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Comments: Helena Lewis and Clark National Forest

Forest Wide Prescribed Fire Project

Public Comment concerning Prescribed Burn Proposal for Helena National Forest

The Forest Service has announced that as a part of the EA process for a proposed massive and multi-year prescribed burn program, the public has the opportunity to present comment to support or oppose the proposal.

From our experience with the Forest Service we understand that this is a necessity, asking for public comment. However there is likely nothing which can be said that will deter the program as planned from proceeding forward. The ink is dry, the plan is in place and the burning will begin.

Our experience has been that there is considerable negative impacts to the forest, the land and trees with a prescribed burn. I want to be clear, we understand that through application of a fire policy which lasted for more than a century, the forest's health now is worse than before.

There is too much undergrowth which when combined with climate change has resulted in wildfires which threaten especially the wild land urban interface. Thus we support cutting and stacking the undergrowth. Likewise we also support winter burns of those stacks and some restricted burning of duff and other undergrowth.

We draw the line however at a whole scale broadcast burn of multiple acres. Our experience with this program has been less than satisfactory. We met with forest service representatives for several years, suggesting that with the cutting and stacking of the undergrowth, with the burning of the piles, with duff and other selective burns, the area was sufficiently safe to allow the area to regrow without a burn. To a large degree our opposition to a broadcast burn was that it would destroy much of the trees which we and many others in the area hike on a daily basis. Broadcast burning, while it damages and destroys a significant part of the trees in the forest, does little to enhance the safety of the forest or area homes.

Our request to not do a broadcast burn was treated with a great deal of condescension, a dismissive and almost rude reaction to our request. To give this context, the Forest Service proposed to burn a 90 acre area, on the hillside above Prospector Gulch. The forest itself fronts on only two residences in the proximity of the burn. Our requests were summarily rejected, forest service personnel had made up their minds, burning the area was going to happen and it was done in March of this year.

However there was also an adjacent additional 90 acres where the forest fronted onto about 10-12 residences. This acreage, though cut, stacked and burned in the winter, did not experience any prescribed burn, no duff or other burning. We can only conclude that the choice of which acreage to burn and which to let go with only the piles being burned had little to do with safety of adjacent residences and more to do with the fact that we had objected to the burn. The fire itself was the answer to our objections.

We conclude that large scale prescribed burning is not necessary in most instances and that the better practice may be to cut, stack, burn the piles and selectively burn the duff and other areas of remaining ground vegetation as opposed a total broadcast burn.

One final point. When we met with the Forest District Ranger and the burn expert, we raised the issue of weeds, seeing that in the past once burned, weeds are the quickest to reestablish themselves and asked about plans to deal with weeds in the burn area. We were assured that the USFS knew and understood that a broadcast burn

would created conditions where weeds would rebound and were assured that in the spring, right after the burn and in the following spring, the area would be sprayed to prevent the invasion of weeds.

Of course this promise was not kept. No weed spraying this spring and now with summer, the weed population has established itself to such an extent that no amount of further spraying will ever bring the weed population under control. So not only is the forest full of trees which have been burned and killed but the surrounding landscape is now clogged with weeds. The result has not been to improve but to diminish the health of the forest.

This is the reality which we have been left with and we are concerned that in too many other places where the prescribed burn program is carried out, our experience will be repeated throughout the area where the prescribed burn program will be carried out. Dismissive and indifferent Forest service employees, ready to burn the forest at a moment's notice to make things "safe", even when the process is extreme and counter productive. Promises of weed control which were never followed up on leaving a forest in poorer health then when the program began.

We are opposed to a general broadcast burn project on the Helena National Forest.

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