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Objection Comments  
Project - Gold Butterfly timber sale (G-B)  
Stevensville Ranger District – Bitterroot National Forest  
Forest Supervisor – Matt Anderson

Pursuant to 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and C, this is an objection to the SEIS and Draft Record of Decision for the Gold Butterfly Project, on the Stevensville Ranger District, Bitterroot National Forest (BNF).

I have submitted comments for every NEPA comment opportunity as well as an alternative development workshop and an objection. I hereby incorporate by reference all my previous comments and objection.

I still hold all the issues and remedies made in my previous comments and Objection which were not meaningfully addressed. I believe the most critical inadequately addressed issue is:

### **Climate change**

Sec. 2 Purposes of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act requires projects implemented by the Forest Service to: (C) to “enhance productivity and carbon sequestration”.

The G-B project would immediately and for a long time to come diminish the productivity of the forest and reduce carbon sequestration. The G-B project is not eligible to qualify as HFRA.

Roads reduce forest productivity effectively permanently. Other ground disturbing activities take many decades to recover full productivity due to soil compaction, weed introduction and erosion.

Page C-16 of the Gold Butterfly FEIS Appendices – “Estimates of carbon emissions related to log hauling were calculated and included in project file” (PF-CLIMATE-002). It states, “This estimate only covers log truck traffic, which accounts for the bulk of fossil fuel greenhouse gas emissions.”

This statement ignores the carbon emissions from forest disturbance caused by the logging itself and so grossly underestimates impacts to climate change.

The specialist reports state:

“Thus, even though some management actions may in the near-term reduce total carbon stored below current levels, in the long-term they maintain the overall capacity of these stands to sequester carbon, while also contributing other multiple-use goods and services (Reinhardt and Holsinger 2010)”. (p. 5 Climate 001)

“Long term” is not what it used to be. This conclusion does not consider that the climate has and will continue to quickly change fundamental aspects of growing even trees, let alone a forest. The near-term

reduction of sequestration capacity will not recover as surely as the way it might have in previous years. It is drier and warmer. Regen failures are readily apparent and will increase.

The conclusion also does not consider highly significant subsoil carbon emissions and loss of sequestration caused by logging and ground disturbance such as road building, temporary and permanent.

The damaging impacts of climate change will increasingly exacerbate nearly all the other forested watershed issues. Water quantity and quality problems will magnify more quickly than in the past.

Logging is a major contributor to climate change due to quickly increasing total carbon emissions, above and below ground level, as well as interruption of and removal of sequestered carbon. Also, it is becoming increasingly apparent and backed up by best available science, that regen after fire and timber sales is not proceeding the way it used to here on the BNF. Regen failures are accumulating. The BNF needs to account for this through analysis and disclosure in NEPA documents.

While Ethiopians set a new world record for planting millions of trees to help forestall climate change, the BNF is proposing to cut down many thousands of trees, some several centuries old. Protecting far off Amazon forests while increasing logging in our backyards does not make sense. We will not get old growth and large trees back on the BNF the way things are going. Cutting old growth and large trees at this time amounts to mining old growth; it is not sustainable.

The lack of analysis and selective disclosure of impacts to climate change from the G-B timber sale really is criminally negligent given clearly obvious and measurable existing climate change circumstances.

**Remedy:** Withdraw the dROD and implement an analysis of climate change impacts from this timber sale commensurate with the critical importance of this issue. Impacts involving emission of CO<sub>2</sub> as well as loss of sequestration of C, both above and below the ground need to be analyzed and mitigated. Any logging should not cut large trees, over 8" diameter, and should not include regeneration logging or forest openings that dry out the ground, contributing to regen failures and forest fires.

### **Project specific amendments issue**

The G-B project would continue serial overuse of several "project specific amendments".

