



Flathead National Forest
Tally Lake Ranger District

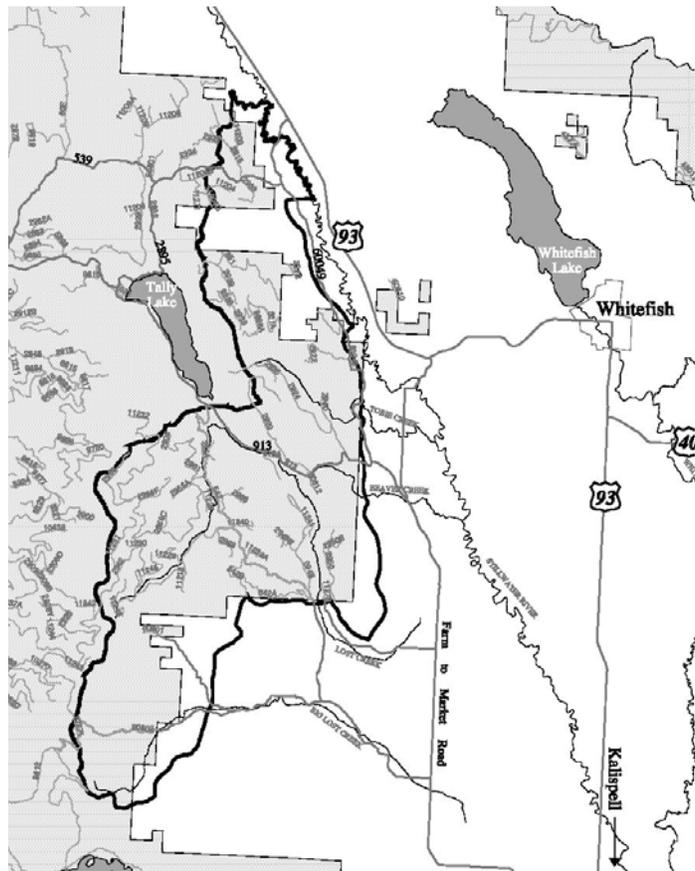
Valley Face Fuels Reduction Project

Purpose of the Project and Proposed Action
June 24, 2005

Introduction

Tally Lake Ranger District employees delineated an area west of Whitefish, Montana as appropriate for study to determine possible management opportunities. The area, which we named Valley Face, encompasses approximately 35,300 acres, of which about 20,000 is National Forest System land. District personnel conducted a watershed level analysis of this area to review the current condition of resources. From that analysis, the Interdisciplinary Team, in cooperation with local members of the public, developed a set of recommendations to move the area toward a desired future condition. They then identified a set of proposed management actions for the area to address resource issues.

This document presents a summary of analysis findings, the purpose and need for action, and the proposed action. A proposed action map is enclosed for your review.



Vicinity of the Project Area to Whitefish and Kalispell

Summary of Watershed Analysis Findings

The following are summaries by resource area of analysis findings and recommendations from the Valley Face preliminary analysis, completed this past spring. A summary document is being prepared and will be available upon request.

Fire and Vegetation

Fire suppression since the early 1940s has altered the normal disturbance regime and allowed an accumulation of ground and ladder fuels on the landscape. In some areas where a fire may have historically burned with low intensity along the ground, it will now be expected to kill all or most of the trees. In other areas, very large stand-replacing fires were the norm, but these are no longer acceptable because of the values to protect on the landscape. Presently, fuels are at levels that could contribute to fire behavior that would be very difficult to control, and in areas that are likely to threaten private land and valuable resources.

Many wildland fires occurring over the last 300 years created very large "patches" of homogeneous timber stands on the landscape. Modern fire suppression and timber management have left a mosaic of relatively small openings compared to larger openings that natural wildland fires created prior to the early 1940s. This has caused fragmentation of what were, historically, large patches of varying age classes.

