

XII. SPECIAL DESIGNATIONS

Inventoried Roadless Area

Introduction

The project area includes portions of several inventoried roadless areas. The Thompson-Seton Inventoried Roadless Area (IRA), approximately 52,000 acres in size, is located in the northern portion of the project area. The Benchmark IRA, approximately 6,400 acres in size, is located in the middle portions of the project area while the Coal Ridge IRA, approximately 15,000 acres in size, is located in the southern portions of the project area (refer to Map 3-11).

The only activities proposed within the Red Whale Project that are found within inventoried roadless areas are the prescribed burning units.

Information Sources and Analysis Area Description

Lands within the Red Whale Project area served as the analysis area to disclose the effects of the proposed action and alternatives on inventoried roadless lands. Information for this analysis was gathered through information from the Flathead National Forest GIS database as well as knowledge of the area from the ground.

Affected Environment/Existing Condition

When considering effects of projects on inventoried roadless areas, several roadless characteristics should be considered:

Natural Integrity, Apparent Naturalness and Remoteness

This characteristic relates to the physical setting of an area. Natural integrity is the extent to which long-term ecological processes are intact and operating. Impacts to natural integrity are measured by the presence and magnitude of human induced change to an area. Such impacts include physical developments (e.g. roads, utility-rights-of-way, fences, lookouts, cabins), recreation developments, domestic livestock grazing, mineral developments, wildlife/fisheries management activities, vegetative manipulation, and fire suppression activities.

Apparent Naturalness

This characteristic means that the environment looks natural to most people using the area. It is a measure of importance of visitors' perceptions of human impacts to the area. Even though some of the long term ecological processes of an area may have been interrupted, the landscape of the area generally appears to be affected by the forces of nature. If the landscape has been modified by human activity, the evidence is not obvious to the casual observer, or it is disappearing due to natural processes.

Remoteness

This characteristic is a perceived condition of being secluded, inaccessible, and out of the way. The physical factors that can create “remote” settings include topography, vegetative screening, distance from human impacts such as roads and logging operations (sight and sound), and difficulty of travel. A user's sense of remoteness in an area is also influenced by the presence or absence of roads, their condition, and whether they are open to motorized vehicles.

Solitude

This characteristic is a personal, subjective value defined as isolation from the sights, sound and presence of others, and the developments of man. Common indicators of solitude are numbers of individuals or parties one may expect to encounter in an area during a day, or the number of parties camped within sight and sound of other visitors. A primitive recreation experience includes the opportunity to experience solitude, a sense-of remoteness, closeness to nature, serenity, and spirit of adventure through the application of woodsmen skills in an environment that offers a high degree of challenge and risk.

