



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Gallatin National Forest

Hebgen Lake Ranger District
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File Code: 1950-1/5150

Date: February 6, 2007

RE: Lonesome Wood Vegetation Management Proposal
Scoping Period - **REQUEST FOR COMMENTS**

Dear Interested Party:

The Hebgen Lake Ranger District of the Gallatin National Forest is seeking comments on a proposal for the upcoming analysis of the proposed **Lonesome Wood Vegetation Management Project**. The project area is located on National Forest System (NFS) lands on the west side of Hebgen Lake. The Lonesome Wood Vegetation Management project area extends from Highway 20 on the south, and Hebgen Lake on the east and north. It is focused on the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) and evacuation route adjacent to the west shore of the Lake.

I am asking you to review the proposal and submit any comments or concerns you may have about this project. Your comments will be used in our environmental analysis to help: (1) refine the purpose and need; (2) determine the scope of the issues to be addressed; (3) determine the significant issues relating to the proposed action; (4) assist in the development of alternatives to the proposed action; (5) identify mitigation and restoration opportunities; and (6) to help frame a public involvement plan.

I am planning an Open House for the public on February 26 from 4:00 pm to 6:30 pm at the Hebgen Lake Ranger District Office. The Open House would provide you with an opportunity to discuss the project with interdisciplinary team members. To gauge interest in this forum, I would appreciate a call or note to confirm your interest.

Please submit your written comments to Teri Seth, NEPA Team Leader, Bozeman Ranger District, 3170 Fallon St. Ste C, Bozeman, MT 59718. You can also email comments to **comment_northern_gallatin@fs.fed.us**. Electronic comments must be in one the following formats MS Word, Word Perfect or RTF. The subject line must contain the name "Lonesome Wood Vegetation Management Proposal". **Comments need to be submitted by March 9, 2007.**

If you would like to remain on the mailing list for this project please return the attached form or send an email to tseth@fs.fed.us confirming your interest. If I do not hear from you I will delete your name from the mailing list for further correspondence on this project.



For more information, please contact me at (406)-823-6961 or Teri Seth, NEPA Team Leader at (406)-522-2520. In addition, there is a Lonesome Wood Vegetation Management Proposal Overview posted on the Gallatin Forest Webpage <http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/gallatin/?page=projects>. The overview is a power point presentation with photos of the project area. There are additional maps posted on the website.

Thank you for your interest and participation in the management of you National Forest.

Sincerely,

/S/WILLIAM QUEN

WILLIAM R. QUEEN
District Ranger

Attachments:

- Scoping Summary
- Project Interest Confirmation Form
- Vicinity and Project Area Map
- Scoping Map

Lonesome Wood Vegetation Management Proposal – Scoping Summary

Background

Lonesome Wood Vegetation Management proposal is an outcome of the Hebgen Watershed Risk Assessment, which was completed in November 2005. The Risk Assessment was a landscape level coarse assessment of the risk of wildfire to a variety of resources if no management actions were taken in this area. The watershed assessment evaluated approximately 68,000 acres north, west and southwest of Hebgen Lake. The interdisciplinary team that conducted the analysis considered existing, historical, and projected future landscape conditions, and weighed these considerations with current Forest Plan management direction, the current and projected social setting.

Generally speaking, the main concern at this time is fuel buildup in the area that has a high degree of recreational and urban development. Within that overall purpose, there are opportunities to restore aspen and meadow habitats. Following the watershed assessment, a core team of resource specialists spent last summer identifying a site specific proposed action for the Lonesome Wood Vegetation Management Proposal, which is needed to reduce fuels in and around the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) and evacuation routes on the west side of Hebgen Lake.

We are now ready to start our environmental analysis. The analysis will be conducted in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and will be designed to inform the responsible official of the potential environmental consequences of activities associated with the proposal. The proposal meets the intent of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act and the decision-making authority in the HFRA. The line officer may use either the HFRA process or the regular NEPA process in making his decision. The HFRA process is a streamlined process designed to reduce the time required to conduct an analysis and issue a decision related to Healthy Forest Restoration. For more information on the HFRA, go to the HFRA website http://www.blm.gov/nhp/news/releases/pages/2004/pr040303_forests/field_guide.htm.

The project area includes many private residences and 34 recreation residences located along the Denny Creek Road #167. Most of the recreation residences are under special use permit with the Forest Service. The area west of Hebgen Lake was identified as a community at risk of wildfire because of poor access and heavy fuel loadings along the Denny Creek Road and near the structures.

Gallatin County has a draft Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP), which is scheduled for publishing this spring. The entire Lonesome Wood Vegetation Management project area is identified in the draft CWPP as a WUI at risk from wildfires. A CWPP identifies areas for hazardous fuel reduction treatments, sets priorities for treating them, and recommends the types and methods of treatment on Federal and non-Federal land that will protect one or more at risk communities and their essential infrastructure.

