



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Gallatin National Forest

Gardiner Ranger District
P.O. Box 5
Gardiner, MT 59030

Date: February 15, 2006

Dear Interested Party,

The Gardiner Ranger District of the Gallatin National Forest is currently seeking public comments regarding the Cinnabar Restoration Project. Your comments will be used in our environmental analysis to help in determining the scope of the issues to be addressed, the significant issues relating to the proposed action, and to aid in the development of the proposed action and alternatives.

Purpose and Need:

Purposes for the project include restoration of fire-adapted communities where fire has been excluded, enhancement of species diversity (both grassland and forest), prevention of unwanted changes that could result from a wildfire event given present fuel conditions, reduction of fuels on National Forest System lands adjacent to private lands and private structures, and reduction of basal area in timbered stands to prevent further mortality from Douglas fir bark beetles. The project would also provide benefits to grazing ungulates (domestic and big game) by increasing available forage and increasing the acreage and health of aspen stands.

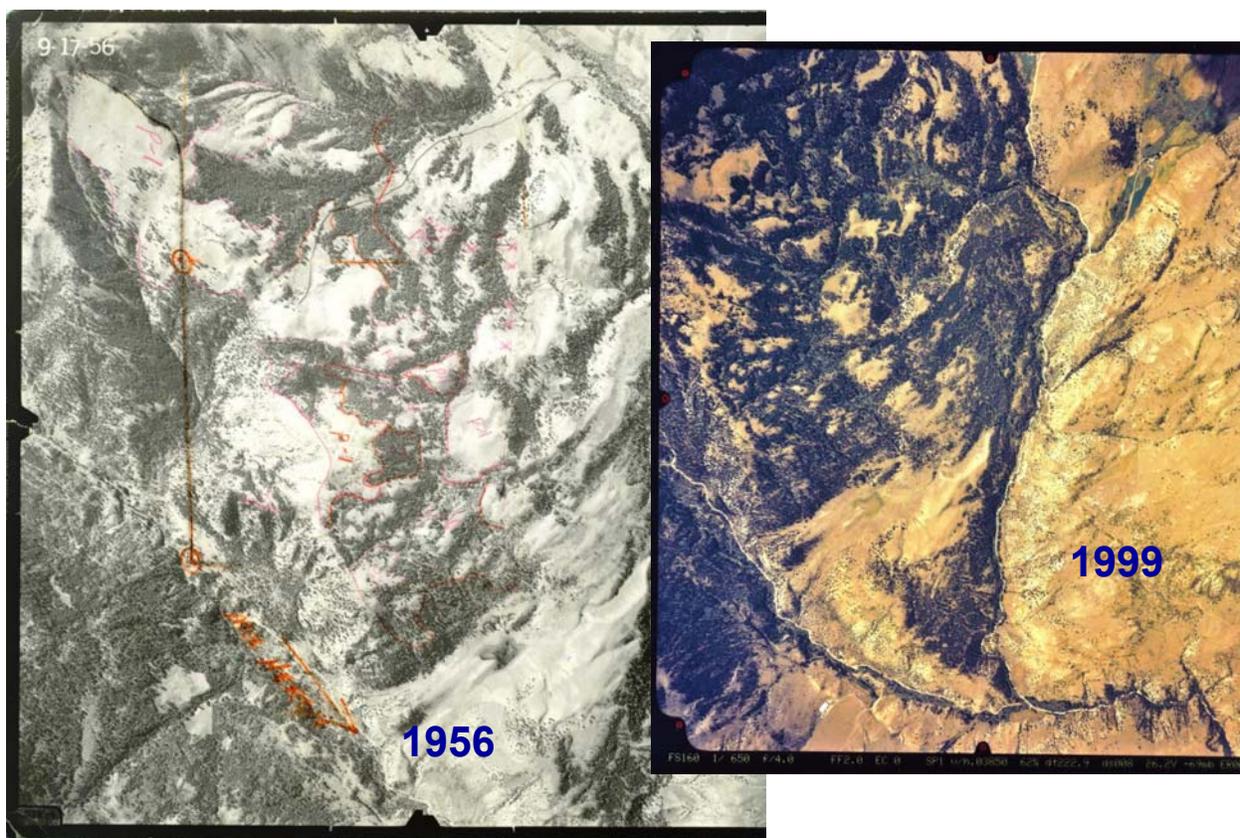
Background:

The analysis area for the project is located in Cinnabar Basin on the Gardiner Ranger District, Gallatin National Forest, which is located about 14 miles northwest of Gardiner, Montana. Yellowstone Park is about 4 miles southwest of the Basin. The project proposal is located within T. 8 S., R. 7 E., Sections 20, 22 and 34 (See attached vicinity maps).

