

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 7/8/2022 6:00:00 AM
First name: Jeff
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Organization: Montana DNRC Southern Land Office
Title: Area Manager
Comments: See attached comments.

Re: Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Comments on the Proposed Action for the Red Lodge Mountain Fuels Project

Dear Ms. Erickson:

The Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) strongly supports the proposed action for the Red Lodge Mountain Fuels Project. DNRC has fire protection on state and private lands and manages state school trust lands near the project area. Our agencies share the common goals of reducing wildfire risk, improving forest health, and retaining a strong forest products industry in Montana.

The project area is about two miles west of the community of Red Lodge which is in a transition area of private and public lands at high risk of wildfire impacts. The project area lies along the boundary of national forest and private lands and is adjacent to the Red Lodge Mountain Ski Area and Timbercrest recreation area. This area is designated as Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) in the Carbon County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). Lands in this area have been designated by the Governor as priority landscapes for insect and disease treatments under the authority of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HRFA) and Farm Bill.

The vegetative fuel loading in the area is high. Past fires have included large stand-replacement events with significant property damage and habitat loss. There is a substantial amount of infrastructure and private property investment in the area. The threat of additional severe fire and property loss is high. This project is critical for reducing that risk.

DNRC supports the objectives of the project which include: 1) Reduce the risk of high intensity wildfire within and adjacent to Red Lodge Mountain Ski Area; 2) Reduce the risk of high intensity wildfire adjacent to the community of Red Lodge and surrounding developments 3) Provide a safer environment to conduct wildfire suppression operations; and 4) Provide more suppression options of wildfire management.

The proposed action includes vegetation treatments to reduce hazardous fuels and risk of severe fire impacts. We support this project as important cross-boundary work necessary to achieve our shared stewardship goals across ownerships in this area.

In the past decade private landowners have been proactive in thinning and clearing of slash in this area. There has been recent activity on nearby private lands through a Montana Forest Action Plan grant. DNRC also has other programs to assist private landowners with treatments on their lands. Additionally, the DNRC has completed vegetation projects in the area on trust land.

We look forward to continuing to work with the Custer Gallatin National Forest and Beartooth Ranger District to further plan and implement this project. By working together, we can more effectively work towards an [ldquo]all lands[rdquo] approach to forest management and restoration benefiting both agencies[rsquo] missions.

Sincerely,

Jeff Bollman, AICP Area Manager, Southern Land Office Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation