

XIII. SCENIC RESOURCES

Introduction

The Red Whale Project area lies generally between Whale Creek to the north and Moran Creek to the south within the North Fork Flathead River drainage. The North Fork Flathead River borders the eastern side of the project area and portions of the Whitefish Range border the west. The project area contains a variety of ownerships with the majority in federal ownership managed by the Forest Service. The area near the North Fork Road, where the majority of fuel treatments are being proposed, includes a mixture of private, federal, and state ownerships. Elevational changes within the project area range from about 7000 feet (e.g. Moran Peak and Red Meadow Peak) to around 3400 feet in the river corridor.

This project area is used by a variety of people – landowners, visitors traveling on the North Fork Road to access Glacier National Park (Glacier NP), hunters or fishermen, floaters on the North Fork Flathead River, snowmobilers, firewood gathers, hikers, campers, etc. Most of these people are interested in viewing scenery while pursuing their interests in the North Fork Flathead Valley.

Information Sources

Information used to evaluate the scenery resource was based on site visits by a landscape architect and the knowledge and experience of the effects on the scenic resource by previous fuels reduction projects. Photo viewpoints were used to specifically address effects to scenic resources in areas that have higher levels of sensitivity and visitor use. These viewpoints are described in more detail below.

Analysis Area Description

The analysis area used for the scenic resource is the project area. To streamline the analysis, several viewing locations were considered primarily in areas located along the North Fork Road which is a heavily traveled two lane gravel road, owned by Flathead County. This road extends from Columbia Falls to the Canadian/U.S. border and provides access for both visitors and landowners to the North Fork Flathead Valley. About 9 miles of this road is included within the project area. This road also provides access to a portion of Glacier NP. Most of the scenic views from this road come from viewing the dramatic peaks of Glacier NP which is located east of the project area. Depending upon the alternative, between four and seven of the proposed units lie directly adjacent to the North Fork Road.

Other proposed mechanical fuels reduction units or prescribed burn units are located along or near the currently year-long/seasonally open Red Meadow, Hay Creek, Moran and Moose Creek roads. The sensitivity and visitor use of these roads are considered lower than that of the North Fork Road because they receive quite a bit less vehicular traffic. A brief assessment will also be made of the changes to visuals by these units. Some of the proposed mechanical treatment units (both sapling and larger diameter stands) are also located away from these open roads.

Affected Environment/Existing Condition

Introduction

The analysis for this project used the visual management system developed by the U.S. Forest Service in: *Landscape Aesthetics - A Handbook for Scenery Management Number 701 (1995)*. It is used to analyze and evaluate the visual resource. This system replaces *The Visual Management System – Handbook Number 462 (USDA, 1974)*. This new system provides for the evaluation of physical features of the landscape called "scenic attractiveness classes" (formerly - "variety classes") together with the levels of concern people have regarding scenery (formerly - "sensitivity levels"). This information is synthesized to develop "Scenic Integrity Objectives" (SIOs). Similar terms were formerly referred to as visual quality objectives (VQOs).

The Flathead Forest Plan established Scenic Integrity Objectives (SIOs - similar to VQOs) for each management area (MA), those SIOs found in the project area include:

High (Similar to VQO of Retention)

This refers to landscapes where the valued landscape character "appears" intact. Deviations may be present but must repeat form, line, color, texture and pattern common to the character so completely that they are not evident. This project area shows **MA 18** lands -Wild and Scenic Rivers - with a high SIO.

Moderate (Similar to VQO of Partial Retention)

This refers to landscapes where the valued landscape character "appears slightly altered." Noticeable deviations must remain visually subordinate to the landscape character being viewed. These landscapes are shown as **MA 7**.

Low (Similar to VQO of Modification)

This refers to landscapes where the valued landscape character "appears moderately altered." Deviations begin to dominate the valued landscape character being viewed but they borrow valued attributes such as size, shape, edge effect and pattern of natural openings, and vegetative type changes outside the landscape being viewed. They should be compatible or complementary to the landscape character. This project area shows **MA 11** lands with a wildlife emphasis and a Low SIO or Modification VQO.

Very Low (Similar to VQO of Maximum Modification)

This refers to landscapes where the valued landscape character "appears heavily altered." Deviations may strongly dominate the landscape character. They may not be appropriate in shape, edge effect, or patterns. However, deviations must be shaped and blended with landforms so that elements such as unnatural edges or landings do not dominate the composition. These landscapes are shown as **MA 15**.

