

Chapter 1

Purpose and Need

Introduction

The Tally Lake Ranger District employees are proposing to reduce fuel loads and treat forest health issues related to insect and disease conditions on National Forest System (NFS) lands located on the western side of the north Flathead Valley. This Environmental Assessment (EA)

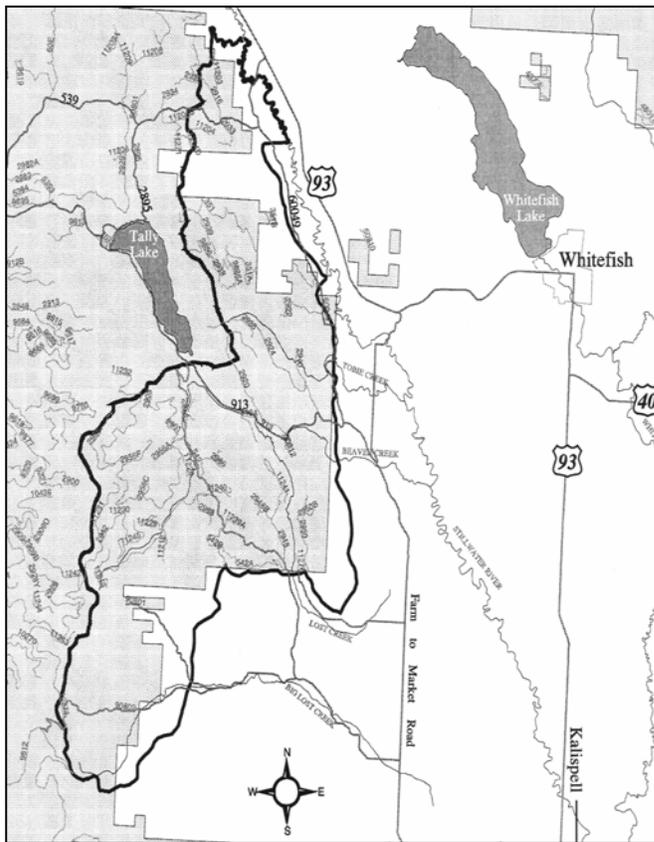


Figure 1-1. Valley Face Analysis Area & Vicinity

will discuss the findings of analysis conducted for the Valley Face Fuels Reduction Project, hereafter referred to as the Valley Face Project. This EA describes the project in detail and analyzes the effects on forest and community resources. Additional documentation, including more detailed analyses of project area resources, may be found in the Project File located at the Tally Lake Ranger District Office in Whitefish, Montana. These records are available for public review. References to project file exhibits in this EA are referred to as simply “Exhibit H-3,” as an example.

The analysis for this EA is being conducted in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations. The Valley Face Project will be conducted under the guidance of the Flathead National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan or Forest Plan (USDA Forest Service 1985) and the authorities of the 2003 Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) (Exhibit U-1).

Three alternatives have been developed for this project; Alternative A is the “no action” alternative, Alternative B is the “proposed action,” and Alternative C responds to issues identified during the public scoping of the proposed action.

Some terms used in this document may be of a technical nature and unfamiliar to the reader. A glossary of definitions is provided in Appendix A.

Project Area Description

As the name implies, the Valley Face Project area generally includes the east-facing slopes of the Salish Mountains that form the western boundary of the north Flathead Valley (see Figure 1-1).

The project area extends approximately from the Round Meadows Recreation Area in the north to the top of the Lost Creek divide above Ashley Lake in the south. The Logan Creek watershed divide is the western boundary of the project area and the valley floor is generally the extent of NFS lands on the east.

Kalispell and Whitefish are the closest incorporated communities, but rural residential development lies along and within the entire analysis area. While the northern and eastern boundaries of the Flathead Valley are defined by steep mountain ranges, the Salish Mountains on the western boundary are more gradual and rolling, with few peaks above 5,000 feet. This less dramatic terrain has in large part determined the historical and current use and development of the area. Whereas relatively little private land exists in the more precipitous mountains around the valley, there are numerous private land holdings in the Salish Mountains, including many within the Valley Face Project area.

