with roads is economical and feasible. A major goal is to emphasize cost-efficient production of timber while protecting the productive capacity of the land and timber resource. **Mechanized fuels treatment units F, G, H, I, J, K, L, N, O, S1, S2, S3, S4, T1, T2, T3, T4, Y2, Y3, BB, CC, DD, EE, FF, GG, HH and 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, 4E, 4F, 4G, 4H, 4I, 4J, 4K, 4L, 4M, 4N, 4P, and 4Q; and portions of mechanized fuels treatment units B, E, M, and Y1 are found within this MA.**

MA 18 - National Forest System lands designated for wild, scenic and recreation river management under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The proposed action includes proposed vegetation treatments in the ‘recreation’ segment of the Wild and Scenic river corridor; timber harvest activities are allowed in the ‘recreation segment’ as long as they do not detract from the visual and recreational resources in the corridor. **Mechanized fuels treatment unit A and portions of mechanized fuels treatment units C, D, and E are found within this MA.**

VI. DECISIONS TO BE MADE

Based on findings in this EA, the responsible official would decide whether and how to reduce fuels, whether to improve wildlife habitat and security, and whether to authorize a road segment to Montana DNRC lands within the *Red Whale Project* area. This decision would include:

- The location, design, and scheduling of the proposed fuels reduction activity and associated silvicultural practices as well as the wildlife habitat improvement activities
- Road/trail access management activities
- Mitigation measures and monitoring requirements, if any
- Whether to defer any or all of the actions at this time
- A Finding of No Significant Impact