The G-B project supplemental draft ROD makes changes to the G-B ROD and G-B SEIS, including what is described in: [https://www.fs.usda.gov/nfs/11558/www/nepa/106518\\_FSPLT3\\_5743093.pdf](https://www.fs.usda.gov/nfs/11558/www/nepa/106518_FSPLT3_5743093.pdf) - Appendix B – Forest Plan Amendment

The term "Forest Plan Amendment" is a misleading use of the singular form. There are three Forest Plan standards that are proposed to be amended: Elk Habitat Effectiveness, thermal cover and old growth.

Appendix B says, "As an amendment that applies to only this project, it is not considered a significant change to the plan for purposes of the NFMA."

I believe the serial use of amendments that cumulatively cover a large area is significant to the Forest Plan for purposes of NFMA. The addition of this large straw makes it a significant change to the plan.

App B says, “The amendment applies to the Gold Butterfly project activities only. It does not apply to future project activities or other proposed activities elsewhere on the forest. The project area is 55,147 acres, which is approximately 3 percent of the Bitterroot National Forest.”

The Gold Butterfly project is the largest proposed on the BNF in about 20 years making it significant just by itself, but it is only a fraction of the serial “project specific” amendments to the BNF Forest Plan that have been implemented across the Forest.

App B mentions “repeated project-specific amendments”. While the G-B EIS does not disclose relevant information regarding “repeated project specific amendments”, nearly every BNF timber sale contains these same exemptions from the rules, so we can assume there will be more.

The chart below shows repeated, routine, serial use of “project specific” amendments.

Project	Acres	Site-specific Amendments	District	Year
Burned Area Recovery Project	unknown	Snag Retention, EHE in Laird Creek, Thermal Cover in Skalkaho Rye	Darby, Sula, West Fork	2001
Slate/Hughes Watershed Restoration and Travel Management	unknown	EHE	West Fork	2002
Middle East Fork Hazardous Fuels Project	25,800	CWD, Snag Retention, Thermal Cover, Unsuitable Lands	Sula	2006
Hackey Claremont Fuels Reduction	3,131	EHE CWD	Stevensville	2008
Trapper Bunkhouse Land Stewardship Project	23,140	EHE CWD Thermal Cover	Darby	2008
Lower West Fork Project	38,400	EHE CWD Thermal Cover	West Fork	2010
Larry Bass Project	1,200	Thermal Cover CWD	Stevensville	2012
Three Saddle Vegetation Management	6,300	EHE CWD	Stevensville	2013
Darby Lumber Lands Watershed Improvement Travel Management Project	28,758	EHE	Darby	2015
Meadow Vapor	11,090	EHE CWD Thermal Cover	Sula	2017
Darby Lumber Lands Phase 2	27,453	EHE Thermal Cover	Darby	2018
Gold Butterfly	55,147	EHE Thermal Cover OG	Stevensville	2018 2022
Westside Vegetation Treatment	5,700	EHE CWD Visual Quality	Darby	2018
Mud Creek	48,486	EHE CWD Elk Thermal cover and road density OG	West Fork	2021 2022

The serial use of project specific amendments causes a “significant change” to the Forest Plan as well as to the forest. Individual project specific amendments in conjunction with previous and future project-specific amendments, effectively invalidate F P Standards as seen with the EHE example below.

Accounting for cumulative effects should be done for all project specific amendments.

Replacement standards and alternatives for the G-B project that do not require project specific amendments should be analyzed and disclosed.

The agency’s decision to make project-specific amendments was arbitrary and capricious because the Forest Service failed to explain what conditions within the project area supported selection of a project-

specific amendment over a forest-wide amendment. A project-specific amendment must be based on unusual or unique aspects of the site itself when compared to the forest generally.

The BNF has announced it is in process of developing forest-wide Forest Plan amendments for EHE, CWD, OG and snag retention. Why not wait for results of that analysis to determine if “an amendment that applies to only this project, [it] is not considered a significant change to the plan for purposes of the NFMA.”? Recovery from actions based on an uninformed bad decision could take decades.

