

November, 2005

Project Scoping
Newsletter



Cabin Gulch Vegetation Treatment Project

Why This Area...?

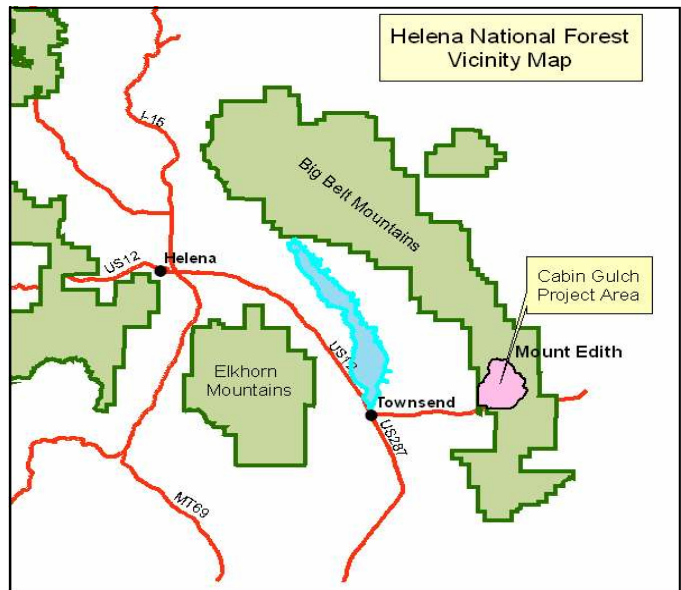
Project Outcomes

- Manage the area to be more resistant to high-intensity wildfires.
- Salvage dead trees.
- Reduce current & future fuel build-up.
- Study the effects of fire in a Douglas-fir forest community.
- Maintain old growth.
- Promote aspen stand health and size.
- Promote the reproduction of whitebark pine.
- Reclaim grassland & shrubland communities.
- Reduce sediment to West Fork Cabin Gulch stream.
- Enhance lynx forage habitat.

Have you noticed the red trees in the Cabin Gulch and North Fork of Deep Creek drainages located in the Big Belt Mountains? Why are so many of these evergreens no longer green?

Most of Montana has been under drought conditions for the past 7 years. It's no surprise that insects and disease are infesting the southern Big Belt Mountains. Drought has made many trees weak and susceptible to these insects. Bark beetle and budworm populations have grown in response to increased availability of food and warmer winters.

Since fires have been suppressed and controlled in this area the number of small trees in the dry forests (lower elevation, south and west facing slopes) has increased dramatically, resulting in in-



creased fuel levels and firerisk.

Large Douglas-fir trees are being killed by the Douglas-fir bark beetle. Both lodgepole pine and whitebark pine are being killed by the mountain pine beetle. The whitebark pine is also being weakened and, in some cases, killed by white

pine blister rust.

Aspen stands are declining in the area. Historic grassland and sagebrush areas are on the decline. Given these conditions, things are ripe for another large wildfire in the South Big Belt Mountains.

Proposed project treatment by acres

Thinning	2,100 ac
Patch Cutting	325 acres
Underburning & thinning research	550 acres
Whitebark Pine restoration	100 acres
Aspen Restoration	100 acres
Grassland-shrubland restoration	375 acres
Underburning*	* see proposed action
Mixed severity burn	475 acres
Total Acres Treated	3,900
New permanent road construction	.6 mile
Temporary Roads	9 miles
Close a portion of the W. Fork of Cabin Gulch Road	3 mile (approx.)

Given the combination of the factors stated above, we feel that action needs to be taken to improve the forest health of this area. For the past two field seasons, Forest Service biologists and research scientists, have collected data and assessed the situation in order to develop a proposal.

Here's What We Propose...

Based on the current conditions, the Helena National Forest is proposing to restore and maintain the health of these fire-dependent ecosystems, including increasing the resistance and resilience of these areas to disturbance from large fires and/or disease and insect outbreaks.

Details of the proposed action are described on pages two and three. These actions will directly address the project outcomes and also provide an opportunity for a research project to study the role of fire in Douglas-fir ecosystems in the Northern Rocky Mountains.

