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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Scenery Fire Recovery; Kootenai National Forest, Lincoln County, MT

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement.

SUMMARY: The Scenery Face Fire burned approximately 4700 acres of Kootenai National Forest system lands in the late summer of 1994. The Libby Ranger District on the Kootenai National Forest intends to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to assess and disclose the environmental effects of opportunities designed to recover economic value of burned timber, reduce fuel accumulations, rehabilitate existing sediment sources and protect long-term soil productivity. These objectives would be accomplished through salvage harvest of fire-killed trees; reforestation of some harvested and severely burned areas; fuels reduction in harvested areas and restoration of non-essential roads. The Scenery decision area is located approximately 1 air mile west of Libby, Montana.

The proposal's actions to salvage fire-killed trees and reforest burned areas, reduce fuels, and restore roads are being considered together because they represent either connected or cumulative actions as defined by the Council on Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1508.25). The EIS will tier to the Kootenai National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan and Final EIS of September 1987, which provides overall guidance for achieving the desired forest condition of the area.

DATES: Written comments and suggestions should be received by no later than March 24, 1995.

ADDRESSES: The Responsible Official is Lawrence A. Froberg, District Ranger, Libby Ranger District, Kootenai National

Forest. Written comments and suggestions concerning the scope of the analysis should be sent to Lawrence A. Froberg, District Ranger, Libby Ranger District, 12557 US Hwy 37 N, Libby, Montana, 59923.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Leanne Marten, NEPA Coordinator, Libby Ranger District. Phone: (406) 293-7773.

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 of these fires occurred on the Libby Ranger District. The Scenery Fire Recovery EIS is being prepared in response to conditions resulting from one of the largest of these fires, the 4700 acre Scenery Face Fire. An interdisciplinary landscape analysis team is using 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.

Burn intensities in the Scenery wildfire varied considerably. Within the fire perimeters approximately 2200 acres burned at moderate intensity (average 55% tree mortality) and approximately 2500 acres burned at low intensity (average 25% mortality). The fire burned within the Cabinet Face East Roadless Area #671.

The Scenery decision area contains approximately 3,300 acres within the Kootenai National Forest in Lincoln County, Montana. The legal location of the decision area is as follows: Sections or portions of Sections 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29, and 30 and Township 31 North, Range 32 West; Sections or portions of Sections 24 and 25 of Township 31 North, Range 33 West; Principle Meridian. The land in and adjacent to the decision area is primarily federal ownership under the jurisdiction of the Forest Service with some intermixed private ownership.

Proposed Action

The primary purpose of the project is to recover valuable timber products from trees burned by the Scenery Face wildfire that occurred in 1994 (while maintaining ecological processes), with the secondary benefit of reducing fuel loads. Actions are also proposed to enhance watershed recovery and improve grizzly bear habitat security.

The Forest Service proposes to harvest approximately 2.1 million board feet of timber by salvaging fire-killed trees and dying trees on approximately 350 acres of forest land outside riparian protection areas. Only trees that were killed, or are expected to die as a result of the fires, would be harvested. The proposal includes prescribed burning of about 67 acres to reduce fuel loads in harvested areas. An estimated 263 acres of proposed salvage units would be planted with conifer seedlings to help meet desired conditions for species diversity. The Forest Service also proposes to scarify and revegetate an estimated 4 miles of existing non-essential roads 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. 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.

The decision area includes a portion of the Cabinet Face East Roadless Area #671. Approximately 330 acres of timber salvage and approximately 250 acres of reforestation would occur within the roadless area. No road construction is proposed 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.

Due to the high level of tree mortality in proposed harvest units, most harvested areas would resemble clearcut or seed-tree silvicultural methods. Only those live trees which must be cut to facilitate logging fire-killed trees would be harvested. Timber harvest would be done by skyline and helicopter yarding, designed 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 four MA's: 11, 12, 14 and 19. Briefly described, MA 11 is managed to maintain or enhance the winter-range habitat effectiveness for big-game species and produce a programmed yield of timber. MA 12 is managed to maintain or enhance the summer-range