

Environmental Assessment Checklist

Project Name: Dog Creek Lodge & Nordic Center Proposal

Proposed Implementation Date: October 2019

Proponent: Stillwater Unit, Northwest Land Office, Montana DNRC

County: Flathead

Type and Purpose of Action

Description of Proposed Action:

The Stillwater Unit of the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) is proposing to amend an existing Land Use License issued to Dog Creek Lodge. Under the current license, Dog Creek Lodge is authorized to maintain and groom approximately 5 miles of Nordic ski and snowshoe trails that are available for use by tourists and local residents. The proposal would amend the current license to include an additional 5.6 miles of trails. The project is located approximately 3 miles north of Olney, Montana in the vicinity of Dog Lake and Upper Stillwater Lake (refer to Attachments vicinity map A-1 and project map A-2) and includes the following sections: Sections 30, 31 and 32 of Township 33 north, Range 23 west and Section 25 of Township 33 north, Range 24 west.

Beneficiary	Legal Description	Total Miles
Common Schools	Sec. 25, T33N R24W	.4
Public Buildings	Sec. 30 & 32, T33N R23W	2.3
MSU 2 nd Grant	Sec. 31, T33, R23W	2.9

Objectives of the project include:

The proposal being considered would amend the license to Dog Creek Lodge allowing for additional miles of Nordic ski trails to be built and maintained while producing additional revenue for the school trusts involved.

Proposed activities include:

The proposal would involve the establishment, maintenance and grooming of the expanded Nordic trail system. Approximately 2 miles of the proposed trails would utilize existing roads while a majority of the remaining 3.6 miles of the proposed trail system would be located on old skid trails where feasible. The proposal also includes an additional groomed crossing over Dog Lake.

The lands involved in this proposed project are held in trust by the State of Montana. (Enabling Act of February 22, 1889; 1972 Montana Constitution, Article X, Section 11). The Board of Land Commissioners and the DNRC are required by law to administer these trust lands to produce the largest measure of reasonable and legitimate return over the long run for the beneficiary institutions (Section 77-1-202, MCA).

The DNRC would manage lands involved in this project in accordance with:

- The State Forest Land Management Plan (DNRC 1996)
- The Real Estate Management Programmatic Plan (DNRC 2005)
- Administrative Rules for Forest Management (ARM 36.11.401 through 471)
- Administrative Rules for State Land Leasing (ARM 36.25.101 through 817)
- All other applicable state and federal laws

Project Development

SCOPING:

- DATE:
 - March 1, 2019
- PUBLIC SCOPED:
 - The scoping notice was posted on the DNRC Website: <http://dnrc.mt.gov/public-interest/public-notice>
 - Local newspapers legal ad (Whitefish Pilot, Daily Interlake)
 - Posted at Olney US Post Office
 - Adjacent landowners and interested parties
- AGENCIES SCOPED:
 - Flathead County
 - Montana Dept. of Fish, Wildlife & Parks
 - USFS – Tally Lake Ranger District
 - MT Dept. of Transportation
 - City of Whitefish
- COMMENTS RECEIVED:
 - How many: 5 (4 in support of project)
 - Concerns: 1
 - Even though the trails would be licensed for winter commercial use, the public would be able to access them in the summer; therefore, there would be potential for human-bear conflict (FWP).
 - Results (how were concerns addressed): Concern was addressed in the wildlife section under mitigations.

DNRC specialists were consulted, including:

- Leah Breidinger, Wildlife Biologist, DNRC NWLO
- Tony Nelson, Hydrologist, DNRC NWLO
- Patrick Rennie, Archeologist, DNRC Helena

Internal and external issues and concerns were incorporated into project planning and design and will be implemented in associated contracts.

OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES WITH JURISDICTION, LIST OF PERMITS NEEDED: *(Conservation Easements, Army Corps of Engineers, road use permits, etc.)*

No permits would be needed from any government agency for the proposed use.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

No-Action Alternative: Under the No-Action Alternative, no activity pertaining to the construction, maintenance and grooming of 5.6 miles of additional Nordic trails would be undertaken. The current license would not be amended to include the authorization of additional trails.