*Proposed Action
Treatment & Methods*

Proposed treatments for the Cabin Gulch Vegetation Treatment project include:

1. Thinning
2. Patch cuts (removal of trees from areas ranging between 1 and 25 acres)
3. Prescribed burning

Different methods would be used within logging and burning treatment areas.

- Logging (removing wood as a forest product)
- Slashing (cutting trees that are not valuable as a product and leaving them on site)
- Using other equipment to “grind-up” small trees and juniper

Logging systems in thinning and patch cut areas would include:

- Cable or skyline logging
- Tractor logging
- Helicopter logging

Prescribed burning would include:

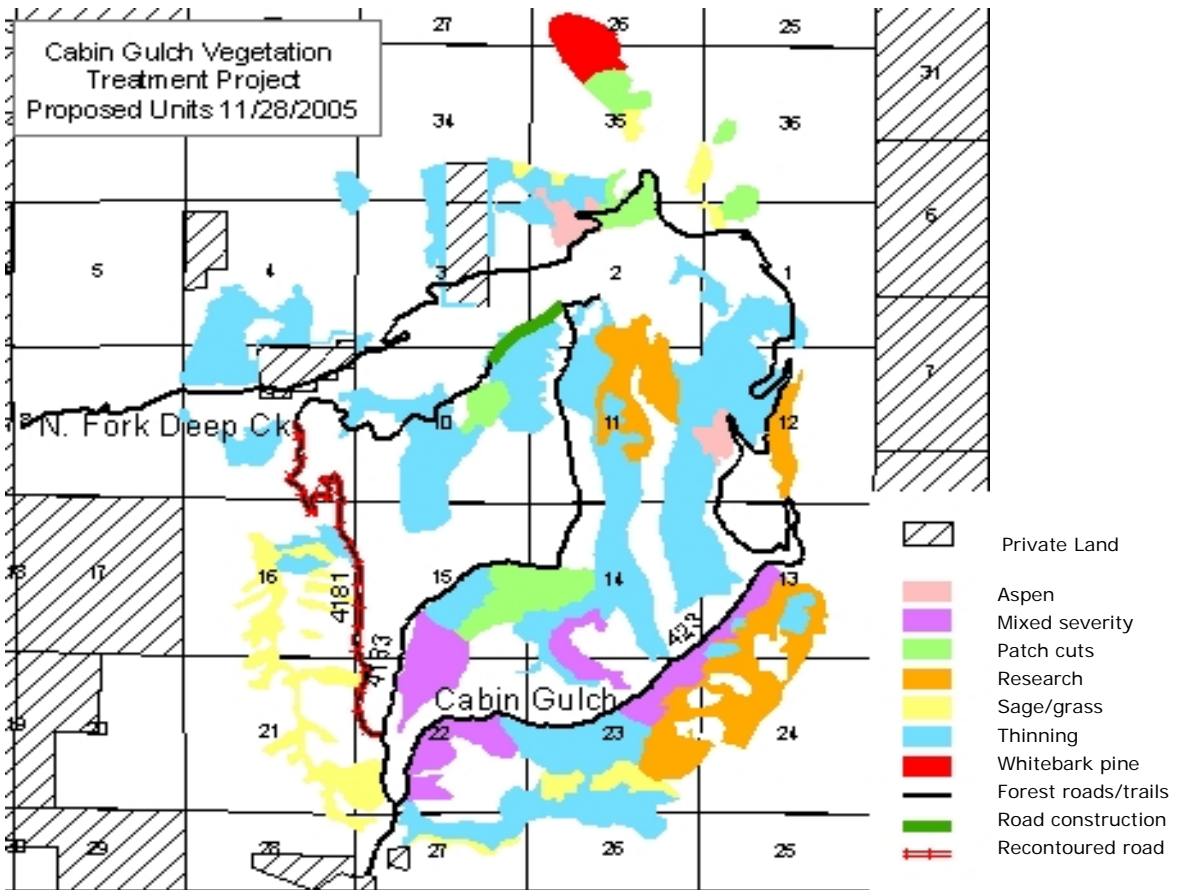
- Underburning (**most of the acres in dry forest would be underburned following thinning*)
- Mixed severity burning

When prescribed fire is used in these forest types, hand slashing of smaller material is often necessary to create a fuelbed and to control

fire behavior.



