



# Upper Sheep Creek Vegetation Project



*The Lewis and Clark National Forest is proposing to conduct vegetation management on National Forest System (NFS) lands in an area of Upper Sheep Creek in the Little Belt Mountains on the White Sulphur Springs Ranger District, Meagher County, Montana.*

## Collaborative Process

Planning and development of the proposal was done through a transparent collaborative process that included interested persons representing diverse interests. This "working stakeholder group" included local land/homeowners, private business owners, recreation interest groups, timber industry professionals, local government interests and State wildlife agency biologists. The Forest Service Interdisciplinary Team assessed existing conditions and ability to achieve Forest Plan goals for identified opportunity areas within the designated area that guided the working group. Through the use of this collaborative approach the working group assisted resource specialists in the identification of issues, refinement of management options and areas, as well as the development of treatment types to meet objectives.

Working group meeting, 05/20/2015



## Project Development Background



The Upper Sheep Creek Vegetation Project area is within one of the Governor's designated areas in Montana for potential projects that reduce the risk or extent of, or increase resilience to, insect and disease infestations. Section 8204 of the Agriculture Act of 2014 (Public Law 113-79) (also referred to as the Farm Bill) amended Title VI of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (HFRA) (16 U.S.C. 6591 et seq.) to add Sections 602 and 603 to address qualifying insect and disease infestations on National Forest System lands. The Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture

delegated authority to implement the provisions of the Farm Bill to the Chief of the Forest Service on March 6, 2014.

Section 602 provides, in part, the opportunity for Governors to request designation to areas in their State that are experiencing or at risk of insect or disease epidemic. Upon reviewing the States' requests, the Chief designated approximately 45.6 million acres of National Forest System lands across 94 national forests in 35 States.

Section 603 establishes a categorical exclusion for qualifying insect and disease projects in designated areas on National Forest System lands and may be used to carry out a collaborative restoration project. An insect and disease project that may be categorically excluded under this authority is a project that is designed to reduce the risk or extent of, or increase the resilience to, insect or disease infestation in the area (HFRA, Sections 602(d) and 603(a)).

Photo1-2, Lodgepole pine killed by mountain pine beetle



Regenerating lodgepole pine suitable for pre-commercial thinning



Example of stand proposed for commercial thinning



A landscape assessment of the Little Belt Mountains was completed in 2014 that identified potential restoration and management opportunities in the Little Belt Mountains, including the Upper Sheep Creek area. A preliminary resource review of the initial opportunities was completed by an interdisciplinary team utilizing a coarse filter process based on forest plan standards. The results were then presented to interested stakeholders at a public meeting, and a working group was formed.

### Project Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is to maintain or restore the structure, function, composition and connectivity of the forest system that has been adversely affected by insect and disease. Treatments can take a variety of forms to promote resilience to insect and disease while providing for the retention of old growth and larger trees as appropriate for the forest type. This includes but is not limited to thinning, prescribed fire, and timber harvesting. The need for treatment has been identified through The Little Belts Landscape Assessment (2014), observed existing condition, working group input and other supporting information from resource specialists (i.e. insect and disease aerial detection surveys).

Additional needs were identified by the working group during the collaborative process that included:

- More employment opportunities provided from active forest management.
- A need to provide wood products to mills and smaller businesses, such as post yards, that in turn support local communities and economies.

- Concerns related to dead, dying or overcrowded forest conditions that pose a higher risk for severe wildfire along the US Highway 89 corridor and around the Forest Green subdivision.

The proposed action would address many of the working group’s concerns as identified in the bullet points above.

### Proposed Action

The proposed plan is to treat approximately 1,914 acres as outlined in Table 1, utilizing commercial, non-commercial and prescribed fire treatments.

The project would utilize approximately 33 miles of existing routes and approximately 6 miles of constructed temporary road. All existing routes utilized would be stabilized and returned to the current use and designation level as outlined in the 2007 Little Belt Mountains Travel Management Record of Decision. All newly constructed temporary roads will be decommissioned and re-contoured no later than 3 years after the date on which the project is completed. No new permanent roads would be added to the forest transportation system.

Example of route being utilized for treatment of stands



Table 1

Unit	Approx. Acres	Harvest System	Proposed Treatment
1	113	Tractor and Manual	Commercial Thin; Stand Improvement; Pile Burn
2	15	Tractor	Commercial Thin; Under Burn
3	72	Tractor	Clear-cut with Reserves; Prescribe Burn
4	2	Cable	Commercial Thin; Pile Burn
5a	38	Manual	Stand Improvement; Pile Burn
5b	34	Tractor	Improvement Cut; Under Burn
6	300	Tractor	Commercial Thin; Clear-cut with Reserves; Improvement Cut; Under Burn
7	2	Tractor	Commercial Thin; Pile Burn
8	75	Tractor and Cable	Commercial Thin; Improvement Cut; Prescribe Burn
9	72	Tractor and Cable	Improvement Cut; Prescribe Burn
10	37	Tractor	Clear-cut with Reserves; Prescribe Burn
11	26	Tractor	Commercial Thin; Pile Burn
12	164	Tractor and Manual	Clear-cut with Reserves; Shelterwood; Stand Improvement; Prescribe Burn
14	106	Cable	Commercial Thin; Prescribe Burn
15	41	Tractor and Manual	Improvement Cut; Jackpot Burn
16	13	Tractor	Commercial Thin; Pile Burn
17	12	Tractor	Improvement Cut; Pile Burn
18	72	Tractor and Manual	Improvement Cut; Jackpot Burn
19	102	Cable and Tractor	Improvement Cut; Prescribe Burn
20	124	Tractor and Manual	Improvement Cut; Jackpot Burn
21	266	Tractor	Commercial Thin; Stand Improvement; Pile Burn
B	24	Manual	Pre-commercial Thin; Pile Burn
D	30	Manual	Pre-commercial Thin; Pile Burn
G	75	Manual	Pre-commercial Thin; Pile Burn
H	12	Manual	Pre-commercial Thin; Pile Burn
I	54	Manual	Pre-commercial Thin; Pile Burn
J	8	Manual	Pre-commercial Thin; Pile Burn
O	40	Tractor	Commercial Thin
P	82	Tractor	Commercial Thin

