

- **Timber Supply**—An estimated 24 million board feet of timber was killed in the China Basin and Quartz 3 fires. 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 Flagstaff Mountain Roadless Area?

- **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?

- **Fisheries**—Some streams contain fisheries habitat and resident fish populations, including torrent sculpin (a Region 1 sensitive species), 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?

- **Bighorn Sheep Habitat**—The proposal contains approximately 1141 acres of "special cuts" intended to improve bighorn sheep habitat. To what extent does the proposed action improve forage for wintering bighorn sheep?

- **Visual Quality along Kootenai River**—The units proposed to improve bighorn sheep habitat are located along the Kootenai River Corridor and can be viewed in places from HWY 2. To what extent will the viewshed be altered from along HWY 2?

Forest Plan Amendment

The Kootenai National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan has specific management direction for the China Basin decision area. The China Basin 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.

Decisions To Be Made

The Kootenai National Forest Supervisor will decide the following:

- Should dead and imminently dead trees within fire areas be harvested and if so how and where,

- What amount, type, and distribution of watershed restoration projects, including road restoration, would be implemented,

- What burned areas need to be replanted,

- Should dead and green trees be harvested to improve bighorn sheep habitat and if so, how and where, and

- If Forest Plan exception or amendments are necessary to proceed with the Proposed Action within the decision area.

Public Involvement and Scoping

Some public participation efforts have already been initiated under the Sheep Range Environmental Assessment, prior to the fires. The design of the proposed units to improve bighorn sheep habitat have been altered in response to the Sheep Range project public involvement. Consultation with appropriate State and Federal agencies has been initiated. Preliminary effects analysis indicated that the wildfires may significantly affect the quality of the human environment, and fire recovery activities have the potential to both intensify and reduce effects. These potential effects prompted the decision to prepare an EIS for the China Basin Fire Recovery Project.

This environmental analysis and decisionmaking process will enable additional interested and affected people to participate and contribute to the final decision. Public participation will be requested at several points during the analysis. The Forest Service will be seeking information, comments, and assistance from Federal, State, local agencies, and other individuals or organizations who may be interested in or affected by the proposed projects. This input will be used in preparation of the draft and final EIS. The scoping process will include:

- Identifying potential issues.
- Identifying major issues to be analyzed in depth.
- Exploring additional alternatives which will be derived from issues recognized during scoping activities.
- Identifying potential environmental effects of this project and alternatives (i.e. direct, indirect, and cumulative effects and connected actions).

The analysis will consider a range of alternatives, including the proposed action, no action, and other reasonable action alternatives.

Estimated Dates for Filing

The draft China Basin Fire Recovery EIS is expected to be filed with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and to be available for public review by May, 1995. At that time EPA will

publish a Notice of Availability of the draft EIS in the **Federal Register**. The comment period on the draft EIS will be 45 days from the date the EPA publishes the Notice of Availability in the **Federal Register**.

The final EIS is scheduled to be completed in August, 1995. In the final EIS, the Forest Service is required to respond to comments and responses received during the comment period that pertain to the environmental consequences discussed in the draft EIS and applicable laws, regulations, and policies considered in making a decision regarding the proposal.

Reviewer's Obligations

The Forest Service believes, at this early stage, it is important to give reviewers notice of several court rulings related to public participation in the environmental review process. First, reviewers of draft environmental impact statements must structure their participation in the environmental review of the proposal so that it is meaningful and alerts an agency to the reviewer's position and contentions.

Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corp. v. NRDC, 435 U.S. 519, 553 (1978). Also, environmental objections that could be raised at the draft environmental impact statement stage may be waived or dismissed by the courts. *City of Angoon v. Hodel*, 803 F.2d 1016, 1022 (9th Cir. 1986) and *Wisconsin Heritages, Inc. v. Harris*, 490 F. Supp. 1334, 1338 (E.D. Wis. 1980). Because of these court rulings, it is very important that those interested in this proposed action participate by the close of the 45 day comment period so that substantive comments and objections are made available to the Forest Service at a time when it can meaningfully consider and respond to them in the final EIS.

To be most helpful, comments on the draft EIS should be as specific as possible and may address the adequacy of the statement or the merit of the alternatives discussed. Reviewers may wish to refer to the Council on Environmental Quality regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act at 40 CFR 1503.3 in addressing these points.

Responsible Official

Robert L. Schrenk, Forest Supervisor, Kootenai National Forest, 506 US Highway 2 West, Libby, MT 59923 is the Responsible Official. I have delegated the responsibility to prepare the China Basin Fire Recovery Environmental Impact Statement to Lawrence A. Froberg, District Ranger, Libby Ranger District. As the Responsible Official I