The project area is in Gallatin National Forest Plan Management Area 14 ((MA-14) (Forest Plan, Chapter III-44 through III-46)), and is designated as big game winter range that is described as either grasslands or a mosaic of grasslands and forested habitats. It is also within the Primary Conservation Area, as established in the proposed Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy (formerly MS-1), which is designated as occupied grizzly bear habitat. The Forest Plan direction for MA-14 allows for “vegetative management practices on areas adjacent to existing roads that maintain or improve the quality and quantity of big game forage and provide for a diversity of habitat for other wildlife species and maintain or increase the acreage of aspen. The cumulative effects analysis and grizzly bear guidelines (Forest Plan, Appendix G) will provide the basis for managing other resource needs”.



Slopes and aspects within the project area are variable. The majority of the forested area is classified as Douglas fir/snowberry habitat type with multistoried Douglas fir. Approximately 40% of the larger diameter Douglas fir were killed or are currently infested with Douglas fir bark beetle. During the past fifty years, sagebrush/grasslands and aspen clones have been encroached upon by Douglas fir saplings and intermediate sized trees reducing the health and vigor of these communities. Photos taken in 1956 show approximately 50% of the analysis area as forested, while current photos (1999) depict a forested canopy over approximately 70% of the area.



Aerial Photos of Section 34 in the Proposed Project Area Taken in 1956 and 1999.

The area includes big game summer and winter range. Because of the limited public access, public lands west of Cinnebar Basin provide secure habitat for all species.

Recent fire activity in Cinnebar Basin has been limited to numerous small lightning fires that have occurred in the surrounding mountains. A larger fire occurred in the early nineteenth-hundreds in the Mill Creek and Lion Creek drainages. In 2001, an 860 acre man-caused fire (Little Joe) occurred on private, National Forest, and National Park lands about 4 miles south of Cinnabar Basin in the Mol Herron Creek and Beattie Gulch drainages.

Cinnebar Basin is primarily private ranch land surrounded by National Forest System (NFS) lands. The ranches date back to the late eighteen-hundreds. Historically, NFS lands have provided a variety of products for adjacent ranchers. Water flowing off NFS lands is used to irrigate hay fields in the basin. Two small cattle allotments are located on NFS lands adjacent to Cinnebar Basin. Trees have been harvested periodically (for firewood, post and poles and lumber) since the area was first settled. A few old logging roads wind onto NFS lands from adjacent private lands, but no motorized public access is available off the county road. A NFS trail connecting with Yellowstone National Park is located in Mill Creek but, again, there is currently no public access to the trail across private land.

The private land adjacent to the project area contains scattered farmhouses and outbuildings. Some of the adjacent private landowners have requested treatment of the adjacent National Forest acres to reduce hazardous fuels and the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

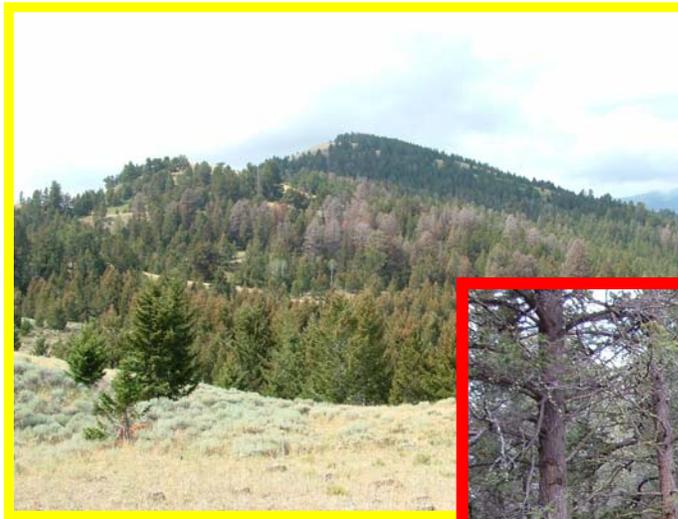
There are small infestations of weeds in the area including musk thistle and hounds tongue. These infestations are limited to areas where livestock have caused disturbance and/or along roadsides.

Proposal:

Brief descriptions and approximate locations of activities that would be included in the proposal include:

- **Douglas fir treatments**: would consist of commercially removing Douglas fir in Section 34 on approximately 150 acres on slopes <35% (See attached maps). Another approximately 130 acres on slopes >35% would be evaluated for treatment, providing the treatment could be accomplished with non-conventional logging systems (helicopter, cable, horse, etc.).

