CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION DOCUMENTATION FOR

DNRC FOREST MANAGEMENT ACTIVITY

Project Name: Sheep Gap Fire Salvage

Proposed Implementation Date: December, 2017

Proponent: DNRC, Northwest Land Office; Plains Unit

Type and Purpose of Action: The Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) proposes to sell approximately 960 tons (155 MBF) of salvage timber in the West Fork Swamp Creek drainage, Section 22, T20 North, R27 West, approximately 5 air miles west of Plains, Montana. This action would produce estimated revenue of $19,200 for the Deaf and Blind (M.S.D.B.) Trust Grant; and $3,724 in Forest Improvement funds. Under the proposed action, DNRC would salvage timber to effectively recover the value of timber killed, damaged, or otherwise injured during the affected by the Sheep Gap Fire (See Attachment 1, Vicinity and Project Maps).

Location: Section 22, T20N, R27W

County: Sanders

Category (refer to ARM 36.11.447 (3)(a) through (w) for additional detail):

- a) ☐ Temporary Uses of Land with Negligible Effects
- b) ☐ Plans and Policies
- c) ☐ Leases and Licenses
- d) ☐ Acquisition of Land or Interest in Land
- e) ☐ Road Maintenance and Repair
- f) ☐ Bridges and Culverts
- g) ☐ Crossing Class 3 Streams
- h) ☐ Temporary Road Use Permits
- i) ☐ Road Closure
- j) ☐ Material Stockpiles
- k) ☐ Backfilling
- l) ☐ Gathering Forest Products for Personal Use
- m) ☐ Regeneration
- n) ☐ Nursery Operations
- o) ☐ Water Wells
- p) ☐ Herbicides and Pesticides
- q) ☐ Other Hazardous Materials

r) ☐ Fences
s) ☐ Waterlines
t) ☐ Removal of Small Trees
u) ☐ Removal of Hazardous Trees
v) ☐ Cone Collection
w) ☒ Timber Harvest (<100 MBF green or 500 MBF salvage)

By process of the adoption of the Forest Management Rules on February 27, 2003, pursuant to ARM 36.2.523(5)(a), the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Trust Land Management Division, has adopted the above categorical exclusions for activities conducted on state forested trust lands. "Categorical Exclusion" refers to a type of action that does not individually, collectively, or cumulatively require an EA or EIS unless extraordinary circumstances occur (ARM 36.2.522(5)).

Extraordinary Circumstances:

Will the proposed action affect one or more of the following resources, species or situations in the project area? If the resource, species, or situation is present, but project design avoids potential adverse effects on the resource, the answer is "No". One "Yes" answer indicates that Categorical Exclusion is not appropriate for the project, and an EA or EIS must be conducted.

YES	NO	
☐	☒	a) Sites with high erosion risk.
☐	☒	b) Federally listed threatened and endangered species or critical habitat for threatened and endangered species as designated by the USFWS.
☐	☒	c) Municipal watersheds.
☐	☒	d) The SMZ of fish bearing streams or lakes, except for modification or replacement of bridges, culverts and other crossing structures.
☐	☒	e) State natural area.
☐	☒	f) Native American religious and cultural sites.
☐	☒	g) Archaeological sites.
☐	☒	h) Historic properties and areas.
☐	☒	i) Several related projects that individually may be subject to categorical exclusion but that may occur at the

same time or in the same geographic area. Such related actions may be subject to environmental review even if they are not individually subject to review.

☐ ☒ j) Violations of any applicable state or federal laws or regulations.

The project listed above meets the definition of the indicated categorical exclusion, including specified conditions and extraordinary circumstances, as provided in the Forest Management Rules (ARM 36.11.447).

Prepared by: Jeffrey Hansen 11/28/2017

Decision by: David Olsen Plains Unit Manager

(Name) (Title)

/s/David M. Olsen December 1, 2017

MEMORANDUM

To: Jeff Hansen

From: David Olsen, Plains Unit Manager, MT DNRC

Subject: Sheep Gap Fire Salvage

Date: September 30, 2017

Primary Objective:

The primary objective of salvage operations is to effectively recover value of timber killed, damaged, or otherwise injured by the Sheep Gap Fire. Loss to the associated trusts is to be minimized. Administrative rules as applicable to salvage operations shall be applied to this project.