Action Alternative: Under the Action Alternative, the existing license would be amended to include 5.6 miles of additional Nordic ski trails. The proposal would involve the establishment, maintenance and grooming of the expanded Nordic trail system. Approximately 2 miles of the proposed trails would utilize existing roads while a majority of the remaining proposed trail system would be located on old skid trails where feasible. The proposal also includes an additional groomed crossing over Dog Lake. Trails would be constructed and maintained between July 1st and December 1st. Trails would be groomed during the winter season for commercial Nordic and cross-country skiing. The new license would include an approximate total of 10.8 miles that would be maintained and groomed on state land.

Impacts on the Physical Environment

Evaluation of the impacts on the No-Action and Action Alternatives including **direct, secondary, and cumulative** impacts on the Physical Environment.

VEGETATION:

Vegetation Existing Conditions: The topography of the area is predominantly northeastern aspects located on lower slopes. The area where Nordic ski trail expansion is proposed is characterized by densely stocked forestland. Much of the forest canopy consists of mature stands dominated by Douglas-fir and western larch and mixed conifer. The forest productivity is rated high.

Past disturbance in the area includes an active history of timber harvesting. Noxious weeds in the area include spotted knapweed, oxeye daisy and orange and yellow hawkweed. Most weeds occur in small spotty populations in the project area.

Vegetation	Impact												Can Impact Be Mitigated?	Comment Number
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative					
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High		
No-Action														
Noxious Weeds	X				X				X				Y	V-1
Rare Plants	X				X				X					
Vegetative community	X				X				X					
Old Growth	X				X				X					
Action														
Noxious Weeds		X			X				X				Y	V-2
Rare Plants	X				X				X					

Vegetation	Impact												Can Impact Be Mitigated?	Comment Number
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative					
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High		
Vegetative community		X			X				X				Y	V-3, V-4
Old Growth	X				X				X					

Comments:

V-1: The DNRC would continue to treat weed infestations along roads and trails in the project area as part of its ongoing weed management program.

V-2: The licensee would be responsible for controlling any noxious weeds introduced on the trail system on state-owned land.

V-3: The trails have been designed to conform to the land and vegetation by using existing roads and skid trails where feasible. The proponent is requesting to remove minimal brush and timber where needed to accommodate the use of a groomer. Trail corridors would be limited to no more than 16 feet in width.

V-4: There is an old existing road bed located within 50 feet of an adjacent riparian area. Encroaching timber would be cut and removed from the existing road prism to allow for the establishment of the trail corridor.

Vegetation Mitigations:

1. The following mitigations would be imposed on all phases of trail construction:

- Clearing of deadfall, woody debris, brush and branches to a maximum width of 16 feet and a maximum height of 16 feet above ground.
- Any merchantable timber required to be removed would be first approved by the state and a small volume permit would be issued.
- No riparian vegetation shall be removed or cut from or immediately adjacent to riparian areas.
- Bare soil must be seeded within 7 days to stabilize soils and reduce the risk of weed infestations.
- Site-adapted grass seed mix would be used for trail cutslopes and wasted material. Wasted material must be seeded to reduce the potential for weeds.

2. Abiding by the Montana County Noxious Weed Management Act, *Mont. Code Ann., 7-22-2101, et seq.* would be required per the license agreement. DNRC would approve method of control with the minimum requirement being a spring treatment of weeds in the trail corridors during the rosette stage by a certified applicator.

SOIL DISTURBANCE AND PRODUCTIVITY:

Soil Disturbance and Productivity Existing Conditions: Roads and skid trails were found in the proposed project area. Many have not been used in 20+ years and are vegetating in. Compaction on old skid trails is ameliorating due to root penetration and frost action. No active erosion or slope instability was found during reconnaissance.

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Soil Disturbance and Productivity	Impact												Can Impact Be Mitigated?	Comment Number
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative					
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High		
No-Action														
Physical Disturbance (Compaction and Displacement)	X				X				X					
Erosion	X				X				X					
Nutrient Cycling	X				X				X					
Slope Stability	X				X				X					
Soil Productivity	X				X				X					
Action														
Physical Disturbance (Compaction and Displacement)		X				X				X			Y	S-1
Erosion		X				X				X			Y	S-2
Nutrient Cycling	X				X				X					
Slope Stability	X				X				X					
Soil Productivity	X				X				X					

Comments:

S-1: Minor amounts of compaction and displacement may occur during construction of additional trails. Most of the proposed trail expansion would take place on existing old roads and skid trails. Minimal amounts of cut and fill construction would be required for the proposed expansion.

