on about 113 acres to reduce fuel loads in harvested areas, which would reduce the risk of future large, uncontrollable wildfires. An estimated 2000 acres of proposed salvage units would be planted with conifer seedlings to help meet desired conditions for species diversity. The Forest Service proposal also includes approximately 0.5 miles of temporary road construction, 1.8 miles of permanent road construction, and 2.5 miles of road reconstruction to access the specific harvest units. All temporary roads constructed for this project, as well as an estimated 39 miles of existing non-essential road are proposed for restoration to reduce sediment and water yields, and improve grizzly bear habitat security. Non-essential roads are those that are no longer considered a necessary part of the permanent transportation system. Drainage improvement activities (such as surface ripping, drainage structure improvement, seeding) would be implemented on an additional 4 miles of existing system roads, with the intent of restoring natural drainage and reducing sediment. These roads will be needed for future management access, and would remain a part of the permanent transportation system. Additional road access restrictions may be needed to provide adequate security areas for grizzly bears, however identification of specific road closure proposals is pending further analysis. In addition, projects to improve watershed recovery, reforestation of 475–550 acres of severely burned areas not proposed for salvage, revegetation of road cut and fill slopes, and repair of damaged hiking trails would be accomplished if adequate funds are available.

The decision area includes all or a portion of three roadless areas: the entire Big Creek Roadless Area #701, and portions of the Zulu Roadless Area #166 and Mt. Henry Roadless Area #666. Some timber salvage, fuels reduction activities, and reforestation would occur within the Big Creek Roadless Area; no activities are proposed within the Zulu or Mt. Henry Roadless Areas. No road construction is proposed within any roadless area. No proposed activities are located in areas considered for inclusion to the National Wilderness System as recommended by the Kootenai National Forest Plan or by any past or present legislative wilderness proposals.

Due to the high level of tree mortality in proposed harvest units, most harvested areas would resemble clearcut, seed-tree, or shelterwood silvicultural methods. Only those live trees which must be cut to facilitate logging fire-killed trees would be harvested. In addition to most live trees, 10–15 snags per acre would be retained in all harvested areas if available. Timber harvest would be done by skyline, forwarder or winter tractor, and helicopter, and designated to result in minimal ground disturbance, risk of erosion, and compaction.

The Kootenai National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan provides overall management objectives in individual delineated management areas (MA's). The decision area contains nine MA's: 2, 3, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 19, and 24. Briefly described, MA 2 is managed to protect and enhance roadless recreation use and provide wildlife values. MA 3 is managed to provide opportunities for dispersed recreation in naturally appearing environments using trails and primitive roads for access. MA 10 is managed to maintain or enhance habitat effectiveness for winter use by big-game animals and protect scenic quality in areas visible from major travel routes. MA 12 is managed to maintain or enhance the summer-range habitat effectiveness for big-game species and produce a programmed yield of timber. MA 13 is managed to provide the special habitat necessary for old growth dependent wildlife. MA 14 focuses on maintaining or enhancing grizzly bear habitat, reducing grizzly/human conflicts, assisting in the recovery of the grizzly bear, realizing a programmed yield of timber production, and providing for the maintenance or enhancement of other wildlife species, especially big game. MA 15 is managed primarily for timber production while providing for other resource values. MA 19 is managed to protect soil stability and water quality by maintaining the vegetation in a healthy condition and minimizing surface disturbance. MA 24 is managed to protect mid to high elevation sites with rocky, thin soils. This MA is also managed for any wildlife resources that may occur. Timber salvage and fuels reduction is proposed in MA 12, MA 14, and MA 24.

Preliminary Issues

Several preliminary issues of concern have been identified by the Forest Service. These issues are briefly described below:

- Water Quality—Streams in the decision area have been impacted by past management and large wildfires. How would the proposed action affect water yield, sediment production, stream stability, and recovery from past impacts?
- Timber Supply—An estimated 92 million board feet of timber was killed in the North Fork Fire complex. Much of this fire-killed timber will quickly lose its commercial value due to rapid deterioration. To what extent does the proposed action recover the commercial value of fire-killed timber to help meet local and national needs?
- Activity in Roadless Areas—What effect would the proposal have on the roadless character of the Big Creek Roadless Area and other roadless areas?
- Grizzly Bear—The decision area lies within the recovery area for the Cabinet/Yaak grizzly bear ecosystem. How would the proposal maintain and enhance grizzly bear habitat, and contribute to recovery efforts?
- Old Growth—An estimated 1500 acres of designated old growth was destroyed by intense, stand replacing wildfire. What options are available to manage for suitable levels of old growth habitat in the decision area?
- Fisheries—Some streams contain fisheries habitat and resident fish populations, including torrent sculpin (a Region 1 sensitive species), possibly bull trout (currently being considered for listing as a threatened or endangered species), and westslope cutthroat trout (likely hybridized). How would the proposed action affect fisheries habitat and populations?
- Future Fire Risk—The wildfires of 1994 killed more trees over a larger area than would be expected in this ecosystem. Over the next 20 years most of these fire killed trees will fall, creating high fuel loadings over an area that is unprecedented in scale. Recurrence of wildfires are anticipated within the next 50 years, and could produce more severe effects to soils, water resources, and vegetation than the 1994 fires. How would the proposed action reduce future fuel loads and the corresponding risk of severe, uncontrollable wildfire?

Forest Plan Amendment

The Kootenai National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan has specific management direction for the North Fork decision area. The North Fork proposed action is designed to maintain or improve resource conditions and move towards achieving desired ecological conditions, and is consistent with the goals and objectives of the Forest Plan. Prior to making a NEPA decision, a thorough examination of all standards and guidelines of the Forest Plan would be completed and, if necessary, plan exceptions or amendments would be addressed in the EIS.

Decision To Be Made

The Kootenai National Forest Supervisor will decide the following: