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Finding of No Significant Impact

Rennic Stark Project

Ninemile Ranger District, Lolo National Forest
Missoula County, Montana

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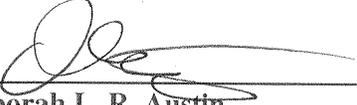
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After considering the environmental effects described in the attached Rennic Stark Project Environmental Assessment (EA) (40 CFR 1508.13) and the project planning record, I have determined that the actions associated with Alternative 2, will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of its impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.



Deborah L. R. Austin
Forest Supervisor
Lolo National Forest

3/22/13
Date

I base my finding on the following:

The Rennic Stark Project would implement project activities that are of limited scope and duration, affecting only local residents and visitors to the immediate treatment units. The duration of treatment operations would span 5-10 years (EA, page 1).

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. My finding of no significant effect on the quality of the human environment is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action. I fully considered the effects of Alternative 2 (Modified Proposed Action) both potentially adverse and beneficial.

No Effects

The EA considered all the resource values that could be adversely affected by implementation of Alternative 2. Initial project design and resource protection measures effectively eliminated or reduced to negligible most of the potential impacts; therefore, implementation of the proposed action would result in no meaningful effect to the following resource elements.

Hydrology and Fisheries (EA, pages 125 to 133): There would be no effects to water temperature or yield; peak/base flows; large woody debris (thus protecting pool frequency and quality, large pools, and off-channel habitat); stream banks; and channel conditions and dynamics. Because harvest and yarding activities are buffered with RHCA buffers, there will be no impact to riparian conservation areas, seeps, springs, bogs, or other sensitive wet areas. There would be no species or habitat impacts in the analysis area, and no effect to continued existence of bull trout or adverse modification of critical habitat.

Forest Vegetation (Forest Carbon Cycling and Storage Report, pages 9 - 10): There would be no discernable impact on atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases or global warming.

Botany (EA, pages 64 to 65): There would be no effects to known federally listed plants because none were found during field surveys in the treatment units. Resource protection measures address any new occurrences (EA page 35, RPM 52) of sensitive plants. Two species of Region 1 sensitive plants are

known to occur in the project area: whitebark pine and *Heterocodon rariflorum*. The whitebark pine, which occurs in EMB units 101 and 102, will be protected by avoiding ignition in areas of well-established whitebark pine trees. The *Heterocodon rariflorum* population will be protected by buffering it (EA page 35, RPM 53). There would be no effect to culturally sensitive plants (camas).

Cultural (EA, page 138): There would be no effect to cultural resources or historic properties. The culturally modified tree in unit 102 will be protected (EA page 32, RPM 29).

Wildlife (EA, pages 74 to 125): There would be no effect to grizzly bears, grizzly denning habitat, lynx critical habitat, or the quality and quantity of lynx foraging habitat. The project would have no impact on bighorn sheep, gray wolf, wolverine, northern bog lemming, Townsend's big-eared bat, American peregrine, common loon, harlequin duck, Coeur d'Alene salamander, northern frog, western toad, biodiversity, fragmentation, corridors, or linkages.

Beneficial Effects

Hydrology and Fisheries (EA, pages 40 to 44): There would be an increase in stream access and the ability to withstand 100-year flood events with the replacement of three culverts. An additional 11 crossing structures will be removed; while these are less important from a fish passage perspective, removing them will reduce risks of sediment addition and downstream habitat impacts. There would be a slight improvement in refugia quality due to increased access.

There would be a net reduction of sediment delivery over the modeled 10-year timeframe. This long-term reduction will allow for more natural habitat conditions to develop in streams over time, which would support native fish populations.

Because of the low intensities, timing, and methodologies of prescribed fire operations, burning operations would also have minimal to no effect, and the risk of very high erosion and sediment delivery associated with some wildfire scenarios would be reduced.

Road density and location will improve primarily in the Cedar Kennedy and Stark Stoney watersheds as about 1 mile of road that is within 100 feet or less of the stream would be removed and another ½ mile would be reduced within 300 feet.

Soils (EA, pages 135 to 136; EA, Appendix G – Soil Rehabilitation Plans): Opportunities to close or decommission roads as well as perform rehabilitation work associated with old landings and road prisms and at recreation sites (EA page 32, RPM 32 and 33 – units 4, 9, and 10) are included in Alternative 2. Non-commercial units 80-85, which currently have low levels of organic matter, will be improved by leaving all cut material on-site to slowly release nutrients to the soil, improve water retention, and provide future organic matter. Units currently low in large woody material (units 4, 5a/b, 9, 10, 15 and 16) will meet the Lolo NF Forest Plan after implementation through recruitment during and immediately after harvest by including recommendations in the silvicultural and fuels prescriptions to provide for both standing and down wood in various sizes and decay classes (Soils Specialist's Report, page 40). Resource protection measures will retain treatment units at or below the 15 percent DSD guideline. Planned mixed severity landscape level fire will benefit soil productivity by adding an influx of nutrients and carbon. Large wood, a combination of standing and down, will remain on-site at levels specified in the Lolo NF Coarse Woody Guideline and Graham et al. (1994).

