RED WHALE PROJECT

Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

Flathead National Forest
Glacier View Ranger District
Flathead County, Montana

May 2008

Lead Agency: USDA Forest Service

Responsible Official: Cathy Barbouletos
Forest Supervisor

For Further Information, Contact: Jimmy DeHerrera, District Ranger
or
Michele Draggoo, Planning Team Leader

Glacier View and Hungry Horse Ranger Districts
Flathead National Forest
P.O. Box 190340
Hungry Horse, MT 59919
(406) 387-3800

Equal Employment Opportunity Act - "The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at 202-720-2600 (voice and TDD).

To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call (202) 720-5964 (voice or TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer."

Data Accuracy - The Forest Service uses the most current and complete data available. Geographic information system (GIS) data and product accuracy may vary. They may be developed from sources of differing accuracy, accurate only at certain scales based on modeling or interpretation, incomplete while being created or revised, etc. Using GIS products for purposes other than those for which they were created, may yield inaccurate or misleading results. The Forest Service reserves the right to correct, update, modify, or replace, GIS products without notification. For more information, contact:

Flathead National Forest
1935 3rd Avenue East
Kalispell, MT 59901
(406) 758-5200

If a map contains contours, these contours were generated and filtered using the Digital Elevation Model (DEM) files. Any contours generated from DEMs using a scale of less than 1:100,000 would lead to less reliable results and should only be used for display purposes.

RED WHALE PROJECT
Decision Notice and FONSI

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Appendices

Tables

Maps

This page intentionally left blank.

RED WHALE PROJECT
DECISION NOTICE/FONSI

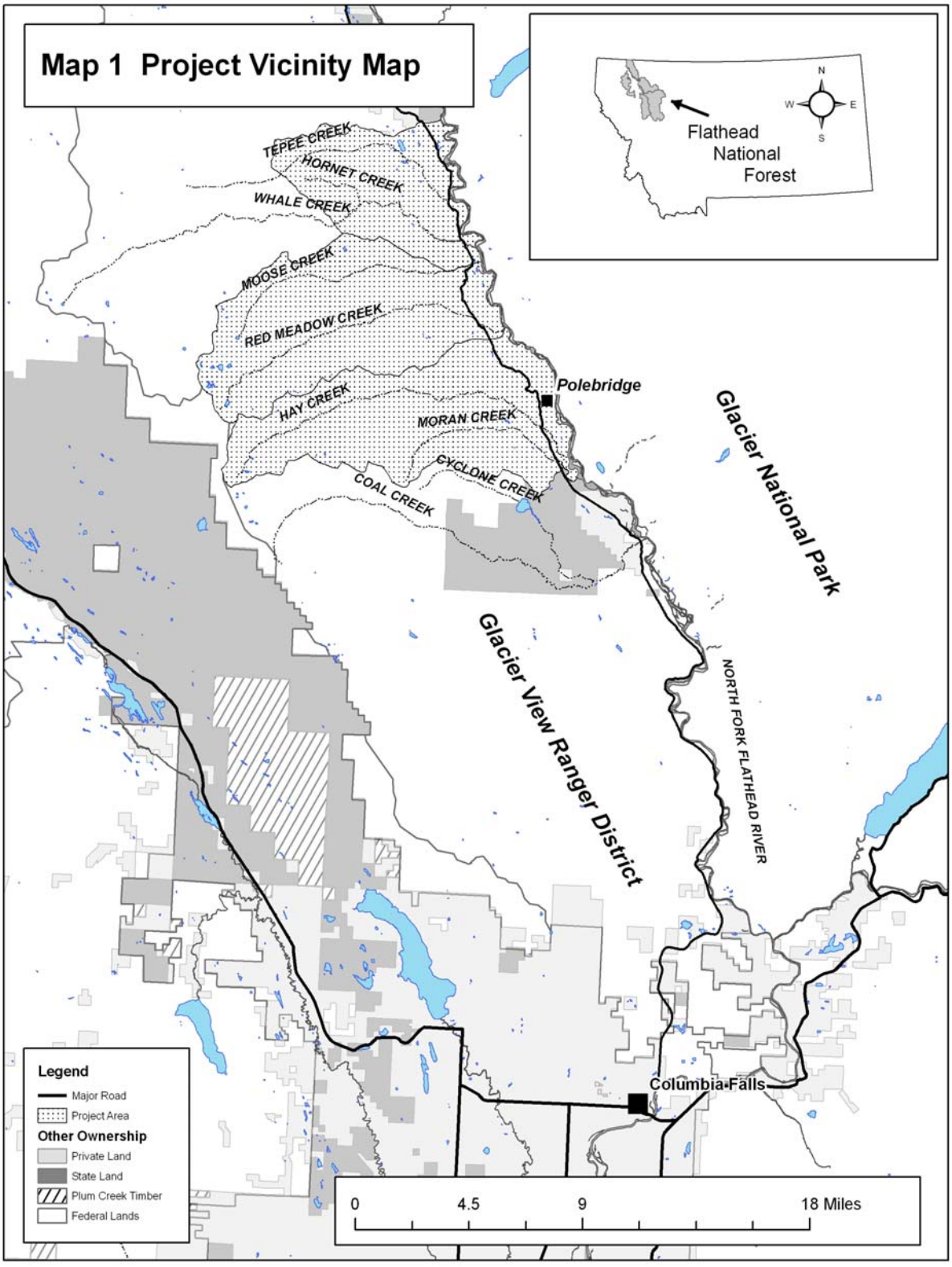
I. SUMMARY OF DECISION

After careful consideration of the potential impacts of the management activities analyzed and documented in the Red Whale Project Environmental Assessment (EA) issued in May 2007, I have decided to implement management actions as outlined below under Decision Summary. Management actions are described in detail in Section VI (Decision) and in Appendix B (Design Features of the Selected Activities). My decision allows for the mechanical treatment of fuels to reduce the intensity and severity of future wildland fires, improves wildlife habitat and security, and provides access to state owned land (managed by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation) near Polebridge. These activities will occur in the Red Whale Project area on the Glacier View Ranger District, Flathead National Forest (Map 1 - Project Vicinity Map). The project area is located in the North Fork Flathead River drainage, generally between Moran Creek (just south of Polebridge) north to Whale Creek (approximately 10 miles south of the Canadian border).

Decision Summary

- Implement vegetation treatments from a combination of all action alternatives presented in the EA, including:
    - Mechanical fuels reduction on approximately 2,807 acres intended to reduce the intensity and severity of future wildfires.
    - Prescribed burning on approximately 1,114 acres to improve wildlife habitat diversity and forage abundance.
    - Planting approximately 338 acres, primarily using western larch and Douglas-fir.
    - Removal of approximately 4.5 million board feet (mmbf) of sawlogs, and approximately 2-3 mmbf of other smaller diameter materials for firewood, post/poles, and other biomass.

- Implement the access management strategy identified in Alternative 2 with one modification, this decision includes:
    - The seasonal closure of approximately 8.1 miles of currently open roads (primarily Hay Creek Road and Moran Creek Road) from December 1 through June 30, and the closure of approximately 24.0 miles of motorized use trails to improve grizzly bear security.
    - The construction of approximately 0.3 miles of new permanent road providing access across National Forest System land to state owned land NW of Polebridge.


Map 1 Project Vicinity Map
Flathead National Forest
N
W
E
S
TEPEE CREEK
HORNET CREEK
WHALE CREEK
MOOSE CREEK
RED MEADOW CREEK
HAY CREEK
MORAN CREEK
CYCLONE CREEK
COAL CREEK
Polebridge
Glacier National Park
Glacier View Ranger District
NORTH FORK FLATHEAD RIVER
Columbia Falls
Legend
Major Road
Project Area
Other Ownership
Private Land
State Land
Plum Creek Timber
Federal Lands
0
4.5
9
18 Miles

II. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

The need for the Red Whale Project is based upon the differences between the desired landscape conditions and the current conditions related to fuels and wildlife habitat and security; and to provide Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) access to a parcel of state owned land. The Purpose and Need for Action is discussed in-depth in the EA, pages 1-2 to 1-5.

One purpose of this project is to reduce wildland fuel levels within the wildland-urban interface (WUI). To achieve this purpose the project is 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.

Another purpose of this project is to improve habitat quality and security for a variety of wildlife species. To achieve this purpose the project is designed to:

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

The final purpose of the project is to address a DNRC request for access across National Forest System (NFS) lands to a parcel of state land. To achieve this purpose the project is designed to:

- Provide a road easement for long-term access to a state owned parcel of land northwest of Polebridge.

III. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Extensive public involvement was conducted with this project. Key public involvement activities are described below, additional details can be found in the Project File (Section C).

Public Involvement

The Flathead National Forest has undertaken collaborative efforts beginning in 2001 with various state and federal agencies (e.g. DNRC and the National Park Service) and other partners to implement fuel reduction activities. Collaborative meetings between the Flathead National Forest and the Fire Mitigation Committee of the North Fork Improvement Association began in April of 2004. The North Fork Improvement Association (now the North Fork Landowner's Association) is a citizen group comprised of landowners and residents of the North Fork Valley.

The focus of these meetings was how to best collaborate on reducing risk to communities, including the North Fork, through fire prevention, staffing, preparedness, fuels treatments/WUI projects and grant opportunities. These partners helped to review criteria (e.g. fuel loads, fire starts, and crown cover) to determine priority setting for various fuels reduction projects on the Flathead National Forest. The Red Whale Project analysis area was identified as one of the priority fuels reduction projects on the Glacier View Ranger District based on this criteria.

Forest Service representatives met bi-annually (winter and summer) with the North Fork Landowner's Association, North Fork residents, and others who have an interest in the North Fork. These meetings, known as interlocal meetings, provided opportunities for federal land management agencies and other government agencies to discuss ongoing/upcoming activities, issues and concerns. Fuels projects have been a continuing topic at these meetings for several years. The Red Whale Project was first discussed as a potential project during the 2005/2006 winter meeting. Following this interlocal meeting, additional meetings occurred with Fire Mitigation Committee members and local landowners concerning fuels on both private and public lands.

The Red Whale Project was first listed in the Flathead National Forest's Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) in the April-June 2006 issue. This listing informed the public of our plan to analyze the Red Whale area for various land management activities. The Red Whale Project has appeared quarterly in the SOPA since the April-June 2006 issue. The SOPA list is displayed nationally and locally on the internet sites located at the Forest Service's Washington Office and the Flathead National Forest.

In late June 2006, a letter was sent to over 400 landowners, government agencies, and groups or individuals potentially interested in or affected by the project. This letter provided details of the proposed action (displayed as Alternative 2 in this EA) and an offer to meet with the public on the ground during a field trip. This field trip was held on July 17, 2006 with about 13 people attending, most of whom were local landowners. We also received comments/feedback on the proposed action from about 21 people through letters, phone calls, and emails. Additionally, individual meetings with landowners took place on the ground and in the office.

The Red Whale EA was published and made available for public comment on May 4, 2007. Copies of the EA were provided to interested people and letters were sent to the remainder of the mailing list informing them of the availability of the EA. The EA was posted on the Flathead National Forest website at www.fs.fed.us/r1/flathead/nepa

A legal notice was published in the *Daily Inter Lake* on May 7, 2007 announcing the completion and availability of the Red Whale Project EA. The public was provided 30 days to comment on the Red Whale EA. We received over 40 letters, phone calls, and emails commenting on the EA. A summary of these comments and our responses to them are attached to this decision as Appendix C. These comments were fully considered in my decision.

IV. ISSUES

Issues were identified from our early public involvement efforts and were used to develop alternatives to the proposed action. The following issues were determined to be relevant within the scope of the purpose and need and the effects of these issues were evaluated in the EA.

1. Grizzly bear security is not adequately addressed in the proposed action because Amendment 19 objectives are not fully being met.

The Proposed Action (Alternative 2) makes improvements to grizzly bear security with its wheeled motorized access management strategy. However, some feel that the proposed reductions in motorized access do not go far enough in improving security for bears.

2. Lynx habitat should not be impacted by the fuels reduction treatments.

Some of the proposed fuels reduction treatment units are considered suitable lynx habitat. There are concerns that some of the proposed treatments would reduce lynx foraging habitat potential.

3. Thinning could break up hiding cover and travel corridors for wildlife species.

The mechanical fuels treatments are located on NFS lands adjacent to private or DNRC properties. There are some concerns that NFS lands may be the only undeveloped areas within this wildland-urban interface and may be providing some of the more suitable hiding cover and/or travel corridors for wildlife between the interior NFS lands and Glacier National Park.

4. There is a need to enlarge treatment areas and improve connectivity of treated areas to be more effective in severe burning conditions.

There were some that felt that the effectiveness of the fuels treatments would be improved if the treated areas were enlarged, particularly on the south and west sides of private properties.

V. ALTERNATIVES

Alternatives Considered in Detail

The EA considered the Proposed Action (Alternative 2) and three alternatives in detail. Alternative 1 is the No Action Alternative, under which the project area would have no fuels treatments, prescribed burning, or access management changes (including access to state lands) at this time, and would remain subject to natural or ongoing changes only. Alternatives 3 and 4 represent different ways to satisfy the purpose and need by responding with different emphasis to the issues discussed earlier in this Decision Notice.

Alternative 1 (No Action)

The emphasis of this alternative is to represent the existing condition against which the other alternatives are compared. Alternative 1 proposes no fuels reduction, prescribed burning or access management changes within the Red Whale Project area at this time. It does include those

activities listed as ongoing and foreseeable actions in Chapter 3 of the EA. It does not preclude activities in other areas at this time, nor does it preclude activities in the Red Whale Project area in the future. Refer to pages 2-4 and 2-5 in the Red Whale EA for the full text of this alternative.

Alternative 2

Alternative 2 was developed to respond specifically to the purpose and need for action. It focuses on fuel reduction treatments, wildlife security and habitat improvements, and providing long-term access to state land NW of Polebridge.

Approximately 2,078 acres of National Forest System lands would have had fuels reduced in 41 distinct areas. To achieve wildlife habitat improvement goals, eight different areas encompassing approximately 1,364 acres would have been prescribed burned. To improve grizzly bear security, approximately 4.6 miles of yearlong open roads would have been seasonally closed and about 0.5 miles of Moran Creek Road would have been bermed. Additionally, 24.0 miles of trail would have been closed to wheeled motorized vehicles. Some of the Amendment 19 motorized access density parameters would have improved due to these changes to roads and trails access. Within the Hay Creek Grizzly Bear Subunit, open motorized access density (OMAD) would have improved to 24%, total motorized access density (TMAD) would have remained at 13%, and security core would have improved to 55%. Within the Red Meadow Moose Grizzly Bear Subunit, OMAD would have remained at 25%, TMAD would have remained at 17%, and security core would have improved to 68%.

Alternative 3

This alternative was designed to respond to issues related to lynx and other wildlife species.

Under Alternative 3, approximately 927 acres of NFS lands would have had fuels reduced in 21 different areas. To achieve wildlife habitat improvement goals, six different units encompassing approximately 1,192 acres would have been prescribed burned. To improve grizzly bear security, approximately 12.8 miles of currently open roads and about 25.1 miles of currently open trail would have been closed yearlong to wheeled motorized vehicles. The Amendment 19 motorized access density parameters would have improved due to these changes to road and trail access. Within the Hay Creek Grizzly Bear Subunit, OMAD would have improved to 13%, TMAD would have remained at 13%, and security core would have improved to 68%. Within the Red Meadow Moose Grizzly Bear Subunit, OMAD would have improved to 19%, TMAD would have remained at 17%, and security core would have improved to 72%.

Alternative 4

This alternative responded to issues regarding a need to enlarge treatment areas and improve connectivity of the treated areas to be more effective under severe burning conditions.

In Alternative 4, approximately 3,583 acres would have had fuels reduced in 58 different areas. To achieve wildlife habitat improvement goals, nine different areas encompassing approximately 1,431 acres would have been prescribed burned. To improve grizzly bear security, approximately

4.6 miles of currently yearlong open roads would have been closed seasonally and 4.0 miles would have been closed yearlong. About 18.0 miles of currently open trail would have been closed yearlong to wheeled motorized vehicles. Some of the Amendment 19 motorized access density parameters would have improved due to the changes to road and trail access. Within the Hay Creek Grizzly Bear Subunit, OMAD would have improved to 26%, TMAD would have remained at 13%, and security core would have improved to 53%. Within the Red Meadow Moose Grizzly Bear Subunit, OMAD would have remained at 25%, TMAD would have remained at 17%, and security core would have improved to 68%.

