Data Submitted (UTC 11): 9/18/2025 6:00:00 AM
First name: Dave
Last name: Poukish
Organization: DNRC
Title: Unit Manager
Comments: September 18, 2025

Gary Blazejewski, Environmental Coordinator

Flathead National Forest
650 Wolfpack Way
Kalispell, MT 59901

Re: Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Comments on the West Reservoir Draft Environmental Assessment

Dear Mr. Blazejewski

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) for the West Reservoir Project. The project is located southeast of the community of Hungry Horse, west of the Hungry Horse Reservoir.

DNRC has fire protection interests and manages state trust lands in the vicinity. Our agencies share the common goals of reducing fire risk and improving forest health in Montana's forest landscapes. The project is not only important for the national forest system lands but also for the state and private landowners in the area.

DNRC supports the stated Purpose and Need for the project. There is a strong need to treat vegetation to reduce wildfire risk and increase the diversity and resilience of forests in this area. Current stand structure, composition, and tree density are out of the range of natural conditions and creating conditions of high risk to uncharacteristic wildfire and insect and disease outbreaks.

DNRC supports the Proposed Action for the project. The proposed vegetation treatments on 7,704 acres, including commercial thinning and prescribed burning, will reduce wildfire risk and help restore the structure, function, composition, and connectivity of forest terrestrial systems. The project will improve conditions for public and firefighter safety, promote forest health, improve wildlife habitat, and create more resilient watersheds. The project aligns with the goals in the Montana Forest Action Plan (MFAP) which emphasizes actions across boundaries to reduce wildfire risk, improve forest health, and retain a forest industry in Montana.

DNRC supports the proposed 3,122 acres of prescribed burning and hand thinning of small trees within the Inventoried Roadless Area (IRA). The proposal is consistent with the 2001 Roadless Rule which provides exceptions for cutting and removing small diameter trees to reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire effects.

The draft EA isn't clear whether there will be follow-up prescribed burning or hand piling following commercial thinning treatments. We know through studies and experience that reducing wildfire risk usually requires prescribed burning, or piling and burning, following commercial thinning. This would be a good point to clarify in the final EA.

The treatments proposed with this project should be considered in context of the resource conditions and need for action on all ownership within the planning area. Treatments on national forest lands will work together with treatments on non-federal lands to significantly reduce wildfire risk and improve forest health. Scheduling and design of treatments on national forest lands should be coordinated with actions on private lands to reduce wildfire risk, protect values, and improve forest health in the planning area.

Stands in the WUI, particularly near property, should be thinned enough for fire to drop to the ground and provide safe conditions for firefighter engagement. This may result in wider spacing and more openings than what is prescribed for other management objectives.

DNRC is committed to continuing a positive working relationship with Flathead National Forest, specifically relating to landscape resiliency, wildfire response, community protection, and sustainable forest management. By working together, we can more effectively work towards an all-lands approach to forest management and restoration, benefiting both agencies' missions.

Sincerely,

/s/ David M. Poukish

David M. Poukish, Unit Manager

Northwestern Land Office, Kalispell Unit

Attachments:

West Reservoir Draft EA Comments_SK.docx