

From: [Tom Partin](#)
To: [FS-appeals-northern-regional-office](#)
Cc: [Cindi Kaneshige](#)
Subject: [External Email]Middleman Project Comment Letter
Date: Wednesday, March 3, 2021 9:24:59 AM
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Attached is AFRC's Objection comment letter for the Middleman Project on the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest. Should an Objection Resolution meeting be held, AFRC would like to participate and discuss our issues highlighted in the letter.

Thank you,

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VIA Email: appeals-northern-regional-office@usda.gov

March 3, 2021

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

Dear Objection Reviewing Officer:

On behalf of the American Forest Resource Council (AFRC) and its members, thank you for the opportunity to comment during the Middleman Project objection period.

AFRC is a regional trade association whose purpose is to advocate for sustained yield timber harvests on public timberlands throughout the West to enhance forest health and resistance to fire, insects, and disease. We do this by promoting active management to attain productive public forests, protect adjoining private forests, and assure community stability. We work to improve federal and state laws, regulations, policies and decisions regarding access to and management of public forest lands and protection of all forest lands. Many of our members have their operations in communities within and adjacent to the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest and management on these lands ultimately dictates not only the viability of their businesses, but also the economic health of the communities themselves.

AFRC is not writing to submit a formal objection, since the objection period is open, but rather to discuss some of the major issues we have with the Project in hopes they may be considered when the Project is implemented. Should other objections be filed, AFRC requests participation in any Resolution meeting to discuss our issues. AFRC wants to see the Project implemented as proposed but would like to open a dialogue with the District on some of the common themes we see coming out of this Project and others on the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest. AFRC submitted scoping comments on March 6, 2020 and Draft EA comments on September 4, 2020. Our comments centered on asking the District to treat more acres within the dead lodgepole stands to help with forest health and fuels reduction. We have submitted similar comments on the Boulder Baldy, Horsefly, and Stonewall Projects on the Forest. The driving force behind this Project is the existing vegetation's departure from historical conditions, in both composition and structure, due to the interruption of the natural fire cycles over the past century. This creates values at risk and high priority areas for restoration and

resiliency. These hazardous fuels pose a risk to the communities of York and Nelson (including outlying developed subdivisions of El Dorado Heights and American Bar), as well as to public and firefighter safety in the event of a wildfire.

With this background AFRC is disappointed that the Forest has chosen to implement the modified proposed action (alternative 2) and we have the following concerns.

1. When appropriate, AFRC requests that the Forest treat as many acres as possible when doing an EA to efficiently address needed restoration work and to spread the cost of planning over more volume. With the treatment footprint decreasing in your Draft Decision, the Forest is losing the economies of scale and the cost of planning will not be offset as much by lower timber sale volumes.

The Draft Decision Notice states:

"I considered six alternatives developed from public comments that were eliminated from detailed study because they failed to meet the purpose and need and/or are technologically infeasible. Although these alternatives were not given detailed study, the issues raised by the public with respect to these alternatives were considered and addressed as described in the subsequent sections of this document. The alternatives not given detailed study included:"

- *No helicopter used for implementation*
- *No new road construction*
- *No treatments in inventoried roadless areas*
- *Meet Forest Plan standards*
- *No commercial timber harvests*
- *No treatment in old growth*

Unfortunately, AFRC's request that the Forest exam treating as many acres as possible for economic and forest health reasons was not considered in an alternative!

2. A recap of the Planning area shows that the Project encompasses 134,491 acres are National Forest System (NFS) lands of which 78,325 acres are in designated Inventoried Roadless Areas. That leaves 56,166 acres where timber harvest could occur yet only 6,669 acres or 12% of the area is being considered now for commercial harvest. Our main issue with treating such few acres commercially is we do not think the Purpose and Need for the Project can be fully met. The Purpose and Need for the Project includes:
 - Life Safety
 - Ecosystem Resiliency, Diversity and Restoration
 - Wood Products for Local Economies
3. In the Modified Alternative 2, timber harvest will occur on approximately 6,669 acres which is down from the number of acres projected in the Draft EA which was 10,800 acres and represented a good portion of the land outside of the IRA's and areas that have not been treated in the past. This is a 38% reduction in planned commercial harvest acres

from the Draft EA phase to Draft Decision. AFRC understands that some of the units were removed because of economic feasibility and we support removal of the planned helicopter logging acres.

