



**Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks**

**DECISION NOTICE for the
Draft Environmental Assessment for the
Stuart Mill Bay Fishing Access Site Timber Salvage Project**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 2
3201 Spurgin Road, Missoula MT 59804
406-542-5500
November 2012

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to complete a forest salvage project (harvest of dead or dying timber) at Stuart Mill Bay Fishing Access Site (FAS), owned and managed by FWP. The combined total acreage proposed for treatment is approximately 80 acres, which is approximately 40% of the approximately 200 forested acres on the property. The total acreage of the FAS is 362 acres. The majority of the forested habitat is being left untreated to maintain forest cover and diversity. Within the untreated area, in addition to lodgepole pine, there is a Douglas-fir component that is not susceptible to pine beetle attack. Harvesting in the untreated area is therefore not as critical, as a Douglas-fir stand would still remain in the event that most of the lodgepole pine would be lost to pine beetles. Conversely, the treated area is primarily lodgepole pine and is currently severely infested with pine beetles.

The objective is to maintain the property over time so it: provides wildlife habitats; is a forest cover that is healthy and is insect, disease, and fire resistant while giving consideration to aesthetic values; and is safer for public use. Another objective of the project is to remove the dead and dying lodgepole pine along the portion of the stand nearest roads and private dwellings to reduce the threat of fire. A healthy new stand of lodgepole pine is anticipated to begin reestablishing the area within 4 to 5 years of harvest. Prior to the reestablishment of a new forest, the area would be grassland, an ecotype that has become less common due to forest encroachment in the Georgetown Lake area due to fire suppression management.

Typically, once a stand of lodgepole pine grows to maturity it may be harvested commercially, or left unharvested a stand would usually succumb to a natural event such as fire, wind throw, disease and/or insect attack. Lodgepole pine is a species that grows as an even-aged species, meaning all the individual trees within a given stand are essentially the same age. The stand of lodgepole pine at Stuart Mill Bay FAS has grown to maturity and is in the process of dying from a mountain pine beetle attack. Many trees are already dead, whereas others are alive, but are heavily infested and are likely soon to die. Some trees are currently uninfested. If the stand is left unharvested, the vast majority of lodgepole pine in the area is expected to die and fall. Regeneration of the forest would be delayed by the fallen timber, and the threat of a wildfire fueled by dead timber could jeopardize structures in the area. The Douglas-fir and occasional Engelmann spruce components of the stand

would not be harvested. The long-term goal is to regenerate the stand for wildlife cover as well as aesthetic reasons. The specific objectives of this project include:

- a. Expedite the regeneration of the lodgepole stand and allow for expansion of Douglas-fir to provide a healthy forest environment by removing infested trees and provide a grassland environment in the interim.
- b. Create an environment that improves forest quality for wildlife and people.
- c. Reduce fire fuel loads and lower the risk of fire in order to protect the FAS and neighboring private lands.
- d. Remove trees that are potentially hazardous to visitors.
- e. Improve the aesthetic value of the forested property.

ALTERNATIVES

Alternative A: No action.

Action: FWP would not initiate forest management practices at Stuart Mill Bay FAS and would let the natural progression of succession take place. Lodgepole regeneration and associated wildlife habitat would be delayed. Regeneration of a healthy lodgepole stand would be in jeopardy as the stand would die and remain uncut--a scenario that usually does not result in regenerating a fully stocked stand.

Mountain pine beetle infestation would continue to kill lodgepole pine. Dead trees would continue to deteriorate and fall, posing safety hazards to power lines, recreationists, adjacent landowners, and site improvements. FWP staff would be challenged in maintaining a safe FAS due to hazardous standing-dead timber.

Because beetle-infested trees would not be removed, beetles would continue to disperse from currently infected trees, resulting in more trees being attacked, with potential infestation spread on adjacent lands.

This area is rated "very high" for fire risk under the Deer Lodge County Wildfire Protection Plan. The dead fuel component would increase over time and reduce the potential of controlling a wildfire. Adjacent landowners and improvements such as roads and power lines would be at risk.

The long-term aesthetics of this tract of public land would be impacted as trees transition from a green color to a dead red and eventually fall, creating a tangle of dead downed timber.

Alternative B: Complete the timber harvest prescription as recommended.

Action: FWP would harvest dead and dying lodgepole pine on portions of Stuart Mill Bay FAS. This alternative would address forest health and regeneration objectives by removing all lodgepole pine and creating a suitable seed bed for the next generation of lodgepole. In addition, healthy grassland would be established and managed with weed control practices. Patches containing 10-15 "leave" (unharvested) trees would be retained for wildlife habitat (especially birds) at the rate of one patch per one-and-a-half acres.

