

AUGUST 2, 2024

District Ranger Mike Thom
Gardiner Ranger District
Custer Gallatin National Forest
P.O. Box 5
Gardiner, MT 59030

Dear Ranger Thom;

Thank you for this opportunity to comment. Please accept these comments from me on behalf of the Alliance for the Wild Rockies, Native Ecosystems Council, Center for Biological Diversity, and Council on Fish and Wildlife on the proposed Cooke City Fuels Reduction and Forest Health Project.

We believe because of the size of the project and the cumulative effects of past current and future logging by the Forest Service and private logging and mining in the area the Forest Service must complete a full environmental impact statement (EIS) for this Project. The project area also adjoins Yellowstone National

Park. The scope of the Project will likely have a significant individual and cumulative impact on the environment. Alliance has reviewed the statutory and regulatory requirements governing National Forest Management projects, as well as the relevant case law, and compiled a check- list of issues that must be included in the EIS for he Project in order for the Forest Service's analysis to comply with the law. Following the list of necessary elements, Alliance has also included a general narrative discussion on possible impacts of the Project.

I. NECESSARY ELEMENTS FOR

PROJECT EIS or for an EA if you refuse to write an EIS:

A. Please disclose all Custer-Gallatin National Forest Plan requirements for logging/burning projects and explain how the Project complies with them.

B. Will this project comply with forest plan big game hiding cover standards?

C. Disclose the acreages of past, current, and reasonably foreseeable logging, grazing, and road building activities within the Project area.

D. Solicit and disclose comments from the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks regarding the impact of the Project on wildlife habitat.

E. Solicit and disclose comments from the Montana Department of Environmental Quality regarding the impact of the Project on water quality.

F. Disclose the biological assessment for the candidate, threatened, or endangered species with potential and/or actual habitat in the Project area.

G. Disclose the biological evaluation for the sensitive and management indicator species.

with potential and/or actual habitat in the Project area;

H. Disclose the snag densities in the Project area, and the method used to determine those densities.

I. Disclose the current, during-project, and post-project road densities in the Project area.

J. Disclose the Custer-Gallatin National Forest's record of compliance with state best management practices regarding stream sedimentation from ground-disturbing management activities.

K. Disclose the Custer-Gallatin National Forest's record of compliance with its monitoring requirements as set forth in its Forest Plan.

L. Disclose the Custer-Gallatin National Forest's record of compliance with the additional monitoring requirements set forth in previous DN/FONSI and RODs on the Custer-Gallatin National Forest.

M. Disclose the results of the field surveys for threatened, endangered, sensitive, and rare plants in each of the proposed units.

N. Please formally consult with the US FWS on the impacts of this project on candidate, threatened, or endangered species and plants.

O. Please consult with the US FWS on the impacts of this project on lynx critical habitat and potential lynx critical habitat; (The US District Court just ordered the US FWS to redo their designation of lynx critical based on where lynx were in 2000 when lynx were listed.

P. Will this Project exacerbate existing noxious weed infestations and start new infestations?

Q. Do unlogged old growth forest store more carbon than the wood products that would be removed from the same forest in a logging operation?

R. What is the cumulative effect of National Forest logging on U.S. carbon stores? How many acres of National Forest lands are logged every year? How much carbon is lost by that logging?

S. Is this Project consistent with “research recommendations (Krankina and Harmon 2006) for protecting carbon gains against the potential impacts of future climate change? That study recommends “[i]ncreasing or maintaining the forest area by avoiding de-forestation,” and states that “protecting forest from logging or clearing offer immediate benefits via prevented emissions.” That study also states that “[w]hen the initial condition of land is a productive old-growth forest, the conversion to for-

est plantations with a short harvest rotation can have the opposite effect lasting for many decades” The study does state that thinning may have a beneficial effect to stabilize the forest and avoid stand-replacing wildfire, but the study never defines thinning. In this Project, where much of the logging is clear-cutting and includes removing large trees without any diameter limit, and where the removal of small diameter surface and ladder fuels is an unfunded mandate to the tune of over \$3 million dollars, it is dubious whether the prescriptions are the same type of “thinning” envisioned in Krankina and Harmon (2006).

T. Please list each visual quality standard that applies to each unit and disclose whether each unit meets its respective visual quality standard. A failure to comply with visual quality Forest Plan standards violates NFMA.

U. For the visual quality standard analysis please define “ground vegetation,” i.e. what age are the trees, “reestablishes,” “short-term,” “longer term,” and “revegetate.”

V. Please disclose whether you have conducted surveys in the Project area for this Project or wolverines, whitebark pine, monarch butterflies, grizzly bears, pine martins, northern goshawk and lynx as required by the Forest Plan and or the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

W. Please disclose how often the Project area has been surveyed for wolverines, pine martins, grizzly bears, monarch butterflies, northern goshawks, and lynx.

X. Would the habitat be better for wolverines, grizzly bears, pine martins, monarch butterflies, whitebark pine, northern goshawks, and lynx if roads were removed in the Project area?

Y. What is the U.S. FWS position on the impacts of this Project on wolverines, pine martins, grizzly bears, monarch butterflies,

northern goshawks, whitebark pine, and lynx? Have you conducted ESA consultation?

Z. Please provide us with the full BA for the wolverines, pine martins, grizzly bears, monarch butterflies, Yellowstone cutthroat trout, northern goshawks, and lynx.

AA. What is wrong with uniform forest conditions?

BB. Has the beetle kill contributed to a diverse landscape?

CC. Why are you trying to exclude stand replacement fires when these fires help aspen and whitebark pine?

DD. Please disclose what is the best available science for restoration of whitebark pine.

EE. Disclose the level of current noxious weed infestations in the Project area and the cause of those infestations;

FF. Disclose the impact of the Project on noxious weed infestations and native plant communities.

GG. Disclose the amount of detrimental soil disturbance that currently exists in each proposed unit from previous logging and grazing activities.

HH. Disclose the expected amount of detrimental soil disturbance in each unit after ground disturbance and prior to any proposed mitigation/remediation.

II. Disclose the expected amount of detrimental soil disturbance in each unit after proposed mitigation/remediation.

JJ. Disclose the analytical data that supports proposed soil mitigation/ remediation measures.

KK. Disclose the timeline for implementation.

LL. Disclose the funding source for non-commercial activities proposed.

MM. Disclose the current level of old growth forest in each third order drainage in the Project area.

NN. Disclose the method used to quantify old growth forest acreages and its rate of error based upon field review of its predictions.

OO. Disclose the historic levels of mature and old growth forest in the Project area.

