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Comments: Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) wildlife biologists worked closely with the U.S. Forest Service in the development of the Greater Red Lodge Area Vegetation and Habitat Management Project when the EIS originally was drafted several years ago.

That project had a number of benefits for wildlife resulting from maintaining and enhancing the ecotonal vegetation complex across the project area. Especially important was the aspen management component of the project. These beneficial components remain a part of the current proposal.

However, the vegetative character of the landscape has changed dramatically since the original EIS. Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) has completed an aggressive timber management program adjacent to Forest Service lands. That project included large clear cuts. While narrow wildlife travel corridors were part of DNRC's plan, those corridors largely disappeared during subsequent wind events. Consequently, large acreages of land immediately adjacent to the proposed Forest Service project no longer function as productive wildlife habitat. Elk and grizzly bear security has been broadly impacted in a negative way. Moose fall, winter and spring habitats were severely impacted, and moose numbers may well be declining.

It appears that the current Forest Service proposal does not take into account these recent impacts to wildlife habitat. So, while there are some positive aspects to the Forest Service project, there appear to be some aspects that require further planning.

FWP welcomes the opportunity to work with the FS to implement the Greater Red Lodge Area Vegetation and Habitat Management Project over time in a way that is compatible with wildlife habitat enhancement without further eroding of key big game habitat components.

Also, FWP generally supports land management agencies undertaking wildfire preventative measures as long as strong consideration is allotted to fish, wildlife, and human interactions and habitats. FWP welcomes any chance to discuss its outdoor recreation planning efforts with Forest Service staff as they relate to vegetation management and resource management planning.