CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name: HWY 83	**Rice Creek Alternative Practice**
Proposed Implementation Date:	June, 2026 through October 2028
Proponent:	USFS Lolo National Forest, Kevin Doherty Seeley Lake District Ranger
Location:	**SE4 NW4 S21 T17N R15W**
County:	**Missoula**

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

To allow the operation of ground-based equipment operation in segments of the Rice Creek (class 1 stream) streamside management zone (SMZ) to ensure directional falling is away from buildings or the stream bed/banks, and to allow the removal of trees threatening homes, outbuildings, and overhead utilities within the SMZ. The alternative practice would allow for the safe removal of both live and dead, tall trees that are within the SMZ and leaning towards adjacent buildings and utilities. This proposed action would allow cutting of hazard trees within the SMZ and retaining fewer than the prescribed minimum number of trees for a class 1 SMZ. The proposed project area runs along both sides of Rice Creek for approximately 400 feet.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

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

Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project. List number of individuals contacted, number of responses received, and newspapers in which notices were placed and for how long. Briefly summarize issues received from the public.

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) Clearwater service forester was consulted in April 2025 by proponent. This activity is on cabin lease sites located on United States Forest Service (USFS) land. Highway 83 project Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) Forester Brian Cannata met on site with DNRC service forester on 04/28/2025. USFS Scoped the entirety of the Hwy 83 project, which the Rice Creek AP is within, no further public involvement is deemed necessary.

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

Examples: cost-share agreement with U.S. Forest Service, 124 Permit, 3A Authorization, Air Quality Major Open Burning Permit.

DNRC Forestry Assistance has Jurisdiction over the SMZ law and any alternative practices, The USFS has jurisdiction over the wildland fire protection and is the landowner, Missoula County Conservation District has jurisdiction over the bed and banks of Rice Creek.

3. ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT:
Describe alternatives considered and, if applicable, provide brief description of how the alternatives were developed. List alternatives that were considered but eliminated from further analysis and why.

Scope of Analysis and Definition of Project Area: The following document describes conditions within the stretch of Rice creek that passes through the project area. The project area is defined as those portions of the SMZ on which the applicant has requested an Alternative Practice. Potential effects analyzed under the action and no action alternatives are limited to this project area.

No action alternative:
Do not issue AP. Landowner or lessee would likely perform these hazard tree removal activities without the assistance and added safety of equipment, or risk hazard trees falling on their structures.

Action Alternative:
Issue AP that allows operation of equipment within the SMZ to ensure that directional falling of hazard trees is away from structures and the stream, and to remove all hazardous trees leaning towards the adjacent structures regardless of SMZ retention requirements. This would allow lessees to meet their stated needs. Mitigate by operating within the SMZ only to the extent necessary to safely conduct work and under dry soil conditions to minimize impacts. Protect sub merchantable trees and brush to fullest extent possible and retain trees that are not a hazard or leaning towards the structures and apply forest best management practices (BMP) during operations.

The following mitigations would be part of the Alternative Practice:

- Operations would be done during dry or frozen soil conditions or with enough snow cover to minimize soil damage.
- Equipment would not operate within 15' of the Ordinary High Water Mark (OHWM).
- SMZ understory shrubs and herbaceous plants would be retained to the fullest extent possible.
- Trees that are not a hazard or leaning towards structures would be retained.
- No material may be cast into the stream channel. If branches or materials do enter the stream channel, they would be required to be removed immediately.
- Any scarified areas within the SMZ would be grass seeded with a seed mixture of proponents choosing.
- BMP would be applied during operations.

III. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" If no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

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 direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to soils.

Based on information gathered from: Web Soil Survey, soils in the project area are Glaciercreek gravelly silt loam and Hollandlake-Bata complex on slopes 0-4%; slight risk and moderate risk of rutting respectively. Under either alternative, operations would likely take place under dry or winter conditions. Under the action alternative any disturbed areas inside the SMZ would be grass seeded. Considering the operation restrictions and mitigation measures, minimal direct, indirect, or cumulative impacts would be expected under either alternative.

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 direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to water resources.

Is it possible that implementing this alternative practice would impact the integrity of the SMZ and these specific functions?

-Ability to act as an effective sediment filter.
-Ability to provide shade to regulate stream temperature.
-Protection of stream channel and banks.
-Ability to provide large woody debris for eventual recruitment into the stream to maintain riffles, pools, and other elements of channel stability.