S-2: Some exposure of bare soil would occur during construction/reconstruction of existing roads and trails. Cut and fill construction would only be done to the minimum standard necessary to operate grooming equipment. As a result, there would be minimal exposure of bare soil and subsequent erosion.

Soil Mitigations:

- Cut and fill new trails only to the extent necessary to operate grooming equipment over snow
- Use existing roads and trails where possible to minimize bare soil exposure
- Seed all disturbed soils with a site-adapted grass seed mix concurrent with activity

WATER QUALITY AND QUANTITY:

Water Quality and Quantity Existing Conditions: No water quality or quantity concerns were identified during field reconnaissance. Some existing roads and skid trails were located near stringer wetlands and a small stream, but no evidence of erosion or sediment delivery were found in these areas.

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Water Quality & Quantity	Impact												Can Impact Be Mitigated?	Comment Number
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative					
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High		
No-Action														
Water Quality	X				X				X					
Water Quantity	X				X				X					
Action														
Water Quality		X					X			X			Y	W-1
Water Quantity	X				X				X					

Comments:

W-1: Construction of new trails and re-opening of old roads and trails may pose a higher risk to water quality, particularly where these existing features are near surface water. Where existing roads or trails are adjacent to wetlands or streams, implementation of all applicable BMPs would minimize the risk of sediment delivery.

Water Quality & Quantity Mitigations:

- Where existing roads or trails are adjacent to surface water features, install slash filter windrow, wire-backed silt fence or wood sawdust wattles near the toe of the fill slope to filter potential sediment from road/trail runoff
- Where existing roads or trails have over-steepened cutslopes due to the width of the groomer blade, lay back cut slopes to a stable angle to minimize the potential for cutslope ravel or slumping
- Seed all disturbed soils with a site-adapted grass seed mix concurrent with activity

FISHERIES:

Fisheries Existing Conditions: None of the proposed trail expansion would occur within 200 feet of a fish-bearing stream. Proposed activities include grooming of trails on Dog Lake during periods of suitable ice.

No-Action: No direct or indirect impacts would occur to affected fish species or affected fisheries resources beyond those described in Fisheries Existing Conditions. Cumulative effects (other related past and present factors; other future, related actions; and any impacts described in Fisheries Existing Conditions) would continue to occur.

Action Alternative (see Fisheries table below):

Fisheries	Impact												Can Impact Be Mitigated?	Comment Number
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative					
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High		
No-Action														
Sediment	X				X				X					
Flow Regimes	X				X				X					
Woody Debris	X				X				X					

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Fisheries	Impact												Can Impact Be Mitigated?	Comment Number	
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative						
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High			
Stream Shading	X				X				X						
Stream Temperature	X				X				X						
Connectivity	X				X				X						
Populations	X				X				X						
Action															
Sediment		X					X			X				Y	F-1
Flow Regimes	X				X				X						
Woody Debris	X				X				X						
Stream Shading	X				X				X						
Stream Temperature	X				X				X						
Connectivity	X				X				X						
Populations	X				X				X						

Comments:

F-1: Construction of new trails and re-opening of old roads and trails may pose a higher risk to water quality and fish habitat, particularly where these existing features are near surface water. Where existing roads or trails are adjacent to wetlands or streams, implementation of all applicable BMPs would minimize the risk of sediment delivery. None of the streams near the proposed trail expansion contain fish. Proposed grooming of trails over the ice on Dog Lake would not contribute sediment or other potential water quality risks to Dog Lake or downstream waters.

Fisheries Mitigations:

- Where existing roads or trails are adjacent to surface water features, install slash filter windrow, wire-backed silt fence or wood sawdust wattles near the toe of the fill slope to filter potential sediment from road/trail runoff.
- Seed all disturbed soils with a site-adapted grass seed mix concurrent with activity.

WILDLIFE:

No-Action: No additional trails would be constructed or used in the Project Area and thus, no additional disturbance to wintering wildlife would occur and the risk of human-wildlife conflict would not increase.

