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Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact

South Bridger Interface Project

Bozeman Ranger District, Gallatin National Forest
Gallatin County, Montana



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1. SUMMARY OF THE DECISION

This Decision Notice (DN) documents my decision to select the proposed action from the South Bridger Interface Project Environmental Assessment (EA) for implementation. I have decided to authorize up to 250 acres of commercial thinning and up to ½ mile of temporary road construction to reduce susceptibility to damage and mortality from western spruce budworm, Douglas-fir beetle and mountain pine beetle, and to enhance growth, quality, vigor, and composition of treated stands. Units will be logged with ground based equipment on sustained slopes that are less than 35 percent. Temporary roads will be reclaimed following their use, and Best Management Practices (BMPs) for water and soil conservation will be incorporated into all project activities (refer to Appendix C and D of the EA). A non-significant, site-specific Forest Plan Amendment is required to address a reentry standard in Management Area (MA) 11.

My decision is based on the analysis documented in the South Bridger Interface (SBI) Project EA, which incorporates response to comments received during the scoping comment period for the project as well as the 30-day comment period on the EA. My decision also considers the content of two objections that were received on my draft decision notice. The SBI Environmental Assessment (EA) was prepared pursuant to the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA, 40CFR 1500-1508), the National Forest Management Act, and the 1987 Gallatin National Forest Management Plan as amended.

This Decision Notice provides my decision, rationale for selecting the proposed action, alternatives considered, Finding of No Significant Impact, and other findings required by law, regulation, or policy. As the responsible official, I am responsible for evaluating the effects of the project relative to the definition of significance established by the CEQ Regulations (40 CFR 1508.13). I have reviewed and considered the EA and documentation included in the project record, and I have determined that the South Bridger Interface Project will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment. As a result, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

2. PROJECT AREA

The approximately 1847-acre South Bridger project area is on the Bozeman District of the Gallatin National Forest and is located approximately 15 miles northeast of Bozeman in Gallatin County. It is geographically located within and immediately south of Bridger Bowl Ski Area in the vicinity of Slushman Creek. Specifically, the project is located in Section 30, Township 1 North, Range 7 East and Section 6, Township 1 South, Range 7 East, Gallatin County, Montana. A map of the project area is included in Appendix A of the EA.

3. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The project area lies partially within and adjacent to Bridger Bowl Ski Area, which has been operating since 1954. The area is considered wildland urban interface, and lies between private residential and forested/agricultural lands to the east and Inventoried Roadless to the west. The area is visible by recreationists skiing at Bridger Bowl, as well as local residents and travelers through Bridger Canyon.

Forest vegetation in the project area primarily consists of mature and over-mature stands of

Douglas-fir and lodgepole pine. Forest structure is generally single-storied, with small areas of two storied vertical structure where remnant overstory trees exist above an understory. Tree densities are high and are being affected by insect related mortality.

Douglas-fir has experienced epidemic levels of mortality from western spruce budworm. Budworm has been impacting all size and age classes of Douglas-fir and subalpine fir in the area around Bridger Bowl for many years. Many large trees have been almost completely defoliated and in some cases subsequently attacked by Douglas-fir beetle. Mountain pine beetle has killed about half of the lodgepole in mixed stands and in some cases has caused 100 percent mortality in lodgepole pine dominated areas. The mixed species composition has resulted in variable levels of mortality and live tree densities across the project area. Mountain pine beetle, western spruce budworm, and Douglas-fir beetle mortality have increased the amount and distribution of standing dead snags throughout the area. Estimates range from zero to 117 dead trees per acre greater than 5" DBH (Konen, 2013). Refer to the Forest Vegetation analysis in Ch 3 for additional information.

In 2010 and 2013, the Gallatin National Forest, in cooperation with the Bridger Bowl Ski Area permittee and Forest Health Protection, Forest Service Northern Region, sprayed approximately 500 acres of both National Forest and private lands with *Bacillus thuringiensis (B.t)* to reduce damage and tree mortality caused by western spruce budworm. Subsequently, the Forest and ski area permittee have been implementing a vegetation management plan for the Bridger Bowl ski area that involves salvaging dead and dying trees and planting young trees in areas that are suitable to establish a younger size class. These activities are being completed within the ski area boundary in Gallatin Forest Plan, Management Area 2 (MA 2).

4. PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of the South Bridger Interface Project is to alter forest stand conditions using vegetation management treatments that reduce tree mortality from ongoing insect infestations and improve the overall health, productivity and resiliency of forest vegetation within and adjacent to Bridger Bowl and adjacent to private land. Treatments are designed to alter stand micro-environments creating conditions less favorable for western spruce budworm (*Choristoneura occidentalis*), mountain pine beetle (*Dendroctonus ponderosae*), and Douglas-fir beetle (*Dendroctonus pseudotsugae*) and enlarge the growing space of remaining trees allowing for improved tree growth, vigor, and resiliency.

Although western spruce budworm is a native insect, extensive damage and mortality from budworm can occur especially during drought periods and in areas where fire has been suppressed. Without treatment, there is a high probability that many more trees would be severely impacted by budworm and Douglas-fir beetles.

According to recommendatons provided by Northern Region Forest Health Protection entomologists (Sturdevant et. al. 2010 and Sturdevant and Jackson 2012), protecting foliage with *B.t.* is a temporary solution to reducing defoliation, growth loss, deformation, and tree mortality, and that silvicultural treatments that reduce stocking density, number of canopy layers, and increase individual tree vigor and species composition are the only long-term solution to budworm management.

The Gallatin Forest Plan provides direction to manage insect and disease populations, and to use integrated forest pest management to reduce long-term losses caused by insects and diseases. Forest wide standards direct the Forest Service to employ silvicultural systems to improve the diversity of tree species and the size and age of trees, and to reduce long-term losses of lodepole pine stands to insects, while protecting other resource values. Silvicultural systems that decrease resistance to attack may include harvesting susceptible stands to gain diversity in age and size between stands, controlling the levels of planting and the ages of trees in even-aged stands to maintain the vigor of the stand, and changing the composition of the forest to favor species that are less susceptible to insects.

This project is needed to maintain healthy, resilient forest in the wildland urban interface in the Bridger Canyon corridor adjacent to Bridger Bowl. The area contains lands suitable for timber management, and presents an opportunity to manage vegetation to reduce losses from epidemic levels of insects in accessible areas with very limited temporary road construction.

5. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

36 CFR 220.4 requires scoping on all proposed actions. Scoping consisted of both internal and external efforts to identify important issues, concerns, and analysis needs related to the South Bridger Interface Project. Among other things, the scoping process is used to invite public participation, to help identify public issues, and to obtain public comment during the EA process. The SBI Project has been listed on the GNF Schedule of Proposed Actions since November 2012.

On November 21, 2012, the Bozeman District mailed a scoping letter to 85 individuals/groups that may be interested in the project, which included adjacent landowners. Additionally, the District issued a press release about the project on November 26, 2012, published the project in the Forest's Schedule of Proposed Actions, and posted the scoping letter on the Gallatin National Forest website. Public comments were accepted at the Bozeman Ranger District through December 24, 2012. The District received eight comments on the project in response to scoping. The District completed content analysis on scoping comments and identified issues of concern that were considered in the EA.

On February 13, 2014, the Bozeman District mailed a letter that announced availability of the EA and provided details about an informational meeting to 83 individuals/groups that may be interested in the project. The District issued a press release on February 14, 2014, and published a legal notice in the Bozeman Daily Chronicle and press release the same day. The EA was posted on the GNF web site for viewing and downloading, or a copy of the EA could be obtained by contacting the GNF. The Bozeman District held an informational meeting at the Bridger Canyon Fire Station on March 3, 2014. The GNF received 12 comments on the EA. A response to comments is included as Appendix G to the EA.

In addition to these opportunities for public involvement on the EA, the South Bridger project had an opportunity for the public to review my draft decision and submit objections on any specific items they felt could be improved in the decision or were not supported by the environmental analysis. We received two objections on the project. An interdisciplinary team reviewed each objection and the Objection Reviewing Officer found the EA, project record and decision adequate and did not find the need to give further instructions or corrections to my decision. However, I found merit in the suggestion to better address dust on the Forest Road 3200 through Bridger Bowl and will add a mitigation measure to my decision to provide for dust control.

6. ISSUES

To identify issues specific to the SBI Project, the ID Team reviewed 1) information about the existing condition of the analysis area, notably a report with recommendations detailing and assessment of a spruce budworm outbreak in the project area prepared by Region 1 Forest Health Protection entomologists (Sturdevant et. al. 2010 and Sturdevant and Jackson 2012), 2) the Gallatin Forest Plan, and 3) public comments received during scoping.

These issues were then evaluated against the following criteria to determine the appropriate method for resolution:

- Is the issue relevant to and within the scope of the Purpose and Need, the decisions being made, and does it pertain directly to the Proposed Action?
- Is the issue already decided by law, regulation, or existing plans? Is it supported by scientific or factual evidence?
- Could the issue be resolved through design and location of activities in the Proposed Action, avoiding the impact by not taking action, minimizing the impact by limiting the action, rectifying the impact by rehabilitation, reducing the impact by maintenance, or compensating for the impact by replacement?
- Issues representing an unresolved conflict with the Proposed Action may be considered a “key issue” to help formulate the alternatives to the Proposed Action.