Forest Vegetation (EA, pages 44 to 47): There would be positive effects across 4,940 acres as the treatments provide for landscape-scale age class and structural diversity and reduced fuel continuity; prescribed fire to perpetuate landscape-scale natural diversity of plant communities; and restoration and regeneration of bark beetle-killed stands by using management-ignited fire. There would be improved forest health and a reduction in bark beetle risk. Treatments would maintain and protect old-growth

characteristics in units 15, 16, 22, and 103 which currently meet old-growth criteria. In addition, the slashing, thinning, and prescribed fire treatments included in this project would not preclude stands from developing into old growth in the future¹. The treatments would likely hasten diameter accretion and stands may potentially provide the large tree component of old growth in the future.

Fuel Conditions and Fire Behavior (EA, pages 71 to 72): Alternative 2 will result in the following improvements in potential fire behavior characteristics: reduced chance of stand-replacing fire and increased effectiveness and safety of initial attack ground resources; reduced probability of crown fire initiation; and improved resilience to vertical crown fire development and sustained crown fire behavior.

Recreation and Visuals (EA, pages 140-141 and 146): Improvements to roads would increase opportunities for recreationists who prefer an easily accessed setting, improving access for hunting, viewing scenery, and other recreational use of the area. Re-graveling and reconstructing the Stark Mountain Trailhead will improve the recreational experience for Forest visitors by giving them a level place to park and turn around. The vegetation treatments will result in a more varied landscape which could enhance recreation by allowing visitors to experience a variety of vegetative communities and a diversity of wildlife.

Botany (EA, page 65): Whitebark pine, a Region 1 sensitive plant known to occur in EMB units 101 and 102, could be beneficially impacted if the burn is hot enough to create pockets of suitable regeneration habitat. The approximate 100 acres of whitebark pine planting included in Alternative 2 could also benefit the species if the seedlings survive and produce viable seeds.

Wildlife (EA, pages 74 to 125): Benefits include restoring fire to the landscape; increasing habitat security and connectivity for grizzly bear, Canada lynx, wolverine, fisher, and other wildlife species by storing and decommissioning roads; increasing vegetative diversity for wolf prey species through prescribed burning; and improving foraging conditions on ungulate winter range.

Potential Adverse Effects

Hydrology & Fisheries (EA, pages 40 to 44): Short-term increases in sediment will result from the road management activities (approximately 6-10% is expected to occur within a 5-year timeframe); however sediment reductions within the modeled 10-year time frame would be greater (up to 17%).

There are potential effects on water quality from weed spraying although they would be limited since all units have standard RHCA buffers and road spraying would follow strict application procedures outlined in the Lolo NF Weed EIS (2007). In addition, the use of a low-toxicity herbicide, such as Milestone, following label precautions; and following application BMPs further reduces any risk of contamination.

Due to the short-term sediment increase, this project generates a “may affect, likely to adversely affect” determination for bull trout consultation. A biological assessment regarding effects to federally listed fish species and critical habitat located within the analysis area was submitted to USDI Fish and Wildlife Service and they provided a letter of concurrence. Implementation may impact westslope cutthroat trout or western pearlshell mussel individuals or habitat, but will not likely contribute to a trend towards Federal listing or loss of viability to the population or species.

Soils (EA, pages 45 to 48): The activities included in the Selected Alternative are primarily restorative and adhere to Region 1 soil quality guidelines for maintaining soil productivity. In harvest units, localized areas with detrimental levels of soil compaction, displacement, and other physical disturbances will reduce the ability of soils to exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide thus affecting the ability of soil

¹ The exception to this statement is Units 1b, 8, 14b, and 23, which are regeneration harvests due to their existing moderate to high levels of mortality from insects and disease.

organisms to survive; however, large areas (>100 ft²) with detrimental levels of soil disturbance are not expected because of project design features, standard soil operating procedures, and Timber Sale contract provisions (Soils Specialist's Report, page 40). All harvest units will remain at or below the 15 percent cumulative detrimental disturbance guideline through resource protection measures, including winter harvest (EA pages 32-33, RPM 34 – units 4, 9, and 10), in-woods processing (EA page 33, RPM 35 – units 9 and 10), slope restrictions (EA page 33, RPM 36 – units 1, 2, 3, 5b, 7, 11, 13, 14, 23, and 24), slash placement on skid trails (EA page 33, RPM 37 – units 3, 5b, and 7).