Douglas-fir is now a more abundant component of the landscape than it was historically. Many of these trees have died from a Douglas-fir bark beetle outbreak, creating large patches with dead trees. Douglas-fir is more susceptible to insects when growing in high stand densities. Root disease is also prevalent in stands of Douglas-fir in the Valley Face area. Several areas no longer qualify as old growth habitat as a result of mortality to large Douglas-fir trees. Areas dominated by large trees, especially western larch and ponderosa pine, are less abundant than historically because of agriculture and other development on private land and timber harvest on both private and national forest land.

Hydrology

Some roads have contributed to poor water quality and continue to produce sediment. Road drainage systems could be improved by replacing culverts to accommodate 100-year flows, increasing the number of ditch-relief features, and general road maintenance. Although the area is within the Stillwater River drainage, all streams eventually flow underground and are not directly connected to the Stillwater River.

Fisheries and Aquatic Habitat

The only fish found within the project area are non-native species in Lost Creek and several lakes. Amphibian occurrence is more widespread among the many wetlands and riparian areas. Measures to reduce road-related sediment as discussed above would benefit aquatic habitat.

Soils

The project area contains landtypes classified as sensitive, where forest management activities or roads not designed with adequate drainage are likely to result in sediment. Roads on these landtypes should be considered for drainage improvement.

Wildlife

The area provides habitat for numerous wildlife species. Vegetation patterns, and therefore wildlife habitat, have been altered by forest management activities and by fire suppression. Connections between patches of older forests have been narrowed or severed. There is a higher

than historic amount of edge (those areas adjoining younger and older forests) which is detrimental to species needing interior forest habitats.

Four threatened wildlife species use the Valley Face area. Grizzly bears, wolves, and bald eagles are more commonly reported in the northern portion. Potential habitat for Canada lynx appears to be limited to higher elevations in the southwestern part of Valley Face.

White-tailed deer use parts of the Valley Face area as important winter range habitat. Forest plan standards for hiding cover and browse are current being met and thermal cover standards are nearly being met. Elk security areas exist on about 19% of the Valley Face landscape and could be improved with road and trail access changes.

Infrastructure

For motorized public access, there are presently 62 miles of road that are open year-round and 12 miles of road open seasonally. Eleven miles of road are open for administrative use only. Some roads have been used so infrequently that they have become nearly impassable.

Public input

Based on public input gathered primarily at the open house sessions held at Bissell School and the ranger station office in March, a large number of landowners in the area support fuel reduction and other activities that improve overall forest health. Concerns expressed by a few citizens were the possible increased log truck traffic on roads and the possible negative impact on white-tailed deer winter range habitat. A wide variety of other ideas, opinions, and concerns were expressed at the open house sessions.

Purpose of this Project

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, and the Flathead National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. A variety of current conditions and guidance from this direction provide the purpose and need for management action in the Valley Face area. The Valley Face project's purpose of the proposed management actions are:

- 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.

The Flathead County Community Wildfire Fuels Reduction / Mitigation Plan (FCWFR) will be completed soon and was prepared in response to provisions of the National Fire Plan (www.fireplan.gov) passed by Congress in 2000. The FCWFR is being completed as a collaborative effort with a diverse group of interested parties. 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 Valley Face project proposes actions to meet the intent of this plan.

The Healthy Forests Initiative (HFI) of 2002 and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) of 2003 were launched to reduce administrative delays to implementation of projects that reduce hazardous fuels and restore healthy ecological conditions. The HFRA expedites hazardous fuel reduction and forest-restoration projects on specific types of federal lands that are at risk from wildland fire or insect and disease epidemics. The current conditions in the Valley Face area fit the criteria for a HFRA project well. For this reason, the Forest Supervisor decided to use this authority to analyze the Valley Face project in an expedited manner.

Components of the Proposed Action

The proposed action is a strategy to satisfy the purpose and need for action as described above in the Valley Face ecosystem. This proposal emphasizes treatment of fuels and management of disease and insect susceptible Douglas-fir stands. The following table and paragraphs, along with the enclosed color map, describe the proposed action.

