

CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	2016 Forest in Focus Grant Project
Proposed Implementation Date:	March 2016
Proponent:	Montana DNRC
Location:	Throughout Montana
Counties:	Fergus, Flathead, Lake, Lewis and Clark, Missoula, Powell, Ravalli, Sweetgrass

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

Purpose:

This Environmental Assessment was prepared in order to evaluate the potential impacts of providing two million dollars, (\$2,000,000.00), in funding to facilitate forest stewardship, restoration and fuel reduction projects on non-industrial private forestlands (NIPF), and/or tribal lands in Montana.

This funding is part of Governor Bullock's Forest in Focus initiative. It originates, via HB354, from the state fire suppression account and was made available for this use during the 2013 legislative session.

Providing this funding specifically addresses the following needs set forth in the Forests in Focus Initiative:

- Promote Forest Stewardship on NIPF, state, and/or tribal lands to meet a variety of landowner objectives.
- Promote landowner coordination, collaboration, and partnership to achieve landscape scale benefits.
- Promote a stable timber supply for Montana's forest industry which is integral to sound forest management, watershed restoration, wildfire risk reduction, and the overall health of our Forests.

Projects proposed to receive funding would otherwise be cost prohibitive to operators and landowners given the current downturn in the timber market.

If the proposed action alternative were chosen, funds would be granted to 10 competitively chosen forest management projects. Projects would be located in Fergus, Flathead, Lake, Lewis and Clark, Missoula, Powell, Ravalli, and Sweet Grass counties. These projects would utilize silvicultural prescriptions such as commercial thinning, pre-commercial thinning, and salvage harvests to make timber stands more resilient to insects, disease, and catastrophic wildfire. Approximately 26,511 tons of pulp and 63,429 tons of sawlogs would be produced and sold to Montana timber processing facilities.

Decision to be made:

- Does granting funds to these projects have significant environmental impacts beyond what could occur under current laws and regulations pertaining to forestry in Montana, and is an Environmental Impact Statement necessary?

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED:

Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project.

The Montana DNRC conducted public scoping for the Forests in Focus Grant Project by soliciting comments at three public meetings, (held in Helena, Missoula, and Kalispell with an option to participate by phone), and by publishing requests for comments in the legal advertisement sections of the following newspapers, the Helena Independent Record, the Missoula Missoulian, and the Kalispell Daily Interlake. One verbal comment was received and it supported the project and thanked the State of MT for establishing the project.

2. OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES WITH JURISDICTION, LIST OF PERMITS NEEDED:

All proposed projects would adhere to all current rules and regulations governing forest practices in Montana including:

- Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation: Slash Hazard Reduction Agreements will be required and the Streamside Management Zone Law must be followed.
- Local Conservation Districts: The 310 law may apply to stream crossings that are a part of one or more of the projects proposed to receive funding.
- Montana Department of Environmental Quality: Slash Burning Restrictions for air quality.

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Alternative A (action): The action alternative would provide two million dollars, (\$2,000,000.00), through the Forests in Focus grant program. Funding would facilitate ten forest stewardship, restoration and fuel reduction projects on NIPF lands in Montana. Approximately 2,939 acres would be treated, using silviculture prescriptions such as commercial thinning, pre-commercial thinning and salvage harvesting. These projects are consistent with each landowner's forest management plan. Combined, all ten projects would provide approximately 26,511 tons of pulp and 63,429 tons of sawlog material to Montana timber processing facilities.

Alternative B (no action): Projects would not be funded under the Forests in Focus grant program. Landowners could choose to perform the work without grant assistance, post-pone or drop the project, or seek other funding sources.

III. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>RESOURCES</i> potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.• Explain <i>POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS</i> following each resource heading.• Enter "NONE" if no impacts are identified or the resource is not present. |
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4. GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE:

Consider the presence of fragile, compactable or unstable soils. Identify unusual geologic features. Specify any special reclamation considerations. Identify any cumulative impacts to soils.

Alternative A: Minor direct, indirect, or cumulative impacts to geology or soils would be expected. All activities funded under the Forests in Focus Project are required, at a minimum, to meet Montana's Best Management Practices (BMP's) for Forestry. These BMPs include several actions that are designed specifically to protect soils. In the event that soils are disturbed in a manner that requires remediation, that work would be required to be completed and approved by the Grant Administrator prior to the close-out of the project.