Douglas fir to be removed include those that have died in the past few years from epidemic levels of Douglas fir bark beetles. Trees with green needles that are obviously infected would also be removed. Adequate snags that are not currently infested with beetles would be retained. Dense stands of Douglas fir would be thinned to feature large healthy trees retaining approximately 80-100 basal area, a prescription recommended by the Regional entomologist. The purpose of thinning is to increase the health and vigor of the remaining stand for prevention of further Douglas fir beetle infestation.



Cinnabar
Dry Douglas Fir Forest



- **Hazardous fuel treatments** would occur in Section 20 (Dixon/Cottonwood) on approximately 140 acres with slopes <35% to reduce risk to nearby structures and continue work that has already been completed on adjacent private lands (See attached maps). Dense Douglas fir stands would be thinned and beetle-killed trees salvaged with the objective of increasing crown base heights and reducing crown bulk density. Dense patches of juniper would be thinned, and much of the dead and downed vegetation removed, thereby reducing fuel loadings and the risk of a large wildfire.
- **Aspen** occurs on approximately 100 acres that are intermingled throughout other vegetative communities and would be treated by slashing and/or ripping the perimeter to stimulate sprouting. Encroaching conifers would be felled and removed either mechanically or with prescribed fire for a distance of 1-2 tree lengths out from the aspen clones to increase the overall acreage of aspen.