Action Alternative (see Wildlife table below):

Wildlife	Impact												Can Impact be Mitigated?	Comment Number	
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative						
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High			
Threatened and Endangered Species															
Grizzly bear		X				X				X				Y	WI-1

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Wildlife	Impact												Can Impact be Mitigated?	Comment Number
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative					
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High		
<i>(Ursus arctos)</i> Habitat: Recovery areas, security from human activity														
Canada lynx <i>(Felix lynx)</i> Habitat: Subalpine fir habitat types, dense sapling, old forest, deep snow zone		X				X			X				Y	WI-2
Sensitive Species														
Bald eagle <i>(Haliaeetus leucocephalus)</i> Habitat: Late-successional forest within 1 mile of open water		X				X				X			Y	WI-3
Black-backed woodpecker <i>(Picoides arcticus)</i> Habitat: Mature to old burned or beetle-infested forest	X				X				X					
Coeur d'Alene salamander <i>(Plethodon idahoensis)</i> Habitat: Waterfall spray zones, talus near cascading streams	X				X				X					
Columbian sharp-tailed grouse <i>(Tympanuchus Phasianellus columbianus)</i> Habitat: Grassland, shrubland, riparian, agriculture	X				X				X					
Common loon <i>(Gavia immer)</i> Habitat: Cold mountain lakes, nest in emergent vegetation	X				X				X					
Fisher <i>(Martes pennanti)</i> Habitat: Dense mature to old forest less than 6,000 feet in elevation and riparian	X				X				X					
Flammulated owl <i>(Otus flammeolus)</i>	X				X				X					

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Wildlife	Impact												Can Impact be Mitigated?	Comment Number	
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative						
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High			
Habitat: Late-successional ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir forest															
Gray Wolf <i>(Canis lupus)</i> Habitat: Ample big game populations, security from human activities		X				X				X				Y	WI-4
Harlequin duck <i>(Histrionicus histrionicus)</i> Habitat: White-water streams, boulder and cobble substrates	X				X				X						
Northern bog lemming <i>(Synaptomys borealis)</i> Habitat: Sphagnum meadows, bogs, fens with thick moss mats	X				X				X						
Peregrine falcon <i>(Falco peregrinus)</i> Habitat: Cliff features near open foraging areas and/or wetlands	X				X				X						
Pileated woodpecker <i>(Dryocopus pileatus)</i> Habitat: Late-successional ponderosa pine and larch-fir forest	X				X				X						
Townsend's big-eared bat <i>(Plecotus townsendii)</i> Habitat: Caves, caverns, old mines	X				X				X						
Wolverine <i>(Gulo gulo)</i> Habitat: Alpine tundra and high-elevation boreal forests that maintain deep persistent snow into late spring	X				X				X						
Big Game Species															
Elk		X				X				X				Y	WI-5
Whitetail	X				X				X						
Mule Deer	X				X				X						
Moose	X				X				X						

Comments:

WI-1 Canada lynx – The Project Area contains suitable lynx habitat and lynx use of the area is possible. Approximately 4.8-miles of trail 16-feet wide would be constructed. However, trail construction is not anticipated to affect the overall suitability of forest structure for lynx. Lynx may be disturbed by winter recreationists should they be in the area; however, few recent records of lynx exist for this area (*MNHP, April 10, 2019*). Additionally, construction and maintenance activity on the trails would be prohibited from April 1 – June 15 and until July 1 in some areas, further reducing the potential for disturbing lynx.

WI-2 Grizzly bear - The Project Area is located in Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) non-recovery occupied habitat (NROH; *Wittinger 2002*) and the area is considered a potential linkage area for bears between the NCDE and the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem ([Servheen et al. 2003](#)). Trail construction would consist of removing logs, small unmerchantable trees as well as a few merchantable trees in an approximately 16-foot wide corridor along 4.8 miles of trails. Shrubs, grasses, and forbs would not be targeted for removal and all trails would detour around wetlands. Non-motorized uses including cross-country skiing and snowshoeing would be permitted on these trails. Motorized activities would be prohibited, except for trail grooming, construction, and maintenance. Motorized construction and maintenance activities on these trails would be prohibited April 1 – June 15 to minimize risk to grizzly bears during the spring. Construction on the section of trail from the North end of Dog Lake through Sections 30 and 25 would be prohibited until July 1. Use of these trails (except for a short trail to Dog Lake) would be restricted to the denning period (December 1 – March 31) to minimize risk to grizzly bears during the spring, summer and fall seasons when bears are most active. Additionally, trails must be constructed in a way that does not encourage summer trail use by retaining brush and downed logs where feasible. This is especially important in the section of proposed trails adjacent to wetlands that contain skunk cabbage near Dog Lake, a preferred bear food in the spring. Trail users would be required to back-haul their own trash to prevent bears and other wildlife from becoming food habituated. Additionally, signs would be posted notifying people that bears are present in the area and recommending use of bear spray.

