DECISION NOTICE:
Wood's Ranch Wildlife Management Area
Blowdown Salvage Project

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 1
490 North Meridian Road, Kalispell, MT 598901
Phone 406-752-5501
March 27, 2020

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

FWP is proposing to conduct timber salvage treatments on approximately 86 acres within the 445-acre project area on the WRWMA. FWP is also proposing to monitor bark beetle infestation within the project area and remove infested trees for up to five years (through April 2025). The purpose of this project is to:

- reduce accumulations of downed timber that could restrict ungulate movement in the blowdown area;
- reduce susceptibility of adjacent stands of trees to future bark beetle infestation;
- reduce fuel loading and removing downed wood that may present a barrier to fire suppression in the event of a wildfire;
- sell resulting merchantable timber byproducts to offset the cost of tree removal before the trees lose commercial value; and
- if surplus revenue is generated from the project, use those funds to pay for future rehabilitation and forest management on the WRWMA as well as forest management work on other FWP properties across the state.

The proposed treatments would include 86 acres of mechanical timber harvesting, monitoring of bark beetle infestation and removal of infested trees within the 445-acre project area for up to five years, log hauling and road maintenance on 2.0 miles of existing roads, prescribed burning (pile burning), rehabilitation of disturbed areas (such as grass seeding bare soils), noxious weed control, and tree planting (if needed). The initial timber salvage of 86 acres would occur between July 1, 2020 and March 1, 2021, in order to remove the trees before bark beetles can complete their life cycle in the downed/wind-damaged trees.

Following this action, FWP anticipates that elk and deer foraging opportunities would be improved due to removal of blown down trees that restrict movement in the area. The treatment would also reduce the risk of bark beetle infestation in adjacent forested stands, reduce fuel loading, and may benefit cavity nesting species (through the retention of broken top snags).

Costs to FWP for these treatments are expected to be covered by the sale of merchantable timber byproduct. Any revenue in excess of project costs would be deposited into the legislatively established FWP Forest Management Account to implement further forest management projects pursuant to the provisions of 87-1-201(9)(a)(iv), Montana Code Annotated (MCA) .

Alternatives

Alternative A: No Action. No timber salvage would be implemented on the WRWMA at this time. Downed trees would remain on the ground indefinitely. Adjacent live stands of trees would be at an increased susceptibility to bark beetle infestations for several years due to the likelihood of increasing bark beetle populations resulting from the infestation of downed trees. Ungulate movement would be restricted in the blowdown area. Heavy downed fuel would be a fire hazard and present a barrier to fire suppression in the event of a wildfire. Timber value would decline rapidly after the first year from decay and wood boring insects. FWP would not generate revenue from timber harvest for the Forest Management Account.

Alternative B: Proposed Action. Conduct timber salvage treatments on 86 acres of the WRWMA and monitor bark beetle infestation within the project area and remove infested trees for up to five years. Following this action, FWP anticipates that elk and deer foraging opportunities would be improved due to removal of blown down trees that restrict movement in the area. The treatment would also reduce the risk of bark beetle infestation in adjacent forested stands, reduce fuel loading, and may benefit cavity nesting species (through the retention of broken top snags). The project may generate revenue for the FWP Forest Management Account and provide merchantable timber to local forest product manufacturing facilities.

PUBLIC REVIEW PROCESS

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environments, evaluate those impacts through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and to make a decision based on this information. FWP released a draft environmental assessment (EA) for public review of this proposal (Wood's Ranch Wildlife Management Area Blowdown Salvage Project) on February 14, 2020 and accepted public comment for 29 days until March 13, 2020.

Legal notice of the availability of the Draft EA was published once each in the *Tobacco Valley News* (Eureka, Feb 19), *Flathead Beacon* (Feb 19) and *Independent Record* (Helena, Feb 16) newspapers.

FWP provided notice via postcard of the EA's availability to 28 landowners adjacent to the WRWMA. Additionally, email notifications were sent to news and media outlets, interested individuals, groups and agencies. The EA was available for public comment on FWP's web site (http://fwp.mt.gov, "Public Notices") from February 14 through March 13, 2020.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Summary of Public Comment

FWP received 9 comments during the public review period--8 from individuals and one from the Montana State Historic Preservation Office (MTSHPO). See Appendix A for all comments received. Eight commenters supported the proposed action, no commenters were in opposition, and one commenter (MTSHPO) did not state support or opposition.

Comments received in support of the proposed action included:

- "YES, proceed with salvaging the usable timber, wise choice !!!." (Commenter 1).
- "I support Alternative B the Proposed Action to salvage log the blowdown area at Woods's WMA. ...if this doesn't get done, it will negatively affect the WMA for years to come. The plan looks good." (Commenter 3)

- "By all means log it." (Commenter 4)
- "I support the decision to responsibly log and manage the Kootenai Woods Ranch." (Commenter 5)
- "I think it is a great idea to clean up the blowdown for many reasons listed. GO FOR IT" (Commenter 8)

Response to Public Comment

The following comments encompass specific issues, questions or suggestions received during the public comment period, along with FWP's responses.