“Pitch tubes” indicating trunk attacks by Mountain Pine Beetle (MPB). Attacks are confirmed by looking under the bark with a hatchet for beetles, their tunnels, and/or bluestaining.



This proposal includes approximately nine miles of temporary road construction. These roads would be fully recontoured following project completion. About three miles of the West Fork of Cabin Gulch road would be permanently closed. Less than one mile of permanent road would be constructed for access to the upper portion of the West Fork of Cabin Gulch from the North Fork of Deep Creek.

The National Fire Regime Condition Class system is being used to describe the area. For more information visit the Forest website.



Whitebark pine is a species that is rapidly disappearing from the landscape due to a combination of white pine blister rust and mountain pine beetle. We are proposing to treat the accessible whitebark pine areas by removing competing lodgepole pine and subalpine fir. This would allow the whitebark pine to reproduce.

Pictures of each individual unit can be viewed on the Forest website.

The following pictures show the current condition of many of these areas followed by what we want the area to look like following treatment. Most of the Cabin Gulch drainage is occupied by dry Douglas-fir habitats.

Trees would be removed in these dry areas to create the desired outcome, sometimes removing only small diameter trees, and sometimes removing a mix, including larger trees.

Dry Douglas-fir –Current Condition in Cabin Gulch



Thinned Dry Douglas-fir in Cabin Gulch. Treated in 1986, photo taken in 2005.

Higher elevation, moist areas (mostly in the N. Fork of Deep Creek drainage) are dominated by lodgepole pine, and include some subalpine fir and whitebark pine. Silvicultural practices would include patch cuts with untreated patches of trees between them.



Lodgepole Pine Current Condition in N. Fork of Deep Creek.



Lodgepole Pine patch cut in N. Fork Deep Creek. Treated in 1986, photo taken in 2005.



Restoration of sagebrush & grassland meadows would be accomplished using mechanical thinning and prescribed fire. This photo depicts small trees and junipers growing where grass and sage should be growing in Cabin Gulch.

Aspen is a species that is declining in this area due to competition from conifers and lack of wildfire in its life cycle.

How the project will progress...

The Forest Service is just beginning an environmental analysis and we would like your participation. Here's how the process works. We are sending you this proposal in order to get your thoughts about, and

alternative suggestions to the proposal. Once we receive your comments or concerns, we will incorporate them into the proposal where possible. Then alternatives to the proposal will be developed.

We will then analyze the environmental effects of all

the alternatives and send you a draft of the document, hopefully by the end of February, 2006.

Once again we will ask for your site specific comments. Further analysis will be conducted if new issues are brought up, and new information will be incorporated.



We are proposing to remove conifers from aspen areas to promote the health and area occupied by aspen.

For more information visit the Helena Forest website
at www.fs.fed.us/r1/helena/projects/cabin_gulch

Helena National Forest
Townsend Ranger District
415 South Front Street
Townsend, MT 59644

Phone: 406-266-3425
Fax: 406- 266-5484
Email: sascott@fs.fed.us

Caring for the land and serving people



Top view of adult mountain pine beetle. (actual size, 1/8 to 1/3 inch).



Mountain area infested by Mountain Pine Beetle (MPB), showing three years of mortality.

Old, dead trees are gray; newly killed trees are straw yellow or orange. Some trees may also be infested but do not turn color until nine months or so under attack.

(continued from page 3)

By the end of June, we plan to send out a final environmental document that will include a decision by the Forest Supervisor as to what management actions will be taken in the project area. Following the project decision, there will be an appeal period with specific rules to appeal the decision. Again please visit the Forest website for more information on how this process works.

Let's work together and incorporate your ideas at this very important stage of the process.

Get Involved! Send us your comments...

If you are concerned about the forest resources on the Helena National Forest, I would appreciate your thoughts about this proposal. We'd like to hear alternatives to this proposal that also meet the purpose and need for action.

For instance, if you have specific areas that you would like to see managed differently than we have proposed, or areas you think we may have missed, let us know.

It's easy to get involved! Please send us your comments by **January 9, 2006**. If you choose, return the enclosed comment form to the

**Townsend Ranger District
415 South Front Street
Townsend, MT 59644**

We know it takes an effort to participate in these projects. Thanks for being involved and having an interest in **YOUR** public lands.

Sincerely,

Mike Cole

Townsend District Ranger