No issues were identified that led to the development of another action alternative. A brief discussion of key issues that were analyzed in the EA is provided on pages 1.4 – 1.7 of the EA, including effects to forest health, old growth, water quality/riparian areas, big game habitat, lynx, and scenery. Additionally, the response to comments on the EA focuses on a number of concerns including:

- Forest Health/Ecosystem Process, and the role of insects in healthy forests
- Effects to old growth, snags, and dependent species
- Cumulative Effects / Scope of analysis
- Effects to MIS northern goshawk and pine marten
- Effects to big game (habitat effectiveness, security, winter range)
- Effects to Threatened/Endangered/Proposed Species (Canada lynx, wolverine)

7. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF ALTERNATIVES

NO ACTION

No management action would occur under this alternative, allowing the processes of vegetation succession and forest insect dynamics to continue. Additional mortality associated with spruce budworm and mountain pine beetle is anticipated. Very little natural regeneration is anticipated to occur until the majority of the stands have lost a significant portion of their biomass and/or impacts from western spruce budworm to seed production are minimized. Christmas tree cutting and continued wildfire suppression consistent with Gallatin Forest Plan direction is expected.

PROPOSED ACTION

Commercial thinning is proposed on up to 250 acres to enhance growth, quality, vigor, and composition of treated stands. This treatment is designed to reduce susceptibility to damage from western spruce budworm, Douglas-fir beetle, and mountain pine beetle. Units would be tractor logged on sustained slopes less than 35 percent.

The existing tree density would be reduced from current levels (ranging 120 – 320 sq. ft. of basal area) to a target residual density ranging from 80 to 100 square feet of basal area per acre on average. Trees to be removed include sawtimber and pole timber sized trees that are dead and/or dying and infested with western spruce budworm, Douglas-fir beetle, and/or mountain pine beetle, as well as live trees, to achieve an average spacing of 15-20 feet between crowns. Smaller sub-merchantable sized trees will not be targeted for removal, however it is expected that some mortality to these trees is likely as a result of operations. Residual live tree spacing will be influenced by the distribution of existing trees and the variable and dynamic nature of mortality in the project area. The purpose of this treatment is to alter the stand micro-environment and enlarge the growing space of desirable trees allowing for improved tree growth, vigor, and resiliency. Treatments will be designed to minimize post-harvest wind damage.

Post harvest, mechanical treatments and/or debris pile burning would be used to reduce fuels and recycle nutrients. Mechanical treatments could include whole tree yarding and/or hand or excavator piling.

A nonsignificant, site-specific Forest Plan Amendment would be required to address a re-entry standard in MA 11. Refer to the Forest Plan consistency section.

ALTERNATIVES NOT STUDIED IN DETAIL

Federal agencies are required by NEPA to rigorously explore and objectively evaluate any reasonable alternatives that also meet the purpose and need and to briefly discuss the reasons for eliminating any alternatives that were not developed in detail (40 CFR 1502.14). Public comments received in response to the Proposed Action provided suggestions for alternative methods for achieving the purpose and need. A number of alternatives were considered, but dismissed from detailed consideration for reasons explained below.

Shelterwood Harvest

The Forest Service originally proposed a shelterwood regeneration harvest on 5 acres within the ski area boundary. This regeneration harvest would have reduced timber to a basal area ranging between 20 and 40 square feet per acre (which averages 20 to 25 trees per acre and average spacing of 45 feet between crowns). Trees that would have been retained included the largest, most vigorous Douglas-fir with good capability of producing seeds to initiate new stand growth. The shelterwood harvest was proposed as a test case, to see if the prescription would successfully start a new age class of Douglas-fir that would improve forest resiliency over time. Upon further consideration of wildlife issues; e.g. further reducing available cover for big game and creating unsuitable habitat for lynx, this prescription was changed to a commercial thin, in order to retain more cover for wildlife and would not contribute to unsuitable habitat for lynx.

Cable Logging

The Forest Service considered including about 20 acres of cable logging units on slopes in excess of 35%. This would have allowed additional vegetation treatment to further reduce tree mortality and improve forest health on additional acres. These units were not carried forward in detail to due visual sensitivity and economic feasibility.

Insecticide Treatment

The use of B.t. in lieu of vegetation management was considered but dismissed as a long term solution to budworm management as it would require repeated treatment to be effective. *B.t.* is a safe alternative to traditional pesticides and provides between 85-88% foliage protection (Reardon 1984). *B.t.* is non-toxic to mammals, birds, fish and humans.

A 2010 study found that there was approximately a one third reduction in defoliation for the treated trees when compared to trees in the nearby untreated area. However, the study concluded that protecting foliage with *B.t.* is a temporary solution to reducing defoliation, growth loss, deformation, and tree mortality. Silvicultural treatments that reduce stocking density, number of canopy layers, and increase individual tree vigor and species composition are the only long-term solution to budworm management. The need for spraying in the future should be greatly reduced if silvicultural treatments continue to be implemented at Bridger Bowl. Therefore, this alternative was not considered in detail.

Tree Planting

A suggestion was made during the comment period on the EA that tree planting be considered as an alternative to the proposed action. This was considered but dismissed from further consideration as it did not meet the purpose and need for the project to reduce tree mortality from ongoing insect infestations and improving overall health in existing stands. It would also likely increase mortality losses from spruce budworm as the younger age classes are highly susceptible to budworm damage.

8. DECISION

As the Responsible Official for the Gallatin National Forest, I have decided to implement the Proposed Action as described in the SBI Project EA. The decision includes a forest plan amendment to address a re-entry standard in MA 11.

The decision would implement the proposed action with the design/mitigation measures and monitoring as detailed below. Additionally, Water Quality and Soils Best Management Practices (BMPs) will be implemented with the project and are described in Appendix C and D of the EA.

This decision also includes a site specific, nonsignificant Forest Plan amendment in order to implement it and remain consistent with Forest Plan direction. Current Forest Plan direction in MA 11 includes the following language:

Re-entry should not occur unless 40 percent or more of the drainage can be maintained in cover (20% hiding, 10% thermal, +10% in either hiding or thermal cover) distributed throughout the drainage.

This decision provides a site-specific exemption to this standard. Neither the current condition nor the condition resulting from this action would meet this standard due to the large portion of private residential and agricultural lands within the watershed.

In addition to the mitigation measures included in the proposed action, I am adding a requirement that will have the contractor treat the portion of Forest Road 3200 open to public motorized traffic to control dust and provide for better sight distances and road conditions. See #52 below.

DESIGN / MITIGATION MEASURES

This decision requires design and mitigation measures to protect resources, including the following:

Forest Vegetation / Fuels

1. **Leave Tree Protection** - The Forest Service will take all reasonable care to implement measures that avoid damage to the roots, bole and crown of trees to be reserved from cutting. No more than five percent of the trees designated to be reserved should be damaged beyond recovery by operations. Any tree damaged beyond recovery (will die within one year due to damage) may be removed or otherwise treated by a contractor as instructed by the Forest Service.
2. **Down Woody Material** - A minimum of fifteen tons per acre of three-inch diameter or larger debris (if available) will be left scattered after machine site preparation and/or hazard reduction within harvest units.
3. **Snag Retention** - Designate for leave an average of 30 snags (greater than 18 ft. in height and greater than 10 inch DBH) per 10 acres within harvest units. If there are not sufficient dead trees meeting these size criteria, the largest available dead trees will be left as snags.
4. **Burning:** All burning of machine or hand-piled material will comply with regulations and reporting requirements set forth by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ). The determinations for burning will consider timing of fall or spring burning windows and air dispersal forecasts to avoid impacting the air quality in the surrounding areas.

Hydrology – Aquatic Species

5. Standard timber sale protection provisions will be applied to the commercial harvest activities to protect against soil erosion and sedimentation. Standard Best Management Practices or BMP's (DNRC 2006) including Montana SMZ compliance rules (DNRC 2006a) will be applied during design and implementation of all commercial activities.
6. Current Best Management Practices (BMP) for the Gallatin National Forest as well as State of Montana Forestry BMPs will be applied (see Appendix C).
7. No trees will be cut within 15 feet of the Ordinary High Water Mark along any Class 1 or Class 2 (DNRC 2006) stream segment within any treatment unit.

8. The fisheries biologist will be allowed the discretion to widen the 15 foot no cut zone to ensure stream bank stability in situations where channel migration or instability may occur.
9. A fisheries biologist will be present during marking of all treatment unit boundaries adjacent to streams and marking of leaning leave trees outside the 15 foot no cut zone.
10. Retain all bank-edge trees and trees leaning toward streams that can provide large woody debris within treatment units.
11. Vehicles and logging machinery will not be operated within wetland areas.
12. Materials will not be deposited in streams or wetland areas.

Soils

13. Require a systematic skid trail pattern during logging.
14. Ground-based harvest systems will be used only on slopes having sustained grades less than 35 percent.
15. Maintain an average separation distance of at least 75 feet between skid trails.
16. Lay out skid trails in a manner that minimizes or eliminates sustained grades steeper than 15%.
17. All skid trails will be constructed with water erosion control and drainage measures installed as required by standard timber sale provisions.
18. Minimize the depth of blading in construction of temporary roads to the extent reasonable within the constraints of Forest Service standards for temporary road construction.
19. Ground based skidding and mechanical harvesting equipment may travel off of the established skid trails but only to the extent reasonably necessary to harvest the available timber, and only when the top 6 inches of soil is sufficiently dry to minimize soil compaction problems. (See Soil BMP's in Appendix D for details). Repeat passes over the same ground will be minimized.
20. Landings with Burn Piles --- Exposed areas of landings around burn piles will be ripped (scarified) to a depth of 6 to 8 inches. (See Soil BMP's for details of rock fragment exclusion to ripping due to abundant large rock fragments. Note: This exclusion will likely not apply for most of the South Bridger Project area.) Broadcast seed all disturbed areas with the appropriate seed after ripping.
21. Temporary Roads --- Rip the road prism to a depth of 6 to 8 inches along the entire length of all temporary roads at the conclusion of this project. See Appendix C for details of rock fragment exclusion to ripping due to abundant large rock fragments. Broadcast seed all disturbed areas with the appropriate seed mix after ripping.

22. Skid Trails --- Rip skid trails to a depth of 6 to 8 inches at the completion of timber harvesting only where detrimentally compacted mineral soil is exposed at the surface or where wheel ruts have formed at least 2 inches deep on grades of 15% or greater or continuous to grades of 15% or greater. Broadcast seed all disturbed areas with the appropriate seed mix after ripping.
23. Coarse Woody Debris --- No pre-existing, downed coarse wood material will be removed from treatment units during timber harvesting from stands where the 15 tons per acre standard cannot be reasonable met because of a lack of available coarse woody material.
24. All temporary roads will be slashed at an approximate rate of 10 to 15 tons per acre along those portions of the road that run through forest stands. Slash left should be oriented at primarily right angles to the road corridor. Where needed, additional leave trees will be left standing adjacent to the temporary roads during harvesting to facilitate slashing the road prism at the end of the project.

Range / Weeds / Sensitive Plants

25. The existing livestock gates will be left closed if cattle are in the allotment.
26. Any fences or structures damaged from the timber harvest will be repaired. The structure will be replaced in a similar condition that it was prior to the harvest. The cost of repairing the structure will be bore by those that caused the damage.
27. All off road vehicles will be power washed and inspected prior to entering Forest Service land.
28. Previously treated weeds will be retreated prior to implementation of this project, and will continue until the weeds are eradicated. Areas where the slashed material was piled and then burned will be monitored for any new weed establishment. Any new weed infestations discovered in the areas of the burned slash piles will be treated as well.
29. Reseed bare soil created by the harvest activities with native grass seed mix recommended by the Forest Service (certified noxious weed seed free). Establishing native grasses on disturbed sites may occur quickly but sometimes it takes multiple years. If seeds are not established with in the first year, the site will need to be reseeded in the following year.
30. If sensitive plants are found during implementation, do not disturb the area. Consult with the biologist to develop additional mitigation measures to protect the site.

Recreation / Roadless

31. Hauling/Access will be coordinated with Bridger Bowl Ski Area such that Bridger management is aware of expected traffic in the area.
32. Road #538 through the Bridger Bowl Permit Area will not be plowed between November 1st and the closure of the ski area in the spring.

33. All structures (Bridger Bowl gun mount, trail signs, ski area signs, etc.) will be protected from damage.
34. For public safety and understanding of the activity, post information at appropriate access points to inform the public of project activities. Provide local media with updates about project work that may affect the recreating public. Post warning signs notifying forest users of potential hazards from fuel treatment activities when occurring adjacent to dispersed areas, roads, and trails. If necessary, issue special orders that temporarily close some areas or routes to protect the public.
35. Holders of special use permits (such as recreation event organizers and outfitters) will be notified prior to treatment in the vicinity of their authorization.
36. No equipment use, staging or storage, nor the decking or piling of slash will occur at trailheads or on Forest Service trails or roads.
37. Location of slash piles for units 1 and 18 will be coordinated between the Bridger Bowl permit administrator and the timber sale administrator.
38. No roads or skid trails will be constructed within the (Inventoried Roadless Area (IRA)). No treatment units or areas will be located in the IRA.
39. Cutting unit boundaries adjacent to the IRA will be clearly marked and mapped to avoid the IRA.

Scenery

40. Units #1 and #18 will be cut-tree marked because they will be in the immediate visual foreground of skiers.
41. In units #1, 2, 3 and 18, exact on-center leave tree spacing will be avoided. Instead, leave trees will be selected based upon their desirability and spacing distance from other leave trees, aiming for 15-20 feet between crowns. This method for selection of leave trees will create a more natural-looking appearance when viewed by skiers.
42. Along the northern and eastern edges of unit #1 and the eastern edge of unit #3, care will be taken to avoid abrupt, straight, unnatural-appearing transitions.

Cultural Resources

43. If, in connection with operations under this decision, any historic or prehistoric resources are encountered, activities must cease in the vicinity of the find and the District Ranger and Forest Archeologist notified. Plans designed to avoid or reduce further disturbance or to mitigate existing disturbance will be formulated in consultation with the MT SHPO, affected tribes, and the Forest Service. The discovery must be protected until notified in writing to proceed by the authorized officer (see 36 CFR 800.100, 112:43 CFR 10.4).

General Wildlife Design Criteria

44. No public motorized use of temporary roads constructed for this project will be allowed. During project implementation, gates or other physical barriers will be maintained to prevent public motorized access.

Migratory Bird Species

45. Trees and snags with broken tops, obvious large nest structures, or cavities will be targeted to meet snag retention standards.
46. If discovered, there will be no treatment within 250 yards of a known active black-backed woodpecker nest between May 1 and July 15.
47. If discovered, there will be no treatment within a minimum buffer of 40 acres around known occupied goshawk nest trees.
48. If discovered, there will be no ground-disturbing activities within known occupied post fledging area (PFA) between April 15 and August 15. The PFA is the area roughly 420 acres surrounding an active goshawk nest.

Big Game

49. Within treatment units, maintain at least two thirds of the existing hiding cover associated with key habitat features such as wet sites and foraging areas. This will be accomplished through implementation of SMZs in riparian areas, and maintaining at least 40% canopy cover in forested habitat within 50 feet of natural meadows for at least 2/3 of the meadow perimeter.
50. Restrict timber sale activities to no longer than five consecutive years.
51. In MA 11, maintain a minimum of two years inactivity following 1-3 years of consecutive sale activity, or a minimum of five years inactivity following 4-5 years of consecutive sale activity.

Roads

52. During log hauling on FR 3200, provide for dust control on the portion of that road open for public motorized use.

MONITORING

This decision requires monitoring during and after project implementation to ensure compliance with all design criteria and determine the adequacy and effectiveness of mitigation measures. The monitoring for the SBI Project will include oversight of project effects on soils, vegetation, water, wildlife, fisheries, and roads. The monitoring required by my decision includes the following:

1. Develop a NEPA to Implementation crosswalk to assure layout complies with NEPA decision (see Chapter 3 - Forest Vegetation analysis)
2. Review Marking Guide compliance to insure trees are marked to achieve conditions described in NEPA decision(see Chapter 3 - Forest Vegetation analysis)

3. Review the contract prior to advertisement to assure project implementation complies with NEPA decision (see Chapter 3 - Forest Vegetation analysis)
4. Monitor and oversee vegetation treatments throughout and post operations to assure compliance with contract specifications, and that treatment objectives were achieved. Complete activity through sale administration and post treatment vegetation monitoring exams. (see Chapter 3 - Forest Vegetation analysis)
5. Complete reviews throughout and post operations to evaluate effectiveness of mitigation measures, Best Management Practices (BMP's), and compliance with State of Montana SMZ Rules. (See Hydrology analysis)
6. Assess detrimental soil disturbance in vegetation treatments units for two years and five years after timber harvesting and remediation actions are complete in accordance with the Region 1 sampling protocol (USFS-R1 2009) and detrimental soil disturbance criteria for the Gallatin National Forest defined by Keck (2012). (See Chapter 3 – Soils)
7. Monitor coarse woody debris at the completion of timber harvesting approximately 2 years after timber harvesting and mitigation actions have been completed. (See Chapter 3 – soils analysis)
8. Before and during project implementation, conduct surveys for black-backed woodpeckers and northern goshawks during the breeding season to identify needs for protective measures associated with potentially occupied nests.
9. Survey treatment units upon completion to evaluate effectiveness of snag and woody debris retention measures.
10. Monitor project road closures during implementation to ensure physical barricades are effective in precluding public motorized use on temporary roads. Monitor temporary project roads upon project completion to ensure permanent and effective closure.
11. Survey treatment units upon completion to evaluate effectiveness of measures to maintain hiding cover associated with key habitat features.
12. The fuel management specialist or fire management personnel will be on-site to assist in determining the placement of machine and/or hand piles within treatment units for efficiency of burning. The fuel management specialist or fire management personnel will monitor the curing (drying out) of the piles and recommend when they should be burned. The fuel treatment specialist will monitor smoke during pile burning. Areas that have been burned will be monitored and treated if noxious weed growth is discovered.

