

May 14, 2020

Objection Reviewing Officer
USDA Forest Service, Northern Region
26 Fort Missoula Road
Missoula, MT 59804

Re: Notice of Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Objection to the Ripley Project, Kootenai National Forest.

Dear Reviewing Officer:

Pursuant to 36 CFR [sect] 218 Subparts (A) and (B), Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) hereby submits this objection to the Ripley Project on the Kootenai National Forest. DNRC'S objection is submitted as support for moving the actions in the draft decision's selected alternative forward to a final decision and implementation.

Connection to Prior Specific Comments: DNRC submitted comments on the Proposed Action for the Ripley Project on August 6, 2019. DNRC's comments highlighted the need to reduce hazardous fuels and improve forest conditions in this landscape. The project is not only important for the national forest system lands, but also for the neighboring private landowners and DNRC, which manages Trust Lands in the area. This project will reduce the high risk of intense fire behavior in this area near Libby. This will protect the community and facilitate safe wildland fire operations. The project will also provide wood supply for local mills, contribute to local economic stability, and to the retention of the timber industry in Montana.

Reasons for Objection: DNRC strongly supports the Selected Alternative in the Draft Decision Notice. We are concerned that the balance of treatments in this alternative may be modified prior to the final decision and project implementation. If changes are requested by another party, and if the final decision differs substantively from the selected alternative, the outcome may not adequately reduce wildfire risk and balance multiple benefits. In addition, if the current analysis is not enough to support these changes, the project may not be implemented in a timely manner. As such, we intend to use the objection process to support the treatments identified in the selected alternative in the draft decision, help address any remaining issues of uncertainty, strengthen the project record, and participate in any objection resolution discussions with other objectors.

The DNRC formally requests to be included as an interested party in objection resolution for this project. DNRC has been a partner in the development of this project and has strong interest in the final decision and implementation. This project, along with treatments on state and private lands, is crucial to meeting our mutual goals of improving forest conditions across ownerships in this landscape.

Sincerely,



Greg Poncin
Area Manager, Northwestern Land Office
MT Department of Natural Resources and Conservation

CC: Doug Turman, Unit Manager, Libby Unit; Stephen Kimball, Local Government Forest Advisor