



DECISION NOTICE:
Bull River Wildlife Management Area
Blowdown Salvage Project

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 1
490 Meridian Road, Kalispell MT 59901
Phone 406-752-5501

October 2021

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to conduct forest management activities on approximately 373 acres of the Bull River Wildlife Management Area, south of Troy in Lincoln and Sanders Counties. If approved by the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission, the work could begin as early as November 2021.

The objectives of the proposed treatments are to:

1. reduce susceptibility of adjacent stands of trees to future bark beetle infestation;
2. reduce fuel loading adjacent to private lands east of the BRWMA;
3. promote growth and regeneration of aspen;
4. improve quality of habitat for a variety of wildlife including big game and nongame species;
5. sell resulting merchantable timber byproducts to offset the cost of tree removal before the trees lose commercial value; and
6. if surplus revenue is generated from the project, use those funds to pay for future rehabilitation and forest management on the BRWMA as well as forest management work on other FWP properties across the state.

The initial treatment would involve 152 acres of mechanical (e.g. logging or mastication) and non-mechanical (e.g. hand cutting, lop and scatter, or pile and burn) treatments. FWP would hire contractors to remove downed and wind-damaged trees on approximately 120 acres, remove conifers around aspen clones on approximately 22 acres, and thin approximately 10 acres of dense conifer stands along the eastern boundary of the BRWMA. Following the treatment, FWP would continue to monitor bark beetle infestation in adjacent stands and potentially removed infested trees for up to five years (through December 2026). Removal of infested trees in subsequent years would depend on the economic feasibility of removal. Monitoring and follow-up treatments would be evaluated annually for mountain pine beetle and pine engraver beetle infestation. Tree removal would be implemented, if deemed necessary, to minimize localized outbreaks.

Following this action, FWP anticipates that the susceptibility to bark beetle infestations within the treated area and adjacent forest stands would be reduced, aspen regeneration and growth would be enhanced, forage opportunities for big game would be increased, and diversity of habitat would be maintained or increased for non-game through the retention of broken top snags and isolated patches of downed wood. The treatment is also expected to reduce the susceptibility of the treated area to high-intensity, stand-

replacement fire; improve accessibility for fire suppression efforts in the event of a wildfire, and reduce the risk of a fire negatively impacting neighboring landowners.

Costs to FWP for these forest management treatments are expected to be partially offset by the sale of merchantable timber byproduct. Depending on the market conditions for forest products at the time of bid solicitation, the project may generate revenue for future rehabilitation and forest management on the BRWMA and other forested FWP properties.

ALTERNATIVES

Alternative A: No Action. If FWP decides not to proceed with the proposed action, no timber salvage would be implemented on the BRWMA at this time. Downed trees would remain on the ground indefinitely. Adjacent live stands of trees would be at an increased susceptibility to bark beetle infestations for several years due to the likelihood of increasing bark beetle populations resulting from the infestation of downed trees. Heavy downed fuel would be a fire hazard and present a barrier to fire suppression in the event of a wildfire. Timber value would decline rapidly after the first year from decay and wood boring insects. No aspen enhancement or additional fuels reduction treatments would be undertaken at this time. FWP would forego the opportunity to generate revenue from timber harvest for the Forest Management Account.

Alternative B: Proposed Action. Conduct forested habitat improvement treatments on approximately 373 acres of the Bull River WMA, including approximately 152 acres of immediate treatment, monitoring of the project area for bark beetle infestation, and potential follow-up treatments to remove infested trees for up to 5 years. Following this action, FWP anticipates that bark beetle infestation within the project area will be reduced and habitat diversity would be expected to increase at the stand level and across the larger landscape, providing habitat niches for a wide range of game and nongame wildlife. Hazardous fuels along the eastern boundary of the WMA would be reduced, decreasing the susceptibility of the proposed treatment units to stand-replacement fire.

PUBLIC REVIEW PROCESS

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environments, evaluate those impacts through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and to make a decision based on this information. FWP released a draft environmental assessment (EA) for public review of this proposal (Bull River Wildlife Management Area Blowdown Salvage Project) on July 2 and accepted public comment for a minimum of 30 days until August 2, 2021.

Legal notice of the BRWMA Blowdown Salvage Project Draft EA was published once each in *The Western News* (Libby, July 20), *The Daily Inter Lake* (Kalispell, July 21) and the *Helena Independent Record* (Helena, July 21) newspapers. A statewide News Release was prepared and distributed July 2, 2021 to a standard list of media outlets interested in FWP issues.

FWP mailed 30 postcards and emailed 45 notifications of the EA's availability to adjacent landowners and interested individuals, groups and agencies. The EA was available FWP's web site (<http://fwp.mt.gov>, "Public Notices") and FWP accepted public comments from July 2 through August 2, 2021. Comments could be made by phone, mail or email to the FWP Libby-area Wildlife Biologist, Tonya Chilton-Radandt.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Summary of Public Comment

No public comments were received.

Response to Public Comment

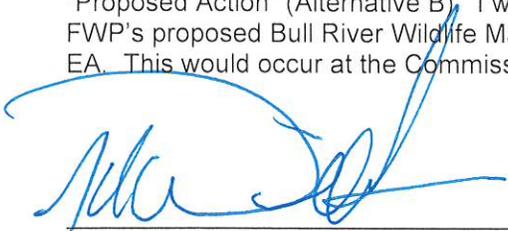
No public comments in opposition or support of the proposed project were received.

DECISION

Based upon the EA and the applicable laws, regulations, and policies, we have determined that the proposed action will not have negative effects on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, we conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis, and the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is unnecessary.

No concerns were raised that would bring the environmental analysis into question. In consideration of these facts, I adopt the Draft EA as final.

Based on the analysis in the draft EA and having received no public comments, I have selected the "Proposed Action" (Alternative B). I will recommend to the Fish & Wildlife Commission that it approves FWP's proposed Bull River Wildlife Management Area Blowdown Salvage Project, as described in the EA. This would occur at the Commission's meeting on October 28, 2021.



Jim Williams
Region 1 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

8/12/2021

Date