With removal of the beetle-infested trees, various hazards associated with dead fall and fire would be reduced. Typically, in 4 to 5 years after harvest, a new stand of lodgepole pine would begin to establish. A mosaic of age classes often develop over time and forest health and forest diversity improve.

Because much of the forested portion to the south of the proposed harvest would remain unharvested, an older and species-diverse stand with a Douglas-fir component would remain. This area would also contain many dead trees that provide wildlife habitat.

Reducing fuels throughout the harvest area would improve access for emergency vehicles and provide a safer working environment for firefighters who might be involved with future fire suppression and structure protection in the vicinity. Efforts to reduce the fire hazard and improve overall forest health are intended to have long-term benefits for on-site recreationists as well as homeowners residing adjacent to the stand.

The implementation of this alternative would meet the requirements of the state's "Good Neighbor Policy" (§ 23-1-126, Montana Code Annotated [MCA]) that seeks a goal of no impact upon adjoining private and public lands. Additionally, this alternative would be in keeping with the intentions of § 87-1-201(9)(iv), MCA that requires FWP to address fire mitigation and pine beetle infestations on forested lands in excess of 50 acres.

PUBLIC REVIEW PROCESS

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks 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 make a decision based on this information. FWP released a draft environmental assessment (EA) for public review of this proposal (Stuart Mill Bay Fishing Access Site Timber Salvage Project) on October 5, 2012 and accepted public comment until 5:00 P. M. on November 5, 2012.

Legal notice of the project and availability of the Draft EA was published in the *Anaconda Leader* (Oct 5), *Independent Record* (Helena, Oct 8), *Missoulian* (Oct 5) *Montana Standard* (Butte, Oct 5), and *Philipsburg Mail* (Oct 11) newspapers.

FWP mailed approximately 36 copies of the EA (and approximately 25 email notifications of the EA's availability) to adjacent landowners and interested individuals, groups and agencies. The EA was available for public review on FWP's web site (<http://fwp.mt.gov/>, "Recent Public Notices" and "Submit Public Comments") from October 5 through November 5, 2012. An FWP statewide news release was issued October 12 and posted on FWP's website (<http://fwp.mt.gov/>, "News Releases") the same day.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

FWP received 7 total emailed or mailed comments (Appendix A), representing 5 people (1 of the 5 is also an Anaconda-Deer Lodge County Commissioner) and 2 agencies (Board of County Commissioners for Granite County and Department of Natural Resources and Conservation). All 7 comments specifically supported the proposed timber salvage project. All comments can be viewed in Appendix A.

FWP would like to acknowledge and address one comment: ". . . the contract deadline for harvest from Nov 30 – Feb 1 needs to be longer . . ."

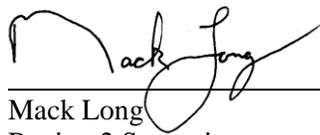
FWP Response: FWP intended for the harvest to be from November 30 – March 1, and it is stated as such in the Timber Sale Contract wording. The February 1 date in the EA should have read March 1. Per this correction, harvest will be extended through March 1.

DECISION

Based upon the EA and the applicable laws, regulations, and policies, I have determined that the proposed action will not have a significant effect on the natural or human environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared, and I conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis. It is my decision to implement Alternative B (proposed action), and complete the timber harvest prescription. By notification of this Decision Notice and the correction noted in it, the draft EA and this Decision Notice are hereby made the final EA. The draft EA and Decision Notice may be viewed at or obtained from FWP (address on page 1). The draft EA is still available on FWP's web site at http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices/environmentalAssessments/restorationAndRehab/pn_0111.html.

Neighboring landowners, agencies, and interested publics were involved throughout the development and planning of this forest project. The project is consistent with statute that requires FWP to implement programs that address fire mitigation, pine beetle infestation, and wildlife habitat enhancement on forested lands it owns. This project meets all those objectives.

In accordance with FWP policy, an appeal may be made by any person who has either commented in writing to the department on the proposed project, or who has registered or commented orally at a public meeting held by the department on the proposed project, or who can provide new evidence that would otherwise change the proposed plan. An appeal must be submitted to the Director of FWP in writing and must be postmarked or received within 30 days of this decision notice. The appeal must describe the basis for the appeal, how the appellant has previously commented to the department or participated in the decision-making process, and how the department can provide relief. The appeal should be mailed to: Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, 1420 East 6th Avenue, P.O. Box 200701 Helena, MT 59620-0701.



Mack Long
Region 2 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

11-9-2012
Date