

October 7, 2019

Matt Anderson, Forest Supervisor  
Bitterroot National Forest  
Attn: Mud Creek project  
1801 N. First Street  
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*Comments transmitted via project webpage at: <https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public/CommentInput?Project=55744>.*

Mr. Anderson:

Please accept into the public record these comments on the Mud Creek project proposal (District Ranger Seth Carbonari's September 6, 2019 scoping letter), on behalf of Friends of the Bitterroot. Items in quotation marks are from your scoping letter, unless otherwise indicated.

The scoping letter does not indicate the level of analysis the Forest Service (FS) plans to conduct, to analyze and disclose environmental impacts of the Mud Creek project. Given the legacy of environmental damage from past management, the intensity of logging, burning, and road work proposed, and the proposed Forest Plan Amendment, we believe that preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is needed to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). We welcome the statement, "One or more alternatives to the proposed action may be developed depending on the issues raised during internal and external scoping." The EIS process is also more welcoming and amendable to consideration of a wide range of alternatives, including one that contains the elements and responds to the issues these comments discuss below.

The Montana Forest Restoration Committee (2007) adopted 13 Principles, written collaboratively by a diverse set of stakeholders which included the Supervisor of the Bitterroot National Forest (BNF) along with representatives from timber and forest products industries, conservation groups, recreation interests, and others. Principle #3 states:

Use the appropriate scale of integrated analysis to prioritize and design restoration activities: **Use landscape, watershed and project level ecosystem analysis in both prioritization and design of projects** unless a compelling reason to omit a level of analysis is present. While economic feasibility is essential to project implementation, **priorities should be based on ecological considerations and not be influenced by funding projections.** (Emphases added.)

Consistent with this principle, the FS would first publicize a landscape assessment so a more informed scoping process could help determine the project Purpose and Need. Here, the FS is "proposing the Mud Creek project to address forest health, hazardous fuels, and road network concerns" based upon its own internal analysis, which has the effect of overly narrowing the scope of the project and biasing the scope of the project based upon Congress's ill-informed priorities for this project area as reflected in annual appropriations to the BNF.

To illustrate the lack of transparency as to how project priorities have been selected by internal black box FS processes, the scoping letter repeatedly references a departure from natural disturbance patterns or from historic fire. Yet nothing in the scoping letter explains what has caused the alleged “departures.” No data, not assessment, no explanation why. It thus reads as a cookie cutter justification for heavy handed management, not a thoughtful proposal based upon sound data or a thorough assessment. The FS needs to take a step or two back, to best involve the public, consider good project area data, and conduct a comprehensive inventory of restoration needs before a scoping process.

The majority of the proposed vegetation management seems to be compelled by vague “desired conditions” which have no basis in the Forest Plan. The proposal fails to explain how implementation of these actions is consistent with Forest Plan priorities. Again, this is consistent with an agency responding to marching orders from entities wanting to maximize timber production.

Similarly, the scoping letter refers to the Bitterroot Community Wildfire Protection Plan, the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), identification of the portions of the project area as “Community Protection” and “36 parcels of private land with 175 structures within or immediately adjacent to the project area.” The Bitterroot Community Wildfire Protection Plan, and the Community Protection and WUI concepts have not been subject to NEPA and are not based in best available science. Yet they are compelling reasons to propose clearcutting here?

Please see “A New Direction for California Wildfire Policy—Working from the Home Outward” dated February 11, 2019 from the Leonard DiCaprio Foundation. It criticizes policies from the state of California, which are essentially the same FS fire policies on display in the BNF. From the Executive Summary: “These policies try to alter vast areas of forest in problematic ways through logging, when instead they should be focusing on helping communities safely co-exist with ...naturally fire-dependent ecosystems by prioritizing effective fire-safety actions for homes and the zone right around them. This new direction— working from the home outward—can save lives and homes, save money, and produce jobs in a strategy that is better for natural ecosystems and the climate.” It also presents an informative analysis of the Camp Fire, which destroyed the town of Paradise, revealing that it was actually an urban fire—not a wildland fire that destroyed the vast majority of homes.

The scoping letter asserts historic fire regimes would have maintained much of the project area in open conditions with widely spaced mature and old trees, mostly ponderosa pine. It fails to acknowledge that mixed-severity and even low-severity fire regimes result in much more variable stand conditions across the landscape through time. Assumptions that drier forests did not experience stand-replacing fires, that fire regimes were frequent and nonlethal, that these stands were open and dominated by large well-spaced trees, and that fuel amounts determine fire severity are not supported by science. Any assertion that fuel treatments will result in likely or predictable later wildland fire effects is of considerable scientific doubt. Full consideration of such science is another reason an EIS is warranted.

Friends of the Bitterroot supports some of the actions proposed, specifically those reducing road density to restore aquatic habitat and soil productivity and improve security for wildlife. There

are no details on the extent of road decommissioning however. We request the FS take a comprehensive approach to minimize motorized travel routes and their associated environmental impacts. Please include and fully analyze an alternative that results in a road system which is fully affordable to maintain on an annual basis, within all of the watersheds affected by the proposal. Please use expected appropriations as the yardstick to measure “affordable”, based on recent years’ funding levels.

“The project area currently has one of the highest road densities found on the Bitterroot National Forest.” The actions needed to reduce the road system to an affordable level need not themselves be within expected budgets. Indeed, few restoration projects proposed or implemented by the FS are fully funded by appropriated dollars. Figuring out a way to fund road decommissioning would follow from a Decision to implement it. That would be a way to truly collaborate.

Such an alternative would avoid active vegetation manipulations in Inventoried Roadless Areas and the Blue Joint Wilderness Study Area in recognition of the vast body of science (including the FS’s) that indicates unmanaged areas have the highest functioning of natural ecological processes. The Scientific Assessment that was a basis for the Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project EIS, along with volumes of other scientific research, strongly indicate that Wilderness and roadless areas already have the highest ecological integrity of all national forest lands. These areas would also fully maintain their current corridor value to other areas for movement of wolverines, the threatened Canada lynx and grizzly bear, big game species and other wildlife species.

Such an alternative would reduce the road network in the project area watersheds consistent with the forest plan and with best available science for maintaining robust populations of native fish.

By reducing the footprint of roads, such an alternative would reduce the spread of noxious weeds and their associated costs and environmental damage.

Such an alternative would be in compliance with the Travel Management Rule Subpart A, which requires the FS to identify the forestwide minimum road system—itsself necessarily being maintainable using expected annual appropriations. This alternative would be consistent with Montana Forest Restoration Committee Principle #13, which is to “Establish and maintain a safe road and trail system that is ecologically sustainable.” This alternative would be consistent with Forest-wide Management Standards J.1 and J.2.

Such an alternative would fully decommission/obliterate the entire length of unauthorized ATV/OHV routes on national forest land in the project area to restore hydrologic functioning and soil productivity, reduce spread of noxious weeds, and promote ecosystem integrity.

Such an alternative would not construct any new roads, including temporary roads. The FS is aware that temporary roads potentially create much of the same impact as system roads.

Such an alternative would maximize the short-term sequestration of carbon in the forest, because already dangerously elevated greenhouse gases are an immediate issue that must be addressed.

“The 1987 Forest Plan contains several standards pertaining to elk habitat effectiveness, thermal cover, and hiding cover, collectively referred to as Elk Habitat Objectives.” After over two decades of being in denial of the need to address “Elk Habitat Objectives” (actually, nondiscretionary **standards**) with a programmatic—not project specific—Forest Plan Amendment, the BNF finally proposes to embark upon the programmatic pathway. Amending the BNF Forest Plan to sidestep the winter range thermal cover and elk habitat effectiveness standards had become routine.

However despite what the scoping letter states or implies, the real purpose of the Amendment (and all the previous project-specific ones) is to justify and increase the level of logging, beyond what the Forest Plan otherwise allows for protection of other resources, including old growth. The Forest Plan FEIS states, “At least 10 percent of lands assigned to this (winter range) prescription must be old growth.” Logging within old-growth and late-successional stands would result in lowering or totally removing the thermal and hiding cover value.

The BNF’s Five Year Review recommended, “Update Guidelines and change Standards to reflect most recent works of Hillis, Christensen, and Lyons, and tie to ecosystem management, including the concepts of corridors, fragmentation, and patch size and distribution. Forest Plan Goals and Objectives are needed.” And “Incorporate elk vulnerability analysis (Hillis) into the Forest Plan.”