MA 2A, 3 and 12 are also located within this project area which either do not have visual significance as seen from important viewpoints or the proposed treatment areas are not identified in those areas. Some of the prescribed burning units are located within these three management areas.

Existing Condition

Vegetation change in the project area is largely a result of the combination of past fires since 1910 (includes the recent 2003 Wedge Canyon Fire and the 1988 Red Bench Fire), logging activity since the 1950s, and private land development (i.e. homes, roads, forest clearing, etc.) in the eastern-most portion of the project area. The vegetation section provides more details of these factors.

Along the North Fork Road, human and fire induced changes are well noted. Due to these past factors, vegetation is now found in different canopy heights and stand densities, resulting in visibly differing textures. Snags remaining from earlier fires are interspersed in the forest canopy in several areas, adding interest to the scenery. Additionally, there are small areas of wet forest types that contain a mixture of hardwoods with a variety of colors. Most of the Wedge Canyon Fire can not be seen from the portion of the North Fork Road that passes through the project area. However, the southern sections of the North Fork Road within the project area (mostly north of Polebridge) provide good views of the effects from the Red Bench Fire. These areas are composed of young sapling forests ranging from 5 to 10 feet tall with many of these forests being extremely dense and suppressed. Ten years ago some of these forests looked like a carpet of seedlings, now they look like walls of sapling sized trees. Some thinning of these dense sapling stands has recently taken place on private lands.

Past timber harvest was accomplished through a variety of silvicultural practices. Some of those treatments were designed to leave select overstory trees. Many of these areas are now regenerating with trees 5-15 feet in height. Consequently, trees and shrubbery are beginning to screen views of the mountains to the west and the spectacular scenery of Glacier NP to the east.

From the Moose Creek, Hay Creek, Moran Creek and Red Meadow Creek roads, where some of the proposed burns are located (on south-facing slopes), past timber harvest is evident near the road. On the steep slopes above these roads, very little harvest or no harvest is evident. These southern slopes are generally composed of mixture of open and semi-open forested conditions with shrub fields in some of these openings. Some rock features are also noted.

Viewing opportunities from the North Fork Flathead River into the project area are somewhat limited because of the high banks and vegetation along the river. A couple of units are located within the river corridor but cannot be seen from the river because of this screening. The effects of these units on the Wild and Scenic River Corridor are also addressed in another analysis within the EA.

Environmental Consequences

The scope of this analysis shows the existing conditions for the scenery resource by photos and narrative format. For photos of the existing conditions see the project file. The narrative uses language consistent with the Flathead National Forest - Forest Plan. Both formats are designed to help the reader understand the existing conditions of the scenic resource. The Forest Plan identifies the level of importance for areas within the project boundaries. Each management area has a companion visual quality objective (VQO). The analysis methods will show how the existing conditions relate to the corresponding VQO(s). Additionally, the effects of each alternative on the scenery and compatibility with Forest Plan direction will be assessed. This report shows the changes to scenery by alternatives and evaluates those changes.

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

A **high** impact would have these outcomes:

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

A **moderate** impact would have these outcomes:

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

A **low** impact would have the following outcome:

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

No impact would have the following outcomes:

- No visual changes.

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative 1 (No Action)

Due to no removal of vegetation or prescribed burning, the process of forest succession would continue. The areas that have been heavily to moderately altered by past timber harvesting would blend into the landscape over time, but would retain much of their current form and line for several decades. This is assuming the area remains unaffected by wildland fire. Tree mortality from insects and disease would be more evident in much of the area than if one of the action alternatives were implemented. Alternative 1 would not reduce the risk of stand-replacing wildland fire. Fuels would continue to build up from tree mortality and undergrowth, creating a higher risk of catastrophic fire than the action alternatives. In the event of such an occurrence, visual change to the landscape would be dramatic. This change may be naturally appearing, but fires of large magnitude may be visually unappealing to some viewers, and could create vast expanses of even-aged stands with little visual diversity that would exist for many decades. This alternative would have no impact on the scenic resource.

