

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: During the night of August 14–15, 1994, a lightning storm started 207 fires on the Kootenai National Forest in northwest Montana. Several fires ranging in size from less than one acre to over 7,000 acres occurred on the Libby Ranger District. The China Basin Fire Recovery EIS is being prepared in response to conditions resulting from two fires which burned within the boundary of the 12,000+ acre Libby Fire Complex. An interdisciplinary landscape analysis team used an ecosystem based approach to assess the fires affects and identify management opportunities that could be implemented to move the postfire landscapes toward a desired ecological condition.

The tree mortality levels which resulted from the China Basin and Quartz 3 wildfires varied considerably. Within the fire perimeters, approximately 1,518 acres average 90% tree mortality, approximately 2,315 acres average 70% tree mortality and approximately 3,643 acres average 30% tree mortality. The China Basin fire burned within and adjacent to a portion of the Kootenai River corridor currently under study for designation as a Recreation River as provided for under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The China basin Fire also burned within and adjacent to the Flagstaff Mountain Roadless Area (X–690).

The China Basin decision area contains approximately 10,300 acres within the Kootenai National Forest in Lincoln County, Montana. A portion of the proposed projects are located in the Quartz Creek drainage, primarily within the Lamoka and West Fork Quartz subdrainages. The remainder of the proposed projects are located within Hunter Gulch, Dad Creek, Burrel Creek and China Creek, which flow directly into the Kootenai River. The legal location of the decision area is as follows: Sections 15, 16, 20, 21, 22, 27, 28, 29, 30 Township 32 North, Range 32 West; Section 36, Township 32 North, Range 33 West; Sections 1, 12, 13, Township 31 North, Range 33 West; Sections 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 Township 31 North, Range 32 West; Principle Montana Meridian. The decision area includes land owned by the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and lands owned by private individuals.

Proposed Action

The primary purposes of the project are to recover valuable timber products from trees burned by wildfires that occurred in 1994; restore watershed conditions within the Quartz Creek and China Creek drainages; and to improve

bighorn sheep winter habitat. The Forest Service proposes to harvest approximately 14–19 million board feet of timber by salvaging fire-killed timber and imminently dead trees on approximately 1,955 acres of forest land outside riparian protection areas and to improve bighorn sheep habitat by harvesting approximately 4–5 million feet of fire-killed and green trees from approximately 1,141 acres in an area known locally as the Sheep Range. Only trees that were killed, or are expected to die as a result of the fires, would be harvested in the areas not designed to improve bighorn sheep winter range. The proposal includes prescribed burning of about 600 acres to improve bighorn sheep winter range and about 727 acres to reduce fuel loads in harvested areas. An estimated 1,500 acres of units proposed for harvest would be planted with conifer seedlings to help meet desired conditions for species diversity. An additional 650 acres of existing conifer plantation which burned would be replanted with conifer seedlings. All temporary roads constructed for this project, as well as an estimated 17.5 miles of existing system and non-system road are proposed for restoration to reduce sediment and water yields, and improve grizzly bear and elk habitat security. Stabilization of two slumps and riparian planting of damaged stream banks are included under the proposal. In addition, projects to improve watershed recovery, repair damaged hiking trails, and damaged wildlife structures (guzzler) would be accomplished if adequate funds are available.

Approximately 468 acres of existing old growth burned in the China Basin Fire. These stands no longer provide habitat for old growth dependent species and will be recommended for a change in management to big game summer range. These burned areas of pre-fire old growth have been proposed for salvage. Approximately 764 acres have been recommended for designation as old growth to replace the stands which burned.

The decision area includes a portion of the Flagstaff Mountain Roadless Area (X–690). Most of the proposed units intended to improve bighorn sheep winter range are located within this roadless area. The activities would include harvest and prescribed burning. There is no proposed road construction within the 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 present legislative wilderness proposals.

Due to the high level of tree mortality in proposed harvest units, most harvested areas would resemble clearcut, seedtree, or shelterwood silvicultural methods. Only those live trees which must be cut to facilitate logging fire-killed trees would be harvested, except in the units intended to improve bighorn sheep habitat where live trees would be designated for removal to enhance forage conditions. In addition to most live trees, clumps of snags and downed woody debris would remain on site for cavity habitat and for watershed purposes. Timber harvest is designed to have the minimal amount of ground disturbance. Proposed harvest would be completed by tractor, skyline, cable winching from existing roads and helicopter logging systems.

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, 10, 12, 13, 15, 18, and 19. Briefly described, MA 2 is managed to protect and enhance roadless recreation use and provide wildlife values. 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 15 is managed primarily for timber production while providing for other resource values. MA 18 are areas which have regeneration difficulties and are managed by maintaining the vegetation in a healthy condition and maintaining populations of existing wildlife. MA 19 is managed to protect soil stability and water quality by maintaining the vegetation in a healthy condition and minimizing surface disturbance. Timber salvage and fuels reduction is proposed in MA 12 and MA 15. Harvest units and prescribed burns to improve bighorn sheep habitat are proposed within MA 10.

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?