9. RATIONALE FOR THE DECISION

My criteria for making a decision on this project was based on how well the management actions analyzed in the EA address the purpose and need of the project and how well the analysis considers the issues that were raised during the initial scoping process, the comment period, and other collaborative phases of project development. As the project decision maker, I had to weigh all potential benefits of the two alternatives against their possible impacts, and consider the

suggestions and concerns from the public. The *Finding of No Significant Impact* detailed below supported the use of an EA as the appropriate level of NEPA analysis. I considered Forest Plan standards and guidance for the project area, and took into account competing interests and values of the public. The Selected Alternative will reduce tree mortality from ongoing insect infestations in areas that are visible from Bridger Bowl Ski Area, which is an important recreational asset for the Bozeman community, and the scenic Bridger Canyon corridor. Additionally, the local community expressed overwhelming support for the project.

The Selected Alternative is responsive to the project's purpose and need, the resource issues described below, as well as the public concerns addressed in Appendix G of the EA and as raised during the objection process (36 CFR 218). The features of this alternative were all site-specifically analyzed in the affected environment and environmental consequences sections presented in Chapter 3 of the EA. The amounts and effects of activities prescribed in the Selected Alternative are all described in the EA. My review of the environmental consequences of the alternatives in the EA and my understanding of the Selected Alternative make me confident my resource specialists have adequately described the limits of the environmental effects of the Selected Alternative.

MEETING THE PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

Central to making my decision was how the selected alternative was designed to meet the purpose and need and how effective the treatments will be at meeting the purpose and need. This of course is balanced with the direct and indirect effects on the array of natural, physical, cultural and social resources.

The analysis clearly shows that the stand hazard ratings for all three tree mortality insect agents are improved with treatments compared to the no action alternative. It shows that the treatments are effective in reducing mortality and improving vigor and stand health. Additionally, the effect of not treating these stands would be continued mortality in all age classes, very little natural regeneration and eventually a loss of overstory cover that provides for a visually pleasing environment and provides for long term wildlife cover. As a secondary effect, wildland fire intensity would be less in these stands than if they remained untreated. I want to emphasize that there is no intent with these treatments to stop or reduce the mountain pine beetle infestation across a larger landscape. These treatment effects are largely confined to the treatment stands and the stands immediately adjacent to them.

Part of my decision also rests on the Forest Plan guidance generally and specific to this area. The Forest Plan clearly gives direction in the forest-wide standards to reduce losses caused by forest insects and diseases utilizing silvicultural systems as the primary tool for pest management. MA 11 also has a standard to actively control tree damaging agents. This area is within the suitable timber base, has a system of existing roads and is within the wildland urban interface. All of these reasons make my decision to proceed with tree removal activities reasonable and prudent.

CONSIDERATION OF THE ISSUES AND ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

In my decision, it was important not only to understand the effectiveness in meeting the intent of the project, but also to understand and weigh overall environmental effects and consider key issues surrounding the project. The key issues under consideration in the analysis were forest health, old growth, water quality and riparian areas, big game habitat, lynx and scenery. Other

issues were also raised during the EA comment period and these were considered. The effects to these resources were fully analyzed in the EA and supporting documentation.

Forest health is clearly improved and susceptibility to insect mortality is reduced under the decision. There are no impacts to old growth stands under this decision. Water quality is well protected under the decision with associated mitigation measures and BMP's. Both water yield and sediment yield effects are projected to be minimal (a net gain of 1.2-2.8% and 4-6% respectively) and stream channel stability changes would be negligible. These effects are well within acceptable level to me in implementing this decision.

Implementation of the decision would likely have some short-term negative impacts on big game resulting from reductions in cover as well as short term disturbance impacts due to noise and human presence. What was important to me in these findings, however, is that the reductions in cover would occur regardless of whether the treatments were implemented or not, due to ongoing tree mortality, and may even increase with increased fuel loading and larger fire risk. Consideration of the impacts to big game was also part of my rationale to approve a non-significant, site specific Forest Plan amendment. Management Area 11 includes the following direction:

Re-entry should not occur unless 40 percent or more of the drainage can be maintained in cover (20% hiding, 10% thermal, +10% in either hiding or thermal cover) distributed throughout the drainage.

The Upper Bridger Creek watershed includes a large portion of private residential and agricultural lands. When considering all ownerships, only about 16% of the drainage is currently providing hiding and/or thermal cover. Due to large proportions of naturally non-forested (e.g. rocky terrain, natural meadows) and converted (e.g. residential and/or agricultural) lands, coupled with past timber harvest on public and private lands in the drainage, neither the existing condition, nor the proposed action meets the cover requirement for this standard. The decision will reduce existing tree density in treated areas and result in additional loss of cover for wildlife. However, the net change in cover across the watershed will be minimal and impacts to cover are occurring in these stands independently due to the insect related tree mortality. Therefore, in order to meet the purpose and need for the proposed action, a site specific Forest Plan amendment is required and reasonable to exempt the SBI Project from this MA 11 re-entry standard.

The analysis shows that the actions would have minor impacts on lynx habitat and would not notably change the utility of the area for habitat connectivity.

The Bridger Canyon corridor is an important scenery resource, as viewed from Highway 86, Bridger Bowl ski area and private lands. It was important to me that we design a project that would fully meet our Forest Plan standard for partial retention. This is one of the reasons that the alternative for cable logging was dismissed. Because the surrounding areas have a great deal of natural and man-made diversity, the treatments will not appear visually dominant and will meet Forest Plan standards.

During the planning and on-the-ground preparation of this project, all relevant mitigation and monitoring measures have been implemented. I am confident that they will be implemented and will be effective in meeting project objectives and minimizing environmental effects. For instance, snag marking has been reviewed on the ground and goshawk monitoring has been conducted.

CONSIDERATION OF PUBLIC COMMENT

In addition to the detailed effects analysis conducted by Forest Service specialists, it is important to listen to and understand the input and sentiments of the public. During both scoping and public review of the EA, the interdisciplinary team reviewed all of the comments and used that information to conduct additional analysis or consider other actions. I also have looked at the comments and responses to better understand how the public views the completeness of the analysis and reaction to the project itself. Many valuable insights were raised in the comments. However, in my mind no insurmountable flaws or unexplored issues were raised that would cause me to make a different decision.

In addition to the public comment received on the EA, I carefully reviewed the two objections received on my draft Decision Notice and the analysis done by the Objection Reviewing Officer. The objection process allows the public to review my draft decision and then address specific issues and suggest remedies that could be incorporated into the decision before it is finalized.

Two objections were submitted. One dealt largely with wildlife and Forest Plan concerns. The other focused on issues related to logging traffic on Forest Road 3200. Before signing this decision I looked for ways to improve the project with additional information or analysis or through changes to my decision. One of the objectors provided a specific remedy to their issue of dust and safety on FR 3200 and therefore I have included dust control measures in my decision.

SUMMARY

Overall, I conclude that the Selected Alternative best meets the purpose and need of the project while protecting the environment. I have selected this alternative with its associated design features as described above for implementation.

My decision is based on a review of the EA and project record that shows a thorough evaluation of relevant scientific information, a consideration of responsible opposing views, and the acknowledgment of incomplete or unavailable information, scientific uncertainty, and risk. The Literature Cited section of the EA is comprehensive and contains many recent publications. Chapter 3 of the EA contains numerous discussions of uncertainty and risk involved in the analysis.

10. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

In accordance with 40 CFR 1508.13 and direction provided in the Forest Service Handbook (FSH 1909.15, Chapter 40, Section 43.1), I have determined that the management actions included in the Selected Alternative of the SBI Project do not constitute a major federal action, and that the implementation of the proposal will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Accordingly, I have determined that an Environmental Impact Statement need not be prepared for this project. I have followed the implementing regulation for NEPA (40 CFR 1508.27) and other criteria for determining the significance of effects.

Before making my determination, I carefully reviewed and considered the following information:

- The direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of these actions as documented in the Environmental Assessment for the SBI Project;

- The analysis documentation in the Project Record of the SBI Project;
- Comments received throughout the public comment periods for this proposal; and,
- Past experiences with resource management projects on the Custer Gallatin National Forests.

The interdisciplinary team and I have “screened” the management actions included in the SBI Project for “significant impact.” The results of this screening are summarized below.

Significant, as used in NEPA, requires consideration of both context and intensity.

Context 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 effects of the proposed actions are limited in context. The proposed action would only thin 250 acres, and the activities are limited in duration (management actions associated with the proposal will be completed within a three year timeframe). Effects are local in nature and are not likely to significantly affect regional or national resources.

Short term adverse effects are addressed through implementation of the project design/mitigation measures, and standard BMPs to protect water and soil quality (see Appendix C and D of the EA). The project design/mitigation measures minimize and avoid adverse impacts to the extent that such impacts are almost undetectable and immeasurable, even at the local level (see design/mitigation section above on page 8-13). Within the context of the landscape as a whole, or at the stand level, the ecological consequences are not found to be significant in either the short or long-term for the SBI Project.

Intensity is a measure of the severity, extent, or quantity of effects, and is based on information from the effects analysis of this EA and the references in the project record. The effects of this project have been appropriately and thoroughly considered with an analysis that is responsive to concerns and issues raised by the public. The agency has taken a hard look at the environmental effects using relevant scientific information and knowledge of site-specific conditions gained from field visits. My finding of no significant impact is based on the context of the project and intensity of effects using the ten factors identified in 40 CFR 1508.27(b).