Alternative B: No funding would be provided to facilitate forest stewardship projects. No direct, indirect or cumulative impacts would be expected.

5. WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION:

Identify important surface or groundwater resources. Consider the potential for violation of ambient water quality standards, drinking water maximum contaminant levels, or degradation of water quality. Identify cumulative effects to water resources.

Existing Conditions: Class 1, 2, and 3 streams, surface drainage areas, springs and adjacent and isolated wetlands exist, on a variety of levels, within the ten project areas.

Alternative A: The Montana Streamside Management Zone Law and MT Forestry Best Management Practices would be required to be followed as a stipulation of receiving funding. Therefore minimal direct, indirect, or cumulative impacts to water quality would be expected.

Alternative B: No funding would be provided to facilitate forest stewardship projects. No direct, indirect or cumulative impacts would be expected.

6. AIR QUALITY:

What pollutants or particulate would be produced? Identify air quality regulations or zones (e.g. Class I air shed) the project would influence. Identify cumulative effects to air quality.

Alternative A: Under the action alternative funding would be provided to facilitate forest thinning and timber harvest. These actions would create slash consisting of tree limbs, tops, and other vegetative debris. Much of this slash would ultimately be burned in accordance the DNRC Hazard Reduction Law and with Montana Department of Environmental Quality regulations. Minimal short-term direct, indirect or cumulative impacts beyond existing conditions would be expected under the action alternative.

Alternative B: No funding would be provided to facilitate commercial or pre-commercial thinning. No direct, indirect or cumulative impacts would be expected.

7. VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY:

What changes would the action cause to vegetative communities? Consider rare plants or cover types that would be affected. Identify cumulative effects to vegetation.

Existing conditions: At a statewide level forests in Montana are suffering from numerous forest health problems. These include overstocking, pine beetle infestation, spruce budworm, mistletoe, and root disease. In many instances, these problems are a result of past management activities including effective wildland fire suppression. The result is forests that are more highly stocked, at higher risk of insect and disease outbreaks and at higher risk of catastrophic wildfire than would have occurred under typical historic conditions. Forest stands within the various project areas are suffering from one or more of these common problems.

In general, most NIPF lands are actively managed to meet landowner objectives. Common management actions include pre-commercial thinning, commercial thinning, and various types of timber harvest to meet objectives such as maintaining healthy, vigorous forests and providing diverse wildlife habitat. If not for the poor economic feasibility of the projects proposed to receive funding, all projects could take place under existing conditions.

Alternative A: Funding would be provided to assist landowners performing forest stewardship, restoration and fuel reduction projects on NIPF lands in Montana. Silvicultural treatments such as pre-commercial thinning, commercial thinning, and salvage harvest would be applied across approximately 2,939 acres. These treatments are site specific and have been developed to meet goals, values, and objectives set forth in each landowner's Forest Management Plan. These treatments will enhance the vigor of leave trees and create forest stands that are more resilient to insects, disease, and catastrophic wildfire. All projects proposed for funding could take place under current laws and regulations pertaining to forestry, but are not economically feasible. Minimal direct, indirect or cumulative effects beyond existing conditions would be expected.

Alternative B: No funding would be provided to assist landowners performing forest stewardship, restoration and fuel reduction projects on non-industrial private forestlands in Montana. These projects may possibly still take place, now or in the future, if the landowner chooses to invest the money, log markets improve, or other funding becomes available. No direct, indirect or cumulative effects beyond existing conditions would be expected.

8. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS:

Consider substantial habitat values and use of the area by wildlife, birds or fish. Identify cumulative effects to fish and wildlife.

Existing conditions: All areas proposed for treatment are on NIPF lands. Across Montana, and on this project area, NIPF provides diverse habitat for an array of terrestrial, avian, and aquatic species. In general, most NIPF land is actively managed to meet landowner objectives and providing high quality wildlife habitat ranks high on the list of many of the NIPF landowners involved. If not for the unfeasible economics of the projects proposed for funding, all projects proposed for funding could take place under existing conditions.