Secondary Objective:

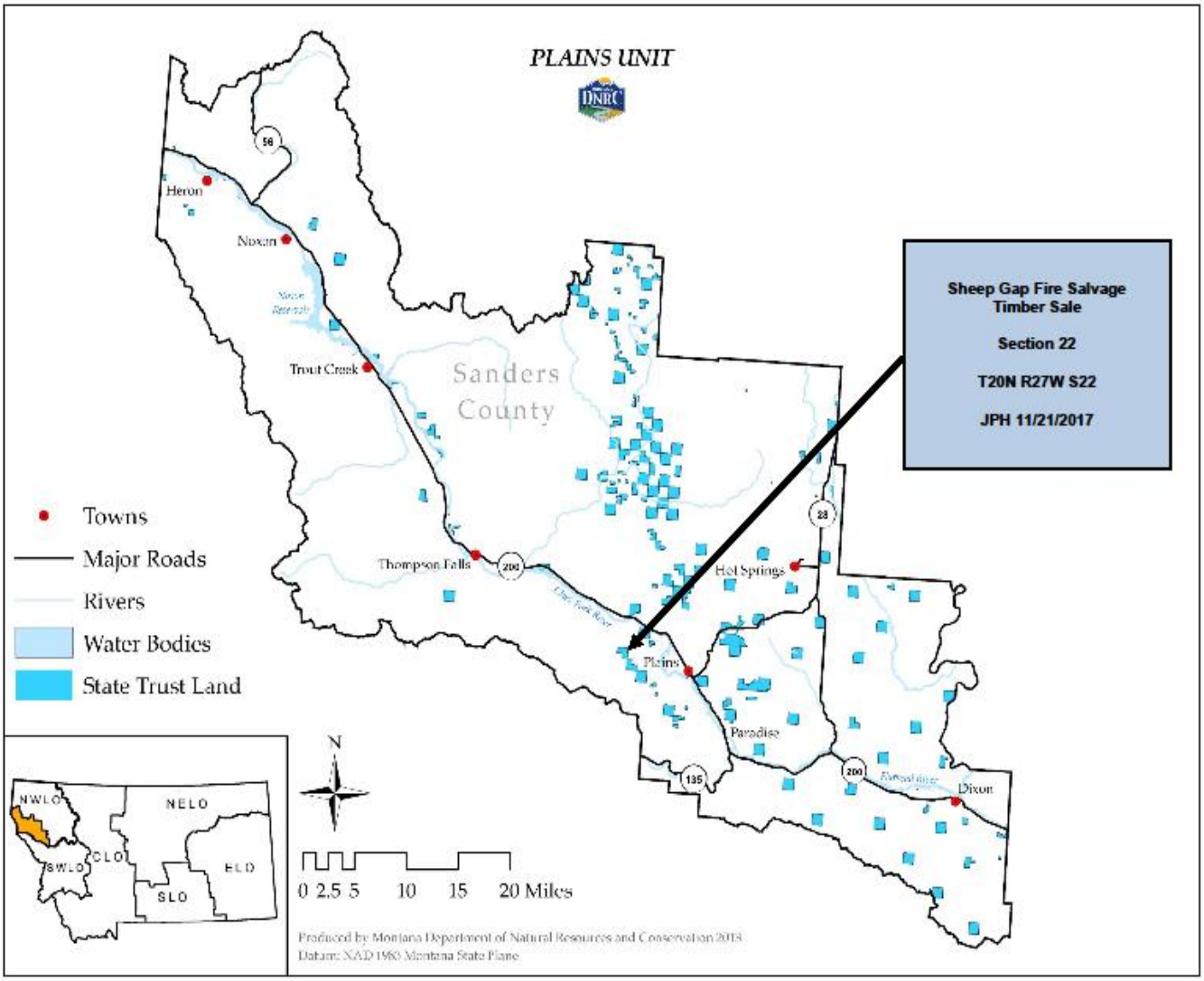
The secondary objective for this project is to promote timber regeneration and vegetative recovery on Trust Lands. Measures to promote natural regeneration as well as tree planting will be addressed in prescriptions for this project.