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

Both beneficial and adverse effects have been taken into consideration when making a determination of significance for this project. While there will be beneficial effects, this action does not rely on those effects to balance adverse environmental impacts. The individual resource sections in Chapter 3 of the EA and the supporting information in the Project Record contain comprehensive effects analyses, and the findings from these resource-specific reports form the basis for my decision.

The project includes thinning up to 250 acres of national forest and constructing up to ½ mile of temporary road. These activities have varying effects on the physical, biological, or social components of the affected environment. Some of these effects are more favorable to a particular resource component than to another resource component. Below is a synopsis of the more

notable effects of the activities; however, none of the effects, whether favorable or unfavorable, beneficial or adverse, are significant.

Forest Health / Resiliency: The term “forest health” is used in the South Bridger Interface EA. Forest Health is a perceived and interpreted condition of a forest influenced by, among other factors, individual viewpoints and land management objectives (Helms, 1998). Treatments included in the South Bridger Interface Project are designed to reduce susceptibility to damage from western spruce budworm, Douglas-fir beetle, and mountain pine beetle and to enhance growth, quality, vigor, and composition of treated stands. This is consistent with both Forest-wide and management area direction found in the Gallatin National Forest Plan. Beetles and native forest insects have a role in the ecosystem and regardless of this decision; they will continue to have a role. Thinning treatments will allow more room for individual trees to grow, increasing their vigor, lowering their stress, and therefore improve tree and forest health and resistance to insect/disease. Treatment will not rid the forest of insects.

Fire/Fuels: As noted in the fire-fuels analysis, treatment would reduce fire behavior in treated areas, which may reduce the intensity of a wildfire should one occur, and improve public and firefighter safety.

Water Quality: Predicted increases in sediment yield were modeled at approximately 15 to 26 percent above reference levels (well within the allowable limit of 50% of reference level in the Forest Plan, and is expected to return to pre-project levels within six years (EA, p. 3.66). Effects to other water quality parameters (water yield, peak flow, and stream channel stability) are negligible (EA, p 3.65 – 71). Wetlands and floodplains would be protected through adherence to State of MT Streamside Management Zone (SMZ) Regulations, implementation of standard soil and water quality BMPs (See Appendix C and D of the EA), and additional aquatic design/mitigation measures as detailed in this decision.

Fisheries: There would be a small, short term increase in sediment (see above) that may slightly decrease rainbow trout embryo survival (predicted 1.4 – 2.6%). Overall, population trends for cold water fish species across the GNF are expected to remain stable, or are increasing (EA, p. 3.89 - 3.91).

Weeds: Invasive plant species are present in the project area. There is a risk that the project would spread weeds in the area; however the design/mitigation measures that are incorporated into the project are very effective at reducing risk of weed spread (EA, 3.116 - 3.117).

Old Growth: None of the treatment units outside the ski area boundary were determined to meet the minimum old growth criteria. Three units inside the ski area boundary are exempt from the Forest Plan old growth standard and existing available stand exam data did not indicate that these units met the old growth criteria. Treatment would not necessarily preclude treated areas from meeting minimum old growth criteria in the future (EA, p. 3.12). The reduction of canopy cover may reduce suitability as goshawk nesting habitat; however the project would reduce suitable nesting habitat by less than one percent in the analysis area (EA p 3.181). Without treatment, canopy cover would be expected to continue to decline due to ongoing insect/disease related mortality.

Snags: Snag habitat is abundant within the project area and across the larger landscape. The decision would directly reduce the availability of snags within treatment units by removing dead and dying trees on up to 250 acres, and would indirectly affect the future availability of snags in treated areas by enlarging growing space, providing for improved tree growth, vigor, and

resiliency. Forest Plan direction would be followed so that at least 30 snags would be left per 10 acres of harvest (3.13-14, 3.188, 3.192).

Big Game Security / Habitat Effectiveness: The analysis concluded that because effects from temporary roads would fall within the buffers of existing routes, the project would have no effect on existing secure habitat (EA: 3.172). Over 7,000 acres of secure areas (with ≤ 1 mi/mi² motorized route density) are available adjacent to the project area (EA:3.173). The project area is already dominated by moderate to low habitat effectiveness since the majority of the area is in the category at or above 1 mi/mi² motorized route density, and much of the project area, including nearly all treatment units, are in the category at or above 2 mi/mi² motorized route density. The temporary project roads would be located in areas where current habitat effectiveness is already reduced between 25 – 50%, and they would not change the proportion of area from 1.0 – 2.0 mi/mi² motorized route density, or the proportion of area greater than 2.0 mil/mi².

It is my determination, based on review of these analyses and consultation with specialists, that the Selected Alternative will not have a significant impact on the environment. All effects will be minimal or short-lived. No effects are deemed irreversible or irretrievable and do not set in motion further effects. All potential direct, indirect, and cumulative effects are evaluated in the EA, Project Record reports, and the Biological Assessments and Evaluations.

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

The Fire-Fuels analysis notes the action would create a safer environment for suppressing wildland fire starts in WUI. Treatment would open up the tree canopies, result in greater spacing between trees, clean up the standing dead, and remove the activity created fuels to 15 tons per acre. As shown in the Behave Plus runs, these actions would result in less of a chance of a high intensity wildland fire. Wildland firefighters will have a greater chance of suppressing a fire start that is low to moderate intensity, with direct suppression actions and ground forces. For the public there will be less of a chance of a high intensity wildland fire and heavy smoke threatening or impacting recreational use activities, access, egress or private property (EA, 3.37).

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as the proximity to historical or cultural resources, parklands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

Treatment units are forested; they do not contain parkland or prime farmlands. There are no designated wild and scenic rivers or identified heritage sites in the project area. Design/mitigation measures would ensure protection of wetlands, riparian areas, key habitat features, and any heritage sties found during implementation.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial. *Note: The term “controversial” in this context refers to cases where substantial scientific dispute exists as to the size, nature, or effects of a major Federal action on some human environmental factor, rather than to public opposition of a proposed action or alternative.*

The project involves thinning up to 250 acres on the GNF to reduce mortality from ongoing insect outbreaks, and enhance growth vigor and resiliency of remaining trees. There is a large body of science showing that the management actions are effective (see forest vegetation analysis in Chapter 3). The majority of the project area is currently at or above 1 mi/mi² motorized route

density. Much of the area, including nearly all treatment units, is currently at or above 2 mi/mi² motorized route density. Additionally, the project area is located, in designated wildland urban interface, and lies between private lands and a ski hill. As such, the project is quite limited in scope. While there is public opposition to the project, there is nothing that rises to the level of a substantial scientific dispute over the size, nature, or effects of the project.

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

The EA discloses the effects of the proposed action for multiple resources, and does not identify any highly uncertain or unique or unknown risks that would result from thinning up to 250 acres of national forest and constructing up to ½ mile of temporary road.

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

The SBI Project represents a site-specific project that does not set precedence for future actions nor does it present a decision in principle about future considerations. Any proposed future projects must be evaluated on its own merits and effects. The actions in the Selected Alternative are compatible with the Forest Plan and the capabilities of the land. I believe that 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.

Past, present, and reasonably future actions that could contribute toward cumulative effects with the SBI Project have been considered and included in the scope of the analysis. Based on my review of the analysis and disclosure of effects in the EA, Biological Assessments and Evaluations, and other analyses in the EA and Project Record, I conclude that the SBI Project does not represent potential cumulative adverse impacts (please refer to Chapter 2, pages 2.7 – 2.11 and each resource cumulative effects analysis in the EA and cumulative effects worksheets in the Project Record).

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, 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 historical resources.

The Heritage Resources analysis notes that based upon a review of the Heritage Site and Inventory database and intensive on the ground surveys, no heritage sites were identified in the project area. The project, which includes timber harvest and temporary road construction, would not impact any heritage resources. Mitigation is in place to protect any sites that may be found during project implementation (EA, 3. 145). I believe that this action will not have a significant effect on scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

A negative cultural resources inventory report was sent to the MT State Historic Preservation Officer fulfilling consultation requirements as per the Region 1 programmatic agreement with the MT SHPO and Advisory Council for Historic Preservation.

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.

A biological assessment (BA) was prepared for the SBI Project, and the Bozeman District wildlife biologist concluded that the project would have *No Effect* on grizzly bear and *is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence* of wolverine. The Wildlife Biologist completed informal programmatic consultation for lynx, and determined that the project may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect lynx, and therefore formal consultation would not be required.

Grizzly Bear: Grizzly bears are not known to be present north of I-90 on the Gallatin National Forest. The project is in an area that may be suitable as a travel corridor for grizzly bears sometime in the future. Implementation of the project is not expected to result in any impediments or barriers to grizzly bear movement.

Canada lynx: Given the naturally fragmented distribution of boreal forest types within the Bridger/Bangtail LAU, coupled with the lack of verified historic or recent lynx occurrence within the LAU, it is a logical conclusion that the Bridger/Bangtail area contains marginal lynx habitat at best, and past events (natural or man-caused) have not likely changed the overall nature of this area for lynx use. The primary utility of this LAU appears to be as connective habitat to facilitate lynx dispersal between core areas. The project would have minor impacts on lynx habitat, but would not notably change the utility of the area for connectivity.

Wolverine: The wolverine is not currently listed as endangered or threatened, but rather is proposed for listing at the time this decision is published.