PP. Disclose the level of mature and old growth forest necessary to sustain viable populations of dependent wildlife species in the area.

QQ. Disclose the amount of mature and old growth forest that will remain after implementation.

RR. Please disclose the survey information and maps for the old growth forests in the project area and how you determined the forest qualified as old growth or now.

SS. Disclose the amount of current habitat for old growth and mature forest dependent species in the Project area.

TT. Disclose the amount of habitat for old growth and mature forest dependent species that will remain after Project implementation;

UU. Disclose the method used to model old growth and mature forest dependent wildlife habitat acreages and its rate of error based upon field review of its predictions.

VV. Disclose the amount of big game (moose and elk) hiding cover, winter range, and security currently available in the area.

WW. Disclose the amount of big game (moose and elk) hiding cover, winter range, and security during Project implementation.

XX. Disclose the amount of big game (moose and elk) hiding cover, winter range, and security after implementation.

YY. Disclose the method used to determine big game hiding cover, winter range, and security, and its rate of error as determined by field review.

ZZ. Disclose and address the concerns expressed by the ID Team in the draft Five-Year Review of the Forest Plan regarding the failure to monitor population trends of MIS, the inadequacy of the Forest Plan old growth standard, and the failure to compile data to establish a reliable inventory of sensitive species on the Forest.

AAA. Disclose the actions being taken to reduce fuels on private lands adjacent to the Project area and how those activities/or lack thereof will impact the efficacy of the activities proposed for this Project.

BBB. Disclose the efficacy of the proposed activities at reducing wildfire risk and severity in the Project area in the future, including a two-year, five- year, ten-year, and 20-year projection.

CCC. Disclose when and how the Custer Gallatin National Forest made the decision to suppress natural wildfire in the Project

area and replace natural fire with logging and pre-scribed burning;

DDD. Disclose the cumulative impacts on the Forest-wide level of the Custer Gallatin National Forest's policy decision to replace natural fire with logging and prescribed burning.

EEE. Disclose how Project complies with the Roadless Rule and please analysis how the project will impact the wilderness quality of the roadless lands; please find attached a copy of S. 1531, the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act which would designate all of the Roadless lands in the project are as Wilderness.

FFF. Disclose the impact of climate change on the efficacy of the proposed treatments.

GGG. Disclose the impact of the proposed project on the carbon storage potential of the area.

HHH. Disclose the baseline condition, and expected sedimentation during and after activities, for all streams in the area;

III. Disclose maps of the area that show the following elements:

1. Past, current, and reasonably foreseeable logging units in the Project area;

2. Past, current, and reasonably foreseeable grazing allotments in the Project area;

3. Density of human residences within 1.5 miles from the Project unit boundaries;

4. Hiding cover in the Project area according to the Forest Plan definition;

5. Old growth forest in the Project area; 6. Big game security areas;

7. Moose winter range;

The best available science, Christensen et al (1993), recommends elk habitat effectiveness of 70% in summer range and at least 50% in all other areas where elk are one of the primary resource considerations. According to Figure 1 in Christensen et al (1993), this equates to a maximum road density of approximately 0.7 mi/sq mi. in summer range and approximately 1.7 mi/sq mi. in all other areas.

Do any of the 6th Code watersheds in the Project area meet either of these road density thresholds? It appears the Project area as a whole also far exceeds these thresholds. Please disclose this type of Project level or watershed analysis on road density.

Christensen et al (1993) state that if an area is not meeting the 50% effectiveness threshold of 1.7 mi/sq mi, the agency should admit that the area is not being managed for elk: “Areas where habitat effectiveness is retained at lower than 50 percent must be recognized as making only minor contributions to elk

management goals. If habitat effectiveness is not important, don't fake it. Just admit up front that elk are not a consideration.” The Project EIS does not make this admission.

The Forest Service should provide an analysis of how much of the Project area, Project area watersheds, affected landscape areas, or affected Hunting Districts provide “elk security area[s]” as defined by the best available science, Christensen et al (1993) and Hillis et al (1991), to be comprised of contiguous 250 acre blocks of forested habitat 0.5 miles or more from open roads with these blocks encompassing 30% or more of the area.

Please provide a rational justification for the deviation from the Hillis security definition and numeric threshold that represent the best available science on elk security areas.

We believe that best available science shows that Commercial Logging does not reduce the threat of Forest Fires. What best available science supports the action alternatives?

Please find Schoennagel et al (2004) attached. Schoennagel states: “we are concerned that the model of historical fire effects and 20th-century fire suppression in dry ponderosa pine forests is being applied uncritically across all Rocky Mountain forests, including where it is inappropriate.

Schoennagel et al (2004) states: “High-elevation subalpine forests in the Rocky Mountains typify ecosystems that experience infrequent, high-severity crown fires []. . . The most extensive subalpine forest types are composed of Engelmann spruce (*Picea engelmannii*), subalpine fir (*Abies lasiocarpa*), and lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*), all thin-barked trees easily killed by fire. Extensive stand-replacing fires occurred historically at long intervals (i.e., one to many centuries) in subalpine forests, typically in association with infrequent high-pressure blocking systems that promote extremely dry regional climate patterns.”

Schoennagel et al (2004) states: “it is unlikely that the short period of fire exclusion has significantly altered the long fire intervals in subalpine forests. Furthermore, large, intense fires burning under dry conditions are very difficult, if not impossible, to suppress, and such fires account for the majority of area burned in subalpine forests.

Schoennagel et al (2004) states: “Moreover, there is no consistent relationship between time elapsed since the last fire and fuel abundance in subalpine forests, further undermining the idea that years of fire suppression have caused unnatural fuel buildup in this forest zone.”

Schoennagel et al (2004) states: “No evidence suggests that spruce–fir or lodgepole pine forests have experienced substantial shifts in stand structure over recent decades as a result of fire suppression. Overall, variation in climate rather than in fuels

appears to exert the largest influence on the size, timing, and severity of fires in subalpine forests []. We conclude that large, infrequent stand replacing fires are ‘business as usual’ in this forest type, not an artifact of fire suppression.”.

Schoennagel et al (2004) states: “Contrary to popular opinion, previous fire suppression, which was consistently effective from about 1950 through 1972, had only a minimal effect on the large fire event in 1988 []. Reconstruction of historical fires indicates that similar large, high-severity fires also occurred in the early 1700s []. Given the historical range of variability of fire regimes in high-elevation subalpine forests, fire behavior in Yellowstone during 1988, although severe, was neither unusual nor surprising.”