ATTACHMENT I

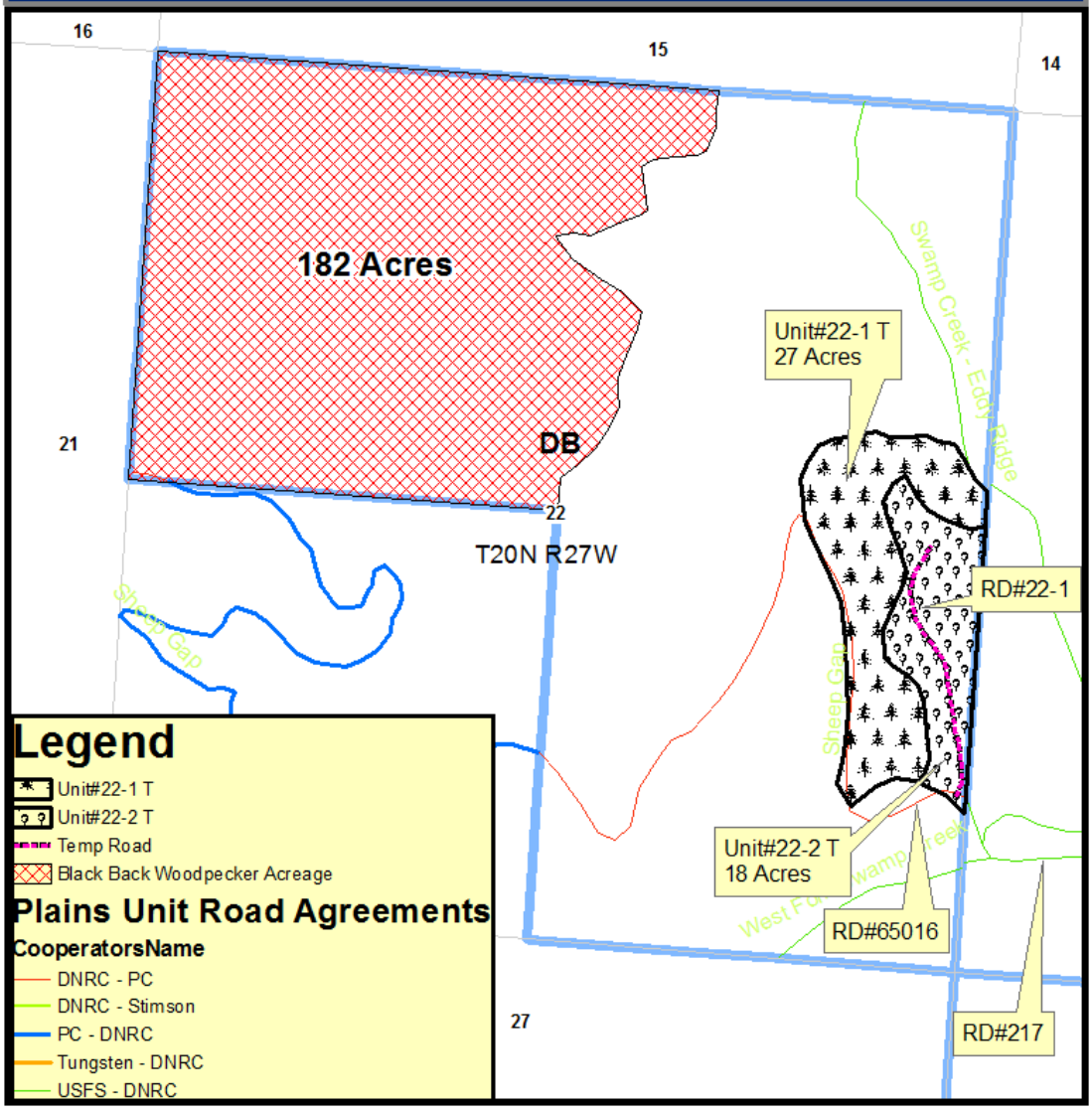
Vicinity Map

Harvest Units

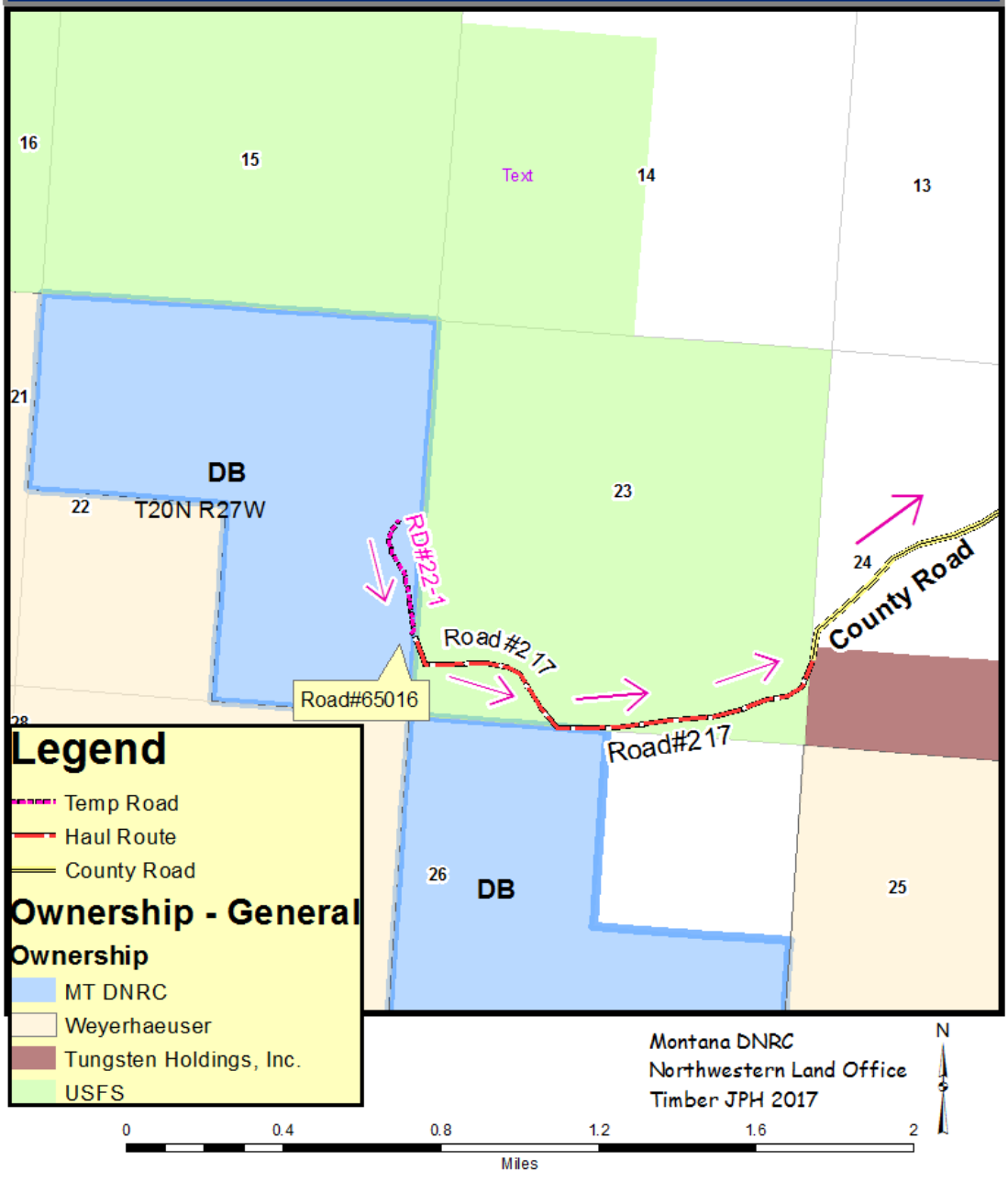
Haul Route


PLAINS UNIT
DNRC
Heron
Noxon
Trout Creek
Sanders
County
Thompson Falls
Hot Springs
Plains
Paradise
Dixon
56
200
28
135
Sheep Gap Fire Salvage
Timber Sale
Section 22
T20N R27W S22
JPH 11/21/2017
Towns
Major Roads
Rivers
Water Bodies
State Trust Land
NWLO
NELO
CLO
SWLO
SLO
ELO
N
0 2.5 5 10 15 20 Miles
Produced by Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation 2018
Datum: NAD 1983 Montana State Plane