Currently, best available science still says thermal cover is important, including Lyon et al., 1985 of which the Forest Plan requires consideration, as well as Christensen et al., 1993 which states:

In recent years, our understanding of animal physiology on winter ranges has modified this view. Forage is important, but in severe weather many animals substitute an energy-conservation strategy for forage intake. Thus, management of winter range to improve thermal cover and prevent harassment may be as important as anything done to change forage quantity or quality.

Christensen, et al., 1993<sup>1</sup> is a Region One publication on elk habitat effectiveness the EIS must consider.

Scientific information recognizes the importance of thermal cover, including Lyon et al, 1985. The BNF Forest Plan includes the standard, “The recommendations in the “Coordinating Elk and Timber Management’ report will be considered during timber management and transportation planning (Lyon, et al, 1985).” Christensen et al., 1993 also emphasize “maintenance of security, landscape management of coniferous cover, and monitoring elk use...” This USFS Region 1 document also states, “management of winter range to improve thermal cover and prevent harassment may be as important as anything done to change forage quantity or quality.”

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<sup>1</sup> **Christensen, Alan G.; L. Jack Lyon** and James W. Unsworth, 1993. Elk Management in the Northern Region: Considerations in Forest Plan Updates or Revisions. United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service Intermountain Research Station, General Technical Report INT-303 November 1993.

And Black et al. (1976) provide definitions of elk cover, including “Thermal cover is defined as a stand of coniferous trees 12 m (40 ft) or more tall, with average crown exceeding 70 percent. Such stands were most heavily used for thermal cover by radio-collared elk on a summer range study area in eastern Oregon (R.J. Pedersen, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife—personal communication).” Black et al. (1976) also state:

Optimum size for thermal cover on summer and spring-fall range is 12 to 24 ha (30 to 60 acres). Areas less than 12 ha (30 acres) are below the size required to provide necessary internal stand conditions and to accommodate the herd behavior of elk.

...Cover requirements on winter ranges must be considered separately and more carefully. Animals distributed over thousands of square miles in spring, summer and fall are forced by increasing snow depths at higher elevations to concentrate into much restricted, lower-elevation areas in mid- to late-winter. Winter range, because of its scarcity and intensity of use, is more sensitive to land management decisions.

Regarding Black et al. (1976) conclusions, Thomas et al., 1988a state, “We concur. New research on elk use of habitat on summer and winter ranges has become available, however (Leckenby 1984). Land-use planning requirements indicate that a model of elk winter-range habitat effectiveness is required.”

Thomas et al., 1988a also state:

Thomas and others (1979, p. 104-127) defined two types of cover: thermal and hiding. Thermal cover was “any stand of coniferous trees 12 meters (40 ft) or more tall, with an average canopy closure exceeding 70 percent” (p. 114). Disproportionate use of such cover by elk was thought to be related to thermoregulation. Whether such thermoregulatory activity occurs or is significant has been argued (Geist 1982, Peek and others 1982). In the context of the model presented here, arguing about why elk show preference for such stands is pointless. They do exhibit a preference (Leckenby 1984; see Thomas 1979 for a review). As this habitat model is based on expressed preferences of elk, we continue to use that criterion as a tested habitat attribute. We cannot demonstrate that the observed preference is an expression of need, but we predict energy exchange advantages of such cover to elk (Parker and Robbins 1984). We consider it prudent to assume that preferred kinds of cover provide an advantage to the elk over nonpreferred or less preferred options.

“There is a need to address discrepancies (e.g. gated roads designated as open) between on-the-ground road conditions and travel status in the Bitterroot Travel Management Plan.” Also, “opportunities exist for the development of motorized and non-motorized routes and loops ... the Bitterroot National Forest Travel Management Plan... will be implemented as part of this project.” The scoping letter fails to explain why a site-specific project is needed to implement the Bitterroot Travel Management Plan, which was already adopted by a BNF Decision. Is the FS saying it won’t implement the Bitterroot Travel Management Plan absent a timber sale? Is the FS proposing to modify the Bitterroot Travel Management Plan with the Mud Creek project? Is the FS saying the current Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM) is wrong, or is in some ways inconsistent with the Bitterroot Travel Management Plan?

“The Mud Creek project area contains 79 terraces plantations ranging in size from 1 acre to 130 acres and totally approximately 1,645 acres.” Consistent with the proposal’s obsession with vegetation management (logging), it fails to provide any details on what actions might address long-term damaged soil conditions from the terracing, instead worrying about “stand health, tree size, density and ...past mountain pine beetle mortality.”

