



File Code: 1950

Date: April 30, 2009

Dear Interested Party:

The Forest Service invites your comments on the proposed Cutoff Project, located along the Highway 135 and Clark Fork River corridor between St. Regis, Montana and Highway 200. This corridor, locally known as “the Cutoff”, spans both the Plains/Thompson Falls and Superior Ranger Districts on the Lolo National Forest. The project was developed through cooperation with the Montana Department of Transportation, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and Montana Rail Link, which are agencies that also have management responsibilities within the area.

We will hold two public meetings (one on each side of the project area) to provide further details about this project and to answer any questions. These meetings will be held in St. Regis at the Community Center/Visitor Center on Monday, May 18; and in Plains at the Grange Hall on Tuesday, May 19. Both meetings will begin at 6 pm. Maps of the proposed action are enclosed. These maps can also be viewed on the Lolo National Forest website at www.fs.fed.us/r1/lolo/projects/.

Project Purpose

We have identified four important focus areas for this project, which are listed below along with each of their objectives.

- 1) Vegetation management:
 - o Improve highway safety
 - o Increase the resistance and resilience of ponderosa pine to the undesirable effects of fires, insects, disease, and drought.
- 2) Recreation: Enhance recreation amenities without significantly changing the existing recreational experience and provide for public safety and sanitation.
- 3) Wildlife: Maintain and improve big game winter range.
- 4) Watershed health: Enhance watershed health with improvements to fish habitat and stream function.

Proposed Action

Vegetation Management

Montana Highway 135 is designated as a National Forest Scenic Byway. While the route is very scenic, there are several hazards that motorists have to contend with – such as black ice and animals in the roadway. The Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) has requested that the Forest Service manage the vegetation along the highway for four primary purposes: 1) to allow more sunlight onto the road in the winter to expedite ice and snow melt; 2) increase sight distance into the forest along the highway to better see animals that could potentially cross the road; 3) improve sight distance around roadway curves; and 4) remove trees adjacent to the highway that are potential collision hazards for errant vehicles.

In addition to highway safety improvements, we have identified a need to thin some of the ponderosa pine stands within the project area to increase the resistance and resilience of the remaining forest to insects, disease, drought, and wildfire. Compared to aerial photographs from the 1930s, the ponderosa pine stands within the project area are much denser today than they were 80 years ago. Proposed selective thinning would primarily remove the smaller trees to provide more water, nutrients, and growing space



for the trees that are retained, which would increase their vitality and make them less susceptible to loss from natural disturbances.

Summary of Proposed Vegetation Treatments (please see enclosed maps)

Proposed Treatments	Acres*
Commercial Thin	833 (Tractor – 554 acres; Helicopter - 279 acres)
Pre-commercial Thin	20
Slash & Pile	19
TOTAL	872

*Figures indicate estimated size of treatment areas. However, due to the varied nature of the vegetation within these identified treatment areas, not every acre included within unit boundaries would be treated.

Commercial thin: commercial-sized trees would be selectively thinned to leave primarily the largest and most healthy trees.

Pre-commercial thin: non-commercial sized trees would be thinned to allow more growing space for the trees selected to be retained.

Slash & Pile: non-commercial sized trees would be cut and the resulting slash would be piled and either burned or chipped. Larger trees would be retained.

The intent of these vegetation proposals is to respond to the Montana Department of Transportation’s request and to address the management needs within ponderosa pine stands while still maintaining the visual quality of the scenic byway.

Recreation

Visitor use continues to increase as more people discover the beauty and recreational amenities within this “Cutoff” area. While there are currently two developed recreation sites along the Cutoff (Cascade campground and Ferry Landing boat launch site), dispersed camping and river associated recreation are some of the most popular activities. Increased visitor use has resulted in sanitation concerns at the more popular dispersed sites; safety issues regarding access to some of these sites; and concerns about existing and potential future resource impacts. As stewards of public land, it is the Forest Service’s responsibility to manage this area to accommodate public use and meet increasing demand while still protecting natural resources. The goal is to achieve these objectives without significantly changing the existing recreational experience.

Below, recreation proposals are described for each site, moving from east to west across the project area.

Cascade Undeveloped Boat Launch

- Reorient the boat ramp from upstream to downstream for improved usage
- Grade the site to improve drainage and protect the river
- Install bulletin board

The intent at this site is to not upgrade it to a developed boat launch like Ferry Landing, but to make some modifications to protect the river from sediment runoff and make the site more useable for boaters.

