

Norton, Michelle - FS, HAMILTON, MT

From: Laura Merrill <[REDACTED]>
Sent: Thursday, May 19, 2022 9:31 PM
To: FS-comments-northern-bitterroot-stevensville
Subject: [External Email]Bitterroot Front Project

[External Email]

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Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this proposed project.

The project describes lofty desired outcomes, boiling down to 1: accomplishing fuel reduction (mitigating the risk of harmful wildfires) while 2: improving forest resiliency. I support both of these objectives, planned with thoughtful consideration, public participation, and full transparency. I sincerely hope that will be achieved.

The scale of this project is huge, affecting a wide range from north to south, varying elevation, topography, geology, soil type and habitat type, small and large mammal species, and so on. Any proposed "forest treatments" along the east face of our Bitterroot Mountains should therefore be site specific, taking into account the diversity of the forest itself. Retaining/enhancing biodiversity should be a high priority, while protecting our visual corridor. I am concerned that project activities lumped together such as timber sales, scenery management, and watershed improvement are too generalized and not very compatible. Since I don't believe there is a "do nothing" forest management alternative in our future, I very much don't want to see the opposite end of alternatives be implemented, either. I would describe that as a heavy-handed, huge commercial timber harvest operation that is planned under the guise of reducing wildfire risk, without consideration of other forest resources and potential negative environmental impacts.

In planning the Bitterroot Front Project, I would like to see no new roads built. There are so many out there already that aren't maintained, and the agency has admitted it doesn't have the resources to keep up. It's a challenge just getting to the Bear Creek Trailhead! We should be decommissioning existing roads and not defragmenting the forest more than it already is.

No new permanent bridges to be constructed.

I don't want to see any cutting in Old Growth Stands (and not by the new definition).

Treatment areas should utilize natural fire breaks, and those fire scars that already exist on the landscape. Create fire breaks that enhance/increase those areas already treated on private lands in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). Offer cooperation of some kind with private landowners adjacent to public lands for access. This would help reduce the need for new roads in areas that are difficult to get to, or are designated roadless areas. Accessibility into those areas could achieve removal/treatment of smaller diameter trees/stands or diseased stands that have no commercial value, but also help to mitigate the spread of devastating wildfires. Hand treatment/piling/burning could be accomplished and avoid cutting in more mature stands and Old Growth Stands.

Has any consideration been given to warming temperatures and decreasing moisture levels in our region and BNF in the future? We should be thinking about retaining snow loads and moisture levels for as long as possible to reduce the threat of wildfire and promote watershed resilience. How does the BNF address the larger impacts of removing trees that are absorbing carbon dioxide without replacing or even improving that ecological service?

I look forward to seeing what comes out of extensive planning and public participation when it comes to furthering the Bitterroot Front Project conversation with BNF and the public.

Thank you,

Laura Merrill

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