For those “Decommissioning treatments” for which “no treatment of roads that are fully revegetated, contain no stream crossings, and have no associated resource impacts (i.e. administrative decommission)” please explain why the compacted road surfaces have “no associated resource impacts.”

The scoping letter mentions “undetermined roads” but fails to provide a definition. We assume these roads are not on the Forest Service Road system, but that leaves questions unanswered. For one, has the FS conducted a thorough survey to locate all such “undetermined roads” in the project area? And, how were these undetermined roads located?

**“Addition of existing non-system roads to the National Forest road system:** There are 9.8 miles of undetermined roads...” How does the FS plan to afford to maintain all the newly constructed and these newly adopted roads without causing long-term resource damage, which is already occurring with system roads?

“Undetermined roads identified as not needed will be decommissioned, either administratively or physically depending on the conditions of each road segment.” If a road is not on the inventory (i.e., nonsystem) and it is causing no impacts to resources, then what exactly does it mean to decommission it “administratively”?

We ask the FS disclose the following information in the EIS:

- The deferred road maintenance backlog
- The annual road maintenance funding needs
- The annual road maintenance budget
- The capital improvement needs for existing roads
- The road density in the project area
- The number of miles of project area roads that fail to meet BMP standards or design standards

For each alternative, please disclose the itemized costs for each of the following: new system roads, new temporary roads (including tracked line machine trails and excavated skid trails), project-related road maintenance, road decommissioning, all other road-related work, sale preparation and administration, project-related weed treatment, other project mitigation, post-project monitoring, environmental analyses and reports, public meetings and field trips, publicity, consultation with other government agencies, responding to comments and objections.

Please disclose in the EIS the estimated Ravalli County road maintenance costs from county roads to be used as haul routes.

Please consider in the EIS that human ignition of wildfires far exceeds natural ignitions, and correlates with the level of motorized access.

The Forest Plan states the FS was to have maintained “sufficient old growth habitat on suitable timberland to support viable populations of old growth dependent species” over the expected life of the Forest Plan, which is long past. The EIS should disclose the amount and distribution of old growth on the Forest and in the project area needed to be consistent with the quoted Objective.

The EIS must analyze and disclose habitat conditions for grizzly bears, and the alternatives’ impacts on potential grizzly bear recovery.

Please quantify all human-caused carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) and other greenhouse gas emissions for each alternative. Please quantify carbon sequestration for each alternative. Please disclose how climate change has affected ecological conditions in the project area, and include an analysis of these conditions under climate change scenarios. Please consider best available science concerning prospects for full restocking following “regeneration treatments” in the context of likely climate change scenarios.

Please disclose in the EIS how the FS will integrate wildland fire use in the project area.

It is vital that the results of past monitoring be incorporated into this project analysis and planning. We request the following be included in the analysis:

- A list of all past projects (completed or ongoing) implemented in the proposed project area watersheds.
- A list of the monitoring commitments made in all previous NEPA documents covering the project area.
- The results of all that monitoring.
- A description of any monitoring, specified in those past project NEPA documents or the Forest Plan for proposed project area, which has yet to be gathered and/or reported.
- A summary of all monitoring done in the project area as a part of the Forest Plan monitoring and evaluation effort.
- A cumulative effects analysis which includes the results from the monitoring required by the Forest Plan.

The EIS must also include an analysis of how well those past FS projects met the goals, objectives, desired conditions, etc. stated in the NEPA documents, and how well the projects conformed to forest plan standards and guidelines. The EIS must also include an analysis of how well the Purposes and Needs identified in those NEPA documents were served.

The EIS must disclose how the Mud Creek project would be consistent with all relevant Forest Plan direction.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input. Please keep Friends of the Bitterroot on the mailing list to receive all future communications about the Mud Creek project.

Sincerely,

/s/

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#### References cited

Black, Hugh, Richard J. Scherzinger and Jack Ward Thomas, 1976. Relationships of Rocky Mountain Elk and Rocky Mountain Mule Deer Habitat to Timber Management in the Blue Mountains of Oregon and Washington. In: Hieb, S.R., ed. Elk-Logging-Roads: Proceedings of a symposium. Moscow, ID: University of Idaho: 11-31.

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