The Valley Face Project area is entirely located in Flathead County. The area is managed by the Tally Lake Ranger District, headquartered in Whitefish. The analysis area is located in T29N, R22W, Sec. 6; T29N, R23W, Sec. 1-10, 16-21, 29-30; T29N, R24W, Sec. 1, 12, 13, 24; T30N, R22W, Sec. 7, 18, 19, 30, 31; T30N, R23W, Sec. 1-4, 8-36; T30N, R24W, Sec. 24, 36; and T31N, R23W, Sec. 3, 4, 9-11, 14-16, 21-23, 25-28, 33-36. A map of the analysis area with prominent landscape features, such as roads and streams, is shown in Figure 2-1. **Activities proposed in this EA are only for implementation on NFS land.**

Background

Following the 2000 fire season, Congress directed the Forest Service to identify high-risk wildland/urban interface areas, using the 2000 National Fire Plan Guidelines (www.fireplan.gov). The communities of the Flathead Valley have been identified as “communities at risk” from wildland fire.

On August 22, 2002, President Bush established the Healthy Forests Initiative, directing the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior, and the Council on Environmental Quality, to improve regulatory processes to ensure more timely decisions, greater efficiency, and better results in reducing the risk of catastrophic wildland fires. The Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (P.L. 108-148) contains a variety of provisions to expedite hazardous-fuel reduction and forest-restoration projects on specific types of Federal land that are at risk of wildland fire or insect and disease epidemics.

Recently, a steering committee comprised of Forest Service natural resource specialists, in cooperation with members of the public, local fire departments, and other agencies, have worked to identify areas in the wildland-urban interface that could benefit from fuel reduction and forest health projects. The Valley Face Project area was identified as such an area. This proposal is consistent with and would implement fuels reduction treatments recommended in the *Flathead County Community Wildfire Fuels Reduction /Mitigation Plan* (FCWP). This plan identified the project area as an area with a high risk of catastrophic wildland fire. This plan also highlighted the need to provide for firefighter and public safety in the area.

The proposed activities for the Valley Face Project are based upon findings from a watershed-level assessment conducted by the interdisciplinary team (ID Team). This team includes the same

members who have prepared this EA. The assessment of the project area put forth no decisions, but was conducted to better evaluate the existing condition of key resources within the area on a broader, landscape scale and a desired future range of conditions using public involvement, current management direction, regulations, and laws within a historical context, including information currently being evaluated on larger ecological scales. The Valley Face *Summary of Findings from the Ecosystem Assessment at the Watershed Scale* (EAWS), completed in September 2005, is available in Exhibit U-3. According to findings in the assessment, several management actions appear appropriate at this time. A Proposed Action was then developed through interdisciplinary consideration of resource conditions and public desires.

Existing Condition

The Valley Face area is approximately 35,000 acres in size, including approximately 20,000 acres that are part of the Flathead National Forest. The remaining acreage is in State of Montana (1400 acres) and private (13,700 acres) ownership.

Historically, virtually the entire area was forested, with only small lakes, a few wet meadows, and rock outcrops breaking the natural vegetation pattern of continuous forest. Wildland fire periodically burned portions of the area. Today, timber harvest, agriculture, and residential development have created numerous openings, both large and small, throughout the area. A network of Forest Service and private roads provides access to many sections of the area. Prior to the advent of modern wildland fire suppression practices in the 1930s, the normal fire regime or pattern for the area was typified by relatively infrequent, large fires. Between the years of 1889 and 1931, 5413 acres, or approximately 15% of the Valley Face area burned. However, since 1936, only 85 acres have burned in the area. During this same period, there have been at least 126 identified and suppressed fire starts. The majority of fire ignitions within the area were human-caused (68% since 1985), reflecting the proximity of the area to the populated Flathead Valley.