Alternative A (action): No specific concerns or issues regarding terrestrial, avian, or aquatic habitats were received during scoping.

Funding would be provided to assist landowners performing forest stewardship, restoration and fuel reduction projects on non-industrial private forestlands in Montana. The funded projects would impact terrestrial and avian habitat by altering forest structure and reducing timber stand densities. These vegetative changes would impact each wildlife species in a unique way. Some wildlife species may benefit in a particular treatment area while others species would be less likely to use that area following treatment. Treatments may actually have both beneficial and detrimental impacts to species on the same acreage. For example pre-commercial thinning may reduce hiding and thermal cover for big game while simultaneously increasing browse and forage. Overall low direct, indirect or cumulative effects beyond existing conditions would be expected to terrestrial or avian resources.

The Montana Streamside Management Zone Law and MT Forestry Best Management Practices would be followed so minimal direct, indirect or cumulative impacts to aquatic life or habitats would be expected.

Alternative B: No funding would be provided to facilitate commercial or pre-commercial thinning. No direct, indirect or cumulative impacts would be expected.

9. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES:

Consider any federally listed threatened or endangered species or habitat identified in the project area. Determine effects to wetlands. Consider Sensitive Species or Species of special concern. Identify cumulative effects to these species and their habitat.

Existing Conditions: All areas proposed for treatment are NIPF land. Across Montana NIPF land provides diverse habitat for numerous wildlife species, including threatened and endangered species. It is possible threatened or endangered species may use some areas proposed for funding, however no Threatened or Endangered species have been identified on any of the lands proposed for funding. A query of sagegrouse.mt.gov/projects/ was completed. It was determined no projects proposed for funding are within Sage Grouse Core or General Habitat.

Alternative A: No specific concerns or issues regarding unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources were discovered during scoping. Under the action alternative funding would be provided to assist landowners performing forest stewardship, restoration and fuels reduction projects on non-industrial private forestlands.

If Threatened or Endangered species are discovered during operations the landowner would be responsible for following the Endangered Species Act.

Projects proposed for funding are similar to projects already taking place across Montana. They would meet all pertinent rules and regulations and, if economically feasible could proceed under existing conditions.

Minimal direct, indirect or cumulative effects beyond existing conditions would be expected.

Alternative B: No Funding would be provided to assist landowners performing forest stewardship, restoration and fuel reduction projects on non-industrial private, state, and/or tribal lands in Montana. No direct, indirect or cumulative impacts would be expected.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:

Identify and determine effects to historical, archaeological or paleontological resources.

No effects to historical or archaeological sites would be expected under either alternative.

11. AESTHETICS:

Determine if the project is located on a prominent topographic feature, or may be visible from populated or scenic areas. What level of noise, light or visual change would be produced? Identify cumulative effects to aesthetics.

Alternative A: All projects proposed for funding could take place under current laws and regulations pertaining to forestry and could take place as part of existing conditions. Projects were originally designed by the landowners and their partners in the grant project. Consequently, the aesthetics of each project have been designed by the people most likely to see them on a day-to-day basis. Minimal direct, indirect or cumulative effects beyond existing conditions would be expected.

Alternative B: No funding would be provided to facilitate forest stewardship, restoration or fuels reduction projects. No direct, indirect or cumulative impacts would be expected.

12. DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AIR OR ENERGY:

Determine the amount of limited resources the project would require. Identify other activities nearby that the project would affect. Identify cumulative effects to environmental resources.

No change from existing conditions would be expected under either alternative.

13. OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS PERTINENT TO THE AREA:

List other studies, plans or projects on this tract. Determine cumulative impacts likely to occur as a result of current private, state or federal actions in the analysis area, and from future proposed state actions in the analysis area that are under MEPA review (scoped) or permitting review by any state agency.

None

<p style="text-align: center;">IV. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>RESOURCES</i> potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.• Explain <i>POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS</i> following each resource heading.• Enter "NONE" if no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.

14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY:

Identify any health and safety risks posed by the project.

No effects to Human Health and safety would be expected under either alternative.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:

Identify how the project would add to or alter these activities.