Existing Condition

The project area consists of both sides of Rice creek on a USFS lease site. Lease cabins are located within the 50' SMZ. The length of the creek in the project area has low levels of overstory trees, with evidence of past and current Douglas-fir beetle activity. Upstream from the project area the creek runs through a natural forest area of Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, lodgepole pine, Engelmann spruce, and western larch. Downstream from project area the creek runs under HWY 83 and into Seeley Lake.

Potential Environmental Effects

No Action Alternative: The SMZ law would be followed during commercial activities therefore it is unlikely there would be impacts to water quality, quantity, distribution or to the functionality of the SMZ during commercial activities. Landowner or lessee would likely perform these hazard tree removal activities without the assistance and added safety of equipment, or risk hazard trees falling on their structures.

Action Alternative:
Under the action alternative, an Alternative Practice would be granted that allows operation of equipment within the SMZ to ensure that directional falling of hazard trees is away from structures and the stream, and to remove all hazardous trees leaning towards the adjacent structures regardless of SMZ retention requirements. Approximately 0.9 acres of SMZ would have additional trees removed that pose a risk of falling onto adjacent structures in the area. This practice would retain all sub merchantable trees and shrubs as well as any trees that are not anticipated to fall onto structures or utility lines. Access to SMZ is off a driveway and cut lawn, this work would be implemented under dry ground conditions, or under frozen ground conditions

This would allow lessees to meet their stated needs. Mitigate by operating within the SMZ only to the extent necessary to safely conduct work and under dry or frozen soil conditions to minimize impacts. Protect sub merchantable trees and brush to fullest extent possible and retain trees that are not a hazard or leaning towards the structures and apply BMPs during operations.

-The ability of the SMZ to act as an effective sediment filter would be maintained as no additional ground disturbance would be expected within 15 feet of the OHWM beyond the no-action alternative, and any disturbed areas would be grass seeded.

-The ability of the SMZ to provide shade would be maintained by leaving all existing brush and submerchantable trees as well as most healthy merchantable trees.

-Stream channel and bank integrity would be protected by keeping equipment a minimum of 15 feet away from the OHWM.

-Down woody debris (DWD) across and within the stream channel would be left in-place.

-The potential recruitment of large woody debris would be maintained as only trees leaning toward structures and away from the stream would be removed.

-The ability of the SMZ to promote floodplain stability would not be impacted.

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6. AIR QUALITY:

What pollutants or particulate would be produced (i.e. particulate matter from road use or harvesting, slash pile burning, prescribed burning, etc)? Identify the Airshed and Impact Zone (if any) according to the Montana/Idaho Airshed Group. Identify direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to air quality.

Slash created from the project would need to be disposed of in accordance with all applicable laws. Impacts are expected to be similar under either alternative and would be expected to be minor.

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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 direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to vegetation.

Existing Condition

This section of the Rice creek SMZ is a low-stocked forest with a mix of ages and size classes consisting of Engelmann spruce, lodgepole pine and Douglas-fir. The surrounding forest is mainly Douglas-fir and lodgepole pine. The project area goes through a cabin lease site that is mainly clear of vegetation beyond grassy ground cover.

Potential Environmental Effects

No Action: Harvest would follow the SMZ law.

Action Alternative:
Under the action alternative, an Alternative Practice would be granted that allows operation of equipment within the SMZ to ensure that directional falling of hazard trees is away from structures and the stream, and to remove all hazardous trees leaning towards the adjacent structures regardless of SMZ retention requirements. Approximately 0.9 acres of SMZ would have additional trees removed that pose a risk of falling onto adjacent structures in the area. This practice would retain all sub merchantable trees and shrubs as well as any trees that are not anticipated to fall onto structures or utility lines. Access to SMZ is off a driveway and cut lawn, this work would be implemented under dry ground conditions, or under frozen ground conditions

This would allow lessees to meet their stated needs. Mitigate by operating within the SMZ only to the extent necessary to safely conduct work and under dry or frozen soil conditions to minimize impacts. Protect sub merchantable trees and brush to fullest extent possible and retain trees that are not a hazard or leaning towards the structures and apply BMPs during operations.

-The ability of the SMZ to act as an effective sediment filter would be maintained as no additional ground disturbance would be expected within 15 feet of the SMZ beyond the no-action alternative, and any disturbed areas would be grass seeded.

- The ability of the SMZ to provide shade would be maintained by leaving all existing brush and submerchantable trees as well as most healthy merchantable trees.

-Stream channel and bank integrity would be protected by keeping equipment a minimum of 15 feet away from the high-water mark.

-DWD across and within the stream channel would be left in-place.