#### EHE amendment

The SEIS, p.D-5, states: “Cumulative Impact of Elk Habitat Effectiveness and Habitat Objectives Amendment, There have been 10 project-specific amendments (one more anticipated with reasonably foreseeable projects (Darby Lumber Lands II)) related to EHE since the Forest Plan was approved in 1987.” Unlike SEIS sketchy analysis and disclosure of cumulative effects from a change in o.g. standards, there is no analysis or disclosure of reasonably foreseeable need for future amendments to EHE or thermal cover standards in spite of the acknowledgment that there is “non-compliance with this [EHE] standard in 110 drainages (out of 386 drainages across the forest).” (p.D-4)

It appears that the BNF has already used project specific EHE amendments on at least 12 projects (see EHE list below), totaling more than 200,000 acres, not counting the 55,000 acre G-B project. Addition of the proposed EHE amendment for the Gold-Butterfly project would increase the total to over 250,000 acres. This is significant. For comparison, the BNF’s total suitable timberland is 389,820 acres (FP, p. III-2). The SEIS does not appear to disclose reasonably foreseeable use of EHE amendments but anticipates that the 143,983 acre Bitterroot Front project will require a project specific old growth amendment. Addition of a Bitterroot Front acreage EHE project specific amendments would result in a total over 390,000 acres, an area larger than the total BNF suitable timberland.

G-B supplemental draft ROD, app B, p.2, states, “Forest-wide standard for Elk Habitat Effectiveness (Forest Plan pp. II-21, F.1.e.(14)): Manage roads through the Travel Plan process to attain or maintain 50 percent or higher elk habitat effectiveness (Lyon, 1983) in currently roaded third order drainages. Drainages where more than 25 percent of roads are in place are considered roaded. Maintain 60 percent or higher elk habitat effectiveness in drainages where less than 25 percent of the roads have been built.”

The meaning of this standard presumes there is some final road building plan and road placement map. Without such, the meaning of “25 percent” seems arbitrary. Twenty five percent of what? No such map or plan is disclosed in the G-B EIS, so it is impossible to determine what the standard actually requires, what the existing condition is, or how far out of compliance the amendment would put us.

App B says, “The purpose of the plan standards that are being suspended in this plan amendment is to constrain management actions that may preclude achievement of forest-wide and management area goals and objectives for elk and big game habitat. Despite repeated project-specific amendments suspending these standards, the Forest Plan objective of maintaining the current (1987) level of big-game hunting opportunities has been achieved. The number of hunters, as well as the number of elk, continues to increase, and the general hunting season has remained at five weeks.”

What impacts to big game other than elk result from reducing the protection of “big game habitat”? Such information deserves analysis and disclosure.

The Forest Service may possibly show a maintenance of elk populations; the Plan requires maintenance of habitat and thermal cover.

How much relevance do elk numbers and hunter numbers have in assessing the “objective of maintaining the current (1987) level of big-game hunting opportunities”? The elk have learned to migrate in a timely way, to nearby large private ranches that are not open to most hunters. When elk habitat effectiveness is reduced on public land the phenomenon of elk migrating to private secure habitat increases, thereby reducing hunting opportunities. The metrics used for assessing big game hunting opportunity are not sufficient, leaving achievement of the objective unknown and essentially unanalyzed. A map of nearby private elk refugia in relation to the project area and out of compliance BNF third order drainages would help to be able to understand the dynamic situation.

#### Thermal cover amendment

“There have been 7 project-specific amendments related to thermal and hiding cover.” (SEIS, p. D-5) The BNF project specific amendments to the Elk Thermal Cover standard have been used already on at least 127,083 acres, not including the large BAR project or proposed 55,147 acres of the G-B project. Thermal cover is getting whittled away across a wide area due to serial use of project specific thermal cover exemptions. It takes a long time, many generations of elk, to grow thermal cover. This is a significant impact to habitat for the elk and for the Plan objectives. We need a map showing the cumulative use of project specific suspension of thermal cover protections required by the Forest Plan.