WI-3 Bald eagles – Bald eagles nest on Upper Stillwater Lake, however, the trails proposed for construction are located outside of the primary use management zone (≤ 0.5 miles from nest) where birds are most sensitive to disturbance. To mitigate impacts of trail construction, important bald eagle habitat attributes such as large emergent trees and snags would not be removed.

WI-4 Gray wolves – The Project Area is near wolf pack home ranges and wolf use of the Project Area is possible at any time. Wolves may be displaced from the vicinity of the trails, should they be in the area. Additionally, dogs would be required to either be on a leash or under vocal control. If conflicts occur, dogs would not be allowed on DNRC trails. Thus, negligible adverse direct, indirect or cumulative effects to gray wolves would be anticipated.

WI-5 Big game – The Project Area is considered elk winter range by DFWP (*2008*). Approximately 4.8 miles of trail would be cleared for winter use. The low elevation and availability of thermal cover make the area attractive to wintering animals and elk could be present in the Project Area at any time. Only non-motorized recreation activities would be permitted on the trails, except for motorized activities associated with grooming, construction, and maintenance. Additionally, dogs would be allowed on the trails but would be leashed or under vocal control to prevent chasing and energy expenditure by wintering animals. Dogs would not be allowed on the ski trails on state lands in the winter if they become a nuisance to

wintering animals. Overall, minor adverse direct, indirect or cumulative effects to big game would be anticipated.

Wildlife Mitigations:

- Signs must be posted detailing ways to stay safe and reduce human-wildlife conflicts. Signs must be posted at the Lodge or adjacent to trailheads and must be approved by a DNRC wildlife biologist.
- Allow winter use of trails only from November 16 – March 31. Prohibit use of the trails beginning April 1 to reduce impact to grizzly bears when they are nutritionally stressed and emerging from dens. Additionally, construction of the trails would be prohibited from April 1 – June 15. The timing restriction for the trail beginning North of Dog Lake and heading north through Sections 30 and 25 would be extended until June 30 (i.e., activity could begin July 1).
- Summer use of the trails (except for the short trail to Dog Lake) is not permitted and trails must be constructed in a way that does not encourage summer use. This can be accomplished by retaining brush and downed wood across trails, particularly adjacent to the large wetlands on the northwest end of the trail system. Prevent un-authorized, motorized use in this area by using rocks or gates to block the trails.
- Require trail users to backhaul garbage, or if garbage collection is provided ensure that bear resistant containers are used and that containers are emptied regularly to prevent trail users from leaving garbage outside of full cans.
- DNRC may temporarily close the trails if conflicts with wildlife occur.
- Require trail-users to maintain vocal control over their dogs or keep them on a leash to minimize disturbance to wildlife, particularly wintering big game. Dogs must be leashed when crossing Dog Lake, if ice fisherman are present. If dogs become a nuisance to wildlife DNRC reserves the right to prohibit dogs from using the trails.

Literature:

- 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, 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.
- Servheen, C., J. S. Waller, and P. Sandstrom. 2003. Identification and management of linkage zones for wildlife between the large blocks of public land in the northern Rocky Mountains (originally published 2001; revised 2003). Unpublished Report. Report on file at U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Missoula, MT. 83pp.
- 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.

AIR QUALITY:

Air Quality	Impact												Can Impact Be Mitigated?	Comment Number
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative					
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High		
No-Action														
Smoke	X				X				X					
Dust	X				X				X					
Action														
Smoke	X				X				X					
Dust	X				X				X					

Comments: No measurable direct, indirect, or cumulative impacts to air quality are anticipated.

Air Quality Mitigations: None

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES / AESTHETICS / DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES:

Aesthetics Existing Condition: Due to the the layout and location of the existing trails, the trails are not discernable from any accessible open road. Minimal timber and vegetation have been removed to allow for grooming of over-the-snow trails; therefore, visual disturbance is minimal.