Fuel reduction work is in progress on many of summer home lots on NFS lands. The fuel reduction on permitted lots is intended to reduce structure ignitability. Fuel reduction beyond the

immediate cabin lots is intended to reduce the risk of crown fire. Crown fire can produce fire sparks or embers that carry in the wind to receptive fuel beds sometimes igniting a new fire. The embers are also called firebrands. National Forest System lands in the project area include dispersed recreation areas and developed recreation sites, a trailhead, suitable timber areas (Gallatin National Forest Plan MA 13), and a grazing allotment.

Hebgen Lake is a summer and winter recreation destination. Less than 10 miles to the east of the project area, West Yellowstone, Montana is the western gateway community to Yellowstone National Park. Two million of three million annual visitors to the Park enter through the West Yellowstone gate. In combination, the predominately forested environment, high degree of human development, and tourism has resulted in a very complex fire management situation.

Purpose and Need

Vegetation treatments that reduce wildland fuels are a primary focus of the project around the wildland-urban interface (WUI) and evacuation routes. In addition, treatments on areas adjacent to WUI are designed to meet other fuels and resource objectives.

Specifically, this integrated vegetation treatment project is needed to:

- Begin modifying potential fire behavior by reducing fuel loadings, which in turn would improve **firefighter and public safety in the event of a wildland fire**. The specific WUI objectives are identified below.

Wildland Urban Interface (WUI): Reduce the risk of crown fire near structures, private in-holdings adjacent to NFS resources, and infrastructure on NFS land by modifying vegetation, which would reduce fire behavior. The risk of sustained crown fire is high in and adjacent to much of the WUI in this area. Surface and ladder fuels are conducive to intense fire with torching that pushes a fire from the ground to the tree crowns. Crown canopy fuels are continuous and lend themselves to fire spread from crown to crown for long distances and are likely to produce lofting firebrands. Continuity of surface, ladder, and crown fuels would be reduced, resulting in elevated canopy base height and reduced fuel continuity in all fuel strata or layers (surface, ladder and crown). The changed condition would lower fire spread rates and result in a change to expected fire type from crown fire to surface fire.

Evacuation Routes: Allow time for safer ingress and egress by lowering flame length and fire intensity adjacent to roadways. The Denny Creek Road provides the only road access to the west shore of the lake and is the primary evacuation route. The route is narrow, with heavy forest fuel accumulations immediately adjacent to the road. Expected flame length and fire intensity is high along the route. Additionally, intense crown fires can generate very high winds, which may preclude evacuations by water. In these areas, continuity of surface, ladder and crown fuels would be reduced, resulting in lower fire intensity and lower flame length.

Fuel Breaks: To improve the effectiveness of fuel treatment in the WUI and evacuation routes, strategic fuel breaks would be created. Within the project area, there are extensive

areas of difficult terrain with small dense forest. These are important to treat, however the treatments, consisting of hand-sawing and piling, would be expensive. To offset the cost of this work, some adjacent areas on gentler ground, that have larger trees (over 6 inches in diameter), would be thinned. The thinning would improve the effectiveness of the hand treatments, while providing some revenue to offset the cost of hand treatments. Continuity of surface, ladder and crown fuels would be reduced, resulting in elevated canopy base height and reduced fuel continuity in all fuel strata or layers (surface, ladder and crown). The changed condition would lower fire spread rates and result in a change to expected fire type from crown fire to surface fire.

- **Aspen Management and maintenance of low fire risk** – Aspen forest is declining across the west. Aspen habitat is a valued habitat component, and a fire-resistant forest type. Aspen stands are being encroached by conifers of various age classes. Conifer removal and/or prescribed burning is intended to reinvigorate aspen clones in the project area. The National Fire Plan (2000) prioritizes maintenance of low fire risk area for management.
- **Forest Health:** In areas where there are compelling reasons to manage fuels or aspen, treatment would be designed to help prevent mortality from insects or disease, while meeting fuels and aspen objectives. In many of the drainages along the Lakeshore, Douglas fir bark beetle killed a large percentage of the mature Douglas fir trees in recent years. Douglas fir beetle is less active on the southern end of the project area. Opening the forest canopy through thinning has been shown to reduce susceptibility of Douglas fir trees to bark beetle mortality. A similar strategy is proposed in areas with recent mountain pine beetle activity in lodgepole pine forest. A few stands have severe dwarf mistletoe infection in the lodgepole pine overstory and intermediate size classes. Removal of severely infected trees would improve the health of the small trees and future regeneration.

Proposed Action

Maps are attached and can also be viewed at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/gallatin/?page=projects>.