Schoennagel et al (2004)(emphasis added) states: “Mechanical fuel reduction in sub- alpine forests would not represent a restoration treatment but rather a departure from the natural range of variability in stand structure.”

Schoennagel et al (2004) states: “Given the behavior of fire in Yellowstone in 1988, fuel reduction projects probably will not substantially reduce the frequency, size, or severity of wildfires under extreme weather conditions.”

Schoennagel et al (2004) states: “The Yellow- stone fires in 1988 revealed that variation in fuel conditions, as measured by stand age and density, had only minimal influence on fire behavior. Therefore, we expect fuel- reduction treatments in high- elevation forests to be generally unsuccessful in reducing fire frequency, severity, and size, given the overriding importance of extreme climate in controlling fire regimes in this zone. Thinning also will not restore subalpine forests, because they were

dense historically and have not changed significantly in response to fire suppression. Thus, fuel- reduction efforts in most Rocky Mountain sub- alpine forests probably would not effectively mitigate the fire hazard, and these efforts may create new ecological problems by moving the forest structure outside the historic range of variability.”

Likewise, Brown et al (2004) states: “At higher elevations, forests of subalpine fir, Engelmann spruce, mountain hem- lock, and lodgepole or whitebark pine predominate. These forests also have long fire return intervals and contain a high proportion of fire sensitive trees. At periods averaging a few hundred years, extreme drought conditions would prime the- se forests for large, severe fires that would tend to set the forest back to an early successional stage, with a large carry- over of dead trees as a legacy of snags and logs in the regenerating forest natural ecological dynamics are largely preserved be- cause fire suppression has been effective for less than one natural fire cycle.

Thinning for restoration does not appear to be appropriate in these forests. Efforts to manipulate stand structures to reduce fire hazard will not only be of limited effectiveness but may also move systems away from pre-1850 conditions to the detriment of wildlife and water- sheds.” “Fuel levels may suggest a high fire ‘hazard’ under conventional assessments, but wildfire risk is typically low in these settings.”

Likewise, Graham et al (2004) states: “Most important, the fire behavior characteristics are strikingly different for cold (for example, lodgepole pine, Engelmann spruce, subalpine fir), moist (for example, western hemlock, western redcedar, western white pine), and dry forests. Cold and moist forests tend to have long fire- return intervals, but fires that do occur tend to be high- intensity, stand-replacing fires. Dry forests historically had short intervals between fires, but most important, the fires had low to moderate severity.”

According to Graham et al (2004), thinning may also increase the likelihood of wildfire ignition in the type of forests in this Project area: “The probability of ignition is strongly related to fine fuel moisture content, air temperature, the amount of shading of surface fuels, and the occurrence of an ignition source (human or lightning caused) There is generally a warmer, dryer microclimate in more open stands (fig. 9) compared to denser stands. Dense stands (canopy cover) tend to provide more shading of fuels, keeping relative humidity higher and air and fuel temperature lower than in more open stands. Thus, dense stands tend to maintain higher surface fuel moisture contents compared to more open stands. More open stands also tend to allow higher wind speeds that tend to dry fuels compared to dense stands. These factors may increase probability of ignition in some open canopy stands compared to dense canopy stands.”

A new study by Dominick A. DellaSala et. al. 2022 (attached) reviewed 1500 wildfires between 1984 and 2014 found that actively managed forests had the highest level of fire severity.

While those forests in protected areas burned, on average, had the lowest level of fire severity. In other words, the best way to reduce severe fires is to protect the land as wilderness, not “manage” it.

The Project will violate the NEPA if there are no valid snag surveys done for the project area both within and outside proposed harvest units.

The project will violate the NEPA if there are no valid surveys for old growth habitat within each project area, as identified by Green et al. 1992; old growth types need to be defined and quantified by timber types, such as lodgepole pine, Douglas-fir, mixed conifer, spruce, subalpine fir, and limber pine.

The project will likely violate the NEPA if the mitigation measures for MIS, sensitive species, and Montana Species of Concern (birds, mammals including bats) are not clearly defined, and demonstrated to be effective as per the current best science.

We request a careful analysis of the impacts to fisheries and water quality, including considerations of sedimentation, increases in peak flow, channel stability, risk of rain-on-snow events, and increases in stream water temperature. Please disclose the locations of seeps, springs, bogs and other sensitive wet areas, and the effects on these areas of the project activities. Where livestock are permitted to graze, we ask that you assess the present condition and continue to monitor the impacts of grazing activities upon vegetation diversity, soil compaction, stream bank stability and subsequent sedimentation. Livestock grazing occurs in the Project area and causes sediment impacts, trampled or destabilized banks, increased nutrient loads in

streams, and decreased density, diversity, and function of riparian vegetation that may lead to increased stream temperatures and further detrimental impacts to water quality.

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The project will likely violate the NEPA if the mitigation measures for MIS, sensitive species, and Montana Species of Concern (birds, mammals including bats) are not clearly defined, and demonstrated to be effective as per the current best science.

FAILURE TO REVIEW AND PROTECT CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES

Consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) must be completed prior to a decision being signed.

Any required protection measures provided from SHPO will be incorporated into my final decision.

Crucial to the preservation of the historical and cultural foundations of the nation, Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) and its implementing regulations, 36 C.F.R. Part 800 (PDF) (revised August 5, 2004) require Federal agencies to consider the effects of projects they carry out, approve, or fund on historic properties. Additionally, Federal agencies must provide the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) opportunity to comment on such projects prior to the agency's final decision.

A Federal project that requires review under Section 106 is defined as an "undertaking." An undertaking means a project, activity or program funded in whole or in part under the direct or indirect jurisdiction of a Federal agency, including those carried out by or on behalf of a Federal agency; those carried out with Federal financial assistance; and those requiring a Federal permit, license, or approval.

Section 110 of the NHPA

Added to the NHPA in 1992, Section 110 requires Federal agencies to emphasize the preservation and enhancement of cultural resources. Section 110 directs agencies to initiate measures necessary to direct their policies, plans, and programs in such a way that federally owned sites, structures, and objects of historical architectural or archaeological significance are preserved, restored, and maintained for the inspiration and benefit of the public. The agencies are also encouraged to institute (in consultation

with the ACHP) procedures to assure Federal plans and programs contribute to the preservation and enhancement of non-Federally owned sites, structures, and objects of historical, architectural, and archaeological significance. Has the MT SHPO received this survey? The cultural surveys need to be done before the NEPA and NHPA process can be completed, which has not occurred. The project must be approved by the SHPO and the public needs to be given a chance to comment on this.