Will Alternative result in potential impacts to:	Impact												Can Impact Be Mitigated?	Comment Number
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative					
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High		
No-Action														
Historical or Archaeological Sites	X				X				X					
Aesthetics	X				X				X					
Demands on Environmental Resources of Land, Water, or Energy	X				X				X					
Action														
Historical or Archaeological Sites	X				X				X				Y	A-1
Aesthetics	X				X				X					A-2
Demands on Environmental Resources of Land, Water, or Energy	X				X				X					

Comments:

A-1: The DNRC archeologist was consulted on this project. No known historical archeological or cultural features exist in the proposed area.

A-2: See Aesthetics Existing Condition above. The proposed trail locations would have similar layout and design features as to the current licensed trail system.

Mitigations:

- Should historical archeological or cultural features be discovered during construction of the trails, a cultural resource specialist would be notified and work in that area would be suspended until the site can be properly evaluated.

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.*

- Dog Creek Lodge Nordic Ski Checklist EA, December 2014
- Duck to Dog Timber Sale Environmental Assessment, 2007
- Valhalla Adventures Backcountry Skiing Checklist EA, 2005
- Dog Sled Use of Existing Roads Checklist EA, 1990

Impacts on the Human Population

Evaluation of the impacts on the proposed action including **direct, secondary, and cumulative** impacts on the Human Population.

Access to and Quality of Recreational and Wilderness Activities Existing Conditions:

The project area, which is near Dog Lake and Upper Stillwater Lake, is a prime area for recreation. The primary dispersed recreational uses include snowmobile riding, ATV/UTV use, cross country skiing, hunting, fishing, hiking and camping.

There are currently six commercial winter recreational licensees operating near the project area that include guided activities such as; Nordic and cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, Cat skiing and dog sledding. Flathead Snowmobile Association also has a license to groom snowmobile trails on Stillwater State Forest near the project area. Special Recreational Use Licenses for events such as dog sled races have also been issued near the project area.

Will Alternative result in potential impacts to:	Impact												Can Impact Be Mitigated?	Comment Number
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative					
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High		
No-Action														
Health and Human Safety	X				X				X					
Industrial, Commercial and Agricultural Activities and Production	X				X				X					
Quantity and Distribution of Employment	X				X				X					

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Will Alternative result in potential impacts to:	Impact												Can Impact Be Mitigated?	Comment Number	
	Direct				Secondary				Cumulative						
	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High	No	Low	Mod	High			
Local Tax Base and Tax Revenues	X				X				X						
Demand for Government Services	X				X				X						
Access To and Quality of Recreational and Wilderness Activities	X				X				X						
Density and Distribution of population and housing	X				X				X						
Social Structures and Mores	X				X				X						
Cultural Uniqueness and Diversity	X				X				X						
Action															
Health and Human Safety	X				X				X						
Industrial, Commercial and Agricultural Activities and Production	X				X				X						
Quantity and Distribution of Employment	X				X				X						
Local Tax Base and Tax Revenues	X				X				X						
Demand for Government Services	X				X				X						
Access to and Quality of Recreational and Wilderness Activities			X				X				X		Y	R-1 R-2	
Density and Distribution of population and housing	X				X				X						
Social Structures and Mores	X				X				X						
Cultural Uniqueness and Diversity	X				X				X						

Comments:

R-1: A moderate increase in commercial winter recreation would be expected to occur with the licensing of an additional 5.6 miles of groomed trails. It is expected that the number of skiers would increase due to promotion of the trail system as well as word of mouth. While the establishment of additional trails would increase the overall use of the area, active management of the trail is expected to increase the access to, and quality of, recreational use. It is also expected that the expansion of the Nordic trail system offered by Dog Creek Lodge would

increase use of other winter recreational opportunities in the area such as snowmobiling, dog sledding, etc.

R-2: User conflicts with ice fisherman have occurred on Dog Lake as skiers with dogs cross the lake. Dogs off leash have been known to disturb ice fisherman. Concurrently, conflicts have occurred on Dog Lake Road as ice fisherman attempt to access the lake with wheeled vehicles before the road gets fully snowed in. A portion of the existing groomed trail system utilizes this road to access the lake. In 2018, signs were posted at the junction of Highway 93 and where the road meets the groomed trail. Signs informed users that there was a groomed trail ahead and that wheeled access to the lake was limited but that snowmobiles and foot traffic were allowed.

