

**SQUEEZER MEADOW MULTIPLE TIMBER SALE PROJECT
FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PROJECT DESCRIPTION, OBJECTIVES AND PROPOSED ACTION

The Swan River State Forest (SRSF), Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), Forestry and Trust Land Management Division, is proposing the Squeezer Meadow Multiple Timber Sale Project. The project area is located approximately 9 air miles southeast of Swan Lake, Montana (MT) on Common Schools State Trust Land in the eastern portion of the Swan River State Forest. The project area is approximately 25,436 acres and includes all or portions of the following sections:

SECTIONS	TOWNSHIP	RANGE
16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32, 33, and 34	24N	17W
24, 25, and 26	24N	18W
3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 30, 32, 34, 35, and 36	23N	17W
1 and 12	23N	18W

The Squeezer Meadow Multiple Timber Sale Project was initially scoped for a 30-day period in March of 2022. During project development, two informational newsletters were released in July 2022 and August 2023 to individuals who replied to the scoping notice or expressed interest in staying informed about the project. The Draft EIS was released on February 16, 2024 for a 30-day public comment period. All public comments were reviewed and addressed in the Final EIS, which was released on May 3rd, 2024. The final Decision Notice for the project will be released on May 20th, 2024.

Project objectives:

- Promote biodiversity by moving forest stands towards historic cover type conditions and species composition.
- Improve forest health and productivity by addressing insect and disease issues.
- Generate revenue for the Common Schools Trust for funding public education and to benefit local economies.
- Contribute sufficient volume towards DNRC’s annual sustained yield target of 60 million board feet (MMBF) as required by MCA (77-5-221 through 223) while incorporating and meeting important ecological commitments.
- Develop and improve the transportation system and infrastructure for long-term

management, fire suppression, and public access.

- Improve water quality by removing and rehabilitating sediment delivery sources and meet Best Management Practices (BMPs) on all project roads, including haul routes to Highway 83.
- Reduce fuel loads and wildfire hazards by decreasing ground and ladder fuels.

The Squeezer Meadow Final Environmental Impact Statement evaluates one no-action alternative and two action alternatives.

NO-ACTION ALTERNATIVE A

This alternative would entail no timber harvested, zero acres treated, zero old growth acres treated, no implementation of silvicultural prescriptions or harvest methods, no replacement, construction or removal of stream crossings, no road work, and no gravel pit use or development.

ACTION ALTERNATIVE B

This alternative would entail a timber harvest of 39.9 MMBF, 5,236 acres treated, 760 old growth acres treated, implementation of commercial thinning, sanitation, individual tree selection, old growth maintenance, overstory removal, seed tree and shelterwood silvicultural prescriptions, implementation of ground-based and cable yarding harvest systems, replacement of 5 stream crossings, removal and restoration of 4 stream crossings, 80 miles of road maintenance, 1.5 miles of road reconstruction, 5.3 miles of new road construction, 7.2 miles of road reclamation.

ACTION ALTERNATIVE C

This alternative would entail a timber harvest of 35.5 MMBF, 4,861 acres treated, 717 old growth acres treated, implementation of commercial thinning, sanitation, individual tree selection, old growth maintenance, overstory removal, seed tree and shelterwood silvicultural prescriptions, implementation of ground-based and cable yarding harvest systems, replacement of 5 stream crossings, removal and restoration of 4 stream crossings, 80 miles of road maintenance, 1.5 miles of road reconstruction, 5.3 miles of new road construction, 7.2 miles of road reclamation.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

The ID Team identified over 67 issues raised internally and by the public. Some issues were determined to be relevant and within the scope of the project. These were included in the impacts analyses and used to assist the ID Team in developing a reasonable range of alternatives (*FEIS, TABLE I - 1*). Issues that were eliminated from further analysis were those that were determined to not be relevant to the development of alternatives or were beyond the

scope of the project, and were, therefore, not carried through the impacts analyses (*FEIS, TABLE I - 2*).

The issues analyzed within this FEIS involve the following resources: vegetation, geology and soils, fisheries, watershed and hydrology, wildlife, economics, air quality, recreation, aesthetics, cultural resources. Each resource analysis involves a description of the current environmental condition, the measurement criteria used to analyze impacts to the resource and the direct, indirect and cumulative effects of the no-action and both action alternatives on the resource.

The following paragraphs provide summaries of impacts from the no-action alternative and both actions alternatives. A full comparison of impacts by alternative is available in the *FEIS, TABLE II-3*.

IMPACTS OF NO-ACTION ALTERNATIVE A

- Implementation of No-Action Alternative A would result in no immediate impacts to vegetation, unless a large disturbance, such as a wildfire, would occur. Over time, there would be an increase in mixed-conifer cover types and a decrease in seral dominated cover types, a shift towards older age classes, potential shift in old growth forest acres as stands continue to mature and fall in or out of the old growth stand classification, increase in patch size of older stands and a decrease in patch size of younger stands, reduction of fragmentation. Potential decrease in vigor would occur as effects of insects and disease continue, increase in crown cover and stocking, increase in insect and disease as dense stocking levels are maintained, increase in wildlife risk, and continuation and potential increase of current weed population levels.
- Implementation of No-Action Alternative A would result in no immediate impacts to watershed and hydrology resources. Over time, there would be a potential decrease in sediment delivery as new funding becomes available for road maintenance.
- Implementation of No-Action Alternative A would result in no immediate impacts to fisheries resources beyond those already present in the existing environment. Existing impacts to connectivity would continue to limit fish distribution and genetic exchange.
- Implementation of No-Action Alternative A would result in no immediate impacts to geology and soil resources. Over time, the current condition of physical soil properties, erosion, site nutrients, long-term soil productivity, and slope stability would be expected to remain stable or increase.
- Implementation of No-Action Alternative A would result in no immediate impacts to wildlife resources. Over time and in the absence of large natural disturbances such as wildfire, there would be an increase in the availability and connectivity of old growth forest habitat, increase in the availability of lynx winter foraging habitat and decrease in lynx summer foraging habitat, increase in habitat connectivity for fisher, decrease in suitability of stands for flammulated owl use, increase in habitat availability and

suitability for pileated woodpecker, and increase in big game thermal cover and elk security habitat availability.

- Implementation of No-Action Alternative A would result in no income earned from timber harvest and no annual jobs supported.
- Implementation of No-Action Alternative A would result in no impacts to air quality beyond those currently present in the existing environment.
- Implementation of No-Action Alternative A would result in no impacts to recreation.
- Implementation of No-Action Alternative A would result in no impacts to the aesthetics of the area beyond those currently present in the existing environment.

IMPACTS COMMON TO BOTH ACTION ALTERNATIVES

- Implementation of Action Alternative B or C would result in impacts to vegetation. Western larch/Douglas fir, western white pine and ponderosa pine cover types would increase and lodgepole pine, mixed conifer, subalpine fir and Douglas fir cover types would decrease. Over time, there would be an increase in seral cover types. Age classes would shift towards an increase in acres of younger age classes and a decrease in acres of older age classes, including a decrease in old growth forest acres. Mean patch size of all age classes, except younger age classes, as well as the mean patch size of all cover types would decrease. Areas proposed for seed tree, shelterwood or salvage harvesting would contribute to fragmentation whereas areas proposed for other harvesting prescriptions would not contribute to fragmentation. Areas proposed for harvest would increase in stand vigor. Single storied and two-storied stands would increase and multi-storied stands would decrease. Representation of well-stocked stands would decrease and representation of medium-stocked stands would increase; over time as stands regenerate, crown cover would increase. Harvest treatments would remove trees affected by insects and disease, which would reduce losses and recover mortality from insects and disease. Fine fuels would increase immediately after harvest, but overall fuel loading and wildfire risks would be reduced. No negative impacts to sensitive plant species are expected. Noxious weeds would be treated and preventative measures would be taken to reduce the spread and establishment of noxious weeds. Forest carbon would be reduced.
- Implementation of Action Alternatives B or C would result in similar impacts to watershed and hydrology resources. Annual water yield would increase in each watershed, however all watersheds would remain below recommended threshold for annual water yield increases. Stream crossing improvements would occur at 3 sites in the Swan River Drainages, 1 site in Squeezer Creek, and 5 sites in Goat Creek to implement appropriate BMPs and provide fish passage. Road construction would result in long-term reductions in sediment delivery in Soup and Goat Creek watersheds and no net change to sediment delivery in Cilly and Squeezer Creek drainages. Short-term

impacts to water quality may occur during replacement or removal of existing stream crossings in the Swan River Drainages, Squeezer Creek, and Goat Creek.

- Implementation of Action Alternatives B or C would result in similar impacts to fisheries resources. Connectivity in Swan River Drainages and Goat Creek would improve due to the replacement or removal of one existing stream crossing in each assessment area. Water yield would increase in the analysis area, which would create low impacts to channel form. Short-term impacts from sediment delivery during stream crossing construction would increase risk to spawning and rearing habitats, however crossing improvements are expected to reduce long-term sediment delivery in Goat and Soup creeks. No RMZ harvest would occur, thus no impacts to riparian condition, large woody debris or stream temperature would occur.
- Implementation of Action Alternative B or C would result in impacts to geology and soil resources. Impacts to physical soil properties, erosion, productivity, and site nutrients would be expected. The risk of slope instability would increase during and after project implementation until the slope revegetated.
- Implementation of Action Alternative B or C would result in impacts to wildlife resources. Old growth habitat acres for wildlife and mean patch size of old growth habitat would decrease, which would impact old growth-associated species. Forest acres that provide habitat connectivity would be reduced. Short-term and long-term negative effects to linkage habitat would be anticipated. Grizzly bear hiding cover would decrease, but adequate amount of hiding cover would persist within the cumulative analysis area. Total road densities would decrease, and disturbance levels associated with commercial timber harvest would increase. Secure grizzly bear habitat would decrease, however harvesting restrictions would occur during spring period to limit potential disturbance to grizzly bears. Suitable lynx habitat would be temporarily reduced, but landscape connectivity for lynx would remain high. Suitable fisher habitat and landscape connectivity would be reduced, but riparian corridors for fisher would remain intact. Portions of the project area would temporarily decrease habitat suitability for flammulated owl, while other portions of the project area would increase in habitat suitability for flammulated owl. Suitable habitat for pileated woodpecker would be reduced, but important pileated woodpecker habitat attributes would be retained. Thermal cover for big game would be reduced but cover patches for big game would remain connected. Security habitat for elk would be reduced.
- Implementation of Action Alternative B or C would result in impacts to economics. Revenue from timber sales would be generated and annual timber industry jobs would be supported.
- Implementation of Action Alternative B or C would result in impacts to air quality. Dust would be generated on roadways, but vegetative barriers and abatement measures would limit the dispersion of particulate matter. Smoke would increase during periods

of pile burning. Carbon emissions would be released from harvest and road-related activities.

- Implementation of Action Alternative B or C would result in impacts to recreation. Public nonmotorized recreation and hunting are anticipated to be negatively affected for temporary periods of operation.
- Implementation of Action Alternative B or C would result in impacts to aesthetics. Visual quality would be reduced short-term and noise levels would temporarily increase during period of operation.

SUMMARY OF CHANGES BETWEEN DEIS AND FEIS

Following the review of public comments received during the 30-day public review of the DEIS, the DNRC decided that the DEIS would be accepted as final. Any minor additions and corrections that were made to the FEIS are denoted with a gray highlight and strikethrough, respectively, to reflect any differences from the DEIS. A table in Attachment C of the FEIS describes the public comments received during the 30-day public review of the DEIS and the DNRC's responses to those comments. No substantive changes were made to any portion of the FEIS.

AGENCY'S PROPOSED ALTERNATIVE

Following a thorough review of the Draft EIS, project file, public correspondence, corrections and additions made by DNRC that were reflected in the FEIS, Department policies, the *SFLMP*, *Administrative Rules for Forest Management*, and the *DNRC Forested Trust Lands Habitat Conservation Plan*, the decision maker proposes the selection of Action Alternative B. The proposed decision would implement Action Alternative B without modification and would include all recommended mitigations described within the Squeezer Meadow Multiple Timber Sale Project FEIS. Rationale for the proposed decision is documented in the *FEIS*, *Chapter II pages 95 through 106*. A final Decision Notice will be published on May 20th, 2024, no less than 15 days after the publication of the Final EIS. The first timber sale would likely be sold in July 2024, contingent on Land Board approval.