Existing Conditions: Currently the timber industry in Montana is suffering from numerous detrimental economic drivers outside the scope of this Environmental Analysis. The result is low lumber and log prices. These low log prices have reduced the economic incentive for landowners to harvest timber and typically limit operating areas for mills. When log prices are higher many forest treatments can be paid for by the products

which are generated. Under current market conditions this is not feasible for many projects. This has resulted in a diminished and less stable timber supply for Montana's forest industry.

Alternative A: The proposed action would provide funding for projects that would provide approximately 26,511 tons of pulp and 63,429 tons of sawlog material to Montana timber processing facilities. These projects could theoretically occur under existing conditions but due to poor economics it is unlikely they would.

Alternative B: The no action alternative would not provide funding to facilitate commercial harvest. No immediate influx of affordable raw material would be experienced by Montana timber processing facilities. Over time if log markets improve, additional funding becomes available, or landowners decide to make financial investments into forest stewardship projects this raw material could become available to Montana timber processing facilities.

16. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT:

Estimate the number of jobs the project would create, move or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to the employment market.

Alternative A: According to the Montana Bureau of Business and Economic Research a general rule of thumb is that for every million board feet of sawtimber harvested in Montana ten person years of employment occur in the forest products industry. Granting funds to these specific projects would harvest approximately 10.5 million board feet resulting in 10.5 person years of employment. Additional jobs would be created through non-commercial stewardship activities such as pre-commercial thinning and slash burning. Considering these individual projects could occur without funding, granting funds to facilitate these projects would not create any new jobs but rather ensure the stability of approximately 10.5 person years of employment.

Alternative B: The no action alternative would not provide any immediate employment or contract opportunities. If, in the future, funding or log markets allow similar opportunities could be possible.

17. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES:

Estimate tax revenue the project would create or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to taxes and revenue.

Both alternatives have only indirect, limited implications for tax collections.

18. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES:

Estimate increases in traffic and changes to traffic patterns. What changes would be needed to fire protection, police, schools, etc.? Identify cumulative effects of this and other projects on government services

Alternative A: The two million dollars was made available for this use in the 2016-2017 biennium. All grant administration would be handled through existing Montana Department of Natural Resources employees. Implementing the proposed action alternative would not create any direct, indirect or cumulative demands for government services beyond existing conditions.

Alternative B: The no action alternative would not create any direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to the demand for government services beyond existing conditions.

19. LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS:

List State, County, City, USFS, BLM, Tribal, and other zoning or management plans, and identify how they would affect this project.

Neither alternative has any direct, indirect or cumulative effects on locally adopted environmental plans or goals.

20. ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES:

Identify any wilderness or recreational areas nearby or access routes through this tract. Determine the effects of the project on recreational potential within the tract. Identify cumulative effects to recreational and wilderness activities.

Alternative A: The proposed action alternative is entirely on private land and would not impact access to, and quality of, recreational or wilderness activities.

Alternative B: The no action alternative would not impact access to and quality of recreational or wilderness activities.

21. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING:

Estimate population changes and additional housing the project would require. Identify cumulative effects to population and housing.

There would not be any direct implications for density and distribution of population or housing under either alternative.

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:

Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.

Neither alternative would have any implications on social structures or mores.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:

How would the action affect any unique quality of the area?

Neither alternative would have any effects on cultural uniqueness or diversity.

24. OTHER APPROPRIATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES:

Estimate the return to the trust. Include appropriate economic analysis. Identify potential future uses for the analysis area other than existing management. Identify cumulative economic and social effects likely to occur as a result of the proposed action.

Alternative A: The projects would provide a significant supply of raw materials at a time when log supplies to Montana mills are low due to numerous external factors. Raw materials generated by these projects will keep Montana processing facilities, logging contractors, and trucking companies working for several months.

Alternative B: The no action alternative would not provide any material for local timber processing facilities nor contract opportunities for local forestry contractors.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	Name: Neil C. Simpson/Roger Ziesak	Date: 3/4/16
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V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

Action Alternative

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

NONE

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

EIS

More Detailed EA

No Further Analysis

EA Checklist Approved By:	Name: Paula Short
	Title: Forestry Assistance Bureau Chief
Signature: <i>Paula Short</i>	Date: 3/11/16