Prescribed treatment would generally occur below the elevation zone typically used by resident wolverines, and would not affect reproductive denning or foraging habitat, or prey bases. Treatment is unlikely to occur during the wolverine reproductive season, or when subadults are likely to disperse (winter/spring). Treatment and associated infrastructure would not pose a barrier to wolverine movement during or after project implementation.

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

As described in the EA (Regulatory Framework and Consistency sections for each resource area in Chapter 3) and in the Findings section below, the actions in the Selected Alternative are consistent with all applicable Federal, state, or local laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment, including:

- The National Forest Management Act (NFMA)
- The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)
- The Endangered Species Act
- The Clean Water Act and Montana State Water Quality Standards
- The Clean Air Act
- The Migratory Bird Treaty Act

- The National Historic Preservation Act
- The American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act
- American Indian Religious Freedom Act
- The Environmental Justice Act

I have concluded that the Selected Alternative is consistent with Forest Plan direction and does not violate any Federal, state, or local laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. A site specific forest plan amendment would exempt the SBI Project from the MA 11 re-entry standard.

Wetlands, riparian areas, and streams will be protected through design/mitigation measures, and it is unlikely that water quality permits would be needed. If necessary, the Forest Service would obtain the following permits to comply with Federal and state laws:

- **Montana Streamside Protection Act (SPA 124 Permit)** - Any project including the construction of new facilities or the modification, operation, and maintenance of an existing facility that may affect the natural existing shape and form of any stream or its banks or tributaries (Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks).
- **Federal Clean Water Act (Section 404 Permit)** – Any activity that will result in the discharge or placement of dredged or fill material into waters of the United States, including wetlands (U.S Army Corp of Engineers).
- **Short-Term Water Quality Standard for Turbidity (318 Authorization)** –Any activity in any State water that will cause unavoidable short-term violations of water quality standards. "State water" includes any body of water, irrigation system, or drainage system, either surface or underground, including wetlands, except for irrigation water where the water is used up within the irrigation system and the water is not returned to other state water (Montana Department of Environmental Quality).

11. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY LAWS, REGULATIONS & POLICIES

Where applicable, compliance with laws, regulations, and policies are listed and addressed in various sections of the EA and project record. My decision to implement the Proposed Action will comply and be consistent with applicable laws, regulations, and policies, including those described below. My decision includes one forest plan amendment to address a re-entry standard in MA 11.

GALLATIN FOREST PLAN

The Gallatin Forest Plan embodies the provisions of the NFMA, its implementing regulations, and other guiding documents. The Forest Plan sets forth in detail the direction for managing the land and resources of the Gallatin National Forest. The Gallatin Forest Plan was approved in 1987 and has been amended.

The Forest Plan identifies standards at two geographical levels, Forest-wide and Management Areas. Forest-wide Standards, which apply to NFS land that is administered by the Custer Gallatin National Forests are intended to supplement, not replace, the national and regional policies, standards, and guidelines found in Forest Service manual and handbooks.

The Project Area is primarily designated MA 11; the portion in the Bridger Bowl ski area boundary designated MA 2. Consistency with the Forest Plan standards are discussed in Chapter 2 and 3 of the EA by resource area, and briefly summarized below.

Forest Plan Standards

- **Insects and Disease:** The Gallatin Forest Plan provides direction to manage insect and disease populations, and to use integrated forest pest management to reduce long-term losses caused by insects and diseases. Forest wide standards direct the Forest Service to employ silvicultural systems to improve the diversity of tree species and the size and age of trees, and to reduce long-term losses of lodgepole pine stands to insects, while protecting other resource values. Silvicultural systems that decrease resistance to attack may include harvesting susceptible stands to gain diversity in age and size between stands, controlling the levels of planting and the ages of trees in even-aged stands to maintain the vigor of the stand, and changing the composition of the forest to favor species that are not susceptible to insects (EA, p. 1.2 & Forest Plan p. II-22). The SBI Project is consistent with the MA 11 standard to actively control tree damaging agents (Forest Plan, p. III-35).
- **Slash and Down Woody Debris: Forest-wide standard E.14** requires that activity created dead and down woody debris will be reduced to a level commensurate with risk analysis. A wildlife standard states that 15 tons per acre will be left for nongame wildlife species. (Page A-13). *The SBI Project is consistent with this standard because activity fuels would be reduced to 15 tons per acre. Wildland fire starts in an area that have 15 t/a or less of 3 inch plus dead and down fuels will have less fire line intensity.*
- **Snags:** The Forest Plan contains the following standards for snag retention.
 - Standard A1a: For harvest units not scheduled for broadcast burning: During timber sale layout, designate for leave an average of 30 snags (greater than 18 ft. in height and greater than 10 inch DBH) per 10 acres within harvest units. If there are not sufficient dead trees meeting this size criteria, the largest available dead trees will be left as snags.
 - Standard A1b: For harvest units not scheduled for broadcast burning: During timber sale layout, designate for leave an average of 30 live snag replacement trees per 10 acres within harvest units. For Douglas fir and Subalpine fir on rocky or shallow soils designate 60 trees per 10 acres as replacement trees.

The SBI project is consistent with these standards as design criteria are in place to retain snags commensurate with these standards. See Section 8 of this Decision Notice.

- **Old Growth:** As stated, the Forest Plan contains an Old Growth related standard stating that the Forest will strive to develop a diversity of vegetation sizes and ages; including 10% minimum area of Old Growth in timber compartments containing suitable timber. All treatment units associated with this project fall into timber compartment 504 (the analysis area), which contains suitable timber. A recent analysis looked at the amount of Old Growth in timber compartment 504. The 2005 Bridger Bowl Special Use Permit and Master Development Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement indicated that timber compartment 504 contained 7.0 % Old Growth. The selected alternative associated with that project also reduced the percent Old Growth from 7.0% to 6.95%. As a result, a

Forest Plan Amendment was included in the Record of Decision stating; development within the Bridger Bowl Ski Area Special Use Permit boundary is exempt from the forest wide 10% old growth successional stage standard.

Given the above, analysis was conducted to ensure that no treatment units associated with this project outside of the ski area permit boundary meet the Green et al. definition of old growth. Existing stand data was analyzed and additional plots were installed in seven proposed units during winter 2013 to sample tree ages. No units outside the ski area boundary were determined to meet the minimum old growth criteria; detailed analysis of these data is included in the project record. Three units fell within the ski area permit boundary. This area is exempt from the Forest Plan old growth standard and existing available stand exam data did not indicate that the units within the ski area boundary met the Old Growth criteria.

Treatments would not necessarily preclude treated areas from meeting minimum old growth criteria (see Appendix B) in the future, given that they are not regeneration harvests intended to establish a new age class. In the absence of additional disturbance, trees will age and increase in size over time moving closer to meeting the minimum criteria. (EA 3.12)

- **Water Quality:** The Forest Plan requires that *best management practices (BMPs) will be used on all Forest watersheds in the planning and implementation of project activities.* Another standard requires *compliance with Executive Order 11990 (protection of wetlands) and Forest Service policy in FSM 2500.*
- **Soils:** The Forest Plan for the Gallatin National Forest (USFS-GNF 1987) provides only limited direct guidance with regard to the management of soil resources. For Objectives B.1.i.: Water and Soils the Forest Plan states that “Watersheds will be managed by application of best management practices...” Under Forest-Wide Standards E.8.c.: Timber – Site Preparation and Activity Debris Disposal the Forest Plan identifies the need to “maintain an adequate nutrient pool for long-term site productivity through retention of topsoil and soil organisms. Water and Soils Forest-Wide Standards indicate in E.10.1. “The Forest Soil Survey will be incorporated into resource area analyses”, E.10.2 “Best management practices (BMP’s) will be used...”, and E.10.8. “All management practices will be designed or modified as necessary to maintain land productivity and protect beneficial uses”.

Best management practices have been specified for the South Bridger Project and are described in the section below. Maintaining an adequate nutrient pool for long-term productivity is accomplished by ensuring that topsoil is not lost or degraded during implementation of the treatments, controlling any potential soil erosion losses of topsoil, and through the wildlife BMP of maintaining 15 tons per acre coarse woody debris on the ground in all treatment units with closed or partially closed canopy coverage of conifers prior to timber harvesting.

The Soil Survey for the Gallatin National Forest was included as part of the initial soils analysis for this project and has been substantially supplemented by field analysis of the Forest Soil Scientist. All management practices in this project have been designed to maintain forest productivity and will be modified if needed to meet the Standard of maintaining land productivity.

- **Air Quality:** A Forest Plan standard states that the Forest will cooperate with the Montana Air Quality Bureau in the State Implementation Plan (SIP). The requirements of the SIP and Montana Smoke Management Plan will be met. The SBI project includes burning of slash piles to reduce activity fuels. Smoke management is regulated through the State of Montana's Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ). If emissions are likely to exceed the NAAQS rates, prescribed fires may not be approved, operations may cease, or implementation may be postponed. All prescribed debris pile burning implemented within the analysis area would comply with the State Requirements for burning. *A burn plan would be in place for any pile burning; therefore the SBI project is consistent with DEQ regulations for smoke management.*
- **Scenery:** All NF land where this project is proposing harvest/treatment units were assigned a VQO of "Partial Retention" (PR) by the Forest Plan. The definition of PR, as shown on page VI-44 of the Gallatin National Forest Plan, is:

Partial Retention: means that human activities may be evident, and the characteristic landscape may appear to be altered slightly. Any noticeable deviations must remain visually subordinate to the landscape character being viewed.