Forest Vegetation (EA, pages 47 to 48): Treatments in Alternative 2 were designed to protect large diameter (>21" dbh) ponderosa pine and western larch from the risk of stand-replacing wildfire due to ladder fuel accumulations, historically atypical stand densities, and high surface fuel loading. There will be no commercial tree removal in old growth stands, as defined by the Forest Plan and Green and others (1992). The potential to negatively affect old-growth characteristics is greatly reduced by having site-specific prescriptions for each unit. The guideline for 8 percent of an ecological management unit to be managed for old growth is exceeded.

Air Quality (Air Quality Specialist's Report, page 9): There would be limited immediate adverse effects on air quality stemming from prescribed burning, but these impacts would be localized, temporary, transient, and within established Federal thresholds. Resource protection measures (EA page 36, RPMs 64-68) will minimize these effects.

Recreation (EA, pages 140 to 141): There would be some short-term and temporary displacement of recreationists while management activities are occurring. Prohibiting ground-disturbing activities in all treatment units and log haul activities during the first week of and on the weekends during big game rifle season will reduce impacts to recreation traffic and hunters (EA pages 31-32, RPMs 15 and 28). There are other locations on the Ninemile Ranger District for these recreationists to use.

Visuals (EA, page 146): Forest visitors will notice changes to the landscape and may observe slash piles, burn piles, road maintenance activities, logging landings, or tree paint; however resource protection measures (EA page 29, RPMs 1 – 4) will assure activities meet visual quality objectives either at project completion or about one growing season after all project activities are complete.

Wildlife (EA, pages 59 to 73): The project could have direct adverse effects to wildlife by temporarily displacing individuals during project activities; species include grizzly bear, gray wolf, fisher, flammulated owl, goshawk, elk, and pileated woodpeckers. For all these species the disturbance would occur in a relatively small area (portions of a maximum of 9,201 acres at a time), and there would be habitat available for them to disperse to. Proposed vegetation treatments will modify the structure of habitat, but will not render any habitat unsuitable for the species analyzed.

2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety. It is my determination that by incorporating the resource protection measures for air quality (EA, RPM 64-68, page 36), and recreation (EA, RPM 27-28)) and because the action will reduce crown fire potential and fire intensity (pages 71-73), Alternative 2 will have no significant adverse effects on public health and safety.

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area, such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, parklands, prime farms, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas. Alternative 2 will not impact historical or cultural resources (EA, page 138) or wetlands (Water Resources Specialist's Report, page 14; EA page 35, RPM 51). The project area has no parklands, prime farms, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly

controversial. Effects analysis was conducted using scientific literature (see EA, Appendix B), and the interdisciplinary team reviewed literature cited in public comments on the project (Project File, Section E). No highly-controversial or significant issues related to the human environment were identified during scoping or through the analysis process (EA, pages 12 to 13, Appendix C).

5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risk. Alternative 2 is similar to the Stark Horse Project (1999) and Barrett Fuels II Project (2010), which are located within the Stark Stoney and Cedar Kennedy HUCs. Neither of these projects was determined to have significant effects. Analysis of Alternative 2 considered the effects of past actions as a frame of reference, in conjunction with scientifically accepted analytical techniques, available information, and best professional experience and judgment, to estimate effects to the human environment. It is my conclusion that there are no uncertain or unique characteristics in the project area which have not been previously encountered or that would constitute an unknown risk to the human environment.

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.

Alternative 2 will not set a precedent for future actions with significant effects. The proposed activities are similar in nature and effects to many other projects in the immediate area and are consistent with the Lolo National Forest Plan. This action does not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. Any proposed future project must be evaluated on its own merits and effects.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individual insignificant but cumulative significant impacts. Cumulative effects were carefully considered for all resources and were determined not to be significant (analysis throughout the EA, individual resource reports and Project File).

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highway structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources. A project-specific resource protection measure that provides site protection has been developed (EA page 29, RPM 29). The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes were contacted about this project. No comments were received from any interested parties concerning any potential adverse effects to recorded archaeological sites, nor has there been any concern this project may affect areas of spiritual or traditional use.

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. The project biologist determined that the proposed action would “not likely to adversely affect” Canada lynx, and would have “no effect” on grizzly bears. A biological assessment was submitted to the USDI Fish and Wildlife Service and they sent a concurrence letter on November 21, 2012.

Bull trout are “not likely to be adversely affected”. A biological assessment regarding effects to federally-listed species and critical habitat located within the analysis area was submitted to USDI Fish and Wildlife Service and they sent a concurrence letter on June 18, 2012.

10. Whether the proposed action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations, and consistency with the Lolo National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, were considered in all of the resource reports. It was determined the actions will not violate Federal, State, or local laws; the Forest Plan; or other requirements for the protection of the environment.