The proposal is to thin or prescribed burn vegetation on about 3,200 acres within the 24,000 project area. The project area extends from the lakeshore, to approximately one-mile upslope and from the northwest tip of the lake to Highway 20 along the Denny Creek Road (see the attached Scoping Map). Primary treatment activity is described and is identified in the table and on the attached maps. Treatments within the individual units vary, and as a result, inclusions of other treatment are often incorporated. The larger units may have inclusions of several kinds of treatments. For instance, in a commercial thin unit that is 100 acres, 10-15 acres may only be treated by hand to remove small trees on areas too steep to use mechanized equipment.

The treatment units proposed within the WUI extend approximately ½ mile from the structures. The distance is based on fire behavior modeling. The model estimated that firebrands from expected crown fire may be lofted and carried up to ½ mile away given the existing fuel conditions.

Treatment units addressing evacuation routes are limited to approximately 400 feet either side of the roadway. Fire intensity and flame length must be reduced immediately adjacent to the

roadway to allow safe ingress or egress. Crown fire behavior models and guidance in the Incident Response Pocket Guide were used to derive this distance.

Aspen units were delineated in the field. Conifer removal within and about 1 ½ tree lengths out from the clone help reduce competition for sunlight and water and stimulate sprouting.

Treatments

Reduce stand density by thinning. The desired tree spacing is 20-30 feet between trees along the road, and in the WUI. Beyond the 400' in the evacuation routes in fuel breaks, trees would be denser at about 15-20' between trees. An estimated 40-50% of the total trees in a stand would be removed. In units with insect and disease concerns thinning and openings would be designed to meet a tree density of about 30-40 feet between trees.

In some units the current stand conditions are not suitable for thinning. In these units the overall stand would be reduced by about 40% by creating small openings 1/3 to 5 acres. This treatment would be implemented primarily in units where trees less than 6 inches in diameter are the target for removal.

Units identified for commercial thin would have all size classes of trees removed to meet desired stand density. Trees over six inches in diameter to be removed would most likely be skidded to landings and hauled offsite for use as a commercial product. A ground based logging system would be the primary method of tree removal. Trees less than 6 inches in diameter may also need to be removed as described in the next paragraph or in conjunction with commercial logging.

Units identified for small tree removal either have mixed ages or primarily small trees. Treatment would be limited to trees smaller than 6 inches in diameter. The treatment may be implemented by hand or with tracked equipment that would facilitate removal of the biomass from the landscape. Generally the equipment impact is less than 6 pounds per square inch (psi) on the surface. About ½ of the proposed units in this treatment type are on slopes less than 35%. These slopes would accommodate equipment to allow mechanized removal of biomass. Incidental amounts of post and pole material could also be removed. Skid or access trails may be needed in these units to facilitate removal of biomass. On slopes greater than 35%, the thinning and associated treatments would be implemented by hand.

Nationally, there is an effort to develop a market for biomass material. Biomass material is a byproduct of forest health and fuels reduction prescriptions. There is not a market to facilitate biomass removal around West Yellowstone at this time. For this project we hope to achieve mechanized removal of biomass less than 6" in diameter for commercial purposes if the market allows. This tool would utilize previously wasted material and lessen the amount of pile burning required to achieve desired fuel loadings. Congress has mandated woody biomass utilization in several significant laws. (FS Chief 1/18/2007)

Prescribed burning . Lop and scatter conifer trees within the identifiable aspen clone perimeter and in a 100’ buffer around the perimeter. Monitor aspen sprouting response, and implement a broadcast burn to further stimulate sprouting if needed.

Associated activities:

Activities may include, but are not limited to thinning through logging, yarding unmerchantable material, piling, hauling of commercial material, slashing small trees, firewood removal, biomass reduction such as chipping, pile burning, broadcast burning, erosion control, rehabilitation of skid trails, landings and temporary roads.

In all units, natural and activity related fuels, including boles, branches and tops would be reduced to 10-15 tons of woody material less than 3 inch diameter. Large woody material would be left in quantities needed to meet the Forest Plan requirements for snags and downed woody material. (GNF Plan, 1987, Amendment 15)

An estimated 3.5-4.5 miles of temporary road would be needed to facilitate logging in thinning units with trees larger than 6 inches in diameter. The temporary roads would maintain skid distances of ¼ mile or less. Temporary roads would be used for implementation of the project, then closed. Rehabilitation includes erosion control, scarification and seeding. If needed, closure devices would be installed to eliminate future use.

The activities proposed could be implemented with Forest Service crews, service contracts, timber sale contracts and/or stewardship contracting. Value from the wood products removed and sold could be re-invested into the project area through stewardship contracting. All primary treatments, associated activities and mitigation would be considered for implementation with stewardship funding. Other projects and activities may be identified throughout the analysis process that could be funded with stewardship funds. Full implementation of the project is expected to take 5-10 years.