The activities associated with the Action Alternative would meet the Forest Plan visual quality standard of Partial Retention, when viewed from the Bridger Canyon Road or Bridger Bowl Ski Area, by incorporating mitigation listed in Section 8 of this Decision Notice (EA, p 3.143).

- **Sensitive Plants:** A sensitive plant field survey was conducted in 2012 (survey documentation in project record). Neither northern rattlesnake plantain, nor California fall hellebore, or any other sensitive plant species were identified in the proposed harvest units. If any sensitive plants are found at a later date, the site would be protected from disturbance (this is a common mitigation measure that is included in most timber contracts that require the site to be protected until a biologist determines the correct course of action). EA 3.123
- **Travel / Access / Recreation:** While the project may result in temporary impacts to recreational opportunities and access, it will not permanently close NFS roads, trails, or recreation facilities. Indirect effects from the action alternative may improve the recreational setting at Bridger Bowl by reducing the impact of insect and disease outbreaks, and retaining the sense of place, wind protection, and glade skiing opportunities on the Forest. *Therefore, all alternatives would be consistent with the Forest Plan standards for roads and trails (Forest Plan, page II-27), and the Gallatin National Forest Travel Management Plan.*
- **Weeds:** All applicable noxious weeds standards listed on page II-28 of the Gallatin Forest Plan would be incorporated into this project. Weed treatments would emphasize spot herbicide treatments. The funding for weed treatment would come from the timber sale and the invasive weed programs.

The applicable weed prevention activities identified in the FSM2080-Noxious Weed Management have been incorporated into this project (see mitigation measures listed above). The treatment of weeds is consistent with Executive Order 13112 (1999) which

directs all agencies to prevent introduction of invasive species, provide for their control, and to minimize economic, ecological, and human health impacts that invasive species cause. (EA p. 3.118)

- **Wildlife:**
 - **Threatened and Endangered Species:** The Forest Plan contains a Forest-wide standard that a biological evaluation will be completed prior to implementation of activities that have potential to affect threatened species (p. II-19). The EA includes the required evaluation for threatened species (grizzly bear and lynx). In addition, a Biological Assessment – including pertinent information from the EA, was prepared for the project and consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service for threatened and endangered species that may be present within the project area is complete.
 - **Sensitive Species:** The Forest Plan contains a forest-wide standard to manage essential habitat to maintain sensitive species (p. II-18). The EA concludes that since there is no essential habitat for sensitive species within the project area, the project is consistent with this direction.
 - **Big Game:** The Forest Plan contains forest-wide standards for big game (p. II-18). These standards include direction that winter range will be managed to meet the forage and cover needs of big game in coordination with other uses and to maintain at least two thirds of the hiding cover associated with key habitat components over time. Key habitat components are to be mapped on a site-by-site basis for project analyses. Moose is the primary big game species that winters in the project area. Tree canopy cover is the limiting factor for moose winter range, as it provides a snow intercept that allows for easier movement and access to forage. By reducing tree susceptibility to insect mortality, the proposed action is more consistent with Forest Plan direction for managing winter range than the no action alternative. The standard to maintain hiding cover would be met with approximately 72% of the hiding cover maintained on NFS lands within the analysis area after project implementation. Hiding cover associated with key habitat features would also be maintained through specific mitigation measures. Key habitat features were mapped for the project and displayed in Figure 3.15.

MA 11 Forest Plan Amendment

MA 11 has a re-entry standard that states:

Re-entry should not occur unless 40 percent or more of the drainage can be maintained in cover (20% hiding, 10% thermal, +10% in either hiding or thermal cover) distributed throughout the drainage. Refer to the glossary in the final Forest Plan for the definition of thermal and hiding cover.

The Upper Bridger Creek watershed includes a large portion of private residential and agricultural lands. When considering all ownerships, only about 16% of the drainage is currently providing hiding and/or thermal cover. Due to large proportions of naturally non-forested (e.g. rocky terrain, natural meadows) and converted (e.g. residential and/or agricultural) lands, coupled with past timber harvest on public and private lands in the drainage, neither the existing condition, nor the decision meets the cover requirement for this standard. The decision will reduce existing tree density in treated areas and result in additional loss of cover for wildlife. However, impacts to wildlife cover are occurring in these stands independently due to the insect-related tree mortality. Therefore, in order to meet the purpose and need for the proposed action, a

site specific Forest Plan amendment is required to exempt the SBI Project from this MA 11 re-entry standard.

Application of FSM 1926.51 Directives Not Significant Criteria

My determination of whether or not this amendment is significant was conducted using the process in the Forest Service Planning Manual, 1926.51. The manual states that changes to the land management plan [Forest Plan] that are not significant can result from four specific situations.

1. Actions that do not significantly alter the multiple use goals and objectives for long-term land and resource management.

The SBI Project does not alter the multiple-use goals and objectives for long-term land and resource management on the GNF, nor does it impact Forest Plan objectives or outputs.

2. Adjustments of management area boundaries or management prescriptions resulting from further onsite analysis when the adjustments do not cause significant changes in the multiple-use goals and objectives for long-term land and resource management.

The SBI Project does not impact multiple-use goals and objective for long-term and resource management.

3. Minor changes in standards and guidelines.

The amendment to exempt the SBI Project from the MA 11 standard does not change the Forest Plan standard or any guidelines.

4. Opportunities for additional projects or activities that will contribute to achievement of the management prescription.

The amendment is only applicable to the SBI project. However, the existing condition of the drainage where the project is located does not meet the 40% cover standard, and never will due to the amount of non-forest in the watershed.

Conclusion – Significance/Non-significance: The existing condition coupled with the fact that insect activity will continue to reduce hiding and thermal cover in the project area in the absence of prescriptive treatment, all lead to a logical conclusion that a site-specific amendment to allow re-entry for the purpose of limiting adverse impacts from continued insect activity would not have significant effects to big game species. Additionally, based upon consideration of the four factors identified in the Forest Service Planning Manual, 1926.51, and considering the Forest Plan in its entirety, I have determined that the forest plan amendment to exempt the SBI Project from the MA 11 re-entry standard is not significant.

Other resource specific MA 11 standards are discussed in Chapter 3 by resource area in the EA, and briefly summarized below. No additional plan amendments are needed.

Forest Plan Consistency Summary

My decision complies with Forest Plan standards with the exception of the Forest Plan Amendment in MA 11 to exempt the SBI Project from the re-entry standard. Standards and

guidelines established in the Forest Plan that are pertinent to the various resources potentially affected by the alternatives are described in more detail in the EA.

All required interagency review and coordination has been accomplished; new or revised measures resulting from this review have been incorporated. There is documentation in the record showing coordination with other agencies such as the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana State Historic Preservation Officer, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and interested members of the public. See also EA, Chapter 4 Coordination.

NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (NEPA)

The provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) have been followed as required under 40 CFR 1500-1508. This Decision Notice and EA comply with the intent and requirements of the NEPA. Alternatives in the EA were developed and analyzed under full public disclosure. This Decision Notice discusses the decision I have made and the reasons for making the decision.

NATIONAL FOREST MANAGEMENT ACT (1976)

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 (P.L. 94-588) governs the administration of national forests, and was an amendment to the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974. NFMA requires that resource plans and permits, contracts, and other instruments for the use and occupancy of National Forest System lands shall be consistent with the land management plan (i.e. the Forest Plan). NFMA also requires public participation, including adequate notice and the opportunity to comment on projects that affect NFS lands.

NFMA also requires that several specific findings be document at the project level for forest management, including the following:

Suitability for Timber Production: NFMA requires no timber harvesting shall occur on areas classified as not suited for timber production, except salvage sales, sales necessary to protect other multiple-use values, or activities that meet other objectives on such lands if the forest plan established that such actions are appropriate.

The silvicultural diagnosis process and the Forest Plan were used to determine that all areas associated with this project are suitable for timber harvest or are planned to protect other multiple use values (such as the vegetation within and adjacent to the ski area). There is reasonable assurance that lands can be restocked within five years of final harvest. None of the areas considered for harvest have been withdrawn from timber production (EA3.25)

Maintenance of the Diversity of Plant and Animal Communities: Forest Plan goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines address maintaining a diversity of vegetation and habitats across the forest to meet a variety of wildlife species and to provide for sustained yield of timber products. *The purpose and need for the project is to maintain healthy, resilient forest habitat in an area that has been hard-hit by recent and ongoing insect infestations. Wildlife have evolved with native forest insects, and these forest "pests" also have beneficial functions as prey for other species, and creators of habitat components such as snags. However, with insect activity at epidemic levels in the project area and surrounding landscape, treatment would promote habitat diversity, which in turn would help maintain a diversity of plant and animal species (EA p. 3.188). In addition to applying forest plan direction, project design/mitigation prescribed by the project wildlife biologist address plant and animal community needs (EA 2.5, 3.26).*

Appropriateness of Even-Aged Management and Optimality of Clearcutting: NFMA directs that clearcutting be used only where “it is determined to be the optimum method”. Other even aged methods can be used where “determined to be appropriate.” *No clearcutting is proposed with this project (EA, p. 3.26).*

NFMA Findings for Vegetation Manipulation: All proposals that involve vegetation manipulation of tree cover for any purpose must comply with the following requirements.

