

Signed at Washington, DC, on January 8, 2003.

Kenneth J. Roberts,

Acting Administrator, Foreign Agricultural Service.

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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Gallatin National Forest Invasive Plant Treatment EIS, Gallatin National Forest, Gallatin County, Madison County, Meagher County, Park County, Sweet Grass County, and Stillwater County, MT

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement.

SUMMARY: Invasive plants can alter ecosystem processes, including: productivity; hydrologic function; nutrient cycling, and natural disturbance patterns such as frequency and intensity of wildfires. Changing these processes can lead to displacement of native plant species, eventually impacting wildlife and plant habitat, recreational opportunities, livestock forage, and scenic values. The Forest Service has identified that at least 15,500 acres on the Gallatin National Forest that are in a downward trend due to the infestation of invasive plants. The Forest Service will evaluate these known infestations and high-risk areas or conditions that may cause infestations over the next ten to fifteen years and analyze various management activities to reduce the spread and density of invasive plants and allow desirable native vegetation to re-establish and regain vigor. Based on previous trend information, it is estimated that infestations could increase to approximately 155,000 acres over the next ten to fifteen years at historic funding levels. The purpose and need for this project is for the Forest Service to improve the trend of the

ecological condition for the known infestations, prevent infestations in areas that have potential for invasion, and allow for adaptive management to treat anticipated new infestations across the Gallatin National Forest over the next ten to fifteen years. The proposed actions being considered to achieve the purpose and need include implementing an integrated pest management program aimed at controlling new starts, priority areas and areas of minor infestations; and implementing holding actions on areas of existing large infestations. The Gallatin National Forest is proposing to continue control of invasive plants through the integration of mechanical, biological, ground and aerial (helicopter) herbicide control methods.

DATES: Comments concerning the scope of the analysis should be received in writing on or before February 28, 2003.

ADDRESSES: Send written comments to Hebgen Lake Ranger District, Gallatin National Forest, PO Box 520, West Yellowstone, MT 59758.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Direct questions about the proposed action and EIS to Susan LaMont, Project Coordinator, PO Box 520, West Yellowstone, Montana 59758, phone (406) 823-6976.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: These management activities would be administered by the Gallatin National Forest in Gallatin, Madison, Meagher, Park, Sweet Grass, and Stillwater Counties, Montana. The EIS will tier to the 1987 Gallatin National Forest and Grasslands Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan), which provide the overall management direction for the area. The proposed action is consistent with the Forest Plan. The purpose of the Forest Service proposal is to further movement towards desired conditions outlined in the Forest Plan, by:

- Protecting the natural condition and biodiversity on the Gallatin National Forest by preventing or limiting the spread of aggressive, non-native plant species that displace native vegetation;

- Promptly eliminating new invaders (species not previously reported in the area) before they become established;

- Reducing known and potential invasive plant seed sources on trailheads and campsites, along main roads and trails, within powerline corridors, and in wildlife and livestock use areas;

- Preventing or limiting the spread of established invasive plants into areas containing little or no infestation;

- Protecting sensitive and unique habitats including the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness Area, LeeMetcalf Wilderness, municipal watersheds, critical winter ranges, research natural areas, riparian areas, and sensitive plant populations.

The proposed action will be consistent with the Forest Plan, which provides goals, objectives, standards and guidelines of the various activities and land allocations on the forest. The Forest Plan allocates the project area into twenty-six management areas (MAs), the invasive plants occur within most of these management areas. Private lands are also included within the project area boundary. Although excluded from Forest Service activities, project access and the condition of private lands will be considered during alternative development and when analyzing potential cumulative efforts.

The key issue topics identified to date include:

- The current and potential impacts of invasive plants on natural resources such as critical big game habitat, native plant communities, wilderness values, watersheds, and threatened, endangered, or sensitive species;

- Economics, effectiveness, and potential impacts of various control methods on natural resources;

- Potential effects on non-target native plants, wildlife and fish populations, and human health from the application of herbicides (both ground base and aerial applications).

The areas the Forest Service plan to analyze include:

Ranger district	Location (township range)	Maximum treatment acreage ¹	Estimated aerial treatment acreage
Big Timber	Between T5N—T5S; and Between R15E—R10E, Montana Principle Meridian.	900 Acres	0 Acres.
Livingston	Between T6N—T8S; and Between R12E—R5E, Montana Principle Meridian.	2,000 Acres	0 Acres.
Gardiner	Between TFS—T9S; and Between R17E—R5E, Montana Principle Meridian.	6,200 Acres	0 Acres.
Bozeman	Between T4N—T9S; and Between R8E—R1E, Montana Principle Meridian.	3,700 Acres	171 Acres.
Hebgen Lake	Between T8S—T15S; and Between R5E—R2E, Montana Principle Meridian.	2,700 Acres	172 Acres.

¹ These are the maximum projected treatment acres, actual treatment acres may be less.

A range of reasonable alternatives will be considered, including a no action

alternative. Other alternatives will examine various combinations of

invasive plant treatment. Based on the issues gathered through scoping, the