Proposed Activity	Approximate Units
Fuel Reduction/Stand Level Treatments (3906 acres) Commercial Timber Harvest with Fuels Treatments Precommercially thin saplings with slash disposal Slash / Handpile / Burn Piles (no commercial harvest) Slash / Handpile / Burn Piles (no commercial harvest) in areas that may be old growth habitat	2876 acres 473 acres 463 acres 94 acres
Distribution of Retention Levels after Fuel Reduction/Stand Level Treatments (3906 acres) Heavy aggregated retention (Retain 70-90% tree cover) Moderate aggregated retention (Retain 10-30% tree cover) Heavy dispersed retention (Retain 30-70% tree cover) Moderate dispersed retention (Retain 10-30% tree cover) Light dispersed retention (Retain 5-10% tree cover)	54 acres 24 acres 694 acres 2935 acres 199 acres
Road and Watershed Treatments Road rehabilitation (drainage improvements) New temporary road construction	40.1 miles 5.3 miles

Some of these values are derived from our Geographic Information System and are estimates.

Fuel Reduction/Stand Level Treatments

Prescriptions of variable levels of tree retention are proposed to meet the multiple ecological objectives that were described in the purpose and need statements. Two general categories of retention prescriptions are proposed. These are aggregated and dispersed retention, with

varying amounts of trees retained in each (light, moderate, or heavy). Aggregated retention appears as clusters or groups of trees within a larger area. Dispersed retention refers to retained trees spaced more regularly over the entire harvest unit. The structure and composition of trees currently in each harvest unit and the desired future conditions for the stand determined what level of retention is proposed. Retention would emphasize the largest dominant and co-dominant root-firm trees, typically western larch and Douglas-fir. Examples of proposed retention levels are shown in Figure 1.

Vegetation and fuels treatments total approximately 2876 acres of commercial harvest, along with about 1030 acres of fuels reduction using hand tools. Units numbered 1 through 41 on the enclosed map are proposed for commercial timber harvest. Units numbered 200 through 500 would not have timber harvest as part of their treatment. The proposed action was designed to not harvest timber in areas that meet old growth conditions or are mapped as riparian landtypes. Ninety-four acres of fuel reduction using hand tools are proposed in areas that have stand conditions currently meeting old growth definitions. Treatments in these areas would reduce fuels but maintain the old growth components of the stand.

Prescribed fire use is an integral part of the variable retention prescription. In dispersed retention harvest areas, large-diameter fire-resistant trees would be left, in some units followed by a low intensity prescribed burn. The objective of this treatment is to reduce ladder and ground fuels and create conditions for conifer regeneration, while protecting the large larch, ponderosa pine, and Douglas-fir, thus deriving the ecological benefits of fire while protecting the long-lived trees that survived past fires.

Prescribed fire use is not desirable in other areas due to topographic or landownership considerations, expectations of high levels of fuel, or a high percentage of Douglas-fir retention trees (Douglas-fir is susceptible to bark beetle damage after being exposed to even low intensity fire). Machine piling using tracked excavators is the preferred method for fuels reduction in these areas. All areas proposed for commercial timber harvest would have whole tree yarding applied to reduce the amount of logging slash to desirable levels. Trees too small to be merchantable would be felled and subsequently piled in order to reduce the amount of ladder fuels in the residual stand.

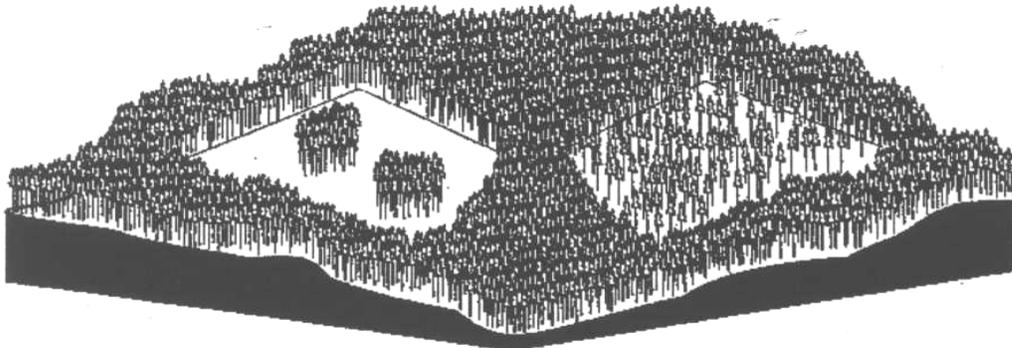
Unit 500 on the attached map is proposed for fuel reduction and long-term habitat improvement in an important white-tailed deer winter range. Within unit 500 (located in the southeast corner of the project area on Pete Ridge), small scattered areas would be treated for fuels reduction and would not exceed 25 percent of the total area of the unit. The exact location and shape of these areas are not known at this time.