Comparison of Features of the Alternatives (Includes Decision)

The following table provides a tabular comparison of the features of the alternatives described above including how the decision compares with each of the alternatives:

Table 1. Comparison of Features of the Alternatives (Including the Decision)

Proposal Feature	Alternative 1	Alternative 2	Alternative 3	Alternative 4	Decision
Mechanical Fuels Reduction					
Estimated Acres of Thinning/Patch Seedtree with a Commercial Product	0 acres	1,454 acres	833 acres	2,074 acres	1,781 acres
Estimated Acres of Sapling Tree Thinning	0 acres	624 acres	94 acres	1,509 acres	1,026 acres
Total Acres	0 acres	2,078 acres	927 acres	3,583 acres	2,807 acres
Prescribed Burning					
Total Acres of Prescribed Burns	0 acres	1,363 acres	1,192 acres	1,431 acres	1,114 acres
Anticipated Acres Directly Affected by Burns	0 acres	~ 650 acres	~ 560 acres	~700 acres	~ 560 acres
New Road Easement to Access State Land					
New Road Easement	0 miles	0.3 miles	0.3 miles	0.3 miles	0.3 miles
Access Management					
Year-round Trail Closures to Wheeled Motorized Vehicles	0 miles	24 miles	25 miles	18 miles	24 miles
Seasonal Trail Closures to Wheeled Motorized Vehicles	0 miles	0 miles	0 miles	6 miles	0 miles
Currently Open Roads to be Closed Seasonally to Wheeled Motorized Vehicles	0 miles	5 miles	0 miles	5 miles	8 miles
Currently Open Roads to be Closed Yearlong to Wheeled Motorized Vehicles	0 miles	0 miles	13 miles	4 miles	0 miles

Proposal Feature	Alternative 1	Alternative 2	Alternative 3	Alternative 4	Decision
Amendment 19 Standards by Subunit					
Open Motorized Access Density					
Hay Creek	39%	24%	13%	26%	24%
Red Meadow Moose	25%	25%	19%	25%	25%
Total Motorized Access Density					
Hay Creek	13%	13%	13%	13%	13%
Red Meadow Moose	17%	17%	17%	17%	17%
Security Core					
Hay Creek	41%	55%	68%	53%	55%
Red Meadow Moose	52%	68%	72%	68%	68%

Alternatives Not Considered in Detail

The planning team also considered one alternative that was evaluated but dropped from detailed study. This alternative considered logging the prescribed burning units prior to igniting them with fire. The EA on pages 2-52 and 2-53 provided the rationale as to why it was dropped from further analysis and consideration.

VI. DECISION

As the responsible official for this project, I have selected components of the fuel reduction, wildlife habitat and security, and state access activities from several alternatives within the Red Whale Project EA. I have also incorporated into my decision the following items in Chapter 2 of the EA, section IV. Design Criteria (Features Common to All Action Alternatives). This section has also been included in Appendix B of this document.

Fuel Reduction

The fuel reduction units chosen in the decision are a combination of the three action alternatives (Alternatives 2, 3, and 4) presented in the Red Whale EA. Every unit in each of the action alternatives was considered individually before being retained, dropped or changed. Some units were dropped in their entirety due to concern for lynx habitat (Units A, 4K, 4L), wildlife security or cover (Units GG, 4A, 4E, A), lack of access (Unit FF), because they are already in a desirable forest condition for fuels (Unit W and portions of GG), or because they are considered to be a low priority for fuels reduction (Units A, FF, GG, 4A).

The following table lists each fuel reduction unit included within the decision and the primary alternative it was derived from. The table describes if further changes were made to the configuration of the unit based on field review and public comment.

Table 2. Fuel Reduction Units Included in the Decision and Alternative They Were Selected From

Fuel Reduction Unit	Alternative it was Selected From
C[1], F, H, K[4], L[4], N, O[4], P[4], S[4], T, U, V, X, Y, Z, HH, DD	Alternative 2 and 4
D[1], E, I, J[2]	Alternative 3
4B, 4C, 4D, 4F, 4G, 4H, 4I[5], 4J, 4M, 4N, 4P, 4Q, 4R	Alternative 4
B, G, Q[4], R, BB, CC, EE	Alternatives 2, 3, and 4
M[3]	Components of all action alternatives

[1] Unit reduced in size to provide an area of visual screening for wildlife
[2] Unit reduced in size because (1) the northwest corner of the unit is located in grizzly bear security core and could not be treated in the winter season (dense sapling stand); and (2) south portion of unit left untreated to retain wildlife hiding cover.
[3] Unit reduced in size and configuration to provide cover in this important wildlife corridor.
[4] Units reduced in size and/or boundary adjusted to buffer creeks or exclude known riparian areas.
[5] Unit reduced in size to exclude area of higher lynx habitat value

The units selected for mechanical fuels treatment are strategically located within the project area focusing on lands closest to private property while minimizing resource impacts. Approximately 2,807 acres of National Forest System lands will have fuels reduced on 58 distinct areas (refer to Map 2 - Project Decision Map). All treatment areas have suitable terrain (slopes <35%) for the use of mechanized equipment (feller bunchers, rubber tired skidders, excavators, log processors, chippers/masticators, etc) to remove trees, slash, and other excess woody material. Some work may also be carried out by hand, particularly in the sapling thinning areas, although mechanized equipment may be used in these areas.

Private contractors and Forest Service crews will be used to accomplish thinning, tree removal, prescribed burning, and/or slash disposal work. Small sawlogs, posts, poles, pulpwood, and firewood are all potential commercial materials that may be removed from some of the mechanized fuel reduction units. Approximately 6.5 mmbf of sawlog and non-sawlog material may be removed as a result of treatments.

Current forest conditions within the mechanical treatment units fall into one of five forest stand groups. Because of differing forest stand conditions, different treatments (or prescriptions) will occur within these groups. Tables 3 and 4 below display a summary of acres for each stand group and the acres of each treatment type. A description of the stand groups and treatments follows these tables.

Table 3. Acres Treated by Treatment Type

Treatment Type	Treatment Acres in Decision
Light Understory Thin	28
Thinning of Sapling[1] Stands	921
Thinning of Sapling Stands (30% of the total unit area will be treated; remainder will be left untreated).	118

Treatment Type	Treatment Acres in Decision
Thinning of Sapling/Small Tree[2] Stands	594
Thinning of Small/Medium[3] Tree Stands	1,041
Patch Seedtree of Lodgepole Pine Stands	105
Total Acres	**2,807**

[1]Sapling stands are stands of trees generally <25 ft tall, ≤5" dbh, and 17 - 30 years old.
[2]Sapling/Small Tree stands are stands of trees mostly ≤8" dbh (diameter at breast height, 4.5 feet from the ground) and from 30 - 70 years old.
[3]Small/Med Tree stands are stands of trees mostly ≤12" dbh and 70 - 90 years old

Table 4. Acres Treated by Stand Group

Stand Group	Treatment Acres in Decision
1 (Mature lodgepole)	263
2 (70 to 90 year mixed species)	1,092
3 (Mixed species 70 to 120+ yrs)	28
4 (Past harvest up to 50 yrs old)	668
5 (Dense 18-year old sapling – Red Bench Fire)	756
Total Acres	**2,807**

Stand Group 1 This group is composed of stands dominated by mature 70 - 90 year old lodgepole pine. These generally single-story stands originated after large fires that occurred between 1910 and 1926. The lodgepole stands are typically densely stocked with small diameter trees. There are usually few understory trees in these closed canopy stands, in some stands there are heavy concentrations of downfall.

Fuel Treatments In some of the units a thinning will occur, leaving about 70 - 130 trees per acre (spacing between trees averaging 18 - 25 feet). Adequate numbers of trees will be retained on these sites to manage into the future. In other units a patch seedtree treatment will occur, which will create small irregular shaped openings across portions of the dense lodgepole pine stand. Long-lived, fire-resistant larch and Douglas-fir will be planted, allowing the establishment of a new stand of trees of more diverse species mix. These species need open conditions to grow well. In all units, all existing larch and Douglas-fir trees will be left (unless in poor condition), as will most hardwood trees; some of these trees may need to be felled for operational reasons. Most of the understory trees (mainly scattered spruce and subalpine fir) will be removed, although some may be left to provide species and forest structure diversity.