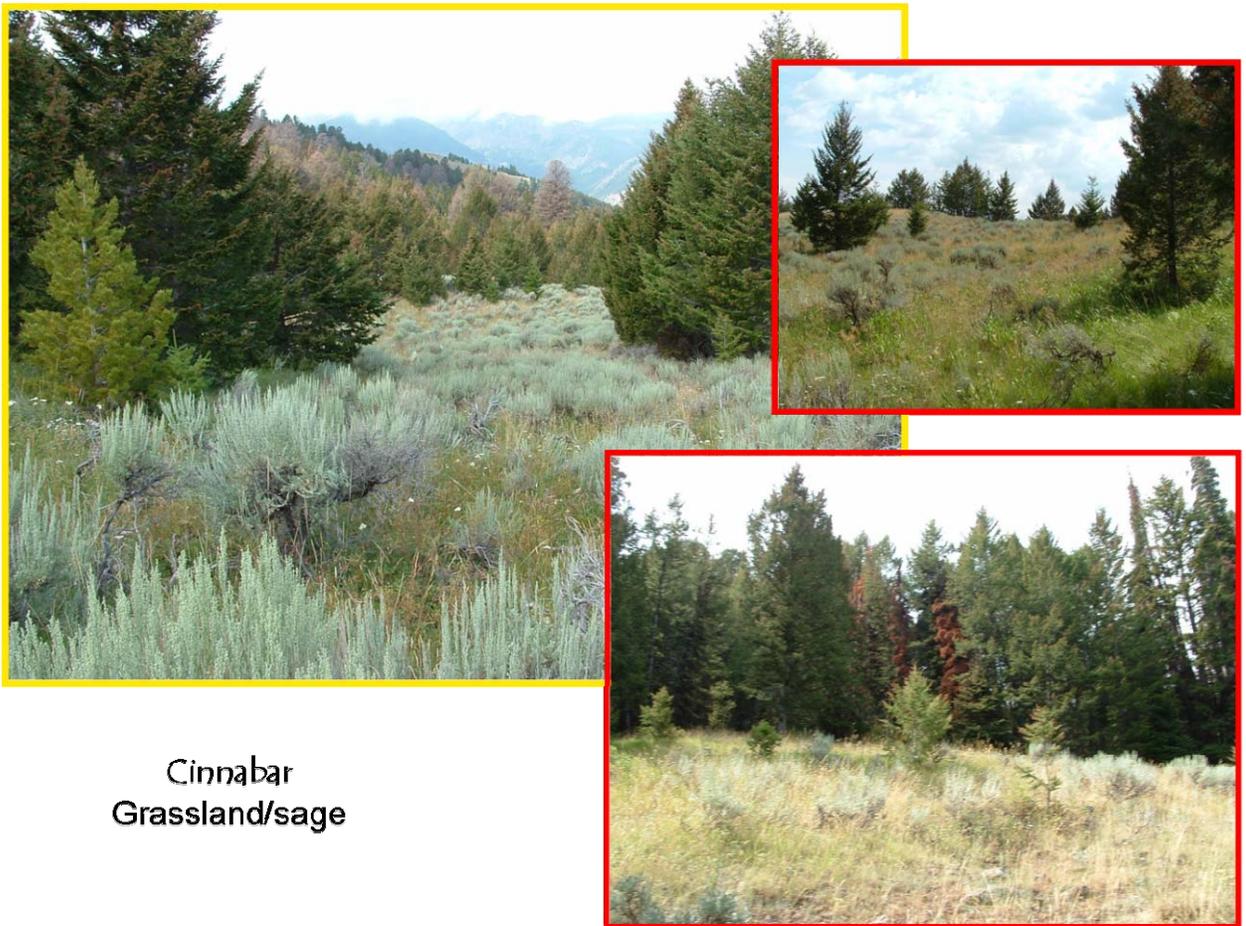


Cinnabar
Aspen



- **Grassland/sagebrush restoration** would occur in Sections 20 & 34 on approximately 300 acres with slopes <35%. Approximately 70% of the young conifers that have encroached into the grassland or sagebrush habitats would be removed either with prescribed fire or mechanically. Some clumps and individual trees would be retained to emulate natural fire patterns. Pending further field review, additional prescribed burning of up to 500 acres of encroached grasslands with slopes >35% may occur in Sections 20 & 34 (See attached maps)

In Section 22, up to approximately 550 acres of grassland/sagebrush are proposed for treatment with prescribed fire (See attached maps).



Cinnabar
Grassland/sage

- **Access** to the project area is through private land. We are currently working to obtain temporary access to use private roads for the associated project activities. No new roads will be constructed. Landing piles and skid trails would be located on National Forest land and would be rehabilitated upon completion of harvest related activities.

Public Involvement:

Collaborative efforts are being made to involve the adjacent private landowners, other agencies, and groups in the identification of issues and development of the proposed action and alternatives. In November and December, field trips were conducted including personnel from the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, as well as members of the Bear Creek Council and the Greater Yellowstone Coalition. A power point presentation is available upon request that summarizes the restoration project's concepts and objectives.

This letter is being mailed to individuals or groups who have indicated an interest in projects such as this on the Gallatin National Forest and/or live in the vicinity of the project area. Additionally, a news release is being prepared for submittal to local newspapers.

Preliminary Issues:

A preliminary list of issues includes but is not limited to:

- **Access** to each proposed treatment site is through private land on existing roads; there is a need to analyze the need for long-term public access to Section 34 (although currently there is public foot access from the Mulherin side of Section 34). Long-term public and/or administrative access to Dixon Creek (section 20) may best occur across the Shooting Star Ranch. Access to Section 22 would be across the Stermitz property. Some of the affected landowners have indicated they would grant access for the life of the project but none have indicated that they would grant long-term public or administrative access.
- **Weed spread** is a concern. Houndstongue and thistle are currently in Section 34. Cheatgrass is a concern relative to the use of prescribed fire.
- There is concern about **retaining sagebrush** wherever it is still viable, and a need to assess vegetation needed by mule deer wintering in Section 22.
- Some of the project is within a livestock allotment, which could affect schedules for implementation; in turn, **project implementation could affect the ability to use the allotment relative to vegetation recovery** after fire or other treatments. Currently the permittee has sold their base property and the allotment may become vacant at least for some period of time.
- **Grazing animals could preclude successful regeneration of aspen**; however, FWP indicates a low level of elk and mule deer use in Section 34, and there is indication that aspen has regenerated in the presence of domestic ungulates in the area.

Your comments will help confirm if these are significant issues as well as help to identify other issues that should be addressed.

Opportunities:

Opportunities that have been identified include but are not limited to:

- Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation is interested in this project from a stewardship perspective. They have been a vital partner in acquiring lands in the Gardiner area and would like to continue to be involved in projects that improve the habitat for elk and other wildlife.
- Where sagebrush removal is a concern, there is the opportunity to use new mechanized equipment to remove smaller diameter conifers and not disturb sagebrush.
- This project has the potential to be a showcase project for integrated vegetation management on the Gallatin National Forest – achieving multiple objectives and providing some commercial products as well.

In Closing:

We ask you to review the proposal and submit any comments or concerns you may have about this project on the enclosed comment sheet. Please submit your written comments to Barb Ping, ID Team Leader, Bozeman Ranger District, 3710 Fallon St., Suite C, Bozeman MT 59718. You can also email comments to bping@fs.fed.us. Comments would be most helpful in our analysis if submitted by March 17, 2006.

For more information, please contact myself (406)-868-7375, Jodie Canfield, Range and Forest Ecology Program Manager (406) 522-2554, or Barbara Ping, ID Team Leader (406)-522-2558.

Thank you for your interest and participation.

Sincerely,

/s/ Ken Britton

KEN BRITTON
Gardiner District Ranger

Attachments: Project Maps and Comment Sheet

CINNABAR RESTORATION PROJECT

Comment Sheet on Proposals – Please Return by March 17, 2006

Your name _____

Your address _____

Are there additional issues or concerns specific to the proposed action?

Other comments on the Proposal:

Would you like to receive further correspondence for this project?

YES _____

NO _____