

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 4/4/2025 6:00:00 AM

First name: Lincoln

Last name: Chute

Organization:

Title: Flathead County Fire Warden

Comments: After reviewing the Scoping Document for East Valley Fuels Reduction Project I have some questions and concerns. I helped host a meeting at Bad Rock Fire Hall with the USFS Hungry Horse Fuels group and landowners that border USFS lands to gain access to work on USFS lands. At that meeting there were multiple landowners that agreed to grant access or work with USFS to assist with getting the fuels reduction work completed. I also own adjacent land and offered to work with the USFS to provide access but never received a follow-up phone call.

On page 4 of the East Valley Fuels Reductio Project Scoping Document under Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) and Community at Risk it states that Federal Register notice 66 FR 766, January 04, 2001, identified Bigfork and Hungry Horse, Montana as "wildland-urban interface communities in the area of federal lands at high risk from wildfire". Yet when looking at the North map there is only one small unit north of Lake Blaine. This identified project is nine miles south of the north end of the project area. This is after landowners offered to work with the USFS to provide access to USFS lands.

From Lake Blaine north to Jensen Road there are areas of USFS lands that could have mechanized timber harvest. Around the Lake Blaine area there are a few USFS roads to work from, like USFS road 11144, 11145 and 11146. I provided the name of landowner that was willing to work with the USFS to provide access. As you move north there are not USFS roads but there are landowners that would work with the USFS to provide access to the USFS lands. Landowners provided their names to the fuels crew from Hungry Horse at the meeting at Bad Rock Fire Hall. I attended the meeting, provided my contact information, and offered access to the USFS land though my property.

From Doris Mountain to Elk Park Road on the west side to Hungry Horse Dam on east side to Highway 2 in Bad Rock Canyon, there are no roads for firefighters to work from. If a wildland fire gets established in this area there are few tactical options. The area is heavy timber and has a high probability to move into a crown fire. The ember cast would be typically to the northeast and could start spot fires on Lion MOUNTY or Hungry Horse/ Martin City areas. There is also critical infrastructure in the area also, Hungry Horse Dam, Bonneville Power Administration Line, Northwest Energy natural gas pipeline and US Highway 2.

From Jensen Road north the USFS lands are very steep and would have to be hand work only. But in this area, there are open parks on the mountain side that are old decedent brush with encroachment of young trees, Utilizing prescribed fire to rejuvenate the brush and grass would help the Elk, Deer, Black Bears and Grizzly Bears. It would also provide an area to utilize aircraft to slow the fire moving up hill or down. On the North end of Columbia Mountain there are some areas that could have mechanized timber harvest.

While reviewing the proposed work south of Lake Blaine there were a few things that jumped out to me. First there is a lot more proposed work in the southern project area than at the north end. I also noticed that there is a lack of planned work on the mid slope off of USFS roads, when mid slope work happens this would give options if a wildland fire starts and moves north or south along the mountain. Rice Ridge Fire moved that way above Seeley Lake, the fire could just run up hill and over the top but if the right winds and conditions could move mid slope north or south.

When reviewing the units, I questioned the probability of selling units that call for Skyline Logging or Tethered Logging is expensive and not cost effective when the units are under 10 acres, and two other units are 16 acres and 24 acres. Logging in general is expensive with the mobilization of large equipment to units to build landings. Landings that need to be built before crews can cut trees. In my review I also noted that there are seven units

under 10 acres and four of those units are one to six acres. Having such small units the logger will spend more time moving equipment than cutting down trees.

I support forest management on USFS lands, but when the units are small a wildland fire can spot over the unit with no problem. The southern area around Jewel Basin Road has a fuel load of dead down fall, this would lead to a wildland fire to build rapidly. This area is popular with hikers in the summer, if a fire starts it could move up hill rapidly trapping people and endangering a valuable communications site for Flathead County 911.

In conclusion, I support forest management on USFS lands both hand work and mechanized timber harvest. But I do have concerns that I have identified with the East Valley Fuels Reduction Plan as it stands. The units in the south need to be reviewed to see if they can be larger, as this would provide for a higher probability of a contractor to bid on those units or having a higher bid that will help fund the hand work. In the northern area many of the landowners have completed forest management on their property and the USFS has not completed any work on their lands. I have lived in the area for 32 years and purchased property at 750 Spruce Mounty Road in 1997, adjacent to USFS lands. My 10 ac has been logged and cleaned up. The last time the USFS lands next to my property had a wildland fire in the 1950s and there is now has a large amount of down and dead wood that would provide a fire with enough ladder fuels to move the fire from a surface fire to crown fire.

With the insurance company's looking closer at the fuels near structures and a landowner has completed the fuels work on their property but the lands next to them has not it is very frustrating. All the years I have lived in the area I have asked the USFS when are you going to work on the USFS lands? I have been told it is coming just be patient. Then it finally looked like the work would happen until I reviewed the project. There is no work north of Lake Blaine.