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative 2*Mechanical Fuels Treatments – General Discussion*

This alternative mechanically treats approximately 2000 acres within the wildland-urban interface area. The treatment units lie on very gentle slopes, making them less visible from any one area and difficult to see in their entirety from one viewpoint (as opposed to a treatment unit high on a hillside). Short-term changes may include views of stumps, a reduction of understory vegetation, and removal of trees due to open views. Structure of some foreground forest stands would change from dense stands to stands with more openings and fewer trees per acre. The prescriptions allow for an uneven pattern of overstory leave trees. Relatively small openings with clusters of leave trees would be a typical prescription. This should provide for a non-uniform appearing stand. In the long-term, those changes would be softened by vegetation growth.

Thinning slash would be disposed of in several different ways depending on site conditions (e.g. removal could be through chipping/mastication, piling and burning or removal off-site). The intent is to have slash disposed fairly quickly after logging or thinning; generally within a year after the harvest or thinning.

All landings and temporary roads would be rehabilitated to a natural appearing condition. Some of the treatment areas contain hardwood trees, primarily birch, aspen and cottonwood. Some of these hardwoods would be retained in a variety of areas for visual diversity and fall color.

The changes described above are rated as moderate for the short term and low in the long term.

Mechanical Fuels Treatments – Specifically Adjacent to the North Fork Road

Approximately seven proposed fuels reduction units are located adjacent to the North Fork Road. A variety of silvicultural prescriptions are proposed ranging from patch seedtree to thinning small/medium trees, to sapling thinning. Unit C would change the scenic resource the most because the intended treatment is to remove most of the lodgepole and leave the larch and

Douglas-fir (patch seedtree). The second most change to visuals would likely occur in Units U and Z because they are located in dense sapling stands and the prescription is to include some small openings along with variable spacing between remaining leave trees. In the long term, these sites would have better growing conditions for the leave trees which would increase bole diameters and develop better crowns. The appearance of these stands would look more healthy and sturdy and would likely stay intact longer than if no treatments were included at this time. The units associated with thinning small and medium trees would result in visual effect changes somewhere between that of the patch seedtree harvest type and the sapling thinning type.

Slash disposal would be the same as described above except that extra attention would be made to ensure that slash is disposed of quickly in areas within view of the North Fork Road or near homes.

The changes described above are rated as moderate for the short term and low in the long term.

The following table lists those units located adjacent to the North Fork Road and displays some brief comments of effects of these units. This table also discloses potential long term effects of those units found in management areas with a Retention visual quality objective (VQO) (e.g. MA 18 – Units A, C, D, and E) or a Partial Retention VQO (e.g. MA 7 – Units P, Q, R, U, V, W, X, Z, and 4R; portions of mechanized fuels treatment Units B, C, D, E, M, and Y1).

Table 3-79. Effects of Alternative 2, 3 and 4 on Units with Partial Retention (PR) VQO in MA7 or Retention (R) VQO in MA 18 (* Units Adjacent to the North Fork Road).

Alt.	Unit #	VQO-Prescription	Meets Retention/ Partial Retention VQO?	Scenery Comments
2, 4	A*	R - Lt Understory Thin	Yes	Low impact; short duration view and very small unit
2, 3,4	B	PR - Patch seedtree	Yes	Low impact; not visible from the North Fork Road
2, 3,4	C*	R and PR - Patch seedtree	Yes	Moderation impact; short duration view visible from Whale Creek Road and the North Fork Road. Leaves larch overstory for diversity.
2,3,4	D*	R and PR - Thin small/med tree	Yes	Moderate impact; three smaller patches on both sides of the road. Low impact due to short duration view.
2, 3,4	E*	R - Thin small/med tree	Yes	Low impact; short duration view from North Fork Road
2, 3,4	M*	PR - Thin small/med tree	Yes	Moderate impact; both sides of the road for short duration
2,3,4	P	PR- Small/med tree	Yes	Low impact; not evident from North Fork Road
2,3, 4	Q	PR – Patch seedtree	Yes	Low impact; small unit, not visible from North Fork Road
2,3,4	R	PR – Patch seedtree	Yes	Low impact; not visible from the North Fork Road

Alt.	Unit #	VQO-Prescription	Meets Retention/ Partial Retention VQO?	Scenery Comments
2, 4	U*	PR – Thin sapling	Yes	Low impact; small unit and short duration view as seen from the North Fork Road
2, 4	V	PR – Thin sapling	Yes	Low impact
2 & 4	W	PR – Thin sapling	Yes	Low impact; small unit not visible from the North Fork Road
2 & 4	Y1	PR – Thin sapling	Yes	Low impact; access via a closed road
2 & 4	X	PR – Thin sapling	Yes	Low impact; small unit not visible from the North Fork Road
2 & 4	Z*	PR – Thin sapling	Yes	Low impact; small unit, short duration bordered by managed private lands on two sides
4	4R	PR - Thin small/med tree	Yes	Low impact