Cascade Campground

Within the campground, the Douglas-fir trees have been dying over the past several years from insects and root disease, which has significantly reduced the privacy screening from the highway. Dead trees are removed on a regular basis to reduce hazards to campers. The proposal here is to gradually convert the tree species within the campground to western larch and ponderosa pine, which are resistant to the root disease found at this site. To do this, the live and dead Douglas-fir trees would be removed from about one acre on the west end of the campground and sapling-sized (6-8 foot tall) ponderosa pine and western larch trees would be planted in the created opening. This would affect the camping at approximately 2-3 campsites of this 10-site campground. If this effort is successful, another one-acre area could be done

several years later to continue the process. Educational signs would be posted in the campground to explain this activity.

Muchwater Flat

Provide safe access

- Construct a new entrance to provide the best sight distance for safe ingress and egress onto the highway where indicated by the Montana Department of Transportation.
- Close the existing two entrances

Manage dispersed camping

- Develop a site plan with the help of public input. The current road system at this site is essentially a haphazard array of numerous user-created roads. The site plan would redesign the road system to provide access to campsites while enhancing the privacy of others and to reduce soil and vegetation damage.
- Install steel fire rings
- Remove hazard trees and selectively remove other live trees to maintain full crowns of those trees that are retained to provide privacy screening.

Provide for sanitation

- Install vault toilet(s).

Ferry Landing

- Expand the upper parking area to the east to provide for more boat and stock trailer parking
- Pave the parking areas and roadway
- Lengthen the boat ramp up towards the parking area
- Install additional interpretative signing to document local history

Peninsula (see map)

Provide safe access

- Construct a new access road (approximately ½ mile) into this dispersed site from Highway 135 underneath the railroad trestle at Patrick Creek. Location of the new highway junction will be identified by the Montana Department of Transportation.
- Close the two currently used access routes. One existing access is via an unauthorized railroad crossing that Montana Rail Link and the Forest Service would like to close because of concerns for public safety. The other access route is a user-created road that traverses the river bank across from Ferry Landing and then passes underneath the highway and railroad bridges. The river bank road is steep and difficult for many vehicles to navigate. In addition, the road is under water in the spring. Concerns about public safety and resource damage are the primary reasons that this access route is proposed for closure. The Montana Department of Transportation and Montana Rail Link would still be able to access their bridge pilings for maintenance using the proposed new route into the Peninsula as described above.

Manage dispersed camping

- Develop a site plan with the help of public input that strives to maintain the existing recreational experience
- Organize campsite locations
- Harden campsite parking where needed
- Install additional steel fire rings

Provide for sanitation

- Install two vault toilets

Manage use of beach area

- Install barriers to prohibit vehicles from driving on the beach and into the river.

Patrick Creek Dispersed Campsite (located adjacent to the river, just north of Patrick Creek)

Provide safe access

- Close the existing unsafe access to this site (Road 18659). Current highway junction is located on a curve with very poor sight distance
- New access to this site would be via the proposed new access road described above for the Peninsula

This site would still be accessible for day use and overnight camping. However, the existing pit toilet would eventually be removed at the end of its service life rather than be replaced. Sanitation facilities would be provided at the Peninsula (see above).

Dunn's Draw

Safe access

- Close the non-system road (#37513) to motorized travel to keep vehicles from driving on the dangerous, steeply outsploped segment of road located above Highway 135
- Keep the rest of the road as pathway for non-motorized access
- Leave an area to park off the highway

Donlan Saddle Trail (# 205)

Safe access

- Change the travel management of this open motorized trail to closed yearlong to all motorized vehicles. Currently, motorcycles are allowed to use this trail. However, a few accidents in the last several years have indicated that the steep, rocky terrain is not suitable for motorized use.

Add stock and camping facilities at the trailhead

- Install a hitch rail and corral
- Harden the stock water area
- Install a bulletin board and steel campfire ring

River Trail Trailhead – west end (St. Regis side) on Road 9113.

- Relocate the trailhead onto Forest Service land and construct a new trailhead with sufficient space for parking and a turn-around area for stock trailers. The existing gate on Road 9113 would be moved about 1½ miles to the east, which would change the travel management status of approximately 1½ miles of road from closed yearlong to open for motorized use.