Stand Group 2 This group is composed of mixed species, single age stands usually consisting of western larch and lodgepole pine, with minor amounts of Douglas-fir, spruce, and subalpine fir. Similar to Group 1, these stands are the result of fires that occurred between 1910 and 1926 and are 70 - 90 years old. They are well stocked with tree sizes ranging from 6"- 12" diameter. There

are varying densities of understory trees from sparse to dense, mostly shade-tolerant species such as spruce and subalpine fir. Downed wood amounts tend to be moderate to light.

Fuel Treatments In these units a thinning treatment will occur, selecting the larger, healthier trees for leave and favoring larch, Douglas-fir, and lodgepole pine, in that order. Most understory trees will be removed, except where left at low densities to provide some species and structural diversity. Trees will be left at an average spacing of 18 - 25 feet (about 70 - 130 trees per acre), but spacing will vary in order to allow selection of the best trees. Hardwood trees will be left unless they must be felled for operational reasons.

Stand Group 3 This group is composed of mixed species and multi-aged stands with western larch, spruce, lodgepole pine, Douglas-fir, and subalpine fir all present in various amounts. Trees in the main forest canopy range from about 70 to over 120 years old. The understory is moderately to densely stocked with spruce, subalpine fir, and Douglas-fir in some stands.

Fuel Treatments A light understory thin will occur in these units, removing trees in the lower canopy layers, particularly those that extend into the crowns of the overstory. Scattered overstory trees may be removed if in particularly poor condition, but most of the overstory will be retained. Leave tree density will range from 110 - 140 trees per acre.

Stand Group 4 This group includes areas that have been harvested in the past 50 years and currently consist of saplings and small trees (most less than 8" diameter), ranging from about 20 - 50 years old. They are predominately western larch and lodgepole pine, although some stands have spruce, Douglas-fir, and subalpine fir. Trees are generally healthy with good crowns, especially those that have had some thinning in the past. High tree densities in some stands are impeding growth. Downed wood amounts tend to be very light.

Fuel Treatments A thinning will occur, favoring the healthiest trees of best form for leave trees, and western larch and Douglas-fir over lodgepole pine and other species. The spacing of leave trees will be variable depending upon stand age and tree size, but will range from about 15 - 25 feet.

Stand Group 5 This group includes stands that originated from the 1988 Red Bench Fire. They consist of very densely stocked 17 year old sapling stands, <15 feet tall, dominated by lodgepole pine or western larch. The exceedingly high tree densities have severely impacted tree growth and crown development in most of these stands. Downed wood amounts are variable with some areas having heavy concentrations of small diameter trees (trees killed in the 1988 fire that have now fallen).

Fuel Treatments A thinning will occur, favoring western larch as a leave tree where present, but lodgepole pine will be the primary species left in many stands due to its dominance. Spacing of individual or small clumps/strips of trees will vary from about 6 - 15 feet or more, with the trees in better condition selected for leave trees where possible. Treatment units T4, Y1, Y2, and Y3 are each shown on the map as one large area, however, thinning will only take place on 30% of the total area in these four units. The areas thinned will be of irregular shape, size, and leave tree densities, designed with both fuel reduction and lynx habitat objectives in mind.

Table 5 lists each treatment unit with acreage, the actual estimated treated acreage, stand group, specific treatment type, and required season of activities. Seasonal restrictions on mechanized activities are designed primarily to reduce displacement of grizzly bears during project implementation. This is particularly important in the northern portion of the project area, in the Lower Whale Grizzly Bear Subunit, where fire suppression and salvage activities have been occurring since 2003.

Table 5. Treatment Units in Decision

Unit	Total Acres	Est. Treat-ment Acres	Stand Group	Est. Planting Acres	Treatment Type	Treatment Considerations[1]/ Season Requirements[2]
Mechanical Treatment Units						
B	40	16	1	16	Patch seedtree	Logging/fuel reduction during bear denning season
C	9	9	1	9	Patch seedtree	None specified
D1	75	75	1	14	Thin sapl/small tree	Logging during bear denning season; fuel reduction in north part during bear denning season. West portion no restriction on fuel reduction.
D2	10	10	1		Thin small/med tree	Logging/fuel reduction during bear denning season
E	31	31	2		Thin small/med tree	Logging/fuel reduction during bear denning season
F	61	61	2		Thin small/med tree	Use of temporary access road on NF lands and logging limited to bear denning season (road is in grizzly bear security core). No restriction on fuel reduction if private access is obtained
G	196	196	4		Thin sapl/small tree	None specified
H	78	78	2		Thin small/med tree	Logging during bear denning season/no restriction on fuel reduction
I1	3	3	3		Light understory thin	None specified
I2	4	4	3		Light understory thin	None specified
I3	3	3	3		Light understory thin	None specified
J	19	19	4		Thin sapl	None specified
K	50	50	4		Thin sapl/small tree	None specified
L	125	125	2	23	Thin small/med tree	None specified
M1	9	9	2		Thin small/med tree	None specified

Unit	Total Acres	Est. Treat-ment Acres	Stand Group	Est. Planting Acres	Treatment Type	Treatment Considerations[1]/ Season Requirements[2]
M2	38	38	2		Thin small/med tree	**West of North Fork Road:** None specified **East of NF Road** (except NE corner): No treatment July 1-Sept. 1, otherwise treat weekdays only, 8am-8pm (Schnaus Cabin) **Extreme NE corner:** Treat weekdays only Sept.2-Jan.31 (eagle nest)
N	44	44	2		Thin small/med tree	None specified
O	29	29	4		Thin sapl/small tree	None specified
P1	22	22	1		Thin small/med tree	None specified
P2	37	37	2		Thin small/med tree	None specified
Q	45	32	1	32	Patch seedtree	None specified
R	40	28	1	28	Patch seedtree	None specified
S1	9	9	5	5	Thin sapl	None specified
S2	5	5	5	2	Thin sapl	None specified
S3	38	38	5	19	Thin sapl	None specified
S4	46	46	5		Thin sapl	None specified
T1	10	10	5	5	Thin sapl	None specified
T2	17	17	5	7	Thin sapl	None specified
T3	10	10	5	5	Thin sapl	None specified
T4	283	85	5	42	Thin sapl 30%	None specified
U	9	9	5	4	Thin sapl	None specified
V	11	11	5	5	Thin sapl	None specified
X	34	34	5		Thin sapl	None specified
Y1	53	16	5	8	Thin sapl 30%	None specified
Y2	26	26	5		Thin sapl	None specified
Y3	58	17	5		Thin sapl 30%	None specified
Z	14	14	5	7	Thin sapl	None specified
BB	110	110	4		Thin sapl/small tree	Soil concerns - mechanized treatments in winter only
CC	42	42	1	8	Thin small/med tree	None specified
DD	98	98	2		Thin small/med tree	None specified
EE1	9	9	1		Thin small/med tree	None specified
EE2	18	18	3		Light understory thin	None specified

Unit	Total Acres	Est. Treat-ment Acres	Stand Group	Est. Planting Acres	Treatment Type	Treatment Considerations[1]/ Season Requirements[2]
EE3	9	9	4		Thin sapl	None specified
HH1	13	13	4		Thin sapl	None specified
HH2	27	20	1	20	Patch seedtree	None specified
4B	102	102	2	75	Thin small/med tree	Logging during bear denning season. Fuel reduction during bear denning season (portion in Grizzly bear security core).
4C	76	76	4		Thin sapl	None specified
4D	119	119	4		Thin sapl	None specified
4F	47	47	4		Thin sapl	None specified
4G	13	13	5	4	Thin sapl	None specified
4H	40	40	5		Thin sapl	None specified
4I	204	204	5		Thin sapl	None specified
4J	152	152	5		Thin sapl	None specified
4M	78	78	2		Thin small/med tree	None specified
4N	153	153	2		Thin small/med tree	None specified
4P	134	134	2		Thin sapl/small tree	None specified
4Q	100	100	2		Thin small/med tree	None specified
4R	4	4	2		Thin small/med tree	None specified
Total	**3,138**	**2,807**		**338**		
Prescribed Burn Units						
1	380	190	6		Prescribed burn	
2	116	70	6		Prescribed burn	
3	40	30	6		Prescribed burn	
7	270	110	6		Prescribed burn	
8	308	120	6		Prescribed burn	
Total	**1,114**	**520**				

[1]In the context of this table, "Logging" refers to the removal and hauling away of commercial timber products. "Fuel reduction" refers to the on-site disposal of logging slash and non-commercial material (i.e. by chipping/ mastication, piling/burning, etc)

[2]To minimize effects to grizzly bears during the critical spring period, fuel reduction treatments such as logging will not occur from April 1 through June 30. Exceptions to this seasonal limitation are detailed in the Design Criteria section of the Red Whale EA (Chapter 2), and in Appendix B of this document.

