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Comments: Since the Bitterroot Valley ranks as one of the highest for catastrophic wildfire risks in the State, it should be an "all hands-on deck" clarion call for all the agencies to work together on an integrated strategy to reduce that risk. The Forest Service is best positioned to provide the leadership that is needed. The proposed Bitterroot Front Project is a great start to defining the problems and opportunities, but it falls short of showing the whole picture. It also needs to be a tool to help residents and the county to identify what they need to do to adopt a long-term strategy for living with fire.

Even though you do not have the authority to tell private landowners or the county what to do, you do not need any authority to analyze the forest conditions and access constraints in the zone of private lands adjacent to the Forest as part of your analysis area. That is the only way you will be able to evaluate the effectiveness of actions you may take to meet the objective of reducing the wildfire risk in the WUI.

Considering the complexity and controversial nature of the project, I suggest you take a closer look at the objectives of the project and broaden the analysis area.

1. Stick to the reduction of wildfire risk and fire fighter safety as the purpose and need and as the first criteria used to identify actions. Those targeted management actions would then be specifically designed and fine-tuned by ecological restoration goals and considerations, otherwise it will just get too complicated and esoteric (aka "forest health") for the average citizen to understand and you will get accused of just looking for commercial product to harvest for jobs and money.

2. Include a defined area adjacent to the forest of private lands showing the forest conditions and where the highest density of houses is located. The Montana Forest Action Plan should be more visibly integrated into your analysis. Identifying where the homes are and where the fire traps are should provide you the criteria to help you decide where to go first.

3. The current Fire in the Root effort to update the Community Wildfire Protection Plan should be more closely tied or integrated in some fashion with this analysis.

4. It is obvious that frequent prescribed burning (such as you do in the Larry Creek Recreation area) should be established as standard operating procedure across the entire front in the Ponderosa Pine forests. The need for prescribed fire should be more prominent in your analysis and treatments needed to set up the conditions that are required to safely conduct annual maintenance burning should be a priority.

Additional considerations that are also important to me:

1. The visual environment is important to not only the quality of life here, but also the economic value to the real estate and tourism industries. I'm glad to see that you have done the requisite visual analysis to identify the visually sensitive areas where extra care and attention is needed.

2. When every acre of ground in the valley has a house on it, every one of the drainages along the front will be in demand for recreational access. Many of the trailheads are already being used to overcapacity. I ask that you keep in mind the need for additional parking capacity, loop trails, and shoulder season locations for additional trails during your project design. Log landings and skid trails can easily become new parking areas and trails when you are done with the fire and fuels reduction projects and can serve to assist future entries for periodic prescribed burning that will be needed to maintain the areas treated.

3. I would like to see a greater emphasis on what you anticipate will be the impacts created by climate change on our forest so we have a better idea of what to expect and how that should help identify priority management actions. Given the importance of old growth stands, priority consideration should be given to evaluating what should be done to increase the odds that they will survive.

4. Wildlife is important to our quality of life here, especially elk and deer. Wildlife corridors are important to sustain those populations and help them travel from one side of the valley to the other. Those corridors should be identified so that the impacts created by management actions needed for wildfire risk reduction and increased fire fighter safety could be designed to minimize the negative effects on wildlife.

Thank you for considering my comments and tackling such an important project. Good Luck!