After wildland fire, the most common natural disturbance agent in the area has been the activity of various insect and disease pathogens. In recent decades, the mountain pine beetle was at epidemic levels in lodgepole pine, causing substantial mortality in mature stands. Currently, bark beetles and fungal root diseases are impacting many acres of Douglas-fir, the dominant conifer in the area. Other tree species in the analysis area, including subalpine fir and grand fir, have been affected by a similar mix of bark beetles and disease-causing organisms. The prolonged drought that has lingered over the region for the past seven years has further weakened the trees and reduced their resistance to these pathogens. Mortality resulting from these various disease vectors has contributed to the accumulation of hazardous fuels in the forests of the area.

The impact of fire suppression and other natural disturbance processes has been the increased accumulation of biomass in most unmanaged timber stands. The biomass is in the form of dead standing and down trees and shrubs, as well as live shade-tolerant true firs, spruce, lodgepole pine, and Douglas-fir. The combination of dead fuel and continuous live vegetation from the forest floor to the upper forest canopy creates a complex of fuel that, when ignited under severe fire conditions, would leave little or no surviving above-ground vegetation. These fuel conditions lead to a decreasing probability of stopping the wildfire before it spreads to adjoining lands.

Noxious weeds exist within the analysis area; the dominant species are spotted knapweed, orange hawkweed, and Canada thistle. Numerous other noxious weeds are present in the area in lesser amounts. Weeds tend to be most prevalent at previously disturbed sites such as along roads and areas cleared for timber harvest or housing construction.

The Valley Face Project area provides a diversity of habitats for most of the species of wildlife that are found in the Flathead National Forest. These include several species listed as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act, and others that are listed as sensitive on the Regional Forester's Sensitive Species List. The southeastern part of the project is very important white-tailed deer winter range, a Management Indicator Species (MIS) for the Flathead National Forest. Suitable habitat is available in the area for the gray wolf, grizzly bear, bald eagle, and Canada lynx. Grizzly bears and wolves are known to travel through the area, although neither species is known to have denned in the Valley Face area. Bald eagles nest at nearby Tally Lake and the Stillwater River. Lynx habitat is abundant and well distributed in the Valley Face area.

Due to previous logging activity, historic fires, and scattered pockets of disease-related mortality, most of the old growth habitat areas are fragmented and include a substantial amount of abrupt edge along stands of younger trees. The largest intact patch of old growth (approximately 750 acres) is northeast of the Mountain Meadows area. Largely due to fire suppression, much of the old growth has high stocking levels (trees per acre) in the understory and mid-story canopy.

The Valley Face Project area is within the Stillwater River basin. It is bounded by the Stillwater River to the east and Logan Creek to the north. However, all of the streams within the project area disappear underground upon reaching the valley floor and none flow into the Stillwater River or Logan Creek. Water quality within Valley Face is generally good. There are several small lakes in the analysis area, the largest of which is 35-acre Bootjack Lake west of Whitefish, which is popular with area fishermen. The remaining lakes are smaller and have no public access. Lost Creek is the most substantial stream in the Valley Face landscape, but sinks subsurface upon reaching the valley floor like the other area streams. Lost Creek was once a much larger stream that was likely the outlet of Tally Lake, but was pushed into its present course by glaciers some 10,000 years ago. A small population of non-native brook trout occupies the upper reaches of the stream.

There are several wetlands and marshes scattered throughout the area that provide good amphibian habitat. Inventories have documented abundant spotted frogs, chorus frogs, and salamanders, as well as low numbers of western toads. No non-native amphibian or reptile species have been detected in the area.

The Valley Face area generally forms the western vista from the Flathead Valley, and for this reason the visual impacts of any land use activity may be more apparent than similar actions in more remote locations. Increasing numbers of homes and clearings can be seen amidst the forest as residential development expands on private lands above the valley floor. Some past timber harvest units on both federal and private land are visible from valley locations.