Best suited to the multiple-use goals stated in the Forest Plan for the area with impact. *All treatments are consistent with multiple use Forest Plan direction and address the project purpose and need.*

Assure that the lands can be adequately restocked within 5 years. *No regeneration harvests are proposed with this project.*

Not chosen because they will give the greatest dollar return. *Although timber harvest associated with this project will generate revenue, interdisciplinary resources were considered in the development of this project.*

Be chosen after considering the effects on residual trees and adjacent stands. *The effects to residual trees and adjacent stands were considered in the interdisciplinary development of this project. Residual tree protection measures are included in the design criteria section of this report.*

Be selected to avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and to ensure conservation of soil and water resources. *The Soils and Water BMPs (EA, Appendix C and D) and project design/mitigation are in place to ensure conservation of the resources.*

Be selected to provide beneficial effects to water quality and quantity, wildlife and fish habitat, regeneration of desired tree species, forage production, recreation uses, aesthetic values, and other resource yields. *Following Forest Plan and management area direction, an interdisciplinary team considered all of these resources in the context of the surrounding landscape and this project as documented in the project file.*

Be practical in terms of transportation and harvesting requirements and total costs of preparation, logging, and administration. *Standard logging systems and log hauling is prescribed for this project and has been determined to be practical for this project.*

Prior to harvest, stands of trees throughout the National Forest System shall generally have reached the culmination of mean annual increment of growth. *Treatments associated with this project are intermediate thinning and all treatments are designed to address insect issues.*

ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

The GNF fulfilled consultation requirements for threatened, endangered, and proposed species (grizzly bear, lynx, and wolverine). The Biological Assessment for the project reached conclusions of *no effect, not likely to adversely affect, and not likely to jeopardize*, for these species respectively. There is no designated or proposed critical habitat in the project area. Therefore, pursuant to 50 CFR 402.13 (a), formal consultation on these species and critical habitat is not required, and the GNF has satisfied the requirements of the Endangered Species Act.

MIGRATORY BIRD TREATY ACT (16 U.S.C. 703-712)

Under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA), which implements various treaties and conventions for the protection of migratory birds, it is unlawful to take, kill or possess any migratory birds, except as regulated by authorized programs. Executive Order (E.O.) 13186 is associated with the MBTA and requires agencies to ensure that environmental analyses evaluate the effects of federal actions and agency plans on migratory birds, with emphasis on Species of Concern (SOC).

The EA evaluated the effects of the project on migratory birds.

BALD AND GOLDEN EAGLE PROTECTION ACT (16 U.S.C. 668)

The Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (BGEPA) contains language similar to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA), but specific to eagles. Under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (BGEPA), it is unlawful to take (to include harm, harass), kill or possess any bald or golden eagle, except as regulated by authorized programs. The United States Forest Service (Forest Service or USFS) has a responsibility to ensure that environmental analyses evaluate the effects of federal actions and agency plans on bald and golden eagles.

The EA considers the effects of the project on golden eagle under the discussion of Migratory Birds, and on bald eagles, which are discussed as a sensitive species.

FEDERAL CLEAN WATER ACT (CWA)

This Act requires Federal agencies to comply with all Federal, state, and local requirements, administrative authority, process and sanctions related to the control and abatement of water pollution (CWA, Sections 313(a) and 319(k), USC 2002). Section 303 of the CWA gives authority to individual States to develop, review, and enforce water quality standards, requires the States to identify existing water bodies that do not meet water quality standards, and develop plans to meet them (TMDL's - total maximum daily load). The MD Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) regulates water quality in Montana. Section 404 of the Act gives authority to the Corps of Engineers to review and permit activities that may impact navigable waters of the U.S, including wetlands.

The EA analyzes impacts to water quality, wetlands, and floodplains. As noted in the EA, the project will be constructed in compliance with best management practices to protect soil and water quality (see Appendix C and D of the EA). None of the streams in the project area are classified as water quality limited stream segments by MT DEQ's 2012 version of the 303d list or

listed as segments in need of total maximum daily load (TMDL) developed by the MT DEQ. The project will employ effective BMPs to ensure that water quality changes, if any, would be negligible and would be considered “naturally occurring” under Montana water quality standards (ARM 17.30.602 (19). (EA, p. 3.73 – 3.75).

EXECUTIVE ORDER 11990 – PROTECTION OF WETLANDS

Under E.O. 11990, all federal agencies must take action to minimize the destruction, loss or degradation of wetlands. The Selected Action complies with EO 11990 to minimize the destruction, loss, or degradation of wetlands. Design/mitigation measures provide that vehicles and logging machinery would not be operated within wetlands, and materials would not be deposited in stream or wetlands.

EXECUTIVE ORDER 11988 – FLOODPLAIN MANAGEMENT

E.O. 11988 provides that each agency shall provide leadership and shall take action to reduce the risk of flood loss, to minimize the impact of floods on human safety, health and welfare, and to restore and preserve the natural and beneficial values served by floodplains in carrying out its responsibilities for (1) acquiring, managing, and disposing of Federal lands, and facilities; (2) providing Federally undertaken, financed, or assisted construction and improvements; and (3) conducting Federal activities and programs affecting land use, including but not limited to water and related land resources planning, regulating, and licensing activities.

The SBI Project will adhere to MT Streamside Protection Zones with respect to work that may occur in riparian areas. Additionally, the project includes a mitigation measure that prohibits cutting of trees within 15 feet of the Ordinary High Water Mark along any Class 1 or Class 2 (DNRC 2006) stream segment within any treatment unit. Compliance with MT SMZ and the aquatic mitigation measures will ensure protection of floodplain values and functions.

EXECUTIVE ORDER 12898 - ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Executive Order 12898 directs Federal agencies to integrate environmental justice considerations into federal programs and activities. Environmental justice means that, to the greatest extent practical and permitted by the law, all populations are provided the opportunity to comment before decisions are rendered, or are allowed to share in the benefits of, are not excluded from, and are not affected in a disproportionately high and adverse manner by government programs and activities affecting human health or the environment (RO 13898 and Departmental Regulation 5600-002, “Environmental Justice”).

My decision will not have a discernible effect on minorities, American Indians, or women, or the civil rights of any United States citizen, nor will it have a disproportionately high and adverse impact on minorities or low-income individuals. The EA details the public involvement that occurred for this project including outreach to the local community and Native American tribes. As the project will not disproportionately impact environmental justice populations, my decision is consistent with EO 12898.

NATIONAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION ACT

The Heritage Resources analysis notes that based upon a review of the Heritage Site and Inventory database and intensive on the ground surveys, no heritage sites were identified in the project area. The project, which includes timber harvest and temporary road construction, would not impact any heritage resources. Mitigation is in place to protect any sites that may be found during project implementation (EA, 3. 145). I believe that this action will not have a significant effect on scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

A negative cultural resources inventory report was sent to the MT State Historic Preservation Officer fulfilling consultation requirements as per the Region 1 programmatic agreement with the MT SHPO and Advisory Council for Historic Preservation.

NATIVE AMERICAN TREATY RIGHTS

Many tribes have aboriginal ties and use areas within the GNF, including the Northern Crow, Cheyenne, Nez Perce, Salish and Kootenai tribes. The Forest Service contacted each of these tribes and explained the project. None of these tribes expressed concerns with the SBI project. My decision does not affect treaty rights.

2001 ROADLESS AREA CONSERVATION - FINAL RULE, 36 CFR 294

The 2001 Roadless Rule prohibits road construction, road reconstruction and timber cutting, sale and removal in inventoried roadless areas with some exceptions. The SBI Project is consistent with the 2001 Roadless Rule as no activities would occur within IRAs.

FEDERAL CAVE RESOURCES PROTECTION ACT

This Act is to secure, protect, preserve and maintain significant caves to the extent practical. Site features and field review substantiate that no caves are in the area. No known cave resources will be affected by this proposal.

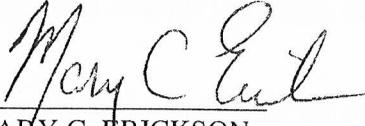
12. IMPLEMENTATION

The Custer –Gallatin National Forest, Bozeman Ranger District, has prepared an environmental assessment and decision notice and finding of no significant impact for the South Bridger Interface Project, which is subject to the objection process pursuant to 36 CFR 218, subparts A and B. The objection process has been completed. Implementation may occur once the decision notice is signed.

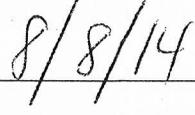
13 CONTACT PERSON

Copies of the EA and Draft Decision Notice are available on the Gallatin Forest Webpage at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/gallatin/landmanagement/projects>.

Other formats are also available upon request from the Bozeman Ranger District, Custer Gallatin National Forests - Bozeman Ranger District, 3710 Fallon St., Ste. C, Bozeman, MT 59718, 406-522-2520. For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service objection process, contact Amy Waring, NEPA Team Leader, or 406-255-1451.



MARY C. ERICKSON
Forest Supervisor
Custer Gallatin National Forest



Date