4. In both our scoping and Draft EA comment letters we stated that we were pleased to see that one of your goals of the Project is to provide a sustained yield of timber for the local milling infrastructure. The National Forests in Montana are very important for providing the raw materials that sawmills within the State need to operate. The timber products provided by the Forest Service are crucial to the health of our membership. Without the raw material sold by the Forest Service these mills would be unable to produce the amount of wood products that the citizens of this country demand. Without this material, our members would also be unable to run their mills at capacities that keep their employees working, which is crucial to the health of the communities that they operate in. These benefits can only be realized if the Forest Service sells their timber products through sales that are economically viable. This viability is tied to both the volume and type of timber products sold and the way these products are permitted to be delivered from the forest to the mills. There are many ways to design a timber sale that allows a purchaser the ability to deliver logs to their mill in an efficient manner while also adhering to the necessary practices that are designed to protect the environmental resources present on Forest Service forestland. Studies in Montana have shown that between 12 and 15 direct and indirect jobs are created with every million board feet of timber harvested. Thus, the local community has significant social and economic ties to National Forest Service lands. However, with the modified action timber harvest plan and a 38% reduction of acres being treated commercially AFRC believes you are not meeting this Purpose and Need for the Project at a sufficient level.
5. AFRC supported commercial harvest on 1,329 acres of timber harvest (typically followed by prescribed burning) in the Roadless Expanse Areas. These areas are different from Inventoried Roadless Areas. The Modified Alternative 2 reduces those treatment acres down to 959 acres of timber harvest.

We remain concerned about the large acreage of prescribed burning (approximately 53,131) of which approximately 22,496 acres will be conducted across the five inventoried roadless areas (about 29 percent of total inventoried roadless area). Using prescribed fire as a tool comes with risk, and we feel there is significant risk for some of the fire to get out of control and burn acres not scheduled for fire, or for the fire to burn hotter than expected in some areas and kill more green timber than anticipated. For these reasons AFRC noted in our previous comments that we would like the Forest to supplement the record and allow for salvaging any merchantable timber that gets killed by uncontrolled and unscheduled prescribed fire.

As we mentioned in our scoping and Draft EA documents, AFRC is concerned about the amount of dead gray lodgepole that is in the project area. This timber has stood for a long time and is becoming a big threat for wildfire and using prescribed fire will be risky and could easily move from the ground into a crown fire.

6. A key to improving habitat for big game includes providing more early seral habitat that is established by using regeneration treatments. AFRC continues to support the use of regeneration harvests to address the dead and dying timber and to help implement regeneration for early seral species. However, we are disappointed that the number of acres where the regeneration tool will be used has fallen from 6,157 acres down to 3,478 acres. Between the release of the preliminary and final environmental assessment, the Forest dropped approximately 6,037 acres of treatment overall and greatly reduced the extent of forest openings to be created using regeneration harvests that are greater than 100 acres. AFRC also supported the Forest in seeking approval from the Region to create openings over 40 acres.

Additionally, AFRC supports the proposal to amend the 1986 Helena National Forest Plan for lands encompassed by the Middleman project. The amendment would be site-specific and applicable only to this project. This would be a one-time exemption and would not replace the existing standards which address elk hiding and thermal cover and access within the elk management units. AFRC believes the treatments are necessary to generate the early seral plant conditions for elk. Recent studies have shown that forage is more important than cover.

7. AFRC continues to support the Forest's plan to treat approximately 1,804 acres of old growth to improve resilience and maintain old growth characteristics. The terrestrial vegetation analysis found that these stands are highly vulnerable in the short term to mortality from ongoing insect infestations as well as potential wildfire. The number of acres is reduced from the Draft EA, but the work is needed. These vegetation treatments are proposed within some old-growth stands or those trending toward old growth to promote and maintain old-growth structure and increase the resiliency of the stands to future disturbance. Treatments include managing the understory trees with improvement harvest, hand slashing of ladder fuels, pulling slash away from old components, and piling/burning or low severity under-burning as appropriate. Without treatments, these old-growth stands are at more risk from insects and disease and catastrophic wildfire.
8. AFRC suggested the Forest implement shaded fuel breaks along major road systems. These could be implemented in the Middleman Project especially along the major ingress and egress roads. We recommend these shaded fuel breaks extend 150 feet on both sides of the road. These treatments could be very effective in areas of dead lodgepole and heavy ground fuel loadings. We would like to see the Forest use this tool during implementation.
9. AFRC would like to reiterate our position for the Roads Plan on the Project. AFRC supports the construction and reconstruction of roads within the project area. Those include construction of 46 miles of temporary roads and reconstruct or recondition 90 miles of existing roads. AFRC believes that a significant factor contributing to increased fire activity in the region is the decreasing road access to our federal lands. This factor is often overshadowed by both climate change and fuels accumulation when the topic of