Purpose and Need

The Valley Face Project is proposed to respond to the goals and objectives of the National Fire Plan, the Flathead County Community Wildfire Fuels Reduction / Mitigation Plan, the Healthy

Forests Initiative, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, the Flathead National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, and input received from members of the public at collaborative meetings held in 2005, as described below. A variety of current conditions and guidance from this direction provide the purpose and need for management action in the Valley Face area. The purpose and need for the proposed management actions is:

- Reduce hazardous fuel to varying degrees across the landscape. Create and expand fuel reduction zones throughout the landscape to enhance fire suppression control efforts by reducing fire intensity.
- Reduce the vulnerability of the forest to large scale, dramatic disturbances from insects, diseases, or unwanted wildland fire, both on a stand basis and across the landscape.

Proposed Action

A “proposed action” is defined early in the project-level planning process. This serves as a starting point for the interdisciplinary team of Forest Service resource specialists and gives the public and other agencies specific information on which to focus comments. Using these comments and information from preliminary analysis, the ID team then develops alternatives to the proposed action. The proposed action and alternatives are discussed in detail in Chapter 2 of this EA; a brief description of the proposed action is below.

The proposed action for the Valley Face Project includes a variety of fuel reduction treatments on a total of 3,912 acres of NFS land. The total includes 2,965 acres of fuel reduction and timber stand health improvement accomplished through commercial timber harvest, and 947 acres utilizing non-commercial fuel reduction methods, primarily using hand tools. The proposal also calls for the construction of 4.5 miles of temporary road and 40.1 miles of rehabilitation and drainage improvements on existing roads.

Decisions to Be Made

The Flathead National Forest Supervisor will decide whether and how to meet the purpose and need in the Valley Face Project area using the environmental analysis in this EA. The decision will be based upon Forest Plan goals, objectives, and the desired future condition for the analysis area. The decision will include:

- The location, design, and scheduling of the proposed activities, temporary road construction and reconstruction, and silvicultural practices;
- Design criteria and monitoring requirements.
- A Finding of No Significant Impact

Relationship to Forest Plan

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

The Forest Plan embodies the provisions of the National Forest Management Act, its implementing regulations, and other guiding documents. The Forest Plan sets forth in detail the direction for managing the land and resources of the Flathead National Forest. Where appropriate, the Valley Face Project EA tiers to the Forest Plan, as encouraged by 40 CFR 1502.20.

The Forest Plan uses management areas to guide management of the NFS lands within the Flathead National Forest. Each management area provides for a unique combination of activities, practices, and uses. The Valley Face Project area includes eight management areas. The goals and primary objective for each management area are summarized in Appendix B; Figure B-1 displays the management area distribution within the project area.

Public Participation, Scoping, and Collaboration

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) defines scoping as "...an early and open process for determining the scope of issues to be addressed and for identifying the significant issues related to a proposed action" (40 CFR 1501.7). Among other things, the scoping process is used to invite public participation, to help identify public issues, and to obtain public comment at various stages of the NEPA process. Collaboration is described as a framework in "A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment: 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan" (Exhibit U-4). The intent of this collaborative framework is to "improve cooperation and communication among all parties at national, regional, and local levels acknowledging that key project planning decisions should be made after collaboration at the local level."

After the *Flathead County Community Wildfire Fuels Reduction/Mitigation Plan* and *Summary of Findings from the Ecosystem Analysis at the Watershed Scale* recommended several management actions, a public involvement strategy was developed to ensure that potentially interested members of the public and other government agencies received timely information about the upcoming analysis so they may collaborate in the process (Exhibit B-1).