Slash and Down Wood Treatment

Within all treatment units, downed wood, including existing fuels and those created by the tree cutting activities, will be reduced to a relatively low level (10 – 12 tons/acre) to reduce potential surface fire intensity. Larger diameter (>12") downed wood will be left, when available, to provide for long-term soil productivity and wildlife needs. Removal of slash and concentrations of downed wood will occur by physical removal from the site, chipping/mastication, or excavator piling/burning (in order of preference). Methods used will depend upon a variety of factors including amount of slash or downed wood, soil conditions, visual sensitivity, ease of access, etc. Burning of piles is dependant on weather and fuel conditions identified in the burn plan. The weather and fuel conditions are considered to allow for slash consumption and to reduce the risk of an escaped fire.

Conifer Regeneration Treatments

Most of the units will be thinned, leaving at least 70 trees per acre; regeneration of a new stand of conifers is not an objective in these units. However, in the patch seedtree units and in some of the sapling thinning units within Stand Group 5 (the very dense lodgepole pine stands regenerated after the 1988 Red Bench Fire) conifer regeneration is an objective to establish a new, young, vigorous stand of trees with greater species diversity. Larch and Douglas-fir will be planted where they are not expected to naturally regenerate. These species are more long-lived and fire-resistant than lodgepole pine. The decision calls for about 338 acres to be planted with larch and Douglas-fir, including approximately 105 acres of patch seedtree openings and about 233 acres of thinned areas. See Table 5 above for units to be planted and the estimated planting acreage.

Access to Units

Most units will be accessed using existing county or National Forest System (NFS) roads (Map 3 - Access Map). Some of the NFS roads to be used are currently closed to motorized use yearlong (Table 6), and some units will require construction of short temporary roads. If temporary roads or closed NFS roads are used to access units, mitigation for the temporary loss of grizzly bear security will occur. This mitigation may include treating the unit only during the bear denning period (i.e. winter) or temporarily closing other open roads within the affected grizzly bear subunit while the temporary road or closed road is being used. The latter measure is to mitigate for the temporary increase in motorized access. These roads will not be open to the public. The details of this mitigation could be as follows:

> If fuel treatments do <u>not</u> occur in the winter season within unit S1, S2, S3, S4, 4G, 4H, 4I, and 4J, a portion of the Moose Creek Road (from about the junction with Road 5234 to the end of the Moose Creek Road, approximately 1.2 miles) will be closed to wheeled motorized use while currently closed roads are temporarily re-opened to treat these units. It may take up to 4 seasons for the treatments to be completed. Since these units involve sapling thinning, it is unlikely that treatments will take place during the winter unless there were low snow accumulations.

If fuel treatments do not occur in the winter season within Units T1, T2, T3, T4, Y1, Y2, Y3, HH1, and HH2 the Moran Creek Road will be closed to wheeled motorized use during the time currently closed roads are used to access the units. It is expected that it may take 2 to 3 seasons to complete the work in these units. Some of these units involve sapling thinning and it is unlikely that treatments will take place during the winter.

Table 6. Closed/Temporary Roads Needed for the Decision

Unit	Access Needs	Miles	Subunit
B	Access via currently NFS closed Road #5399 and temporary road (old template exists)	1.7	Lower Whale
D1	Access via new NFS temporary road (will only be needed if commercial products are removed)	0.3	Lower Whale
S1, S2, S3, S4, 4G, 4H, 4I, 4J	Access via currently closed Road #1685	2.5	Red Meadow Moose
T1, T2, T3, T4	Access via currently closed Road #1685	0.4	Hay Creek
Y1, Y2, Y3	Access via currently closed Road #10845	0.5	Hay Creek
HH1, HH2	Access via currently closed Road #1643	0.3	Hay Creek
BB, CC	Access via currently closed Road #10845	0.3	Hay Creek
Total		**6.0**	

All temporary roads will be rehabilitated after use. Snow roads (constructed on top of snow pack or frozen ground) may be used in some mechanized units if they are treated in winter.

There are some units where access from private lands and/or use of private roads is the only feasible option for treatment of the units. These include all or portions of Units CC, P, Q, R, EE, and 4R. Permission from landowners will be necessary and will be pursued during the implementation phase. Other units have the option of access through private lands, but it is not necessary in order to treat the unit. Access through private lands may also be sought for these units during the implementation phase.

There are segments of the existing road system that need improvements in the road surface/stream drainage systems to meet current Montana State Best Management Practices and INFISH standards. The improvements could include additional cross-drains, culverts, drive-through-dips, flappers, filter windrows, sediment traps, etc. Approximately 17.2 miles of haul route roads (roads used to haul potential commercial products) will receive road drainage improvement work. Refer to the Project File, Section T, for a spreadsheet that identifies roads needing improvement work

Wildlife Habitat and Security

Habitat Improvement - Prescribed Burning

Five different units (Units 1, 2, 3, 7, and 8) encompassing approximately 1,114 acres, have been selected for prescribed burning (Map 2 – Project Decision Map). Several of the other prescribed burn units considered (Units 4 and 5) in the EA were not included within the decision because

they occurred in forests with old growth-like conditions that were considered of more value to wildlife in their current unburned condition. Although it could not be confirmed (due to of lack of data) that burn Unit 6 occurred in forests with old growth-like conditions it is located in similar stand conditions as Units 4 and 5 and therefore was also dropped from the decision. Burn Unit 9 was not included in the decision because of concerns that burning may cause additional sediment or instability to Hay Creek.

The selected prescribed burning areas are located on southerly aspects, at elevations generally below 6,000 feet within the Moose Creek, Hay Creek, and Moran Creek drainages. The areas are currently a mix of open, semi-open, and dense forest patches, where Douglas-fir dominates but lodgepole pine, western larch, subalpine fir and spruce occur in localized areas. Whitebark pine occurs at the highest elevations. Forests are mostly young (<100 years old), but some areas contain an older tree component.

The burns will be designed to be low to moderate intensity, with only about 1/3 to 1/2 (approximately 370-560 acres) of the total acreage expected to be directly affected by fire. In order to maintain whitebark pine as a component of suitable habitat, fire will not be applied to stands of healthy whitebark pine (if any) located in the burn units. The objective of the burn is to create a more diverse mix of forested and shrub/forb dominated areas intended to improve early spring range and habitat for wildlife species such as grizzly bear, black bear, elk, deer, and moose. In Unit 1, we will try to avoid targeting fire on approximately 50 acres in the middle portion of the unit (late successional forest).

Although forage resources may be somewhat depleted for the first season post-burn, the land's response to fire is typically to produce an abundant variety of early successional vegetation including grasses, forbs, and shrubs. Burns that occur on southerly slopes tend to produce especially important spring foraging sites for wildlife. This is because these sites tend to be the first snow-free areas with exposed 'greened-up' forage that provides vital nutrition to ungulates that have been living primarily on low-value shrub twigs and stems all winter. For bears, having nutrient-rich vegetation available as forage is important after den emergence.

Prescribed fire plans (burn plans) will include plans for ignition, holding, escaped fire contingency, mop-up, and patrol. This is to ensure that each burn meets the objectives prescribed for that particular area. The plan will be designed to use the prescribed weather, personnel, and equipment needed to control the burn within the identified boundaries. Prescribed burns will generally be ignited using helicopters, and will occur when suitable burn and air quality conditions exist. Ignition of the prescribed burning units within the Moose Creek drainage will be spaced out over at least 2 seasons in order to reduce potential water run-off by allowing some vegetation growth to become re-established before additional burning is initiated. Ignition will not occur in riparian habitat conservation areas in any of the prescribed burn units.

Wildlife Security Improvement

The access management strategy I have chosen to implement from the EA is the Alternative 2 access management proposal with one modification. This modification includes an additional

seasonal wheeled motorized restriction on the Moran Creek Road to provide more security to grizzly bears in the spring (Table 7).