**Clear-cut with Reserves:** An even-aged regeneration harvest that removes a majority of overstory trees in a stand in one operation producing a fully exposed microclimate for the development of a new age class. A minor live component of the stand may be retained for purposes other than regeneration. The retained trees, referred to as leave trees, should generally comprise less than 10 percent of full stocking of the stand.

**Improvement Cut:** An intermediate treatment made in a stand, pole-sized or larger, primarily to improve composition and quality by removing less desirable trees of any species.

**Intermediate Treatment:** A collective term for any treatment or tending designed to enhance growth, quality, vigor, and composition of the stand after establishment or regeneration and prior to final harvest.

**Thinning:** An intermediate treatment made to reduce stand density of trees primarily to improve growth, enhance forest health, or to recover potential mortality.

**Stand Improvement:** An intermediate treatment of trees not past the sapling stage made to improve the composition, structure, condition, health, and growth of even- or uneven-aged stands.

To address current stand conditions and objectives, proposed regeneration harvest in unit 3, 6, and 12 may create openings greater than 40 acres in size.

Preliminary review indicates this project falls within a category of actions established by statute for insect and disease infestation and is excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) per Section 603 of HFRA (16 U.S.C. 659 1b). A proposed action may be categorically excluded from further analysis and documentation in an EIS or EA only if there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action. The resource conditions that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances related to a proposed action warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS are:

1. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species;
2. Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds;
3. Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas;
4. Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas;
5. Research natural areas;
6. American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites; and
7. Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas.

The mere presence of one or more of these resource conditions in the project area does not preclude use of a CE. It is the existence of a cause-effect relationship between

a proposed action and the potential effect on these resource conditions. If such a relationship exists, it is the degree of the potential effects of a proposed action on said resource conditions that determine whether an extraordinary circumstance exists. Preliminary resource conclusions are listed in Table 2.

The project was developed with design criteria to be consistent with forest plan standards and management area direction.

The Forest is now scoping this project. As the Responsible Official, I would like to solicit comments on the proposed action. Your feedback on this proposal will assist in refining project design criteria and identifying potential issues that may have not been raised during the collaborative process. Comments specific to the proposed action that identify a cause-effect relationship are most helpful.

Please submit comments to the White Sulphur Springs Ranger District by electronic mail (email) to [comments-northern-lewisclark-white-sulphur-sprg@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-northern-lewisclark-white-sulphur-sprg@fs.fed.us) with "Upper Sheep Creek" in the subject line or send written correspondence to USDA-Lewis and Clark National Forest, White Sulphur Springs Ranger District, 204 W. Folsom P.O. Box A, White Sulphur Springs, MT 59645. Please include with all correspondence; the project name, your name/organization and a return address. Your comments are appreciated and

will be most helpful if received by September 4, 2015.

If you have additional questions or would like to be removed from this mailing list please contact John Casselli, the project team leader, at 406-791-7723. Additional information for this project is posted on the Lewis and Clark National Forest website at

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/lewisclark/projects/>

Sincerely,

*Carol Hatfield*

Carol Hatfield  
District Ranger

Whitebark pine in need of stand improvement treatment



Example of Pini stem rot fungus found in the project area



Table 2

Resource	Preliminary Conclusion
<b>Federally listed, threatened or endangered species or critical habitat</b>	No Effect for listed, threatened or endangered species or critical habitat.
<b>Species proposed for listing</b>	No proposed or candidate species present.
<b>Forest Service sensitive species</b>	<p>May Impact Individuals but Would Not Likely Contribute to a Trend Towards Federal Listing or Cause a Loss of Population Viability for black-backed woodpecker or Townsends' big-eared bat. Beneficial Effect to whitebark pine.</p> <p>No Impact for all other wildlife, plant and aquatic sensitive species.</p>
<b>Flood plains, wetlands or municipal watersheds.</b>	Riparian areas will be avoided with equipment and appropriate buffers applied as part of design criteria and compliance with Best Management Practices for Forestry Activities in Montana.
<b>Congressionally designated areas</b>	There are no wildernesses, wilderness study or National Recreation Areas in the project area.
<b>Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas or Research Natural Areas</b>	The project is not within any of these. The North Fork Smith and Middle Fork Judith IRA's are adjacent to the eastern portion of the project area.
<b>Cultural sites; Archaeological or historic properties</b>	Identified sites will be avoided through design features.

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