

Finding Of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

for the

Martin Creek Watershed Restoration Project

Sula Ranger District
Bitterroot National Forest
Montana

January 10, 2013

After considering the environmental effects described in the attached Environmental Assessment, and the entirety of the Project Planning Record, I have determined that the actions associated with the Proposed Action will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared.

I base my finding on the following:

(a) Context. This means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts such as society as a whole (human, national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. For instance, in the case of a site-specific action, significance would usually depend upon the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Both short- and long-term effects are relevant (40 CFR 1508.27):

The disclosure of effects in the Martin Creek Watershed Restoration Project EA (Project) found the actions limited in context. The project area is limited in size and the activities limited in duration. Effects are local in nature and are not likely to significantly affect regional or national resources. Impacts to water quality would be limited in scope and duration. Actions would increase turbidity where activities were occurring in the stream channel or immediately adjacent to it, such as when culverts were removed or road fill at crossings were removed and would last less than six hours. There would be no changes to those roads included in the National Resource Manager Roads Database (also called system roads). Undetermined roads that would be stored would be added to this Database and be available for future use. Other undetermined roads would be decommissioned but this would not preclude them from consideration as an ATV or foot trail at another time. Decommissioned, recontoured roads would have a narrow foot path left to facilitate walking use as a result of public comment. The original decision, dated September 30, 2012 was appealed due to plans to include a motorized path on four roads. As a result of the appeal and recommendation from the appeal reviewing officer, these roads have been dropped from the project.

Following implementation of this Project, there would be reasonable access to the project area and would be long-term benefits from implementation of Alternative 2: Improved passage of aquatic life and reduction in sediment contributions when soils stabilize and revegetate (EA, Section 4.0).

On those roads included in travel planning (EA, Section 4.2.3, Table 12), treatments would consist of storage without treatment or have been dropped. Those roads that the inventory noted as having motorized travel would be left with an OHV accessible route to eliminate the potential risk of conflict with Travel Planning.



(b) Intensity. This refers to the severity of impact. Responsible officials must bear in mind that more than one agency may make decisions about partial aspects of a major action. The following are considered in evaluating intensity (40 CFR 1508.27):

1) Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effects will be beneficial.

A total of 110 miles of road have been carried forward to the Decision (in the EA, 212 miles were analyzed for potential treatment). Eighty-nine miles of these have already been treated or are recovering naturally and are not negatively impacting water quality, fisheries, wildlife or the other natural resources in the area. Only 21 miles would need some sort of treatment ranging from spot sediment reduction treatments to full recontour (EA, Section 2.9). These treatments would follow the direction in the Bitterroot National Forest Plan and the Bitterroot Headwaters TMDL to reduce sediment from existing roads, restore drainage pathways, improve infiltration and foster vegetation recovery (EA, pages Section 1.3, 1.4).

Impacts associated with the project are discussed in the EA (EA, Section 4.0). Probably the most controversial impact with the Martin Creek Watershed Restoration Project is that associated with access and travel. To avoid conflict with Travel Planning, several options will be used in this project: 1) Store the undetermined road without treatment where appropriate; 2) Leave a narrow foot/stock trail on obliterated roads to provide non-motorized use; 3) Drop the four roads planned for treatment that are currently receiving motorized use. Access would not be eliminated due to the use of these options discussed above nor does it preclude access pending final decision of the BNF Travel Planning EIS. Other roads in the area provide access to nearby areas (EA, Alternative 2 map). In addition, 53 miles of road would be placed on the forest transportation system as stored (EA, Section 1.4, 2.9) and be available for future use.

This project will not determine motorized travel by vehicle type and/or season of use as outlined in the 2005 Travel Management Rule. The travel by vehicle type and time of year for the Bitterroot National Forest is being analyzed in the Bitterroot National Forest Travel Management Planning Project Final Environmental Impact Statement Record of Decision.

Whenever culverts are replaced or removed on streams with threatened fish species, there is always risk that short-term sediment pulses produced by the work activities could negatively affect individual fish that reside in the vicinity of the disturbed area. This risk has been documented in the EA (EA, Section 4.2.1, 4.2.2, PF-SPEC-2, SPEC-8) and in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2008 Biological Opinion of the Effects to Bull Trout and Bull Trout Critical Habitat from Road Management Activities on National Forest System and Bureau of Land Management Lands in Western Montana (Project File document SPEC-2 and SPEC -4). The conclusion issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in their Biological Opinion is that road storage and decommissioning are “not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of bull trout or result in destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat” (EA, Section 4.2.2, PF-SPEC-2 and SPEC-4). The incidental take statement in the Biological Opinion acknowledges some risk that a few individual bull trout or their habitats could be negatively affected by short-term sedimentation. However, the negative impacts on habitat would be limited in scope and duration and would only affect small numbers of bull trout. Furthermore, the long-term impact on bull trout would be beneficial at both the local population scale and the core area meta-population scale (EA, Section 4.2.2, PF-SPEC-2 and SPEC-4).