In order to provide increased grizzly bear security, the travel status of approximately 16.0 miles of road will change. Four roads (Hay Creek Road #376, two of its spurs #1680 & 5221, and Moran Creek Road #5241) currently open yearlong will be seasonally open July 1 through November 30. The Benchmark Road (#1681) currently closed yearlong with a gate, will be bermed, and 0.5 miles of Moran Creek Road (#5241) currently open yearlong will be bermed. New berms on roads serving as snowmobile routes (such as the Benchmark Road) will be made negotiable for snowmobiles.

Approximately 23.6 miles of currently open motorized trails will be closed yearlong to wheeled motorized vehicles. Trails to be closed to wheeled motorized use include the Hay Creek Trail (#3), Coal Ridge Trail (#14), Moran Trail (#2), and Coal Creek/Coal Ridge Trail (#239).

Table 7. Access Management

Road Number	Miles	Existing Travel Status	Selected Travel Status
1681 (Benchmark Rd.)	7.4	Closed yearlong - gate	Closed yearlong to wheeled motorized vehicles - berm
376 (Hay Creek Rd.)	4.0	Open yearlong	Open seasonally to wheeled motorized vehicles (7/1 – 11/30)
1680 (Hay Creek Spur)	0.3	Open yearlong	Open seasonally to wheeled motorized vehicles (7/1 – 11/30)
5221 (Hay Creek Spur)	0.3	Open yearlong	Open seasonally to wheeled motorized vehicles (7/1 – 11/30)
5241 (Moran Creek Rd.)	3.5	Open yearlong	Open seasonally to wheeled motorized vehicles (7/1 – 11/30)
5241 (Moran Creek Rd.)	0.5	Open yearlong	Closed yearlong to wheeled motorized vehicles
Total	**16.0**		
Trail Number	**Miles**	**Existing Travel Status**	**Selected Travel Status**
3 (Hay Creek Trail)	5.6	Open to ATV & motorcycles yearlong	Closed yearlong to wheeled motorized vehicles
14 (Coal Ridge Trail)	12.3	Open to motorcycles from 7/1 – 8/31	Closed yearlong to wheeled motorized vehicles
2 (Moran Creek Trail)	2.9	Open to motorcycles from 7/1 – 8/31	Closed yearlong to wheeled motorized vehicles
239 (Coal Creek/Coal Ridge Trail)	2.8	Open to ATV & motorcycles yearlong	Closed yearlong to wheeled motorized vehicles
Total	**23.6**		

Because of these access changes, certain grizzly bear security parameters will improve. Table 8 includes current and expected changes to open motorized access and security core that will result from the implementation of the decision.

Table 8. Amendment 19 Parameters in the Hay Creek and Red Meadow Moose Grizzly Bear Subunits[1]

Access Parameters	Current Condition	Decision
Hay Creek Grizzly Bear Subunit		
Open Motorized Access Density (OMAD)	39%	24%
Total Motorized Access Density (TMAD)	13%	13%
Security Core	41%	55%
Red Meadow Moose Grizzly Bear Subunit		
Open Motorized Access Density (OMAD)	25%	25%
Total Motorized Access Density (TMAD)	17%	17%
Security Core	52%	68%

[1]The Lower Whale grizzly bear subunit is the third subunit contained within the project area. Access management was recently addressed in this subunit with the 2004 Record of Decision on the Robert-Wedge Post-Fire Project. This project amended Amendment 19 objectives to the following: OMAD of 37% and Security Core of 47%. The objective for TMAD did not need amending because the Lower Whale subunit meets or exceeds this particular objective once all previous decisions in the area are completed.

State Access

This portion of the selected action addresses long-term Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) access needs to Section 16 within Township 35N, Range 21W. This is a state owned parcel of land located approximately 1.5 miles northwest of Polebridge along the North Fork Flathead River. The decision will involve constructing approximately 0.3 miles of new road across Flathead National Forest lands (Map 3 - Access Map), thereby providing access to the DNRC parcel of land. An easement will be granted to the State of Montana for this road, and the road will be gated yearlong.

This page left intentionally blank.

Map 2 – Red Whale Project Decision – North Half

This page left intentionally blank.

Map 2 – Red Whale Project Decision – South Half

This page left intentionally blank.

Map 3 – Access Map

This page intentionally left blank.

VII. RATIONALE FOR THE DECISION

I have selected certain actions from each alternative to form the final decision. I have made my decision based on the information in the Environmental Assessment (EA) and the Project File, consideration of issues and public comments, and from my field review of the project area. I have determined my decision is consistent with all laws, regulations, and agency policies, and I have considered the potential cumulative effects and reasonably foreseeable activities. I believe my decision provides the best array of management activities to respond to the purpose and need, issues, and public comments. The decision best responds to the purpose and need of reducing wildland fuels by authorizing the treatment of the higher priority areas for fuels treatments while maintaining and improving habitat quality for wildlife species, specifically lynx and grizzly bears. It responds well to improving wildlife foraging opportunities by prescribed burning on suitable sites within the project area, yet also preserves old forest values that are important to wildlife. In addition, the access needs of the State of Montana are being met with this decision with no significant environmental effects.

The criteria I used to make my decision on this project included:

- Achievement of the project's purpose and need
- Relationship to environmental and social issues, and public comments

Meeting the Purpose and Need

I have given strong consideration to the need to reduce fuels in the project area. My staff has had numerous discussions with the North Fork community for many years about concerns of hazardous fuels. These concerns have been heightened due to the recent large fires in the North Fork during 1988 (Red Bench), 2001 (Moose), and 2003 (Robert and Wedge Canyon). The North Fork Valley does not have a designated fire district, but concerned citizens have formed a Fire Mitigation Committee to determine what can and should be done to mitigate risk from wildfire on private property. They have identified priority fuel reduction areas within the North Fork including areas from Whale Creek south to Moose Creek, from Hawk Creek south to the Red Bench Fire area, and in the Hay Creek area; these priority areas correspond with the Red Whale Project area. I have been pleased with these efforts and with adjacent landowners who have indicated support for the project via written or verbal comments and their willingness to allow the use of their lands to help facilitate fuel reduction treatments on National Forest System lands.

My decision includes almost 3,000 acres of wildland-urban interface (WUI) fuel reduction treatments in a variety of stand conditions, including sapling stands originating from the Red Bench Fire, mature lodgepole pine stands, mixed species stands from around 70 - 100 years old, and past-harvested stands. In mature stands, treatments will focus on removing the smaller, less fire-resistant trees and will emphasize the retention of larger, fire-resistant species. In sapling stands, thinning while favoring fire-tolerant species as leave trees will be the focus of treatments. The fuels analysis indicates the treatments should help reduce the potential for crown fires and high-intensity surface fires due to changes in fire behavior (i.e. reductions in rate of spread, flame length, and crown fire potential). The resulting situation should enable firefighters to more

efficiently suppress future fires within this wildland-urban environment. More treatments than were originally included in the proposed action (approximately 400 acres from Alternative 4) are incorporated in this decision to improve the overall connectivity of the fuel treatments. The vast majority of these additional acres are located in sapling stands where treatments should also improve overall stand health.

In addition to reducing potential fire intensity, I believe my decision will create more sustainable forest conditions by improving overall stand health. Growing space, individual tree vigor, and the ability to withstand pests and pathogens should be improved in the treated forest stands, especially in those stands where tree growth has been severely limited due to high densities (such as the sapling stands in the 1988 Red Bench Fire area). Some of the sapling stands in the Red Bench Fire area have greater than 10,000 trees per acre. Increased opportunities for the establishment of more fire-tolerant species, such as western larch regeneration, should result from the creation of more open stand conditions.

Another important need of this project is to improve security for grizzly bears by changing motorized access management. Access management continues to be one of the most challenging issues on this Forest as reflected in the nature of comments we received on this project. Some commenters cited the need to restrict motorized access to meet Amendment 19 standards, while others expressed equal concern over the cumulative loss of motorized recreational opportunities and the increasing inability to access and manage National Forest System lands. In making my decision, I weighed the need to decrease wheeled motorized access to improve security for bears against the social need to continue to provide motorized access to private, state, and federal lands. Professionals involved in the recovery of grizzly bears in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) have mentioned the need for balanced approaches to support recovery of this species and social support is a critical element in achieving this balance. In October 2005 (a little less than a year before this project was initially proposed to the public), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) published a Biological Opinion (BO) on the Effects of the Flathead National Forest Plan Amendment 19 Revised Implementation Schedule on Grizzly Bears (Project File Exhibit N-4b). This BO was in response to our proposal to continue to reduce motorized impacts and provide security core habitat for grizzly bears in the Flathead National Forest's portion of the NCDE but over an extended timeframe than what was originally associated with Amendment 19. In this BO, the USFWS reviewed their previous assumptions and updated analyses in several previous consultations. Additionally, they considered the current environmental baseline in their review, including the grizzly bear subunits associated with the Red Whale Project. The USFWS concluded the proposed extension of time for achieving Amendment 19 requirements would result in "take" due to displacement of grizzly bears, specifically female bears, from essential habitat. They expected "take" in the form of harm or harassment as a result of disturbance from roads or from alternation of habitat. Additionally, they determined they did not expect adult or subadult grizzly bear mortality because of displacement.

During our consultation with USFWS on the Red Whale Project, they concluded the project is in compliance with the 2005 BO. Additionally, they believe this project is improving existing baseline conditions by increasing security for grizzly bears with the proposed reductions in motorized use. Although potential displacement of bears as a result of this project may occur, it is not expected to cause grizzly bear mortality. In the event there is discovery of any human-

caused grizzly bear mortality in the subunits directly associated with this project, the Forest will reinitiate consultation with the USFWS.

In assessing the issue of wheeled motorized access, I personally visited the area in which motorized use is occurring in the project area and evaluated the on-the-ground conditions and analysis information relative to wildlife security. I believe the reductions in motorized access associated with the selected action will impact motorized recreation. However, I believe that the reductions in motorized access are an important step in assuring additional secure habitat (especially for grizzly bears) in the Red Whale Project area. This decision carefully considered and favored the needs for improving habitat quality while maintaining some motorized access needs of the National Forest System user. The reduction of approximately 24 miles of motorized trails and a change of motorized access on about 16 miles of road continues current Flathead National Forest efforts to favor the recovery of grizzly bear populations. This reduction of motorized access, combined with other projects and Forest programs (signing, gates, food storage orders, etc), are all positive examples of the efforts being made that are contributing to recent population estimates for grizzly bear in the NCDE.

I did not select the alternative that proposed meeting all of the Amendment 19 objectives in the project area immediately (Alternative 3) because I believe the access changes needed to fully address these objectives would have considerable impacts to important historic access routes. I fully considered the effects of these access reductions relative to recent information of an increasing and expanding grizzly bear population combined with the evidence of where grizzly bear mortality is concentrated. As discussed in the 2005 BO "known human caused mortality of grizzly bears on Forest Service lands is consistently lower than rural roaded private lands, despite bears spending significantly more time on Forest lands than private lands." However, I believe that improving habitat security by reducing current levels of motorized use is important to reduce any potential displacement and provide for continued reproduction and population growth over the long term.

There are other potential effects to grizzly bears as a result of project activities besides roads and road use. However, design criteria included in the decision such as season of operation and vegetation screening are expected to avoid or reduce impacts to bears. The USFWS has reviewed this project and concurred that this project would not be likely to adversely affect the grizzly bear (Project File Exhibit N-1).

The final need of this project was to address a Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation request for access across National Forest System lands (0.3 miles) to a parcel of state land. Effects of this road construction/easement were analyzed in the EA, and as a result of this analysis and reviewing public comment I have concluded that this easement should proceed.

Consideration of Issues and Public Comments

My interdisciplinary planning team considered a variety of issues in the process of preparing the proposed action, developing alternatives to respond to those issues, and identifying the consequences of the alternatives in the EA. The following section will address how I believe my decision responds to these issues.

I considered the issue of how thinning affects hiding cover and travel corridors for wildlife (this issue helped to form Alternative 3). The Red Whale Project area is within the North Fork Flathead River drainage, which has abundant hiding cover and important travel corridors. Although there is a potential mortality risk to wildlife due to reductions in hiding cover, leaving vegetative screening, where available, within thinning units adjacent to open roads should reduce impacts to wildlife. Additionally, I did not include fuel treatment units located in some of the more important travel corridors for wildlife species moving between the North Fork Flathead River and the upland drainages. I believe my decision provides a good balance of reducing high-risk fuels while maintaining sufficient hiding cover and travel corridors for wildlife species.

My decision also considered the effects to lynx habitat from the fuel reduction treatments. The Northern Rockies Lynx Management decision (signed by the Regional Forester in March 2007) amended our Flathead National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) and recognized the importance of addressing wildland fire risks to communities. This decision allowed fuel treatments in the WUI that may affect lynx habitat, as long as they occurred within certain limits. These limits included constraining the number of acres that do not meet the vegetation standards to no more than 6% of lynx habitat within a National Forest. This translates to up to 103,800 acres of fuels management over ten years. Since this is the first project on the Flathead National Forest to implement fuel treatments within lynx habitat while in the WUI, we are well within these limits.

Overall, our fuel reduction treatments are affecting 1,165 acres of lynx foraging habitat. I consider these effects non-significant based upon the remaining habitat availability (34,000 acres of foraging habitat within the affected Lynx Analysis Units) and the benefits from the fuel reduction treatments. The USFWS stated in their BO on the Northern Rockies Lynx Amendment (NRLA) (Project File Exhibit N-81), that fuels management in potential lynx habitat (within the WUI) would not jeopardize the lynx. They have reviewed site-specific information from the Red Whale Project, including the Biological Assessment (BA) and the environmental baseline for the action area, and determined the range of effects from this project fall within the range of effects analyzed under the BO for the NRLA. As such, this project would not be likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the Canada lynx (Project File Exhibit N-1A).

I considered the issue of enlarging treatment areas and improving connectivity of treated areas to be more effective in severe burning conditions. While the fuels analysis determined that Alternative 4 would have been the most effective in terms of addressing the fuels portion of the purpose and need, there were other effects primarily to wildlife (cover and corridors) that I believe outweighed the need to treat those fuels at this time. I did include some additional units from Alternative 4 in my decision that I thought were of high value in treating the fuels and that would not cause significant negative consequences to wildlife and their habitat.

My decision is based upon the consideration of the best available science. This science is thoroughly discussed throughout the EA, in the response to comments, and in the Project File documentation. I believe that the implementation of Best Management Practices and Design Criteria reflect the consideration of best available science.

VIII. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY LAWS, REGULATIONS, AND POLICIES

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.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

Consistency with Forest Plan Standards, Goals, and Objectives

The Forest Plan establishes management direction for the Flathead National Forest. This management direction is achieved through the establishment of Forest Goals, Objectives, Standards, and Guidelines, and Management Area goals and accompanying standards and guidelines. Project implementation consistent with this direction is the process through which desired conditions described by the Forest Plan are achieved.

The National Forest Management Act requires that all resource plans are to be consistent with the Forest Plan (16 USC 1604(i)). The EA displays the Forest Plan Management Area goals and objectives applicable to the Red Whale Project area (EA, Chapter 1). The Consistency with the Flathead Land and Resource Management Plan document (Project File) displays the Forest Plan Management Area Goals, Standards, and Guidelines applicable to the Red Whale Project. The management goals of the alternatives and the environmental consequences of the alternatives in relation to the Forest Plan standards and guidelines are described in the EA, Chapter 1.

After reviewing the EA, I find that my decision is consistent with Forest Plan standards, goals, and objectives as amended.

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA)

Suitability for Timber Production

Most of the fuel reduction treatments (includes some commercial tree harvest) are located in management areas that are suitable for timber production. According to the Flathead National Forest Plan there are some units allocated to MA 18 (Wild and Scenic River) that are not classified as suitable for timber production. However, tree harvest can take place in this management area to manage for visual quality, wildlife protection, and water quality. Based on the analysis provided in the EA and Project file, the fuel treatments identified in these areas meet these objectives/standards.

Clearcutting and Even-aged Management

The National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA) directs that clearcutting could be used only where “it is determined to be the optimum method.” Other methods could be used where “determined to be appropriate.”

Thinning is proposed for many of the treatment areas. This is not a regeneration method of harvest, but is an intermediate treatment under an even-aged management system.

In the stands dominated by lodgepole pine, thinning would do poorly at increasing tree species diversity and conversion to more fire-tolerant species. The desired species (specifically larch) require abundant light to establish on a site and grow well. The more shaded conditions in the thinned areas do not provide good or even acceptable growing conditions for this species.