Special Features

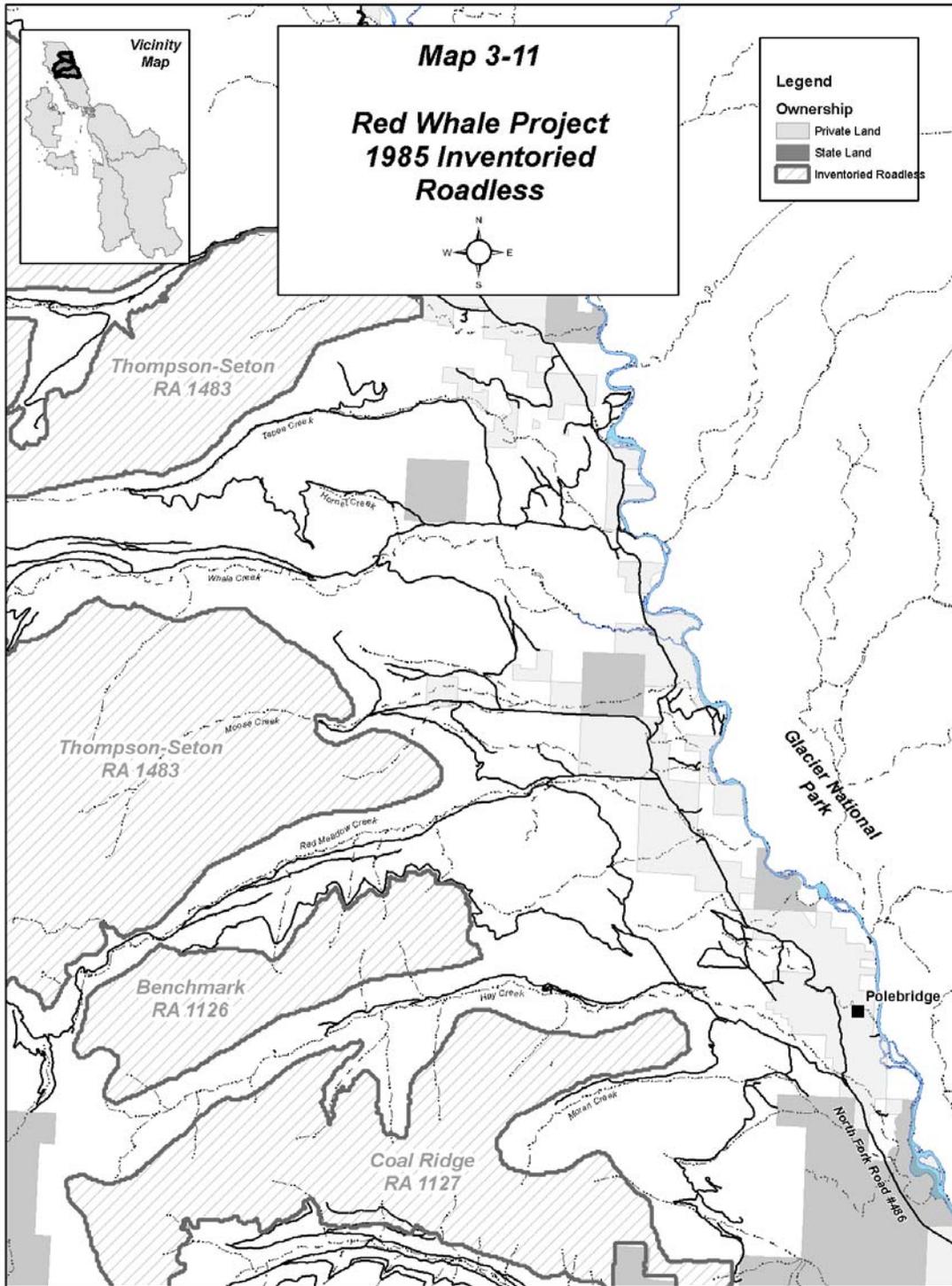
These characteristics are those unique geological, biological, ecological, cultural, or scenic features that may be located in roadless areas. Unique fish and wildlife species, unique plants or plant communities, potential Research Natural Areas, outstanding landscape features such as unique rock formations, and significant cultural resource sites are some of the items that should be considered when analyzing this element.

The Manageability/Boundaries

This element relates to the ability of the Forest Service to manage an area to meet size criteria and the five elements discussed above. Changes in the shape of an area influence how it can be managed. If broken into narrow corridors or small islands interspersed with areas of non-conforming management practices, many of the 6 elements may be compromised. To meet the requirements of size, an area must be at least 5,000 acres. This is an especially important element to address if a proposed action would essentially road the interior of a small roadless area. Changes in shape of roadless areas and the location of other proposed projects outside the area are also factors that should be considered. Boundary management impacts relate to such factors as need to change boundaries to terrain features that can easily be located and the provision of access to the remainder of the roadless area (changes in trailhead locations, motorized access patterns, etc.).

Additionally, *special values* of inventoried roadless areas will also be analyzed. These are values that are often difficult to quantify – instead these are subjective values from people who have certain feelings about these special areas.

The inventoried roadless areas mentioned in the introduction have many features including undisturbed natural processes, minor improvements such as trails (Mt. Hefty Trail #15, Thoma Lookout Trail #18, Moran Creek #2, and Coal Ridge #14) and lookouts (Thoma Lookout), opportunities for solitude, rugged terrain and a variety of threatened and endangered species such as grizzly bears, lynx and wolf. (Mt. Hefty Trail, Thoma Lookout Trail, and the Thoma Lookout are features not found within the project area). The northern edge of the Thompson-Seton roadless area abuts an international border with Canada that has become a higher priority (patrol-wise) in recent years due to terrorist activity on 9/11.