#### Old Growth amendment

According to Ranger Steve Brown, “the Forest went on to use ‘Green, et al’ for the next 26 years but did not bother to amend the Forest Plan to say that Green, et al, would be used to define old growth.” (Bitterroot Star, 9/1/20) This means the BNF Forest Plan old growth standard has been amended de facto without notice for every timber sale project for 26 years.

The existing BNF Forest Plan old growth standards include: (dROD, App B, p.3)

“Management Area 1 (chapter Wildlife and Fish) (2) Old growth stands should be 40 acres and larger, distributed over the management area. About 3 percent of Management Area 1 suitable timberland, in each third order drainage will be maintained in old growth. Provide 40-acre stands of old growth by coordinating management activities in this area with activities in adjacent management areas and with intermingled riparian and unsuitable management areas (USDA, 1979).

Management Area 2 (chapter Wildlife and Fish) (2) Old growth stands should be 40 acres and larger, distributed over the management area. About 8 percent of the Management Area 2 suitable timberland, in each third order drainage, will be maintained in old growth. Provide 40-acre stands of old growth by coordinating management activities in this area with activities in adjacent management areas and intermingled riparian and unsuitable areas (USDA, 1979).

Management Area 3a (chapter Wildlife and Fish) (2) Old growth units should be 40 acres and larger, distributed over the management area. About 8 percent of the Management Area 3a suitable timberland in each third order drainage will be maintained in old growth. Provide 40-acre stands of old growth by coordinating management activities in this area with activities in adjacent management areas especially Management Area 3b, riparian areas (USDA, 1979).

Regarding the proposed old growth standard, the Final SEIS (December 16, 2021) states:

“Stand size is not identified in Green et al. as a driving factor in whether a stand should be classified as old growth because even small patch sizes provide important ecological values and increase ecosystem diversity. However, the required percentage of old growth to be maintained within each Management Area would not be modified.” (p. 4) (bold added) While recognition of the value of even small patches of old growth is commendable, this statement is not accurate.

The dROD states: “The management area standards for management areas 1, 2, and 3a, that require a minimum old growth stand size of 40 acres will be modified as follows:

“Management Area 1/2/3a (chapter Wildlife and Fish) (2) Old growth stands should be 40 acres and larger, distributed over the management area. About 3 percent of Management Area 1/2/3a suitable timberland, in each third order drainage will be maintained in old growth. Vegetation management activities should provide 40-acre stands of old growth by coordinating management activities in this area with activities in adjacent management areas and with intermingled riparian and unsuitable management areas (USDA, 1979). (Strikethrough text to be removed, underlined text to be added.)”

Thus, despite that SEIS assurance that it would not be modified the dROD old growth amendment proposes to change the requirement to retain a minimum 8% old growth in MA 2 and 3 and reduces it to 3%. This change is done without further analysis.

The proposed amendment also eliminates the distribution requirement from, “over the management area” without disclosing the impact of doing that action.

This is a significant change, but the resulting impacts are not disclosed in plain language or on a map. A thorough analysis of a G-B project no action alternative could provide some understanding of the significance of the changes proposed.

The proposed change strikes out the size of old growth stands from a minimum of “40 acres distributed over the MA” and allows for smaller o.g stands on the MA to be cobbled together in bits and pieces to count as o.g. stands. Where is the science to show that approach will maintain ecological function of old growth? The role of such habitat is too important to risk without thorough analysis and disclosure.

App B: “Effective date (§ 219.17(a)(3): This forest plan amendment will be effective immediately after the decision is signed pursuant to 36 CFR 219.17(a)(3)”

The effective date discloses when it begins, but when will it end? If the answer is when the project ends, how is that determined? What is the maximum time this amendment might suspend the rules in the project area?