-The potential recruitment of large woody debris would be maintained as most standing trees would be maintained and only trees leaning toward structures and away from the stream would be removed.

-The ability of the SMZ to promote floodplain stability would not be impacted.

Action Alternative would result in five to ten fewer large overstory trees within the proposed project area.

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8. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS:
Consider substantial habitat values and use of the area by wildlife, birds or fish. Identify direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to fish and wildlife.

Terrestrial and Avian Life and Habitats:
The area is used by numerous terrestrial and avian species. On field visits no nests or dens of any animals were discovered.

No Action: Harvest would follow the SMZ law.

Action Alternative:
The action alternative would have minor impacts on terrestrial, avian and aquatic life and habitats, through the removal of five to ten trees that could be used for nesting habitat in the future.

Aquatic life and habitats:
DWD across and within the stream channel would be left in-place under either alternative. Shade is being supported by this debris and existing vegetation. Minor impacts to aquatic life and habitat would be expected under either alternative.

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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 direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to these species and their habitat.

Threatened or endangered species such as grizzly bears, bull trout, west slope cutthroat trout, and Canada lynx may use the area. The proposed actions would be low impact on overall behavior, populations, or habitat.

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10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:
Identify and determine direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to historical, archaeological or paleontological resources.

No impacts to historical, archaeological, or paleontological resources would be expected, under either alternative.

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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 direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to aesthetics.

Under the action alternative minimal impacts to aesthetics would be expected, through a more open corridor adjacent to the structures.

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 direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to environmental resources.

No limited resources would be used for this project. Rice Creek alternative practice is within the footprint of the greater Highway 83 GNA project area. Highway 83 GNA sale has been analyzed and reviewed through USFS National Environmental Policy Act processes.

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.

The proposed project is within the footprint of the Highway 83 GNA project on the Seely Lake Ranger District of Lolo National Forest, HWY 83 Environmental Analysis is pertinent to the project area.

IV. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS 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.

Under the Action Alternative, normal health risks associated with logging operations would be anticipated. The Action Alternative ultimately strives to increase safety by reducing the likelihood of structure damage due to windthrow. Using equipment to assist with directional falling of trees leaning towards structures would help to improve human safety.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:
Identify how the project would add to or alter these activities.

The action alternative would add a minor amount of additional timber to the wood products industry.

16. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT:
Estimate the number of jobs the project would create, move or eliminate. Identify direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to the employment market.

The action alternative would add a small amount of additional work and income to the contractor.

17. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES:
Estimate tax revenue the project would create or eliminate. Identify direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to taxes and revenue.

The action alternative would generate minor additional income tax revenue from the additional work.

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 direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of this and other projects on government services

Under either alternative there would be no anticipated effects on the demand for local government services.

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.

The project area is covered by the Missoula County Community Wildfire Protection Plan, USFS Lolo National Forest plan, and Montana Forest Action Plan. This project would not be contrary to any of these plans.

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 direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to recreational and wilderness activities.

Under either alternative, this activity would have no impact to access to or quality of recreational and wilderness activities for the public.

21. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING:
Estimate population changes and additional housing the project would require. Identify direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to population and housing.

Under either alternative, this activity would have no impact to density or distribution of population and housing.

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:
Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.

Logging is an activity that would be considered a traditional lifestyle for this community and area, this activity would not disrupt social structures.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:
How would the action affect any unique quality of the area?

Under either alternative, cultural uniqueness and diversity would not be affected.

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 direct, indirect, and cumulative economic and social effects likely to occur as a result of the proposed action.

There are no unique social or economic qualities on this site.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	Name: Kyle Carpenter	Date: 7/21/2025
	Title: Service Forester	

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

Following a review of this document as well as the corresponding Department policies and rules, the Action Alternative has been selected because it meets the intent of the project objectives outlined in Section I – Type and Purpose of Action and implementing the mitigations as required will maintain the integrity of the SMZ.

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

I find that the Action Alternative will not have significant impacts for the following reasons:

- The Action Alternative is in compliance with the existing laws, rules, policies, and standards applicable to this type of proposed action.
- Appropriate mitigations have been designed to minimize potential impacts to resources such as vegetation, soil, and water quality.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

[ ]	EIS	[ ]	More Detailed EA	[X]	No Further Analysis

EA Checklist Approved By:	Name: Kristen Baker-Dickinson	
	Title: Clearwater Unit Manager	
Signature: /s/ K. Baker-Dickinson		Date: 7/21/2025