Sheep Gap Fire Salvage
Proposed Harvest Plan
S22 T20N R27W



Sheep Gap Fire Salvage
Haul Route
S22 T20N R27W



ATTACHMENT II

RESOURCE ANALYSIS

SOILS & HYDROLOGY ANALYSIS

WILDLIFE ANALYSIS

To: Jeff Hansen, Project Leader

CC: Chris Forristal, Wildlife Biologist; Leah Breidinger, Wildlife Biologist

From: Marc Vessar, Forest Hydrologist

Date: November 28, 2017

Subject: Sheep Gap Timber Salvage (Sheep Gap Fire)

The proposed salvage harvest of fire-killed trees would occur on the Plains Unit in section 22, T20N, R27W. Approximately 45 acres of gently sloping terrain would be harvested using conventional ground-based equipment. No stream were identified during field reconnaissance which is supported by the hydrology analysis in the *Sheep Gap Timber Sale Environmental Assessment* (DNRC 2004). All work would be completed under frozen and/or snow-covered conditions.

According to ARM 36.11.447 (w), the project meets the criteria necessary to be nominated as a Categorically Excluded project. To ensure the soil, water and fisheries resources present in the project area do not preclude the CatEx designation; this document will assess the risk to existing resources including addressing the extraordinary circumstances listed in ARM 36.11.447 (a) (b) (c) (d) and (i).

Issue	Assessment	Meet Criteria for CatEx?
High erosion risk soils? ARM 36.11.447 (2)(a)	The inventoried soil types in the project area is listed as 15U in the Plains Unit Soil Survey (Collins and Ottersberg 1985). This is a well-drained soil type with moderate to high productivity. This soil is moderately erosive with a low sediment delivery efficiency.	Yes
Federally listed threatened and endangered ***aquatic*** species or critical habitat for threatened and endangered ***aquatic*** species as designated by the USFWS? Adapted from ARM 36.11.447 (2)(b)	No streams or fisheries habitat resides on the parcel.	Yes
Within a municipal watershed? ARM 36.11.447 (2)(c)	No. Due to the size of the project and the distance from any water course, only a very low risk of impacts would occur to water quality.	Yes
SMZ of fish bearing streams or lakes…? ARM 36.11.447 (2)(d)	No streams have been identified on the state parcel, therefore, no SMZ harvest is proposed.	Yes
Cumulative effects? Adapted from ARM 36.11.447 (2)(i)	Due to the small scale of this project, the gentle terrain and the lack of surface water resources in the parcel, the risk of additional cumulative impacts would be very low and likely immeasurable. Therefore, cumulative impacts would remain acceptable for this watershed.	Yes

Conclusion:

This project meets watershed, soils and fisheries criteria for a categorical exclusion because the potential for impacts to these resources would be very low.

References:

Collins, Jeff and Ottersberg, R. 1985. Plains Unit Soil Survey. Montana Department of State Lands. Missoula, MT.

Recommended Mitigations:
--Implement all applicable Forestry Best Management Practices to ensure long-term site productivity and minimize resource impacts
--Retain 10-20 tons/acre of CWD ≥3" diameter within the proposed units
--Ensure temporary roads are impassable to motor vehicles.

Memorandum

To: Jeff Hansen, Project Leader
Cc: Marc Vessar, Forest Hydrologist
From: Leah Breidinger, Wildlife Biologist
Date: November 30, 2017
Re: Sheep Gap Fire Salvage -wildlife comments

I reviewed the proposed salvage, which would occur in T20N, R27W, Section 22. The area burned in the approximately 24,847-acre Sheep Gap Fire in the summer of 2017. The proposed salvage would remove approximately 150 MBF of fire-killed ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir and would retain at least 4 trees ≥21 inches diameter per acre, any green trees, and all sub-merchantable trees to the extent possible. The timber sale contract would be for a brief period from December 15 – April 14.