#### Overuse of Project Specific amendments in general

ROD App B: “When a plan amendment is made together with, and only applies to, a project or activity decision, the analysis prepared for the project or activity may serve as the documentation of the preliminary identification of the need to change the plan (§ 219.13(b)(1)).” (p.3)

It is way past time to analyze and disclose cumulative impacts of the serial use of various project specific forest plan amendments and prepare Forest Plan amendments. The BNF has announced it is in the process of developing forest-wide Forest Plan amendments. It may take some time to prepare the

amendments, but that would be nothing compared to the time required to recover from a bad, uninformed Decision, replace old growth stands, elk thermal cover or EHE.

### **Relief/remedy**

Proposed use of the project specific amendments involved should be withdrawn until forest-wide Forest Plan amendments are developed.

A G-B project EIS alternative that does not require project specific amendments should be developed.

A more thorough no-action alternative analysis, including maps, should be implemented and disclosed in an EIS.

### **WUI issues**

“This project is proposed under Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA; 16 USC §6591) authority.” (G-B scoping letter)

“Seventy-six percent of treated acres would occur within the Wildland-Urban Interface.” (G-B dROD, p.6)

The dROD discloses that a change was made to the WUI map and definition used for the G-B project:

[https://www.fs.usda.gov/nfs/11558/www/nepa/106518\\_FSPLT3\\_5743094.pdf](https://www.fs.usda.gov/nfs/11558/www/nepa/106518_FSPLT3_5743094.pdf)

Gold Butterfly Project – draft Record of Decision Appendix C WUI: Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) “The Gold Butterfly Project analysis initially used a previous version of the CWPP and I have decided to utilize the most current information available to use from our county and state partners. This new information remains within the scope and range of effects considered in the original analysis. This document, the 2009 CWPP map, was reviewed and incorporated by reference into the 2017 Ravalli Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plan and is the most current text describing the authoritative layer by the county and state. The CWPP map can be found on page 5 in Appendix E of the Bitterroot Community Wildfire Protection Plan Update, <https://ravalli.us/507/Document-Library>. This plan also reflects on how the county and others developed the maps and how their at-risk communities and WUI is defined in the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA). For the purposes of the CWPP, the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) is defined as the zone where structures or other human development meets to intermingle with undeveloped wildland or vegetative fuels. The width of the zone is determined on a site-specific basis to protect values at risk from wildland fire. The Wildland-Urban Interface has been identified by the Bitterroot Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) on the Bitterroot National Forest as 1 to 1 1/2 mile deep along the forest boundary.”

HFRA, the relevant federal law, defines a “wildland-urban interface” as:

(A) an area within or adjacent to an at-risk community that is identified in recommendations to the Secretary in a community wildfire protection plan; or

(B) in the case of any area for which a community wildfire protection plan is not in effect –

(i) an area extending ½-mile from the boundary of an at-risk community;

(ii) an area within 1 ½ miles of the boundary of an at-risk community, including any land that –

(I) has a sustained slope that creates the potential for wildfire behavior endangering the at-risk community;

(II) has a geographic feature that aids in creating an effective fire break, such as a road or ridge top; or  
(III) is in condition class 3, as documented by the Secretary in the project-specific environmental analysis; and

(iii) an area that is adjacent to an evacuation route for an at-risk community that the Secretary determines, in cooperation with the at-risk community, requires hazardous fuel reduction to provide safer evacuation from the at-risk community.”

Ravalli County CWPP describes the WUI as: “For the purposes of the CWPP, the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) is defined as the zone where structures or other human development meets to intermingle with undeveloped wildland or vegetative fuels.”

Apparently, simply the presence of any structure at any distance from “vegetative fuels” or “wildland” defines the WUI in Ravalli County. The BNF adopts this definition without analysis, opportunity for public comment or judicial review as a basis for justifying the largest timber sale in decades. And as a qualification for HFRA tax money access.

The Wildland-Urban Interface has been identified by the Ravalli County Bitterroot Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) on the Bitterroot National Forest as 1 to 1.5 mile deep along the forest boundary. The blanket inclusion of 1 to 1.5 miles is arbitrary and without scientific basis.