Patch seedtree harvests will occur on 105 acres of dense lodgepole pine dominated forests. This treatment would create irregular sized small openings generally less than 6 acres in size, with no more than about 150 feet to the edge of the opening. Up to 30 or more live trees (larch or Douglas-fir where available, lodgepole if necessary) would be left in the openings. Larch and Douglas-fir, and sometimes western white pine and/or ponderosa pine, would be planted. This treatment is intended to begin the conversion of the stand from a dense, mature lodgepole pine stand (short-lived and susceptible to fire and mountain pine beetle attack) to long-lived, vigorous, fire-tolerant species suited to this site. Larch in particular requires full, or nearly full, light to survive and grow well. The patch seedtree treatment not only meets the purpose and need of the project by reducing the potential for future high-intensity fire, it creates the desired diverse species composition in the stand and across the landscape. This regeneration method is determined to be the optimum method by which to achieve these objectives.

Vegetative Manipulation

All proposals involving vegetative manipulation of tree cover for any purpose must comply with the seven requirements found in 36 CFR 219.27(b).

1. Management prescriptions shall be best suited to the multiple-use goals established for the area with impacts considered in the determination.

- All treatments meet a portion of the goals and objectives in the Forest Plan for designated Management Areas, and meet the purpose and need for action.

2. Management prescriptions shall ensure that the lands can be adequately restocked as provided in 36 CFR 219.27(c)(3)"…assure that the technology and knowledge exist to adequately restock the lands within 5 years after final harvest" (16 USC 1604(g)(E)(ii)).

- Adequate stocking of the units to be thinned will be accomplished by planting tree seedlings, if needed. An estimated 338 acres will be planted in patch seedtree and other thinning units. Site conditions in these units lead me to believe that adequate stocking will be achieved on these sites.

3. Management prescriptions shall not be chosen primarily because they would give the greatest dollar return or the greatest output of timber.

- The Economics section in Chapter 3 of the Red Whale EA describes the economic effects for each alternative.

4. Management prescriptions shall consider the effects on residual trees and adjacent stands.

- Management prescriptions were chosen primarily because they would result in desired environmental and social effects, as defined by the Purpose and Need for Action.

- The analysis considered the effects of management activities and practices on residual trees and adjacent stands as shown in Chapter 3 of the EA. I find the stand treatments and the design criteria are adequate to protect the residual trees and adjacent stands.

5. Management prescriptions shall avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and ensure conservation of soil and water resources.

- The effects of each alternative and its modifications on soil and water resources are disclosed in Chapter 3 of the EA. I find the unit locations, silvicultural systems, riparian protection, logging technology, and post harvest activities, in relationship with the soil and water conservation practices planned, will minimize impairment of site productivity and ensure conservation of soil and water resources. The Best Management Practices (BMP) to be followed in the project are identified in Appendix A of the EA.

6. 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). 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, aesthetic values, and other resource yields.

7. Management prescriptions shall be practical in terms of transportation and harvesting requirements, and total cost of preparing, logging, and administration.

- 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. Equipment and technology that are commonly available are prescribed. 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 Chapter 3 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" [36 CFR 219.27(10)]. NFMA also requires that "all roads are planned and designed to re-establish vegetation cover on the disturbed areas within a reasonable period of time, not to exceed 10 years....unless the road is determined a

necessary permanent addition to the National Forest Transportation System" [36 CFR 219.27(11)].

Management actions associated with the Red Whale Project include the construction of approximately 0.3 miles of new permanent road, and the use of approximately 6.0 miles of currently closed roads and new temporary roads to access treatment units. The new permanent road will be constructed to meet all Best Management Practices Standards, and all temporary roads will be rehabilitated after use (EA, Chapter 2). I believe that we have met the intent of 36 CFR 219.27(10) and (11).

NFMA Diversity

The Forest Plan contains an array of components that contribute to the wildlife/fisheries habitat capability of the Flathead National Forest. Based upon consideration of these components of the Forest Plan, the monitoring and design criteria of the decision, an analysis of effects of the Red Whale Project at the Forest and Regional scale, and the Biological Assessments/Evaluations, I concluded that my decision poses little risk to the diversity of native species. In addition, my conclusion is based on a review of the record that shows a thorough review of relevant scientific information, a consideration of responsible opposing views, and the acknowledgment of incomplete or unavailable information, scientific uncertainty, and risk.

Clean Water Act and Montana State Water Quality Standards

Upon review of the Red Whale Project EA (Chapters 2, 3, and Appendix A – BMPs) I find that activities associated with the decision will comply with the Clean Water Act and Montana State Water Quality Standards, with application of the Best Management Practices as outlined and associated monitoring requirements.

Clean Air Act

Upon review of Chapter 3 in the EA, I find that the activities in my decision will be coordinated to meet the requirements of the State Implementation Plans, Smoke Management Plan, and Federal air quality requirements.

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 this action. 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 thinning operation had begun. This project complies with the Region 1 programmatic agreement (1995) with the State Historic Preservation Office and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation.

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 wildlife BA (Project File Exhibit N-2), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) concurred with the determination that the project is "not likely to adversely affect" the grizzly bear and gray wolf and "likely to adversely affect" the Canada lynx (Project File Exhibit N-1A dated 11/13/07).

The Wildlife Biologist also determined that adverse effects to lynx could occur from the removal of potential lynx foraging habitat because of some of the fuel treatments. The USFWS determined that the direct and indirect effects of the project fall within the range of effects analyzed in the Tier 1 BO for the Northern Rockies Lynx Amendment (amendment to 18 Forest Plans, including the Flathead National Forest Plan). This BO concluded that Canada lynx would not be jeopardized as a result of this amendment. Additionally, the USFWS determined in a Tier 2 BO (specific to the Red Whale Project – same Project File cite as above) that this project will result in incidental "take" in terms of habitat modification, but is well within the "take" allowed in the Tier 1 BO and therefore is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of Canada lynx.

In February 2008, the USFWS proposed to revise designated critical habitat for the contiguous United States distinct population segment of the Canada lynx. The proposed revised designation would add an additional 40,193 mi^2 to the existing critical habitat designation of 1,841 mi^2. A portion of this proposed additional habitat is found on the Flathead National Forest, which includes the Red Whale Project area. The proposed designation of critical habitat does not affect our ongoing formal consultation process with the USFWS on the Red Whale Project (as required under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act). As mentioned above, while the USFWS concluded this project would result in incidental "take" in the form of harm through habitat modification, they also determined that it would not result in jeopardy to the lynx and the proposed project is not likely to result in the destruction or adverse modification of proposed critical habitat.

A BA was completed for bull trout (Project File Exhibit L-3) which determined that effects from the proposed activities, except for culvert removal/upsizing, were "not likely to adversely affect" bull trout. The USFWS concurred with this determination (Project File Exhibit L-4 dated 8/31/07). The effects of the culvert removals/upsizing were analyzed in the EA and although these effects were not addressed in the above BA, they were covered under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's April 29, 2008 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 (Project File Exhibit L-6).

The Forest Botanist determined in a BA (Project File Exhibit H-6) that there would be "no effect" on the water howellia or Spaulding's catchfly.

Upon review of the Red Whale Project EA Chapter 3, the BAs and Biological Evaluations (BE) for wildlife, plants, and fish, and the BO and Letters of Concurrence from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, I find the decision complies with this Act.

Environmental Justice

The action alternatives were assessed to determine whether they will disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations, in accordance with Executive Order 12898 (EA Chapter 3 - Economics Section). No impacts to minority or low-income populations were identified during scoping or the comment period. Compliance with other laws, regulations, and policies are listed in various sections of the EA, the Project File, and the Forest Plan.

IX. APPEAL PROVISIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION

Copies of the Red Whale EA are available for review at the Hungry Horse Ranger Station in Hungry Horse, Montana, and at the Forest Supervisor's Office in Kalispell, Montana. The supporting Project File is available for review at the Hungry Horse Ranger Station, 10 Hungry Horse Drive, P.O. Box 190340, Hungry Horse, Montana, 59919.

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.

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

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, Portable Document Format (PDF) 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 Jimmy DeHerrera, District Ranger (406-387-3800) or Michele Draggoo, Project Leader (406-387-3827).

_____ _____

CATHY BARBOULETOS **Date**
Forest Supervisor

This page intentionally left blank.