Did the Forest Service conduct NEPA analysis (i.e. an EA or EIS) for the Fire Plan the Forest is using for this project? If you don't the project will be in violation of NEPA, NFMA, and the APA.

Please provide a map showing the WUI and the locations of all homes in comparison to the project area. Please demonstrate that your map of the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) complies with the definition of the WUI in the Healthy Forest Restoration Act.

Since the Forest Service did not conduct NEPA for the Fire Plan, please disclose the cumulative effects of Forest-wide implementation of the Fire Plan in the project EIS, or EA if you refuse to write an EIS, to avoid illegally tiering to a non- NEPA document. Specifically analyze the decision to prioritize mechanical, human-designed, somewhat arbitrary treatments as a replacement for naturally-occurring fire.

Did the Forest Service conduct ESA consultation for the Fire Plan?

Will the Forest Service be considering binding legal standards for noxious weeds in its revision of the Custer Gallatin Forest Plan?

How effective have BMPs been at stopping (i.e. preventing) new weed infestations from starting during logging and related road operations?

Is it true that new roads are the number one cause of new noxious weed infestations?

Why isn't the Forest Service considering a Forest Plan amendment in this Project to amend the Forest Plan to include binding legal standards that address noxious weeds?

Is it true that noxious weeds are one of the top threats to biodiversity on our National Forests?

How can the Forest Service be complying with NFMA's requirement to maintain biodiversity if it has no legal standards that address noxious weeds?

Will this Project address all Project area BMP needs, i.e. will the BMP road maintenance backlog and needs from this Project all be met by this Project?

The scoping notice was not clear if any MIS were found. What MIS did you find, how many and how did you look for these MIS?

How will the decreased elk security and thermal cover affect wolverines? Please formally consult with the US FWS on the impact of this project on wolverines. The U.S. District Court ordered the USFWS to reconsider if wolverines should be listed under ESA. Wolverinees need secure habitat in big game winter range.

Which wildlife species and ecosystem processes, if any, does the fire-proofing in the proposed project benefit? Which species and processes do fire-proofing harm?

What is your definition of healthier?

What evidence do you have that this logging will make the forest healthier for fish and wildlife? What about the role of mixed

severity and high severity fire – what are the benefits of those natural processes?

How have those processes (mixed and high severity fire) created the ecosystems we have today?

Over how many millennia have mixed and high severity fire have been occurring without human intervention?

What beneficial ecological roles do beetles play? You didn't answer this in violation of NEPA, NFMA and the APA.

Can the forest survive without beetles?

Will all WQLS streams in the project area have completed TMDLs before a decision is signed?

Will this project leave enough snags to follow the Forest Plan requirements and the requirements of sensitive old growth species such as flammulated owls and goshawks?

Will this Project exacerbate existing noxious weed infestations and start new infestations?

Do unlogged old growth forests store more carbon than the wood products that would be removed from the same forest in a logging operation?

What is the impact of the project on climate change?

What is the cumulative effect of National Forest logging on U.S. carbon stores? How many acres of National Forest lands are logged every year? How much carbon is lost by that logging?

Is this Project consistent with “research recommendations (Krankina and Harmon 2006) for protecting carbon gains against the potential impacts of future climate change? That study recommends “[i]ncreasing or maintaining the forest area by avoiding deforestation,” and states that “protecting forest from logging or clearing offer immediate benefits via prevented emissions.”

Please list each visual quality standard that applies to each unit and disclose whether each unit meets its respective visual quality standard.

Please disclose whether you have conducted surveys in the Project area for this Project for whitebark pine, wolverines, pine martins, northern goshawk and lynx, as required by the Forest Plan.

Please disclose the last time the Project area was surveyed for whitebark pine, wolverines, pine martins, monarch butterflies, Yellowstone cutthroat trout, whitebark pine, grizzly bears, northern goshawk, and lynx.

Please disclose how often the Project area has been surveyed for whitebark pine, wolverines, monarch butterflies, Yellowstone cutthroat trout, pine martins, northern goshawks, and lynx.

Would the habitat be better for whitebark pine, monarch butterflies, Yellowstone cutthroat trout, wolverines, pine martins,

northern goshawks, and lynx if roads were removed in the Project area?

Please provide us with the full BA for the whitebark pine, wolverines, monarch butterflies, Yellowstone cutthroat trout, pine martins, northern goshawks, and lynx.

Weeds

Native plants are the foundation upon which the ecosystems of the Forest are built, providing forage and shelter for all native wildlife, bird and insect species, supporting the natural processes of the landscape, and providing the context within which the public find recreational and spiritual opportunities. All these uses or values of land are hindered or lost by conversion of native vegetation to invasive and noxious plants. The ecological threats posed by noxious weed infestations are so great that a former chief of the Forest Service called the invasion of noxious

weeds “devastating” and a “biological disaster.” Despite implementation of Forest Service “best management practices” (BMPs), noxious weed infestation on the Forest is getting worse and noxious weeds will likely overtake native plant populations if introduced into areas that are not yet infested. The Forest Service has recognized that the effects of noxious weed invasions may be irreversible. Even if weeds are eliminated with herbicide treatment, they may be replaced by other weeds, not by native plant species.

Invasive plant species, also called noxious weeds, are one of the greatest modern threats to biodiversity on earth. Noxious weeds cause harm because they displace native plants, resulting in a loss of diversity and a change in the structure of a plant community. By removing native vegetative cover, invasive plants like knapweed may increase sediment yield and surface runoff in an ecosystem. As well knapweed may alter organic matter dis-

tribution and nutrient through a greater ability to uptake phosphorus over some native species in grasslands. Weed colonization can alter fire behavior by increasing flammability: for example, cheatgrass, a widespread noxious weed on the Forest, cures early and leads to more frequent burning. Weed colonization can also deplete soil nutrients and change the physical structure of soils.

The Forest Service's own management activities are largely responsible for noxious weed infestations; in particular, logging, prescribed burns, and road construction and use create a risk of weed infestations. The introduction of logging equipment into the Forest creates and exacerbates noxious weed infestations.

The removal of trees through logging can also facilitate the establishment of noxious weed infestations because of soil disturbance and the reduction of canopy closure. In general, noxious weeds occur in old clearcuts and forest openings, but are rare in mature and old growth forests. Roads are often the first place

new invader weeds are introduced. Vehicle traffic and soil disturbances from road construction and maintenance create ideal establishment conditions for weeds. Roads also provide obvious dispersal corridors. Roadsides throughout the project area are infested with noxious weeds. Once established along roadsides, invasive plants will likely spread into adjacent grass- lands and forest openings.