The CWPP states, “At-Risk Ravalli County communities include: Florence, Stevensville, Victor, Pinesdale, Corvallis, Hamilton, Darby, West Fork, Sula, and other areas where numerous residents live in the Wildland Urban Interface in Ravalli County that meet the above mentioned criteria.” (G-B DEIS, p.2)

An alternative HFRA definition of the interface community emphasizes a population density of 250 or more people per square mile.

#### “Category 2. Intermix Community

The Intermix Community exists where structures are scattered throughout a wildland area. There is no clear line of demarcation; wildland fuels are continuous outside of and within the developed area. The development density in the intermix ranges from structures very close together to one structure per 40 acres. Fire protection districts funded by various taxing authorities normally provide life and property fire protection and may also have wildland fire protection responsibilities.”

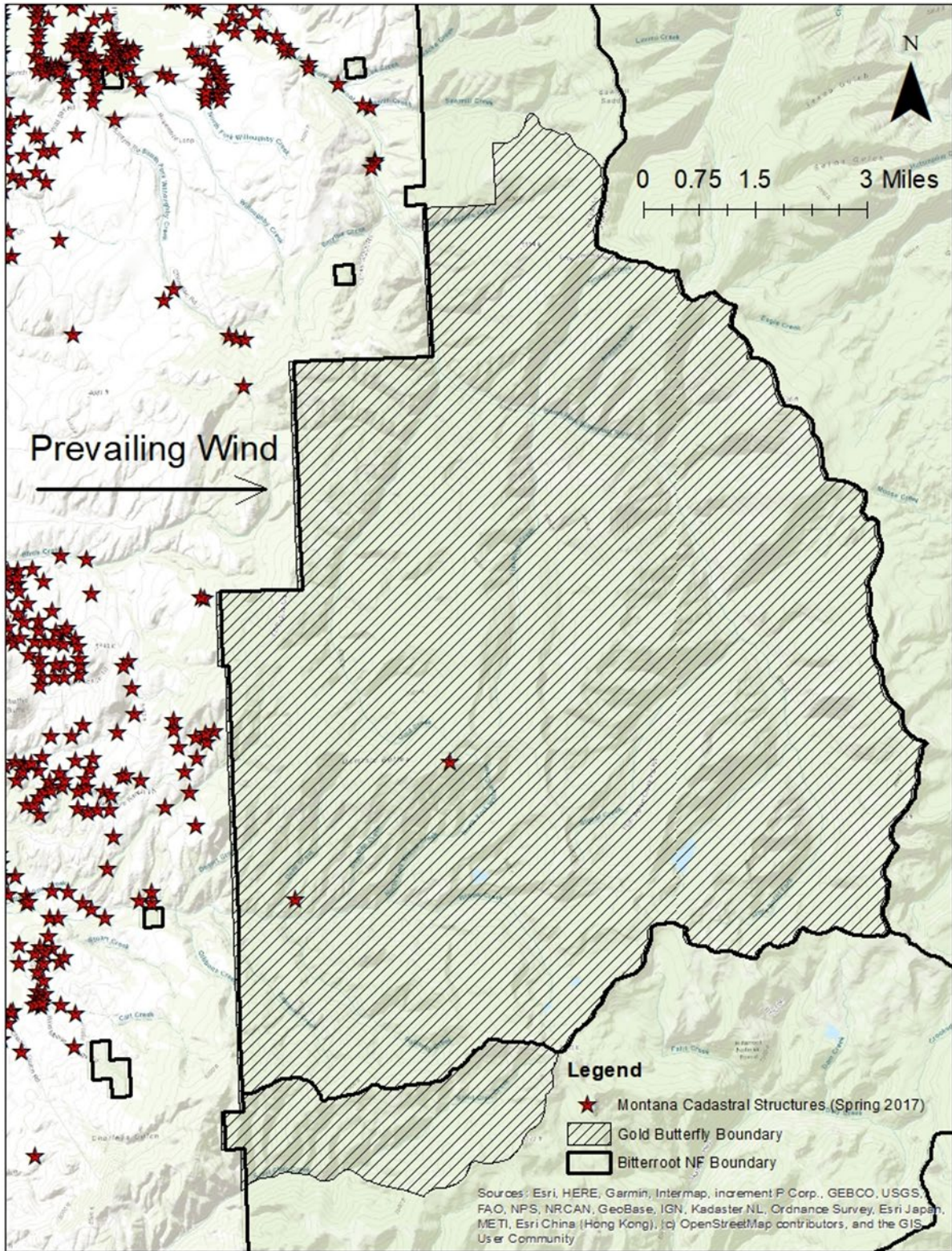
An alternative definition of intermix community emphasizes a population density of between 28-250 people per square mile.