The attached table summarizes the anticipated effects of the proposed activities on each Threatened or Endangered species, sensitive species, or big game species.

SPECIES/HABITAT	**DETERMINATION – BASIS**
THREATENED AND ENDANGERED SPECIES	
Canada lynx (*Felis lynx*) Habitat: Subalpine fir habitat types, dense sapling, old forest, deep snow zones	Suitable Canada lynx habitat would not be affected by the proposed activities. No direct, indirect or cumulative effects to Canada lynx would be anticipated.
Grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos*) Habitat: Recovery areas, security from human activity	The Project Area is located outside of grizzly bear recovery zone and non-recovery occupied habitat (*USFWS 1993, Wittinger 2002*). Grizzlies may use the area at any time, however, the density of grizzly bears in the area is low. Additionally, considering that the proposed salvage would occur for a brief period in the winter of 2017/2018, disturbance to grizzly bears would be minimal. Thus, negligible adverse direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to grizzly bears would be anticipated.
SENSITIVE SPECIES	
Bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) Habitat: Late-successional forest less than 1 mile from open water	Bald eagle nests have not been documented near the Project Area and suitable nesting habitat is not present. Thus, no adverse direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to bald eagles would be anticipated.

Black-backed woodpeckers (Picoides arcticus) Habitat: Mature to old burned or beetle-infested forest	The Project Area was burned in the Sheep Gap Fire in the summer of 2017 and approximately 447 acres of DNRC timber stands were burned. Of these acres, approximately 45 acres (10% of available habitat) would be harvested. To provide nesting habitat for black-backed woodpeckers 182 acres (41% of available habitat) would not be cut. These acres are located adjacent to stands on USFS lands that also had a high tree mortality, increasing the likelihood that these areas would be used be black-backed woodpeckers in upcoming breeding seasons. Additionally, the proposed activities would occur outside of the breeding season for a brief period and all sub-merchantable materials that do not pose a risk to human safety would be retained. Thus, minor adverse direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to black-backed woodpeckers would be anticipated under the Action Alternative. No effects to black-backed woodpeckers would be anticipated under the No Action Alternative.
Coeur d'Alene salamanders (*Plethodon idahoensis*) Habitat: Waterfall spray zones, talus near cascading streams	No moist talus or streamside talus habitat occurs within the Project Area. Thus, no direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to Coeur d'Alene salamanders would be anticipated.
Columbian sharp-tailed grouse (*Tympanuchus Phasianellus columbianus*) Habitat: Grassland, shrubland, riparian, agriculture	No suitable grassland communities occur within the Project Area. Thus, no direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to Columbian sharp-tailed grouse would be anticipated.
Common loons (*Gavia immer*) Habitat: Cold mountain lakes, nest in emergent vegetation	No suitable lake habitat occurs within 500 feet of the Project Area. Thus, no direct, indirect or cumulative effects to common loons would be anticipated.
Fishers (*Martes pennanti*) Habitat: Dense mature to old forest less than 6,000 feet in elevation and riparian	The proposed activities would not affect suitable fisher habitat. Thus, no adverse direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to fisher would be anticipated.
Flammulated owls (*Otus flammeolus*) Habitat: Late-successional ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir forest	The Project Area contains suitable flammulated owl forest types and suitable nesting snags may be removed. However, considering that only 10% of the burned stands on DNRC-ownership would be harvested and that at least 2 snags and 2 snag recruits >21 inches dbh per acre would be retained in cutting units ample snags will remain post-harvest. Thus, negligible adverse direct, indirect or cumulative effects to flammulated owls would be anticipated.
Gray wolves (*Canis lupus*) Habitat: Ample big game populations, security from human activities	Gray wolves may use the Project Area at any time. However, the proposed activities would not occur in areas likely to be used as denning or rendezvous sites and are not anticipated to have adverse effects on wolf prey. Thus, negligible adverse direct, indirect or cumulative effects to gray wolves would be anticipated.
Harlequin ducks (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) Habitat: White-water streams, boulder and cobble substrates	No suitable high-gradient stream or river habitats occur near the Project Area. No direct, indirect or cumulative effects to harlequin ducks would be anticipated.
Northern bog lemmings (*Synaptomys borealis*) Habitat: Sphagnum meadows, bogs, fens with thick moss mats	No suitable sphagnum bogs or fens occur within the Project Area. Thus, no direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to northern bog lemmings would be anticipated.
Peregrine falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) Habitat: Cliff features near open foraging areas and/or wetlands	Suitable cliffs and rock outcrops were not observed near the Project Area and the proposed activities would occur outside of the breeding season. Thus, no direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to peregrine falcons would be anticipated.
Pileated woodpeckers (*Dryocopus pileatus*) Habitat: Late-successional ponderosa pine and larch-fir forest	The proposed activities would not affect suitable pileated woodpecker habitat. Thus, no direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to pileated woodpeckers would be anticipated.