Prescribed burning activities within the analysis area would likely cumulatively contribute to increases to noxious weed distribution and populations. As a disturbance process, fire has the potential to greatly exacerbate infestations of certain noxious weed species, depending on burn severity and habitat type (Fire Effects Information System 2004). Soil disturbance, such as that resulting from low and moderate burn severities from prescribed fire and fire suppression related disturbances (dozer lines, drop spots, etc.), provide optimum conditions for noxious weed invasion. Dry site vegetation types and road corridors are extremely

vulnerable, especially where recent ground disturbance (timber management, road construction) has occurred. Units proposed for burning within project area may have closed forest service access roads (jammers) located within units. These units have the highest potential for noxious weed infestation and exacerbation

through fire activities. Please provide an alternative that eliminates units that have noxious weeds present on roads within units from fire management proposals.

Please address the ecological, social and ascetic impact of current noxious weed infestations within the project area. Include an analysis of the impact of the actions proposed by this project on the long and short term spread of current and new noxious weed infestations. What treatment methods will be used to address growing noxious weed problems? What noxious weeds are currently and historically found within the project area? Please

include a map of current noxious weed infestations which includes knapweed, Saint Johnswort, cheat grass, bull thistle, Canada thistle, hawkweed, hound's- tongue, oxeye daisy and all other Category 1, Category 2 and Category 3 weeds classified as noxious in the MONTANA COUNTY NOXIOUS

WEED LIST. State-listed Category 2 noxious weed species yellow and orange hawkweeds are recently established (within the last 5 to 10 years) in Montana and are rapidly expanding in established areas. They can invade undisturbed areas where native plant communities are intact. These species can persist in shaded conditions and often grow underneath shrubs making eradication very difficult. Their stoloniferous (growing at the surface or below ground) habit can create dense mats that can persist and spread to densities of 3500 plants per square mile (Thomas and Dale 1975). Are yellow and orange hawkweeds present within the project area?

Please address the cumulative, direct and in- direct effects of the proposed project on weed introduction, spread and persistence that includes how weed infestations have been and will be influenced by the following management actions: road construction including new permanent and temporary roads and skid trails proposed within this project; opening and decommissioning of roads represented on forest service maps; ground disturbance and traffic on forest service template roads, mining access routes, and private roads; removal of trees through commercial and pre-commercial logging and understory thinning; and prescribed burns. What open, gated, and de-commissioned Forest Service roads within the project area proposed as haul routes have existent noxious weed populations and what methods will be used to assure that noxious weeds are not spread into the proposed action units?

Noxious weeds are not eradicated with single herbicide treatments. A onetime application may kill an individual plant but

dormant seeds in the ground can still sprout after herbicide treatment. Thus, herbicides must be used on consistent, repetitive schedules to be effective.

What commitment to a long-term, consistent strategy of application is being proposed for each weed infested area within the proposed action area? What long term monitoring of weed populations is proposed?

When areas treated with herbicides are re-seeded on national forest land, they are usually reseeded with exotic grasses, not native plant species. What native plant restoration activities will be implemented in areas disturbed by the actions proposed in this project? Will disturbed areas including road corridors, skid trails, and burn units be planted or reseeded with native plant species?

The scientific and managerial consensus is that prevention is the most effective way to manage noxious weeds. The Forest

Service concedes that preventing the introduction of weeds into un-infested areas is “the most critical component of a weed management program.” The Forest Service’s national management strategy for noxious weeds also recommends “develop[ing] and implement[ing] forest plan standards” and recognizes that the cheapest and most effective solution is prevention. Which units within the project area currently have no noxious weed populations within their boundaries? What minimum standards are in the Custer Gallatin National Forest Plan to address noxious weed infestations? Please include an alternative in the DEIS that includes land management standards that will prevent new weed infestations by addressing the causes of weed infestation. The failure to include preventive standards violates NFMA because the Forest Service is not ensuring the protection of soils and native plant communities. Additionally, the omission of an EIS alternative that includes preventive measures would violate

NEPA because the Forest Service would fail to consider a reasonable alternative.

Rare Plants

The ESA requires that the Forest Service conserve endangered and threatened species of plants as well as animals. In addition to plants protected under the ESA, the Forest Service identifies species for which population viability is a concern as “sensitive species” designated by the Regional Forester (FSM 2670.44).

The response of each of the sensitive plant species to management activity varies by species, and in some cases, is not fully known. Local native vegetation has evolved with and is adapted to the climate, soils, and natural processes such as fire, insect and disease infestations, and windthrow. Any management or lack of management that causes these natural processes to be altered may have impacts on native vegetation, including threatened and sensitive plants. Herbicide application – intended to

eradicate invasive plants – also results in a loss of native plant diversity because herbicides kill native plants as well as invasive plants.

Whitebark Pine

Not all ecosystems or all Rocky Mountain landscapes have experienced the impacts of fire exclusion. In some wilderness areas, where in recent decades natural fires have been allowed to burn, there have not been major shifts in vegetation composition and structure (Keane et al. 2002). In some alpine ecosystems, fire was never an important ecological factor. In some upper subalpine ecosystems, fires were important, but their rate of occurrence was too low to have been significantly altered by the relatively short period of fire suppression (Keane et al. 2002).

For example, the last 70 to 80 years of fire suppression have not had much influence on subalpine landscapes with fire intervals of 200 to several hundred years (Romme and Despain).

Consequently, it is unlikely that fire exclusion has yet to significantly alter stand conditions or forest health within Rocky Mountain sub- alpine ecosystems.

Whitebark pine seedlings, saplings and mature trees, present in subalpine forests proposed for burning, would experience mortality from project activity. Whitebark pine is fire intolerant (thin bark). Fire favors whitebark pine regeneration (through canopy opening and reducing competing vegetation) only in the presence of adequate seed source and dispersal mechanisms (Clarks Nutcracker or humans planting white- bark pine seedlings).

White pine blister rust, an introduced disease, has caused rapid mortality of whitebark pine over the last 30 to 60 years. Keane

and Arno (1993) reported that 42 percent of whitebark pine in western Montana had died in the previous 20 years with 89 percent of remaining trees being infected with blister rust. The ability of whitebark pine to reproduce naturally is strongly affected by blister rust infection; the rust kills branches in the upper cone bearing crown, effectively ending seed production.

Montana is currently experiencing a mountain pine beetle epidemic. Mountain pine beetle prefer large, older whitebark pine, which are the major cone producers. In some areas the few remaining whitebark that show the potential for blister rust resistance are being attacked and killed by mountain pine beetles, thus accelerating the loss of key mature cone-bearing trees.