In addition to the following public participation processes, the Valley Face Project has been listed on the Flathead National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions since July 1, 2005. To date, the public has been invited to collaborate in designing the project in the following ways:

Community Wildfire Protection Plan Development: The Flathead National Forest has undertaken collaborative efforts beginning in 2001 with various state and Federal agencies (e.g. Montana DNRC, National Park Service) as well as other partners to implement the National Fire Plan. The focus of these efforts was how to best collaborate on reducing risk to communities through fire prevention, staffing, preparedness, fuels treatments/wildland urban interface projects and grant opportunities. These partners helped to review criteria (e.g. condition class, fire starts, crown cover) that have been used to determine priority setting for various fuels reduction projects on the Flathead National Forest.

Beginning in the summer of 2004, the Flathead National Forest participated in the development of the *Flathead County Community Wildfire Fuels Reduction/Mitigation Plan* (FCWP) (Exhibit U-2), a Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) as outlined in the Healthy Forest Restoration Act. Emphasis in this plan was given to the following goals:

- Community-based involvement in defining at-risk priority areas;

- Emphasis on involving local fire district chiefs responsible for community fire protection across the county;
- Collaboration and information exchange with responsible stakeholders interested in furthering the planning process;
- Use of GIS technology for data aggregation, analysis, and the public involvement process itself;
- Utilization of the best available GIS data for the study area;
- Utilization of existing homeowner fire protection programs such as FIREWISE;
- The compilation of the planning results in a dynamic, digital document that would serve the community as it moves toward continued and meaningful fuel mitigation projects across Flathead County.

The FCWP's foundation rests upon the collaborative efforts of the Flathead County Steering Committee, which brings together diverse stakeholders from all levels of government and other interested parties. One of the over-arching goals of the FCWP planning process was to engage local community members to assist in the prioritization process, which was accomplished over a series of ten meetings. Specifically, local fire chiefs from Flathead County fire districts were asked to review and comment upon the fire hazard priority areas within each of the districts. This interaction was valuable for both improving the quality of priority area assessment and building consensus in the county-wide planning process. The plan is an adaptive document, one that will continue to be updated annually or as needed to reflect accomplishments and newly emerging needs, issues, and opportunities surrounding wildland fire management in Flathead County.

The units identified for treatment in the Valley Face project area are within or adjacent to the West Valley and Whitefish Rural Fire Districts' boundaries, and many adjoin or occur within the high priority fuel reduction areas identified in the FCWP. See Exhibit U-5 for these priorities and a map of the FCWP wildland urban interface boundary in relation to the Valley Face project area boundary.

Public Mailings: On March 17, 2005, a letter announcing the beginning of the initial assessment of the Valley Face area was mailed to over 300 individuals and groups, including federal and state agencies, environmental organizations, and adjacent landowners. The letter invited the public to attend open house presentations on initial findings from the project on March 30, 2005. A second letter was mailed on June 24, 2005, detailing the proposed action and inviting comments. Comments were received from 39 members of the public. A mailing on June 6, 2006 to those individuals and organizations that had collaborated thus far (approximately 110 letters) was made to request who would be interested in receiving a copy of the EA. Approximately 21 individuals and organizations were interested.

Collaborative Public Meetings: Two open house meetings were held on March 30, 2005, to acquaint interested members of the public with the preliminary analysis that had been completed for the project area. An afternoon meeting was held at the Bissell School on Farm to Market Road, and an evening meeting was held at the Tally Lake Ranger District office in Whitefish. Approximately 50 people attended the two public meetings and collaborated with district employees by expressing their support or concern regarding the initial findings. The public was invited to review the proposed action at an open house at the ranger station on July 13, 2005, which was attended by 23 people. Individuals at this open house expressed support or concern about the proposed action, often for specific locations in the project area. Suggestions regarding

modifications were also expressed. On October 6, 2005, the Tally Lake Ranger District hosted a field trip attended by 19 members of the public to several of the proposed treatment units. The majority of the attendees at the open houses and field trip were private landowners within the project area who were interested in fire prevention and effective fuel reduction in the wildland urban interface. These collaboration efforts resulted in specific comments that shaped the development of the alternative to the proposed action.