Prescribed burning

The intent of these burns is to create a mosaic of open and semi-open areas scattered across south-facing slopes. Patches of blackened trees are desired to create opens so that shrubs and forbs can dominate. It is not intended that these slopes would be dominated by large blackened stand replacing fire areas.

Many of the prescribed burning units in Moose Creek, Hay Creek and Moran Creek would not be very visually apparent from the open roads accessing the units due to the steepness of the slopes and because the roads are at the bottom of the slopes. The Red Meadow Creek prescribed burns would be more apparent because the bottom of this drainage is wider than the other drainages; portions of the burns would be quite readily viewed from the Red Meadow Road. For the units that would be more readily apparent, one short term effect would be red needles and blackened trunks. Over time those areas would green-up and re-vegetate to stands of forest vegetation.

Some of the burns are located within management areas that have a VQO of retention (Moran and Hay Creek). Since these have limited visibilities, it is anticipated that the potential effects of these burns would be rated as low. The remaining burn units are located within management areas which have a VQO of Modification. These burn areas (Moose and Red Meadow) are allowed further changes, but is anticipated that the prescribed burning actions would have no more than a moderate short term effect rating. All burn units should meet the visual objectives in the long term.

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative 3*Mechanical Fuels Treatments – General Discussion*

The narrative provided for Alternative 2 is very similar to Alternative 3 except that this alternative mechanically treats approximately 900 acres within the wildland-urban interface area. There would be less overall short-term change to visuals with Alternative 3 than in Alternative 2 because fewer acres would be affected. However, the overall rating of impacts would be the same as described for Alternative 2.

Mechanical Fuels Treatments – Specifically Adjacent to the North Fork Road

Approximately four proposed fuels reduction units are located adjacent to the North Fork Road. A variety of silvicultural prescriptions are proposed ranging from patch seedtree to thinning small/medium trees. The narrative provided for Alternative 2 is similar to Alternative 3 except there are no sapling thinning units planned directly adjacent to the North Fork Road.

Prescribed Burning

The narrative provided under Alternative 2 is very similar to Alternative 3 except that there are fewer acres proposed for burning. As such, there would be less overall short-term change to visuals with Alternative 3 compared to Alternative 2. However, the overall rating of impacts would be the same as described for Alternative 2.

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative 4*Mechanical Fuels Treatments – General Discussion*

The narrative provided for Alternative 2 is very similar to Alternative 4 except that this alternative mechanically treats approximately 3500 acres within the wildland-urban interface area. There would be more overall short-term change to visuals with Alternative 4 than in Alternatives 2 or 3 because more acres would be affected. However, the overall rating of impacts would be the same as described for Alternative 2.

Mechanical Fuels Treatments – Specifically Adjacent to the North Fork Road

Approximately seven proposed fuels reduction units are located adjacent to the North Fork Road. A variety of silvicultural prescriptions are proposed ranging from patch seedtree to thinning small/medium trees. The narrative of effects provided for Alternative 2 is similar to Alternative 4.

Prescribed burning

The narrative provided under Alternative 2 is very similar to Alternative 4 except that there are more acres proposed for burning. As such, there would be more overall short-term change to

visuals with Alternative 4 than in Alternatives 2 or 3. However, the overall rating of impacts would be the same as described for Alternative 2.

Cumulative Effects of All Action Alternatives

As mentioned earlier in this section, past harvest, fires, and other management activities have placed unnatural shapes and textures on the landscape in several areas. Visibility of some of these features would continue. Similar actions to reduce fuels buildup and thinning may occur on surrounding State or private lands within this project area. Riparian areas for the most part would likely be left untreated.

All of the action alternatives plan to leave trees within the units and prescribed burning units. Regeneration of both conifers and broadleaf species would help screen out views of stumps and debris within five to ten years.

Regulatory Framework and Consistency

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

The No Action alternative and the proposed activities in the action alternatives would comply with the visual resource objectives in the Forest Plan for all management areas.

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