Whitebark pine seedlings and saplings are very likely present in the subalpine forests proposed for burning and logging. In the absence of fire, this naturally occurring white-bark pine regeneration would continue to function as an important part of the

subalpine ecosystem. Since 2005, rust resistant seed sources have been identified in the Northern Rockies (Mahalovich et al 2006). Due to the severity of blister rust infection within the region, natural whitebark pine regeneration in the project area is prospective rust resistant stock.

Although prescribed burning can be useful to reduce areas of high-density subalpine fir and spruce and can create favorable ecological conditions for whitebark pine regeneration and growth, in the absence of sufficient seed source for natural regeneration maintaining the viability and function of whitebark pine would not be achieved through burning.

Planting of rust-resistant seedlings would likely not be sufficient to replace whitebark pine lost to fire activities.

What surveys have been conducted to determine presence and abundance of whitebark pine regeneration? If whitebark pine seedlings and saplings are present, what measures will be taken

to protect them? Please include an alternative that excludes burning in the presence of whitebark pine regeneration (consider ‘Daylighting’ seedlings and saplings as an alternative restoration method). Will restoration efforts include planting whitebark pine? Will planted seedling be of rust-resistant stock? Is rust resistant stock available? Would enough seedlings be planted to replace whitebark pine lost to fire activities? Have white pine blister rust surveys been accomplished? What is the severity of white pine blister rust in proposed action areas?

Page 9 of the Cooke City Fuels Comment Packet states:

Individual whitebark pine trees will be maintained and improved by cutting all other species within 5 to 30 feet of outside crown edge of planted or natural whitebark pine trees.

Please see the attached paper by Six et al 2021 Whitebark

Gnetics 2021. Six et al found:

Anthropogenic change is creating or enhancing a number of stressors on forests. To aid forests in adapting to these stressors, we need to move beyond traditional spacing and age- class

prescriptions and take into account the genetic variability within and among populations and the impact our actions may have on adaptive potential and forest trajectories. Because so little is known about the genetic diversity in most forest trees, and because it is key to effective conservation, studies of genetic diversity and structuring in forest trees should be a top priority in forest adaptation and conservation efforts.

Six also concluded:

*Our results also indicate that thinning prescriptions aimed at increasing tree growth in whitebark pine should be applied with considerable caution. Greater tree ring width/faster growth has been widely used as a proxy for tree vigor and as an indicator of greater resistance to bark beetles (Bhuyan et al., 2017). This view has led to thinning projects in whitebark pine aimed at increasing growth and vigor (Retzlaff et al., 2018) and resistance to *D. ponderosae*. However, while the relationship between growth and resistance to beetles has been shown to be positive in some pines and variable in others (Millar et al., 2012; Knapp et al., 2013; Keen et al., 2020), the opposite appears to be true for some populations of *P. contorta* (Cooper et al., 2018) and for *P. albicaulis*. In our study, as well as in that of Kichas et al. (2020), faster overall growth was the strongest predictor of mortality due to *D. ponderosae* indicating that such treatments will not have their intended effect in *P. albicaulis* and may even be detrimental. Furthermore, naturally low resin production, even by survivor and open-grown *P. albicaulis*, indicates thinning will have little-to-no effect on enhancing constitutive defenses against the insect.*

Therefore the proposal of *Individual whitebark pine trees will be maintained and improved by cutting all other species within 5 to 30 feet of outside crown edge of planted or natural whitebark pine trees* is counterproductive and does not follow the best available science.

Page 1 of the **Cooke City Fuels and Forest Health Project Comment Packet**, including Preliminary Effects states:

The Gardiner Ranger District is proposing a fuels reduction and forest health project that would conduct fuel reduction activities, timber harvest and associated actions. The project area is within the wildland urban interface surrounding Cooke City and Silver Gate, MT. This project is part of the Custer Gallatin National Forest's ongoing emphasis on implementing projects that increase firefighter and public safety in the event of a severe wildfire and is part of a broader program to implement the National Fire Plan (USDA/USDI, 2000).

This project also helps to address the wildfire crisis strategy on this landscape. The wildfire crisis strategy is a 10-year plan to reduce wildfire risk and improve forest resilience. The strategy combines congressional funding, scientific research, and cross-jurisdictional partnerships to increase the scale and pace of forest health treatments. The strategy aims to treat up to 50 million acres of lands across ownerships and develop a long-term forest maintenance plan. More information on the strategy is available here: [Confronting the Wildfire Crisis | US Forest Service \(usda.gov\)](https://www.usda.gov/land-management/wildfire-crisis-strategy).

Has the Forest Service gone through NEPA on the National Fire Plan? If not please do so since you are tiering to it.

Please see the attached report titled: “Have western USA fire suppression and megafire active management approaches become a contemporary Sisyphus?” By Dominick A. Del-laSala^{a,*}, Bryant C. Baker^{b,c}, Chad T. Han-son^d, Luke Ruediger^{e,f}, William Baker ^g

The abstract of the paper states:

Fire suppression policies and “active management” in response to wildfires are being carried out by land managers globally, including millions of hectares of mixed conifer and dry ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) forests of the western USA that periodically burn in mixed severity fires. Federal managers pour billions of dollars into command-and-control fire suppression and the MegaFire (landscape

scale) Active Management Approach (MFAMA) in an attempt to contain wildfires increasingly influenced by top down climate forcings. Wildfire suppression activities aimed at stopping or slowing fires include expansive dozerlines, chemical retardants and igniters, backburns, and cutting trees (live and dead), including within roadless and wilderness areas. MFAMA involves logging of large, fire-resistant live trees and snags; mastication of beneficial shrubs; degradation of wildlife habitat, including endangered species habitat; aquatic impacts from an expansive road system; and logging-related carbon emissions. Such impacts are routinely dismissed with minimal environmental review and defiance of the precautionary principle in environmental planning. Placing restrictive bounds on these activities, deemed increasingly ineffective in a change climate, is urgently needed to overcome their contributions to the global biodiversity and climate crises. We urge land managers and decision makers to address the root cause of recent

fire increases by reducing greenhouse gas emissions across all sectors, reforming industrial forestry and fire suppression practices, protecting carbon stores in large trees and recently burned forests, working with wildfire for ecosystem benefits using minimum suppression tactics when fire is not threatening towns, and surgical application of thinning and prescribed fire nearest homes.

This conclusion of this paper is that the purpose and need of the project will not be met by your proposed management activities. This paper is now the best available science. Why does the Cooke City Vegetation project proposal not follow the best available science?