Environmental Consequences

To focus the IRA analysis and describe relevant effects, the following effects indicators are used:

- Acres of prescribed burning in IRAs
- Changes to natural integrity, apparent naturalness, remoteness, solitude, primitive recreation opportunities, manageability, and boundaries.

Direct and Indirect Effects of Alternative 1 (No Action)

No management activities are proposed in Alternative 1. Therefore, there are no direct or indirect effects from any activities within IRAs. Natural processes would continue to occur as they have been without much human intervention. Existing man-made features in these IRAs would continue as is.

Direct and Indirect Effects of the Action Alternatives

None of the mechanized fuels treatment areas are located within the IRAs. Prescribed burning is the only activity from the alternatives that directly or indirectly affect the IRAs.

Alternatives 2 and 4 have the following prescribed burn units within the Thompson-Seton and Coal Ridge IRAs:

- Units 1, 2 and 3
- Portions of Units 4, 5, 6, and 8

In Alternatives 2 and 4, approximately 857 acres of prescribed burn acres are found within IRAs

Alternative 3 has the following prescribed burn units within the Thompson-Seton and Coal Ridge IRAs:

- Units 1, 2, 3
- Portions of Unit 8

In Alternative 3, approximately 783 acres of prescribed burn acres are found within IRAs.

The remaining analysis will discuss the effects of these burn units on roadless characteristics discussed in the affected environment.

Natural integrity, Apparent Naturalness, and Remoteness

Fire within these landscapes is the main natural disturbance feature of this landscape. Fire history records show that most of the area was burned in the period of 1910 - 1929. This means that large fire has not visited the majority of the area for approximately 75-95 years. Introducing fire through these prescribed burn units would be within the historic natural range of variability for fire return. As a result, burning is expected to enhance the natural integrity and apparent naturalness of the area.

Burning would not affect the remoteness feel of this IRA.

Solitude

Effects to solitude are expected to be very minimal as a result of introducing fire by helicopter. Helicopter use is expected to occur over a 1 to 2 day time period during the ignition process. This noise could impact those who expect solitude during those two days; however, helicopter use is not unusual in the area. Other agencies such as the Border Patrol, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks and the Forest Service periodically use helicopters in the area to monitor border use, wildlife use, and fire activity.

Primitive Recreation Opportunities

The prescribed burns would minimally affect primitive recreational opportunities. People who use the area for primitive recreation opportunities would still be able to use the area as they did before although they may be prevented during the time period the area is actively burning. Additionally, instead of the area being “green” as once before, portions of the area would now be considered “black” but this should not affect their recreational use of the area. Trails in the area are not expected to be impacted by the burning; however, if the fire does burn over the trail, the trail would be fixed to the same condition or better than before the fire.

Other Features

There are no other substantial features that would be affected by the proposed burning within the IRAs.

Manageability and Boundaries

The prescribed burns should not affect the manageability or boundaries of this IRAs.

Special Values

No special values related to IRAs were identified during the public involvement process for this project. However, there were comments received during the scoping process that indicated the desire to log the prescribed burn areas first, even those located in IRAs. We evaluated these comments and considered them in an alternative but ended up eliminated this feature (refer to Chapter 2 – Alternatives Considered but not Given Detailed Study). We also received comments on the contrary indicated concerns if logging did take place in these areas.

Cumulative Effects

Proposed burning would minimally impact the IRA as discussed above. There are no known past, ongoing, or foreseeable activities that would affect trails or other features within the IRA. Periodic helicopter use by the Forest Service or others would not appreciably add to the disruptions to solitude that may temporarily result from the prescribed burning operation.

The Flathead National Forest is currently in the process of revising the Forest Plan. In the draft plan, the Forest Service has recommended the Thompson-Seton and Mt. Hefty IRAs as

wilderness. Prescribed burning portions of these IRAs would not affect the suitability of the area in becoming wilderness.