Some areas of past timber harvest are now growing high densities of sapling sized trees (5 to 25 feet tall). We propose to thin these areas in an operation called precommercial thinning. This thinning reduces the tree density to 300 to 400 per acre. No commercial products would be removed. The proposed precommercial thinning is near values identified as needing protection from wildland fire. Fuels created from the thinning operation would be piled and later burned in these areas.

Road and Watershed Treatments

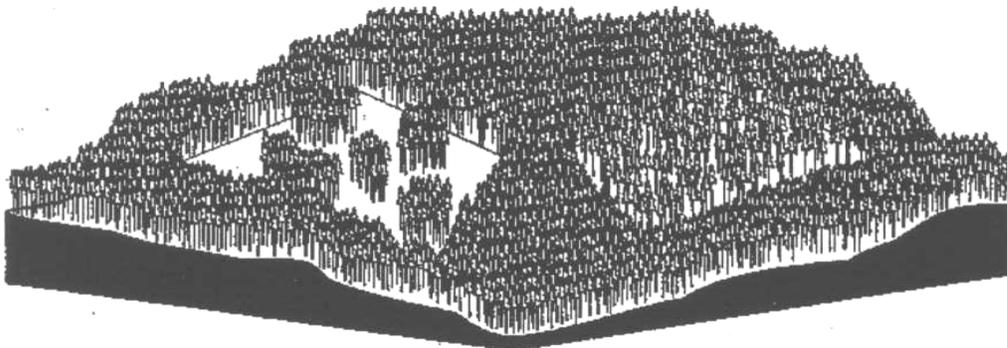
Road rehabilitation involves improving roads to meet or exceed Best Management Practices guidelines, a process that generally installs or improves drainage features. Rehabilitation is proposed for roads that we anticipate having heavy truck traffic. New temporary road construction is proposed to allow access to the vegetation treatments described earlier and would be removed soon after use. Many of the temporary roads would be constructed on existing, historic road templates but have not been maintained for many years. No permanent roads are proposed.

Examples of retention levels.



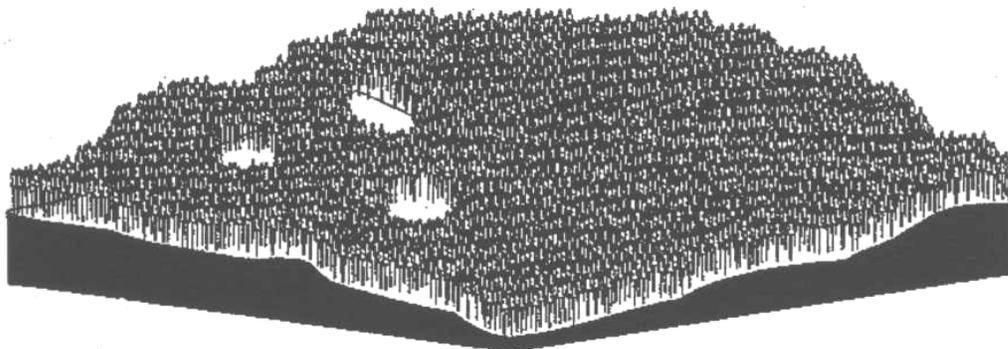
Light Aggregated Retention

Moderate Dispersed Retention



Moderate Aggregated Retention

Heavy Dispersed Retention



Heavy Aggregated Retention

100% Retention