#### “Category 3. Occluded Community

The Occluded Community generally exists in a situation, often within a city, where structures abut an island of wildland fuels (e.g., park or open space). There is a clear line of demarcation between structures and wildland fuels. The development density for an occluded community is usually similar to those found in the interface community, but the occluded area is usually less than 1,000 acres in size. Fire protection is normally provided by local government fire departments.”

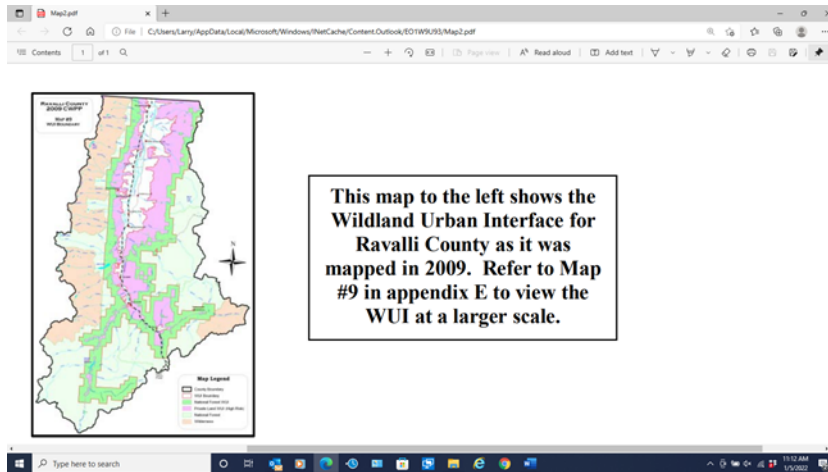
A very small portion, if any, of the G-B project area would meet the HFRA definitions of communities at risk. The structures near the project area do not fall within the communities at risk listed in the CWPP. They are generally quite far from the BNF boundary.





The nearest structures are upwind and downhill of the logging dramatically reducing the already low chance that wildfire would ever reach that particular part of the project area.

The G-B dROD does not appear to display the WUI map used for project analysis. The BNF puts the burden of finding the CWPP WUI map onto the public, requiring computer access and several step navigation of the Ravalli County website to view this key piece of information.



Simply adopting the CWPP definition and map of the WUI is not sufficient for FS NEPA purposes. Simply saying that the project is within the wildland-urban interface, without more, does not make it so.

What are the vegetative conditions on adjacent private lands and have the landowners done anything to mitigate fire moving from the public forest? Why waste taxpayer money logging public forest if the private forest near the structures hasn't been similarly treated?

#### **Relief/remedy:**

Withdraw the G-B dROD.

The CWPP and WUI map should be subject to a normal FS NEPA process, including impacts analysis, disclosure of legal standards and public review.

A map displaying both the Ravalli County CWPP WUI map and the BNF treated acres should be included in the dROD. Structure locations should be shown as well as distinction between residential and non-residential structures. Using a google earth photo as a base for such a map could help provide other important information like vegetation, slope and exposure.