The road storage and decommissioning would not have significant impacts on other resources identified and described in the EA (EA, Section 4.0).

For the reasons described above, the adverse effects of the project will be non-significant in the long and short term (EA, Chapter 4).

2) *The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.*

Proposed activities would not significantly affect public health and safety. The affected roads are relatively remote and receive limited traffic each year. They would be signed and not accessible to the public while work is being accomplished (EA, Section 2.9.1). Warning signs would be used to notify recreationists of the closures. The watershed analysis indicates no degradation of water quality that would constitute a public health threat (EA, Section 4.2.1).

3) *Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.*

There are no adverse effects to historic places or loss of scientific, cultural, historical, or other unique resources (EA, Section 3.5.4, PF-SPEC-1). This project is in compliance with the Region 1 programmatic agreement between the State Historic Preservation Office and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (EA, Section 3.5.4, PF-SPEC-1).

There are no parklands, prime farmlands, or wild and scenic rivers within the affected area.

There would be no adverse effects on wetlands (EA, Section 4.2.1). Restoration at stream crossings would allow wetlands at crossings to recover and function more naturally. Where wetlands were created by road construction/compaction, activity would be limited to protect the wetland sites. Treatment would only occur on the road prism itself and so off-road wetlands would not be entered.

The work would not occur within Inventoried Roadless Areas.

4) *The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.*

An analysis of the proposed action and alternatives has been conducted using the best information available and the latest methods of analyzing data by professionals in their respective disciplines. Nine comment letters/phone calls were received during the public scoping period, including: Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, tpaddock (email), Mike Jeffords, Wildlands CPR/Friends of the Bitterroot, Dean and Betty Frost, Ravalli County Off Road User Association, Jim and Marsha Waliser, and Daniel Thompson. These letters were reviewed and comments responded to in a document attached to the Decision Notice titled Martin Sleeping Child Comments. Commenters were concerned with the level and type of roads analysis completed, concern that proposed activities would increase sediment to area streams, that the number of roads proposed for storage and decommissioning would eliminate access, difficulty of access on the decommissioned and stored roads, the type of treatments proposed, a desire for more roads to be treated, a desire for fewer roads to be treated, support for the project and nonsupport. The effects of the proposed alternative on the various resources (EA, Chapter 4) are not considered to be highly controversial by professionals, specialists and scientists from associated fields of wildlife biology and management, fisheries, hydrology, botany, and heritage resources. The project is balanced with a similar amount of roads proposed for storage and decommissioning and access is retained to vicinity by system



roads (no change to system roads), those roads that would be stored, OHV accessible routes and foot paths on recountoured decommissioned roads. For those reasons, I do not believe that there is significant controversy over the effects of this action.

5) *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.*

Scoping did not identify highly uncertain, unique or unknown risks. The possible effects on the human environment are not highly uncertain nor do they involve unique or uncertain risks. The technical analyses conducted for determinations of the impacts to the resources are supportable with use of accepted techniques, reliable data, and professional judgment. Impacts are within the limits that are considered thresholds of concern. Therefore, I conclude that there are no highly uncertain, unique, or unknown risks.

6) *The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.*

This project is not setting a precedent for future actions with significant effects. The proposed road storage and decommissioning proposals are consistent with the Bitterroot National Forest Plan, INFISH and follow direction of the Clean Water Act (EA, Sections 1.3, 1.7, 4.2.1, 4.2.2, 4.2.3, 4.3.3, 4.3.6). This action does not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration.

7) *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulatively significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by breaking it down into small component parts.*

The EA includes connected, cumulative, and similar actions in the scope of the analysis (EA, Chapter 4). The cumulative effects of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions are considered and disclosed in the EA. The effects of this project are cumulative with a limited subset of effects expected from the Martin Creek Watershed Restoration project, the Cameron Blue Ecoburn project, and ongoing recreation and routine maintenance activities. As disclosed in the cumulative effects analyses in the EA (EA, pages 47-48 and PF-WAT-4, 51-54, 58-59, 62-63). Those effects that are common and cumulative are limited in scope, duration, and intensity.

8) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.*

None of the roads identified for treatment are listed or are being considered for listing on the National Register of Historic Places (EA, Section 4.3.5). The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes were consulted and no Tribal cultural concerns are associated with this project (EA, Section 4.3.5 and PF-SPEC-1). Because the work would occur within areas of previous disturbance (the existing modern road prisms) and many sites have received previous cultural surveys with negative results, the probability of new site discovery is low (EA, Section 4.3.5). The potential for impacting undiscovered sites would be mitigated by immediately notifying the Heritage program manager if any potentially cultural material is uncovered during road storage or decommissioning (EA, Section 2.9.1).



9) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.*

This project has the potential to affect one endangered or threatened species – the bull trout (EA, Section 4.2.2). The ESA project determination for Alternative 2 is “May Affect, likely to adversely affect”. Although this project would be beneficial to bull trout in the long term, there is risk of short term sediment effects adversely affecting a few individual bull trout, particularly on Lodgepole Creek below FSR 73279 where the culvert will be removed (EA, Section 4.2.2).

A site specific Biological Assessment was not written for bull trout but was completed under a programmatic agreement -the 2008 Biological Opinion of the Effects to Bull Trout and Bull Trout Critical Habitat from Road Management Activities on National Forest System and Bureau of Land Management Lands in Western Montana (EA, Section 4.2.2, PF-SPEC-4). The BO allows beneficial road-related projects such as road decommissioning and storage to proceed without individual consultations as long as certain mitigations have been incorporated into the project (EA, Section 2.9.1, 4.2.2). A copy of the Biological Opinion is available in the Project File as SPEC-4.

A Biological Evaluation has been completed documenting the effects of road storage and decommissioning on westslope cutthroat trout, a sensitive aquatic species (EA, Section 4.2.2, and Project File document SPEC-2). The determination for westslope cutthroat trout is “May Impact Individuals and Habitat, but With No Loss of Viability or Trend Towards Federal Listing” in the short-term, and “Beneficial Impact” in the long-term (EA, Section 4.2.2, Project File document SPEC-2). Viable populations of westslope cutthroat trout would be maintained at both the project and Forest-wide scales.

A Biological Evaluation has been completed documenting the effects of road storage and decommissioning on western pearlshell mussels, another sensitive aquatic species (EA, Section 4.2.2, Project File document SPEC-2). For this species the project determination of Alternative 2 is “No Impact” in the short term and “Beneficial Impact” in the long term where mussels are known to occur (lower Cameron Creek) or where suitable mussel habitat is thought to be present. Suitable mussel habitat does not appear to be present in the non-fish bearing streams where crossings would be restored. In the long term, this project would be beneficial impact beginning approximately one year after completion of restoration activities. Direct benefits would be difficult to measure, improved watershed health and water quality are beneficial to future persistence and viability of the western pearlshell mussel (Project File Document SPEC-2).

The road storage and decommissioning were determined by the project wildlife biologist to have “No Effect” on the gray wolf (endangered) and Not Likely to Adversely Affect for the (threatened) Canada lynx (EA, Section 4.3.2). A Biological Evaluation has been completed for sensitive wildlife species (EA, Section 4.3.3). For several sensitive species (Bald Eagle, Black-backed Woodpecker, Coeur d’Alene Salamander, Flammulated Owl, Northern Bog Lemming, Northern Leopard Frog, Peregrine Falcon, Townsend’s Big-eared Bat) the determination is “No Impact”. For other sensitive species (Boreal Toad, Fisher, North American Wolverine) the determination is “May Impact Individuals and Habitat, No Impact on Population” (EA, Section 4.3.2). Viable populations of sensitive wildlife species would be maintained at both the project and Forest-wide scales.

There are no threatened, endangered, or sensitive plant species that have been found within the road prisms, (EA,). These areas are previously disturbed and proposed actions should improve conditions to allow for colonization of native plants. The project determination for sensitive plants is “No Impact” (EA, Section 4.3.4).

Based upon review of the information in the EA (Section 4.2.2, 4.3.2, 4.3.4), and summarized here, the



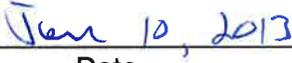
long-term impact on endangered, threatened, or sensitive species would be beneficial. For those reasons, and because of the assessments summarized above, I find that this action would not adversely affect threatened or endangered species or their habitats to a significant degree.

10) *Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.*

The action does not violate any Federal, State or local laws or permits imposed for the protection of the environment.



Charles T. Oliver



Date

Acting District Ranger
Sula Ranger District
Bitterroot National Forest