Regulatory Framework and Consistency

There is no national direction (e.g. FSM, FSH, or other Forest Service policy) that affects prescribed burning activities within IRAs. The current Flathead Forest Plan does not have specific inventoried roadless area direction. Instead, direction is provided through management area direction (specific areas across the Forest that are differentiated by goals, resource potential and limitations). The management area (MA) currently prescribed in the Forest Plan for the prescribed burn units within IRAs is MA 11 – (grizzly bear habitat) or MA 2A (semi-primitive motorized). The prescribed burning is intended to improve habitat for grizzly bears and other wildlife species. MA 11 allows “planned ignition prescribed fire to enhance any habitat component.” MA 2A also allows prescribed burning to enhance resource values or to reduce hazardous fuels. As such, the proposed burning activity meets current Forest Plan direction.

As mentioned above, the Flathead National Forest is in the process of revising the Forest Plan. The proposed forest plan would recommend that the area encompassing the prescribed burns would be MA 1.2 Recommended Wilderness and 2.2 Backcountry. Both MAs allow for wildland fire use and prescribed burning. Consequently, the proposed burning activity associated with the Red Whale Project would also meet the proposed Forest Plan direction.

Wild and Scenic River

Introduction

The North Fork Flathead River forms the eastern boundary of the Red Whale Project area. In 1878, Congress designated this river as part of the nationally Wild and Scenic River System. The designation means each segment will be managed in a manner consistent with the classification assigned to it (Wild, Scenic, or Recreation). The scenic, ecological, and recreation integrity of the river and corridor resource will be maintained through responsible management. The designation protects the free flowing nature, water quality and outstanding remarkable values of the river.

The portion of the North Fork Flathead River corridor which falls within the analysis area of the Red Whale Project was designated as Scenic. A Scenic designation is characterized by accessibility by roads or trails, minimal timber harvests while taking visual integrity into consideration, visibility of structures from the river kept to a minimum and manage fire so it has the least impact on the river corridor if possible.

Information Sources and Analysis Area Description

The analysis area for the environmental effects to Wild and Scenic Rivers is the actual segments either adjacent to the project or segments that are visible from the project area.

Information sources include the Wild and Scenic River Act, the Flathead Forest Plan, and the Flathead Wild and Scenic River Recreation Management Direction, which amends Management Area 18 direction in the Forest Plan. The Flathead Forest Plan designates all portions of the Flathead Wild and Scenic River as Management Area 18, Wild and Scenic River. Goals for this Management Area are to manage the river in a manner consistent with the classifications assigned under the Wild and Scenic River Act.

In 1986, the Forest Plan was amended to incorporate more specific recreation management direction for the Wild and Scenic River into Management Area 18. In this amendment, the North Fork was divided into two management units, the Upper North Fork and the Lower North Fork. The project area encompasses the Upper North Fork management unit.

The evaluation of direct, indirect, and cumulative effects on the wild and scenic river system utilized the most recent and available information and data related to past, present, and reasonably foreseeable events that have occurred or may occur in the analysis area. Applicable past and present events described earlier in the Chapter 3 Introduction (Table 3-1) were considered during the evaluation of the affected environment. The condition of the affected environment, together with applicable reasonably foreseeable events (as described in Table 3-1), were considered during the analysis of the environmental effects of the alternatives. Those events described in Table 3-1 that are not specifically listed or mentioned during the analysis were considered to have no potential effect on the wild and scenic river system.

Affected Environment/Existing Conditions

The North Fork Flathead River corridor is popular for floating, fishing, camping and general outdoor enjoyment. There are two developed river access sites in the Red Whale Project area, Ford and Polebridge, that provide access to the river along with several other dispersed access points. There are several dispersed camping sites with wheeled access to the river in the Wurtz and Sondreson meadows.

Environmental Consequences

Direct and Indirect Effects

All or portions of Units A, C, D, E, and M fall within the Wild and Scenic boundary of the North Fork Flathead River. Specialist floated from the Border River Access site to Polebridge on the North Fork Flathead River during the summer of 2006 and determined treating the fuels within these units would have no direct or indirect effects on the Wild and Scenic Corridor, or for the floater who was experiencing the stretch of river found in the project. The terrain and river channel prevented the floater from even seeing the topography of these units.

Regulatory Framework and Consistency

All management activities and proposals are within management guidelines and direction for the scenic segments of the North Fork of the Flathead River.