Please find attached Baker 2023, “Countering Omitted Evidence of Variable Historical Forests and Fire Regime in Western USA Dry Forests: [SEP] The Low-Severity-Fire Model Rejected”

*William L. Baker 1,**

, Chad T. Hanson ², Mark A. Williams ³ and
Dominick A. DellaSala ⁴

¹ ² ³ ⁴

* Correspondence: bakerwl@uwyo.edu

Abstract: The structure and fire regime of pre-industrial (historical) dry forests over ~26 million ha of the western USA is of growing importance because wildfires are increasing and spilling over into communities. Management is guided by current conditions relative to the historical range of variability (HRV). Two models of HRV, with different implications, have been debated since the 1990s in a complex series of papers, replies, and rebuttals. The “low-severity” model is that dry forests were relatively uniform, low in tree density, and dominated by low- to moderate-severity fires; the “mixed-severity” model is that dry forests were heterogeneous, with both low and high tree densities and a mixture of fire severities. Here, we simply rebut evidence in the low-severity

model's latest review, including its 37 critiques of the mixed-severity model. A central finding of high-severity fire recently exceeding its historical rates was not supported by evidence in the review itself. A large body of published evidence supporting the mixed-severity model was omitted. These included numerous direct observations by early scientists, early forest atlases, early newspaper accounts, early oblique and aerial photographs, seven paleo-charcoal reconstructions, ≥ 18 tree-ring reconstructions, 15 land survey reconstructions, and analysis of forest inventory data. Our rebuttal shows that evidence omitted in the review left a falsification of the scientific record, with significant land management implications. The low-severity model is rejected and mixed-severity model is supported by the corrected body of scientific evidence.

Dr. Baker's and DellaSala's paper are the best available science. Please explain why this project is not following the best available science.

What evidence do you have that shows fire has been suppressed in the area?

Please see the attached peer-reviewed study that includes a concise, step-by-step synopsis of how the Forest Service studies misrepresent the effects of thinning-- Baker and Hanson 2022

From Baker and Hanson 2022, p.6:

Despite controversy regarding thinning, there is a body of scientific literature that suggests commercial thinning should be scaled up across western US forest landscapes as a wildfire management strategy [3–5]. This raises an important question: what accounts for the discrepancy on this issue in the scientific literature? We believe several factors are likely to largely explain this discrepancy.

First and foremost, because most previous research has not accounted for tree mortality from thinning itself [34,35], prior to the wildfire-related mortality, such research has underreported tree mortality in commercial thinning areas relative to unthinned forests. Second, some prior studies have not controlled for vegetation type (e.g., [36]), which can lead to a mismatch when comparing severity in thinned areas to the rest of the fire area given that thinning necessarily occurs in conifer forests but unthinned areas can include large expanses of non-conifer vegetation types that burn almost exclusively at high

severity, such as grasslands and chaparral. Third, some research reporting effectiveness of commercial thinning in terms of reducing fire severity has been based on the subjective location of comparison sample points between thinned and adjacent unthinned forests (e.g., [34]). Fourth, reported results have often been based on theoretical models (e.g., [37]), which subsequent research has found to overestimate the effectiveness of thinning [38,39]. Last, several case studies draw conclusions about the effectiveness of thinning as a wildfire management strategy when the results of those studies do not support such a conclusion, as reviewed in DellaSala et al. (2022) [33].

Please find attached Baker et al. 2023. Their following abstract calls into question the Purpose and Need of the project.

The structure and fire regime of pre-industrial (historical) dry forests over ~26 million ha of the western USA is of growing importance because wildfires are increasing and spilling over into communities. Management is guided by current conditions relative to the historical range of variability (HRV). Two models of HRV, with different implications, have been debated since the 1990s in a complex series of papers, replies, and rebuttals. The “low-severity” model is that dry forests were relatively uniform, low in tree density, and dominated by low- to moderate-severity fires; the “mixed-severity” model is that dry forests were heterogeneous, with both low and high tree densities and a mixture of fire severities. Here, we simply rebut evidence in the low-severity model’s latest review, including its 37 critiques of the mixed-severity model. A central finding of high-severity fire recently exceeding its historical rates was not

supported by evidence in the review itself. A large body of published evidence supporting the mixed-severity model was omitted. These included numerous direct observations by early scientists, early forest atlases, early newspaper accounts, early oblique and aerial photographs, seven paleo-charcoal reconstructions, ≥ 18 tree-ring reconstructions, 15 land survey reconstructions, and analysis of forest inventory data. Our rebuttal shows that evidence omitted in the review left a falsification of the scientific record, with significant land management implications. The low-severity model is rejected and mixed-severity model is supported by the corrected body of scientific evidence.

Page 3 of the Cooke City Fuels and Forest Health Project Comment Packet, including Preliminary Effects states:

During the 1988 fire season, two large wildfires (Storm Creek and Clover-Mist) were recognized as having the potential to enter Cooke City and Silver Gate. At that time, fire management personnel from the Gallatin National Forest and Yellowstone National Park recognized the need for further pre-planning to avoid catastrophic losses in the Cooke City-Silver Gate area. Over one hundred years of successful wildland fire suppression efforts, significant vegetative changes, forest type, and climatic changes place the residents in potentially hazardous situations during periods of moderate to severe fire weather. Since 1988, the population has doubled from less than 75 to more than 140 and development has increased accordingly, especially in the Bannock Trail area, between Silver Gate and Cooke City.

But the proposed alternative does not follow the best available science. Please see attached paper by Calkin et al. 2024 that recommends focusing on home hardening to protect building from wildfire and says logging forests won't protect structures.

Please find A More Effective Approach for Preventing Wildland-Urban Fire Disasters by Calkin et al. attached.

Please see the following article titled:

Montana researchers urge towns to focus on wildfire preparation

<https://missoulacurrent.com/research-wildfire-preparation/>

Laura Lundquist

(Missoula Current) For more than a decade, a small group of scientists have been trying to convince people that fireproofing their homes is far more effective than logging the forest when it comes to surviving wildfire. But few people are listening.

In mid-December, six researchers published a paper in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences journal warning that communities across the nation, but particularly those in the West, aren't prepared to survive an urban conflagration such as the one that devastated Lahaina, Hawaii, in August.

The paper, titled "Wildland-urban fire disasters aren't actually a wildfire problem," points out that, since 2016, communities from Lahaina to Gatlinburg, Tenn., that have lost hundreds of

homes to fires have certain things in common: the fires occurred under extreme weather conditions - high winds and persistent drought - and most of the structures weren't fire-resistant.