Collaborative Individual Meetings: From the onset of this project in March, 2005 to just before the publication of this EA, discussions with individuals and small groups regarding the proposed activities were frequent and constructive. Most of the discussions were with those who live in the area and were related to details of specific proposals. Planning team members gained valuable insight about the importance of the National Forest to these people and how proposed actions could affect them.

Local Media: A legal notice was published in The Daily Inter Lake newspaper on June 26, 2005, announcing the project and seeking public comment. A news release outlining the project was published in both the Hungry Horse News and Whitefish Pilot on June 30, 2005. An announcement of the field trip was published on September 29, 2005 in the Whitefish Pilot.

Content Analysis: Comments generated from the Forest Service's request for comments on the proposed action were analyzed using the content analysis process. Content analysis is a systematic process to compile, categorize, and capture the full range of public viewpoints and concerns regarding a plan or project. Content analysis helps the planning team clarify, adjust, or use technical information to prepare the EA. Information from public meetings, letters, emails, faxes, phone calls, and other sources are all included in this analysis. This process makes no attempt to treat comments as votes. Content analysis ensures that every comment is considered at some point in the decision process. The content analysis is presented in Exhibits in Part C of the Project Record.

To analyze the input, a list of comments was created. This list identifies specific requests expressed by individuals and groups who responded to the proposed action. To develop the list, each letter was read and representative quotations were selected that best capture the respondent's sentiments in the form of an action the Flathead National Forest should consider pursuing. A response from the ID Team follows each concern. The list of comments to the proposed action from the public and the responses from the ID Team are in Exhibit C.

Using the comments received on the proposed action, the ID Team developed a list of issues to address. These issues are discussed in Chapter 2.

Many of the responses to the proposed action cited scientific literature and requested the ID Team to consider this research. An attempt was made to locate and review this literature if team members were not already familiar with the research referenced. The result of this literature search is displayed in Exhibit C.

A list of collaborating agencies, groups, and individuals consulted throughout the entire public participation process is in Chapter 4 of this EA. Participation with the Salish and Kootenai Tribe was conducted during quarterly meetings between tribal representatives and the Flathead National Forest Heritage Resource specialists.

Copies of this EA will be sent to those individuals or groups who responded to our recent invitation to receive a copy. A legal notice will appear in the Daily Inter Lake informing the public of the availability of the EA and where they may acquire a copy.

The complete documentation of public participation, collaboration, and media coverage is contained in Exhibit sets B, C, and D.

Applicable Laws and Executive Orders

Shown below is a partial list of federal laws and executive orders pertaining to project-specific planning and environmental analysis on federal lands. While most pertain to all federal lands, some of the laws are specific to Montana. Disclosures and findings required by these laws and orders are contained in the applicable resource areas of Chapter 3 of this EA.

- National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (as amended)
- National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 (as amended)
- Clean Air Act of 1970 (as amended)
- Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1969 (as amended)
- Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act (RPA) of 1974 (as amended)
- National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 (as amended)
- Clean Water Act of 1977 (as amended)
- American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978
- Archeological Resource Protection Act of 1980
- Executive Order 11593 (cultural resources)
- Executive Order 11988 (floodplains)

Compliance with the Healthy Forests Restoration Act

As stated earlier in this Chapter, the Valley Face project is being conducted under the authorities of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003. The following list demonstrates this project's consistency with applicable portions of the Act.

- The proposed treatments are located on federal land in wildland-urban interface areas.
- The proposed treatments are located on federal land on which the existence of insect and disease pose a threat to an ecosystem component.
- The project is not within a wilderness or wilderness study area.
- The project is not in an area where removal of vegetation is prohibited by an act of Congress or Presidential proclamation.
- The project has been designated through a collaborative process.
- The project objective is to protect communities by treating hazardous fuels.
- The project is consistent with the Flathead National Forest Plan.
- The proposed treatments are consistent with a Community Wildfire Protection Plan.
- The proposed treatments fully maintain the structure and composition of old growth stands.