Mitigations:

- Dogs must be leashed when crossing Dog Lake when ice fishermen are present. If dogs become a nuisance to wildlife or other users, DNRC reserves the right to prohibit dogs from using the ski trails. DNRC will work with Licensee to post signs reminding skiers and ice fishermen to be courteous to one another where trail enters and exits Dog Lake.
- Require signage to be installed at the junction where the easterly access road to Dog Lake meets the groomed trail system. Signage should read "Access to Dog Lake from this point is limited to snowmobiles and foot traffic only" see attached map for location.

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.*

- None

Other Appropriate Social and Economic Circumstances:

Costs, revenues and estimates of return are estimates intended for relative comparison of alternatives. They are not intended to be used as absolute estimates of return.

No-Action Alternative: The No-Action alternative would not generate any return to the trust at this time.

Action Alternative: The amended license would generate additional revenue for Common Schools, Public Buildings and MSU 2nd Grant Trusts. The current fee structure for the license is charged based on the licensor paying \$10.00/person to the state for each trail pass sold. The 2018/2019 end of season report showed the state receiving \$4,500 in revenue from trail use. That was a 37% increase from the 2017/2018 season. It is expected that with an additional 5.6 miles of trail being added to the existing license, the rate of return to the state will continually increase as trail use increases.

References

DNRC 1996. State Forest Land Management Plan: final environmental impact statement (and appendixes). Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Forest Management Bureau, Missoula, Montana.

DNRC. 2010. Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Forested State Trust Lands Habitat Conservation Plan: Final EIS, Volume II, Forest Management Bureau, Missoula, Montana.

Does the proposed action involve potential risks or adverse effects that are uncertain but extremely harmful if they were to occur?

No

Does the proposed action have impacts that are individually minor, but cumulatively significant or potentially significant?

No

Environmental Assessment Checklist Prepared By:

Name: Nicole Stickney
Title: Special Uses Program Manager
Date: August 15, 2019

Finding

Alternative Selected

Two alternatives are presented and were fully analyzed in the EAC:

- **No-Action Alternative:** Under the No-Action Alternative, no activity pertaining to the construction, maintenance and grooming of 5.6 miles of additional Nordic trails would be undertaken. The current license would not be amended to include the authorization of additional trails.

These trust lands would remain as land managed by the DNRC for forest management, development and other revenue generating activities. The DNRC would continue to allow dispersed and developed recreation from existing trails and trailheads.

- **Action Alternative:** Under the Action Alternative, the existing license would be amended to include 5.6 miles of additional Nordic ski trails. The proposal would involve the establishment, maintenance and grooming of the expanded Nordic trail system. Approximately 2 miles of the proposed trails would utilize existing roads while a majority of the remaining proposed trail system would be located on old skid trails where feasible. The proposal also includes an additional groomed crossing over Dog Lake. Trails would be constructed and maintained between July 1st and December 1st. Trails would be groomed during the winter season for commercial Nordic and cross-country skiing. The new license would include an approximate total of 10.8 miles that would be maintained and groomed on State land.

An Interdisciplinary team (ID Team) has completed the Environmental Assessment Checklist (EAC) for the Dog Creek Lodge & Nordic Center Proposal. Following a thorough review of the EAC, public correspondence, and Department policies and rules, the decision has been made to select the **Action Alternative**.

Significance of Potential Impacts

For the following reasons, I find that the Action Alternative will not have significant impacts on the human environment, as:

- There is no conflict with local, State, or Federal laws, requirements, or formal plans.
- No impacts are regarded as major, geographically widespread, or frequent.
- Due to the mitigations listed in this Environmental Assessment, the quantity and quality of various resources, including any that may be considered unique or fragile, will not be adversely affected to a significant degree.
- There is no precedent for future actions that would cause significant impacts.

In summary, I find that the identified low to moderate impacts will be avoided, controlled, or mitigated by the design of the project to the extent that the impacts are not significant.

Need for Further Environmental Analysis

EIS

More Detailed EA

No Further Analysis

Environmental Assessment Checklist Approved By:

Name: David A. Ring
Title: Stillwater Unit Manager
Date: September 6, 2019
Signature: /s/ David A. Ring

Attachment A- Maps

A-1: Dog Creek Lodge & Nordic Center Proposal