"These problem fires were defined as an issue of wildfires that involved houses. In reality, they are urban fires initiated by wildfires. That's an important distinction - and one that has big repercussions for how we prepare ourselves for future fires," the authors wrote.

The authors included three researchers from the Forest Science and Fire Sciences laboratories of the U.S. Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station in Missoula and one from Headwaters Economics in Bozeman.

In a 2014 paper in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Science, some of the same authors developed a community risk assessment that put the focus on improving the security of individual homes in a community, not the forest around them.

The emphasis is placed on modifying the house and the home ignition zone, a region within 100 feet of a house where debris and vegetation should be eliminated or minimized to reduce the chance of fire getting close to the house.

The reason that urban conflagrations begin and spread is because wind pushes embers and heat from one unprotected building to another, overwhelming fire departments that normally train to fight fire in just one building. Conditions are made worse when buildings are close together, because radiant heat becomes a bigger factor, spreading fire quicker.

“Reducing the likelihood that a home will ignite interrupts the disaster sequence by enabling effective structure protection. New construction siting, design, construction materials, and landscaping requirements should take wildfire potential into account,” the authors wrote in the December paper.

One of the paper’s authors, Jack Cohen, is a fire-behavior analyst and heat transfer engineer who has spent 40 years investigating wildfires, particularly those that are linked to incidents where hundreds of homes burned. He has spent at least the past decade writing papers and giving talks about the need to focus on making homes less susceptible to wildfires, which are a natural process, especially in the arid West.

When asked why the researchers decided to submit the recent article that seeks to drum home points they already promoted a decade ago, Cohen said cities and agencies have done very little during that time period to put their recommendations into place.

“What prompted us this time was the Lahaina urban conflagration that was associated with a grassfire. It may be a repeated message on our part, but it’s not being received very well. Not much has changed,” Cohen said. “The federal and state agencies still don’t get it - they’re still defining the problem as a wildfire control problem.”

Since the 2014 paper, Cohen and other researchers have had to just watch as town after town has burned terribly but predictably, as if no one has read their research. In Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge, Tenn., 2,460 buildings burned in a 2016 fire; in 2018, the Camp Fire led to the loss of almost 19,000

buildings in Paradise, Calif.; in December 2021, 1,084 buildings burned in Superior and Louisville, Colo. from a grass fire; and in November 2021, a grassfire sparked fires in 23 homes in Denton, Mont.

Each wildfire had very little connection to most of the burning buildings, Cohen said. A wildfire is the source of initial ignition, but from that point on, it's a series of structure fires that lead to more structure fires. For example, with the Four Mile Canyon Fire in Boulder, Colo., the state of Colorado and the Forest Service had completed a number of fuel treatments nearby that they touted as protective. But high winds carried fire brands to ignite the houses far from the fire. Cohen found that while 168 houses burned, a lot of vegetation around the houses didn't, "so the wildfire didn't sweep through town."

"In the past five years, a number of incidents with more than 100 houses burning have been initiated by grass fires, which burn quickly. The grass fires pass through and are gone while the community continued to burn," Cohen said. "What I've found, particularly over the past five or six years, is that extreme wildfire is not dependent on closed-canopy conifers that produce big flames. The only time these urban disasters occur is under extreme conditions. That typically means it's very windy."

Nothing about the Lahaina Fire surprised Cohen. Not even the overblown claims that a wildfire "roared through and destroyed the town." Again, the wildfire was over before the town really started to burn. The fire started as a grassfire fanned by high winds, and had Lahaina not been there, the fire would

have burned through the buffel grass and guinea grass within a matter of minutes before it died out on the beach.

But Lahaina was there, a high-density community with several blocks of multi-story, largely-connected wooden structures. That configuration caused buildings to catch fire either due to burning embers flying from other buildings or from catching fire due to the overwhelming heat from nearby buildings.

“The ignition initiated where the grassfire came down, and that was it - it was a conflagration,” Cohen said. “You don’t want to be in a high-density community when you can’t control the fire. Thirteen of the 26 fatalities in the 1991 Oakland Hills Fire occurred in the street when two-story buildings were burning on both sides of the street and the road became blocked. The heat was untenable.”

One house in Lahaina stood untouched and was dubbed “the miracle house.” But Cohen said it was just a good example of the points he and his fellow authors have been trying to communicate about defensible space and being fire-adapted. The owners had recently renovated the house with a nonflammable roof. It had wood walls, but the nearest building was about 30 feet away - far enough to prevent radiant heat from starting a fire - and there was little debris on the grounds or the house to actively spread the fire.

“The home ignition zone works,” Cohen said. “The home ignition zone came out of the modeling I did and then the crown fire experiments I did with wood walls to show the distance, the proximity required to produce an ignition was realistic. At the same time, California was cutting 300-foot clearances

around communities, which means nothing to (airborne) burning embers, but it's way over (what's required) for radiant heat exposure."

Cohen and his colleagues hope their latest paper prompts more action from local governments. Cohen is hoping Missoula County can do a better job when it updates its Wildfire Protection Plan in the near future.

But more than likely, Cohen said, they'll be writing a similar paper in another few years, trying to make politicians and the public understand. It doesn't help that they're fighting some in their own agency, the Forest Service, who insist that logging, not home modification, will save communities.

"Fire is inevitable. But nobody's figuring it out," Cohen said. "We're starting from the presumption that it's wildfire that spreads through a community that lays it to waste. We even have the agencies responding in that fashion by being obsessed with this notion of wildfire control. So they do fuel treatments to have safe firefighting. That's not only counter ecologically, it doesn't work."

Contact reporter Laura Lundquist at lundquist@missoulacurrent.com.

Please find the paper Cohen co-authored that is mentioned in the article above, Calkin et al. 2024 attached.

Based on Calkin's paper, the project is not an emergency and not following the best available science.

What are the specific criteria used to define resiliency, and what are the ratings for each proposed logging unit before and after treatment? How is the risk of fire as affected by the project being measured so that the public can understand whether or not this will be effective? How is forest health to be measured so that the public can see that this is a valid management strategy? What specifically constitutes a diversity of age classes, how is this to be measured, and how are proposed changes measured as per diversity? How are diversity measures related to wildlife (why is diversity needed for what species)? If the reasons for logging cannot be clearly identified and measured for the public, the agency is not meeting the NEPA requirements for transparency.

Thank you for your attention to these concerns.

Sincerely yours,

Mike Garrity

Alliance for the Wild Rockies

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