Comment: *(A) We would like to know how this project will impact our road for ingress and egress during the process, for example, will there be days that we will not be able to go in or out. (B) Also, year before last the private property owners who utilize the easement went together to have the easement road graded and graveled from the right-hand turn at 4005 Burma to the Gould Road. The road was in very nice condition until the blow-down occurred. We are wondering what your intentions are concerning the road after the timber salvage project is completed.*
(Commenter 7.3.)

FWP Response: (A) During timber salvage operations, roads may be blocked temporarily while equipment is loaded and unloaded or when equipment is in operation on roads. However, most of the activity will occur off the Burma Road, on temporary spur-roads, and FWP does not anticipate the road to be blocked or closed for more than an hour at a time. Log truck traffic on the Burma Road will increase during operations but will have minor impacts to traffic. (B) During operations, the contractor hired to perform the timber salvage will be required by FWP to maintain those portions of the Burma Road associated with the salvage to meet or exceed the condition that existed prior to project commencement. After salvage operations have concluded, the contractor will be required to surface re-grade those portions of Burma Road affected by timber salvage operations.

Comment: *There are cultural resources in the vicinity of the proposed Woods Ranch Wildlife Management Area Timber Blowdown Salvage Project. The MTSHPO office looks forward to working with you regarding these resources and the Montana Antiquities Act. (Commenter 8)*

FWP Response:

DECISION

Based upon the EA and the applicable laws, regulations, and policies, we have determined that the proposed action will not have negative effects on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, we conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis, and the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is unnecessary.

This project was reviewed by an interdisciplinary team including wildlife biologists, a forester, and a fisheries biologist. Formal comments on the EA were supportive, without opposition. The proposal was well publicized.

No concerns were raised that would bring the environmental analysis into question. In consideration of these facts I adopt the Draft EA as final.

Based on the analysis in the draft EA and the public comment received, I have selected the "Proposed Action" (Alternative B). I will recommend to the Fish & Wildlife Commission that it approves FWP's proposed Wood's Ranch Wildlife Management Area Blowdown Salvage Project, as described in the EA.

This would occur at the Commission's next regularly scheduled meeting, which would be April 23 in Helena.

Jim Williams
Region 1 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

3/27/2020
Date

APPENDIX A. Comments on the proposed Blowdown Salvage Project on the Woods Ranch Wildlife Management Area received by FWP during the comment period of February 14 through March 13, 2020. (Comments received via E = email, T = telephone.)

Commenter #	Via	Paragraph	Comment
1	E		YES, proceed with salvaging the usable timber, wise choice !!!
2	E	1	I have a few comments on the draft EA. I was south in the Whitefish Range the day of this windstorm. We left the woods to avoid either getting hit by falling trees or getting trapped behind downed trees on roads, it was pretty intense. I commend the EA on several points:
		2	• Clear identification of the problem of blowdown restricting ungulate movement and foraging, heightened risk of insect infestation in the blowdown and increased danger of fire in the blowdown.
		3	• The focus on removing only downed or damaged tress and retention of standing healthy trees
		4	• Retention of wind-sturdy snags and broken trees that could become snags for wildlife habitat
		5	• Using the existing road system except for some short spur roads as needed that will be blocked and reclaimed
		6	• Rehabilitation of disturbed areas and seeding with native grasses to restore productivity and reduce erosion
		7	• Fast tracking this sale to harvest wood while it still retains some merchantable value. That will provide material for local mills and likely attract more bids
		8	• The only criticism I have is the reference in the EA that there is a heavy accumulation of downed trees across several Class 1 streams and SMZs that will be removed. The EA states that FWP has consulted DNRC and "alternative treatments" as specified under Rule 10 of the SMZ law guidebook would be used to remove trees. That prompted me to look up the SMZ guidebook and alternative practices. I'm fine with the proposed removal, a few more sentences in the EA would have probably clarified the action and saved me from the extra research.
3	E		Dear Fish Wildlife and Parks Commission, I support Alternative B the Proposed Action to salvage log the blowdown area at Woods's WMA. Looking at the pictures, if this doesn't get done, it will negatively affect the WMA for years to come. The plan looks good.
4	E		By all means log it
5	E		I support the decision to responsibly log and manage the Kootenai Woods Ranch
6	T		*As relayed via telephone conversation* Expressed overall support for Alternative B within the Draft EA but was concerned, as an adjacent landowner, about road access and potential closures during logging operations.
7	E	1	When we first contacted the Kalispell office at Fish, Wildlife, and Parks concerning the downed trees on the Burma Road last fall, we very much appreciated you responding to our call and were thankful that you had the trees cleared from the road so quickly.
		2	We were also glad when we received your postcard on the above salvage project. Please include this email for any updates that we would need to be aware of. We do have a couple of questions we would like you to answer.
		3	We would like to know how this project will impact our road for ingress and egress during the process, for example, will there be days that we will not be able to go in or out. Also, year before last the private property owners who utilize the easement went together to have the easement road graded and graveled from the right-hand turn at 4005 Burma to the Gould Road. The road was in very nice condition until the blow-down occurred. We are wondering what your intentions are concerning the road after the timber salvage project is completed.
		4	Would appreciate your keeping us informed.
8			There are cultural resources in the vicinity of the proposed Woods Ranch Wildlife Management Area Timber Blowdown Salvage Project. The MTSHPO office looks forward to working with you regarding these resources and the Montana Antiquities Act.