Direction in the GNF Forest Plan (1987) as amended, and the National Fire Plan (2000) was incorporated in the design of this proposal.

Table 1: Proposed Action Treatment Summary

Proposed Unit	Acres of Commercial Thin	Estimated Temporary Road needed to maintain skid distances to ¼ mile or less	Acres of Small Tree Thin	Acres of Under burn as a Primary Treatment
1	30	0		
2			220	
3			20*	
4	25	0		
5	35	0		
6			120*	
7	45	.25		

Proposed Unit	Acres of Commercial Thin	Estimated Temporary Road needed to maintain skid distances to ¼ mile or less	Acres of Small Tree Thin	Acres of Under burn as a Primary Treatment
8			5	
9	15	.25		
10			150*	
11	60	0		
12	65	.25		
13				45
14	210	.25		
15			75	
16			25*	
17	195	1.0		
18				25
19			35*	
20	35	0		
21	130	.5		
22			45*	
23	30	.25		
24			15	
25			80	
26	425	.75		
27			45*	
28				# Not used
29	105	0		
30				370
31	140	.3		
32	190	.25		
Estimated Totals	1735 acres	4.05 miles	835 acres	440

* All or part of these units may be suitable for mechanized biomass removal.

The estimates for acreage and temporary roads are derived from GIS mapping tools. The mapped location closely approximates the ultimate treatment boundary and approximate acreage. However, in the implementation phase there are likely to be minor adjustments.

Public Involvement

The first step in environmental analysis is to determine what needs to be analyzed. To do this, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) outlines a process termed "scoping" (refer to 40 CFR 1501.7). 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).

First, comments are obtained from interested and affected parties, both within and outside the agency, to develop potential issues that must be considered. Second, the "potential issues" are reviewed by the interdisciplinary team to determine: (a) the key issues to be analyzed in depth and (b) issues that are not significant or that have been covered by prior environmental review and, therefore, should be eliminated from detailed study. After scoping is complete, documentation of the review of comments and potential issues will be compiled and will be located in the project record.

Your comments relative to the purpose and need, proposed action, project scope and possible impacts are critical. What are some possible improvements/changes to make the proposal better? What are some of your concerns or ideas relative to the project area and proposal?

This letter is being mailed to individuals or groups who have indicated an interest in similar projects on the Gallatin National Forest, or live in the vicinity of the project area. The goal of public involvement continues to be collaboration with interested individuals, agencies, and groups and to solicit comments, concerns and issues. Please share this information with friends and associates who you feel might have an interest in this project.

Preliminary Issues/Concerns

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

- Moose Winter Range – the lakeshore provides key habitat.
- Portions of Units 1, 2, 13, 14 and 15 are within the Inventoried Roadless boundary. However, the area in and around Units 13, 14, and 15 is heavily impacted from roads and past management.
- Scenery

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

During the summer of 2006 I met with the recreation residence permittees. These permittees generally expressed support for the project and demonstrated a renewed interest in reducing the fuel hazards on their permitted lots. Some concern was expressed over logging traffic, wildlife habitat, huckleberry habitat, escaped burns, and visual impacts.

The agency routinely evaluates potential impacts of projects such as this to wildlife habitat, old growth, recreation, water and air quality, noxious weeds, soils, vegetation, other land uses, facilities, heritage resources and areas with special designation such as wilderness. Specialists have conducted a preliminary review of all the resource areas. Based on this review, these resources can be maintained and easily protected with mitigation or best management practices.

Please submit your comments by March 9, 2007.

LONESOME WOOD VEGETATION MANAGEMENT PROPOSAL
PROJECT INTEREST CONFIRMATION FORM

Select the appropriate response and write in new information.

_____ I plan to attend the Open House.

_____ Yes, I am interested in staying involved in the Lonesome Wood Vegetation Management Project. Please keep my name on the mailing list for future mailings. My name and address are correct.

_____ Yes, I am interested in staying involved in the Lonesome Wood Vegetation Management Project. Please keep my name on the mailing list for future mailings. My contact information needs to be corrected. I am sending the corrected information.

Name:

Address:

_____ Yes, keep my name on the list and here is the name and address of someone else that may be interested in the project.

Name:

Address:

_____ Yes, I am interested but would prefer to receive future mailings over the computer.

My email address is _____.

_____ Not interested.

Please return this form to **ATTN: Teri Seth, Bozeman Ranger District, 3710 Fallon St, Ste. C, Bozeman, MT 59718.**

You may also send an email to tseth@fs.fed.us to confirm your interest.

Thank you for your interest in the management of your National Forest.