wildfire is discussed in public forums. However, we believe that a deteriorating road infrastructure has also significantly contributed to recent spikes in wildfires. This deterioration has been a result of both reduced funding for road maintenance and the federal agency's subsequent direction to reduce their overall road networks to align with this reduced funding. The outcome is a forested landscape that is increasingly inaccessible to fire suppression agencies due to road decommissioning and/or road abandonment. This inaccessibility complicates and delays the ability of firefighters to attack nascent fires quickly and directly. On the other hand, an intact and well-maintained road system would facilitate a scenario where firefighters can rapidly access fires and initiate direct attack in a more safe and effective manner.

In addition, AFRC believes that an intact road system is critical to the management of Forest Service land, particularly for the provision of timber products. Without an adequate road system, the Forest Service will be unable to offer and sell timber products to the local industry in an economical manner. The road decommissioning proposed in the Middleman Project likely represents a **permanent** removal of these roads and likely the deferral of management of those forest stands that they provide access to. The land base covered in the Middleman Project area are to be managed for a variety of forest management objectives. Removal of adequate access to these lands compromises the agency's ability to achieve these objectives and is very concerning to us. This is especially true when it comes to having roads available for rapid response to wildfire, especially considering the amount of WUI in the project area and the single road access to these areas.

We would like the District to carefully consider the following three factors when making a decision to decommission any road in the project area:

- a. Determination of any potential resource risk related to a road segment
- b. Determination of the access value provided by a road segment
- c. Determination of whether the resource risk outweighs the access value (for timber management and other resource needs)

We believe that only those road segments where resource risk outweighs access value should be considered for decommissioning.

10. As the Forest moves to implementation of the Project and we are dealing with the issue of economic feasibility, it is important to recognize that not only are some of the stands heavy to dead lodgepole and low value material, but the cost of logging could be high.

AFRC would like the Forest to understand that the primary issues affecting the ability of our members to feasibly deliver logs to their mills are firm operating restrictions. As stated above, we understand that the Forest Service must take necessary precautions to protect their resources; however, we believe that in many cases there are conditions that exist on the ground that are not in step with many of the restrictions described in Forest Service EA's and contracts (i.e. dry conditions during wet season, wet conditions during

dry season). We would like the Forest Service to shift their methods for protecting resources from that of firm prescriptive restrictions to one that focuses on descriptive end-results; in other words, describe what you would like the end result to be rather than prescribing how to get there. There are a variety of operators that work in the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest market area with a variety of skills and equipment. Developing an EA and contract that firmly describes how any given unit shall be logged may inherently limit the abilities of certain operators. For example, restricting certain types of ground-based equipment rather than describing what condition the soils should be at the end of the contract period unnecessarily limits the ability of certain operators to complete a sale in an appropriate manner with the proper and cautious use of their equipment. To address this issue, we would like to see flexibility in the EA and contract to allow a variety of equipment to the sale areas. We feel that there are several ways to properly harvest any piece of ground, and certain restrictive language can limit some potential operators. Though some of the proposal area is planned for cable harvest, there are opportunities to use certain ground equipment such as feller-bunchers and processors in the units to make cable yarding more efficient. We would like the Forest to consider the use of ground-based equipment to operate on slopes up to 45%. Allowing the use of processors and feller-bunchers throughout these units can greatly increase its economic viability, and in some cases decrease disturbance by decreasing the amount of cable corridors, reduce damage to the residual stand and provide a more even distribution of woody debris following harvest. Tethered-assist equipment is also becoming a more viable and available option for felling and yarding on steep slopes. This equipment has shown to contribute little additional ground disturbance when compared to traditional cable systems. Again, we appreciate that helicopter yarding on 539 acres has been removed from the Project. Please prepare your NEPA analysis documents in a manner that will facilitate these options.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments during the Middleman Project Objection Period. I look forward to having follow-up discussions with the District and Forest regarding the issues we discussed above.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Tom Partin", with a stylized, flowing script.

Tom Partin
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