

A primary result of these activities would be a reduction of accumulated down fuel loadings, which would dramatically decrease the potential for future high intensity wildfires and improve the chance to keep fires that do start to a smaller size. Furthermore, it would prepare the sites for regeneration, enhance wildlife habitat and maintain forest health by bringing fuel levels closer to historic levels. Some thinning of saplings would occur to reduce excessive ladder fuels and lower the risk of crown fire and catastrophic wildfire while allowing residual trees to grow at a sustainable rate. The only ground disturbing activity proposed is the obliteration of 3.5 miles of existing road. Ladder fuel reduction using chainsaws and prescribed fire is proposed for those areas that have become overgrown with smaller diameter trees thus creating a fuel profile that acts as a "fire ladder" to the crowns of the dominant overstory trees.

Issues. The following are the preliminary issues identified: Wildlife habitat; Fuels/Catastrophic Wildfire Risk; Ecosystem Sustainability; Air Quality; Water Quality/Riparian Habitat; Threatened; Endangered and Sensitive (TES) Species; Road Management; Noxious Weeds; Recreation; and Urban interface. This list will be verified, expanded, or modified based on public scoping and interdisciplinary review of this proposal.

Alternative. The Forest Service will consider a full range of alternatives. One of these will be the "no action" alternative in which no active management activities would take place. Another alternative will examine restoration involving no commercial timber harvest. Additional alternatives will examine varying levels, locations, and methods for the proposed activities to achieve the proposal's purposes, as well as to respond to the issues and other resource values. The Forest Service has begun discussions with the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife with the objective of looking at all watershed activities in a concerted cooperative process for comprehensive watershed restoration between ownerships.

Scoping Process. Public participation will be especially important at several points during the analysis, beginning with the scoping process. Initial scoping began with the project listing in the 1997 Winter Edition of the Umatilla National Forest's Schedule of Proposed Actions. A public meeting will be scheduled for fall 2003, to discuss the project and other meetings will be scheduled as needed. This environmental analysis and decision

making process will enable additional interested and affected people to participate and contribute to the final decision. The public is encouraged to take part in the process and is encouraged to visit with Forest Service officials at any time during the analysis and prior to the decision. The Forest Service will be seeking information, comments, and assistance from Federal, State, local agencies, and other individuals or organizations that may be interested in, or affected by the proposal. This input will be used in preparation of the draft EIS.

Early Notice of Importance of Public Participation in Subsequent Environmental Review: The draft EIS expected to be filed with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and to be available to the public for review February 2004. The comment period on the draft EIS will be 45 days from the EPA publishes the notice of availability in the **Federal Register**. The final EIS is scheduled to be released September 2004.

The Forest Service believes it is important to give reviewers notice, at this early stage, of several court rulings related to public participation in the environmental review process. First, reviewers of draft EIS's must structure their participation in the environmental review of the proposal so that it is meaningful and alerts the agency to the reviewer's position and contentions. *Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corp. v. NRDC*, 435 U.S. 519, 553 (1978). Also, environmental objections that could be raised at the draft EIS stage but that are not raised until after completion of the final EIS may be waived or dismissed by the courts. *City of Angoon v. Hodel*, 803 F.2d 1016, 1022 (9th Cir. 1986) and *Wisconsin Heritages, Inc. v. Harris*, 490 F. Supp. 1334, 1338 (E.D. Wis. 1980). Because of these court rulings, it is very important that those interested in this proposed action participate by the close of the 45-day comment period so that substantive comments and objections and made available to the Forest Service at a time when it can meaningful consider and respond to them in the Final EIS.

To assist the Forest Service in identifying and considering issues and concerns on the proposed action, comments on the Draft EIS should be as specified as possible. It is also helpful if comments refer to specific pages or chapters of the draft EIS. Comments may also address the adequacy of the draft EIS or merits of the alternatives formulated and discussed in the statement. (Reviewers may wish to refer to the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations for implementing

the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act at 40 CFR 1503.3 in addressing these points.)

In the final EIS, the Forest Service is required to respond to comments and responses received during the comment period that pertain to the environmental consequences discussed at the draft EIS and applicable laws, regulations, and policies considered in making a decision regarding the proposal.

The Forest Service is the lead agency. Monte Fujishin, Pomeroy District Ranger, is the responsible official. The responsible official will decide which, if any, of the proposed projects will be implemented. The decision and reasons for the decision will be documented in the Record of Decision. That decision will be subject to Forest Service Appeal Regulations (36 CFR part 215).

Dated: June 27, 2003.

Jeff D. Blackwood,

Forest Supervisor.

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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Ravalli County Resource Advisory Committee

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of meeting.

SUMMARY: The Ravalli County Resource Advisory Committee will be meeting to discuss projects for 2003 and monitoring of 2002 projects. Agenda topics will include project proposal submissions and a public forum (question and answer session). The meeting is being held pursuant to the authorities in the Federal Advisory Committee Act (Pub. L. 92-463) and under the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000 (Pub. L. 106-393). The meeting is open to the public.

DATES: The meeting will be held on July 22, 2003, 6:30 p.m.

ADDRESSES: The meeting will be held at the Ravalli County Administration Building, 215 S. 4th Street, Hamilton, Montana. Send written comments to Jeanne Higgins, District Ranger, Stevensville Ranger District, 88 Main Street, Stevensville, MT 59870, by facsimile (406) 777-7423, or electronically to jmhiggins@fs.fed.us.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Jeanne Higgins, Stevensville District Ranger and Designated Federal Officer, Phone: (406) 777-5461.