Wildlife

- Prescribe burn approximately 8460 acres to improve winter range. In some areas, small conifer trees would be slashed by hand with chainsaws to facilitate burning. Approximately 70 percent of the project area is designated in the Lolo National Forest Plan to be managed as winter range for deer, elk, and bighorn sheep. Areas proposed for burning are also mapped by Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks as important winter range for elk and bighorn sheep.
- Enhance approximately 10 acres of aspen stands using several methods which could include felling or girdling of competing conifer trees, prescribed burning (where planned for winter range improvement), severing of roots to stimulate new shoot growth, and fencing as needed. Individual aspen stands identified for treatment are generally smaller than ½ acre and about 20 of these stands are recommended for treatment. Aspen stands provide important habitat for birds and wintering deer, elk, and bighorn sheep.
- Treat weeds on roads, trails, trailheads, and dispersed recreation sites with herbicide to reduce existing weed populations and their spread.

Watershed Health

- Decommission approximately 3 miles of unneeded roads. This would include user-created roads that are causing resource damage and closure of routes into dispersed sites where new access would be constructed.
- Remove the culvert on Road 18262 that crosses Fourteenmile Creek.
- Improve fish habitat at the outlet of the highway culvert at Siegel Creek.
- Remove culvert that crosses Dunn's Draw on the old highway prism (which is no longer drivable), located above Highway 135.
- Rehabilitate the lower end of Patrick Creek. Additional survey is needed to determine specific treatments.
- Rehabilitate the illegal ATV hill-climb trail located off of Road 18493 (across from Ferry Landing). Install gate on Road 18493 to change travel management status from open for motorized use to closed yearlong to reduce illegal off-road motorized use. The building stone quarry located at this location could still be used by the public through authorization from the Forest Service.

Summary of Proposed Road Treatments (please see enclosed maps)

Road Treatments	Miles
New Construction for safe recreation access	0.5
Reconstruction - Ferry Landing parking area expansion and paving	***
Maintenance	3
Decommission	3
Convert to trail	0.5
Change travel management from open to closed	0.6
Change travel management from closed to open (trailhead relocation)	1.6

Some of the proposals described above are located on State land that the Forest Service will soon be acquiring in a land exchange (refer to enclosed maps). Completion of this land exchange is scheduled for late 2009. These particular proposals are entirely contingent on the completion of this land exchange. If, for some, reason, the Forest Service does not acquire these lands, other agreements could be pursued with the State to implement at least a portion of these proposals that are on State land. Otherwise, these proposals shown on State land would be dropped.

Approximately 76 percent of the Forest Service lands within the project area are within Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs). The Cutoff project proposes prescribed burning for winter range improvements and about 0.5 miles of road decommissioning within the IRA. No commercial harvest or road construction is proposed within Inventoried Roadless Areas.

How to Comment

We recognize that "the Cutoff" is a popular area that local residents and travelers enjoy, so public participation is very important to us. Your comments or concerns specific to the project or to individual sites are valuable in helping us identify issues and concerns, develop alternatives to the proposed action, and refine our analysis to focus on places or issues that are important to you. This is an opportunity for you to let us know how you think the Forest Service lands in this area should be managed. You are welcome to visit with us at any time during the analysis of this project and prior to a decision being made; however, two periods of time are identified for the receipt of comments on the analysis. The first of these periods is now at the initial scoping stage. The second period is during review of the environmental assessment (EA) document that is expected to be published in February 2010. There will be a 30-day comment period on the EA.

If you wish to be kept on the mailing list for the Cutoff project and/or to comment on this proposal, please send your written responses to:

Cutoff Project Leader
Plains/Thompson Falls Ranger District
P.O. Box 429
Plains, Montana 59859

To send comments electronically, please send to: comments-northern-lolo-plains-thompsonfalls@fs.fed.us – just be sure to include your name and mailing address. Please submit your comments by June 15. The more site-specific your suggestions, the better we will be able to evaluate your comments. If you do not respond to this mailing, we will assume that you are not interested in this project and your name will be removed from the Cutoff mailing list. However, you may still comment at a later date.

If you have any questions, please contact Randy Hojem at 826-4308, Sharon Sweeney at 822-3928, or Pat Partyka, Project Leader, at (406) 826-4314. As a reminder, there will be two public meetings (one on each side of the project area). These meetings will be held in St. Regis at the Community Center/Visitor Center on Monday, May 18; and in Plains at the Grange Hall on Tuesday, May 19. Both meetings will begin at 6 pm. We look forward to seeing you there.

Sincerely,

/s/ Randy R. Hojem

RANDY R. HOJEM
Plains/Thompson Falls District Ranger

/s/ Sharon Sweeney

SHARON SWEENEY
Superior District Ranger