Townsend's big-eared bats (*Plecotus townsendii*) Habitat: Caves, caverns, old mines	No suitable caves or mine tunnels are known to occur within the Project Area. Thus, no direct, indirect or cumulative effects to Townsend's big-eared bats are anticipated.
Wolverine (*Gulo gulo*) Habitat: Alpine tundra and high-elevation boreal and coniferous forests that maintain deep persistent snow into late spring	The Project Area is located outside of areas that retain snow into late spring. Thus, not adverse direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to wolverines would be anticipated.
BIG GAME SPECES	
Elk (*Cervus canadensis*)	The proposed harvest would occur in white-tailed deer, mule deer, and elk winter range as identified by DFWP (*2008*). However, the area proposed for harvest was burned and contains little thermal cover and there are few forage plants available in the understory thus negligible adverse direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to big game would be anticipated.
Mule Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*)	
White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)	

Conclusion:
The potential for adverse effects to threatened and endangered wildlife species is low. None of the extraordinary circumstances listed under ARM 31.11.447(2) affecting wildlife resources would preclude the use of a categorical exclusion for this project.

List of Mitigations

- If a threatened or endangered species is encountered, consult a DNRC biologist immediately. Similarly, if undocumented nesting raptors or wolf dens are encountered within ½ mile of the Project Area contact a DNRC biologist.
- Prohibit contractors and purchasers conducting contract operations from carrying firearms while on duty as per *ARM 36.11.444(2)* and *GB-PR2* (*USFWS and DNRC 2010)*.
- Minimize mechanized activity within 0.25 miles of burned forested stands in the Project Area from April 15-July 1 to reduce disturbance to black-backed woodpeckers.
- Close any road or skid trails opened with proposed activities to reduce the potential for unauthorized motor vehicle use.
- Retain at least 2 snags and 2 snag recruits per acre >21 inches dbh or the next available size class, particularly favoring sound Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, or western larch for retention. If snags are cut for safety concerns, they must be left in the harvest unit. If snag recruits are unavailable due to the burn snags may be substituted.
- Retain sub-merchantable burned trees where soil, slope stability, and human safety concerns allow.

Literature Cited

DFWP. 2008. Maps of moose, elk, mule deer, and white-tailed deer distribution in Montana. *In* Individual GIS data layers. Available online at:
http://fwp.mt.gov/gisData/imageFiles/distributionElk.jpg
http://fwp.mt.gov/gisData/imageFiles/distributionMoose.jpg
http://fwp.mt.gov/gisData/imageFiles/distributionMuleDeer.jpg
http://fwp.mt.gov/gisData/imageFiles/distributionWhiteTailedDeer.jpg.

USFWS. 1993. Grizzly bear recovery plan.

USFWS and DNRC. 2010. Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Forested Trust Lands Habitat Conservation Plan, Final Environmental Impact Statement, Volumes I and II. U.S. Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Region 6, Denver, Colorado, and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Missoula, MT. September 2010.

Wittinger, W. 2002. Grizzly bear distribution outside of recovery zones. Unpublished memorandum. Report on file at Unpublished memorandum on file at USDA Forest Service, Region 1, Missoula, MT.