

Wood's Ranch WMA Blowdown

Background

The Wood's Ranch Wildlife Management Area (WRWMA) is 1,474 acres in size and located 5.5 miles north of Eureka, Montana. The WRWMA was originally acquired in 1982 from the Army Corps of Engineers as mitigation for the Libby Dam. The WRWMA is managed for the primary objective of providing winter range habitat for deer and elk. Approximately 530 acres of the WRWMA are forested and the rest are native grasslands. The forested areas are predominantly mature, mixed-conifer forest dominated by Douglas-fir, western larch, Engelmann spruce, and ponderosa pine. There are also several riparian forest areas adjacent to streams that are composed of a mix of hardwood species (black cottonwood, quaking aspen, paper birch) and conifers.

On November 27, 2019, a major wind event hit northwest Montana and resulted in significant blowdown across the west side of Whitefish Range. The Wood's Ranch was affected by the windstorm to varying degrees. Approximately 80 acres were severely impacted in the southeastern corner of the WMA along Burma Road (see attached map). The remainder of the forest was impacted to a lesser extent, typically the impacts declined towards the north end of the WRWMA.



Figure 1 – Blown down trees along Burma Road (December 2, 2019).



Figure 2 - Blowdown in the southeast corner of the WRWMA (December 19, 2019).



Figure 3 - Moderate blowdown in the south east 1/4 of Section 7 (December 19, 2019).



Figure 4 - Relatively minor blow down patch in north east 1/4 of Section 7 (December 19, 2019).

Management Considerations

FWP Eureka area Wildlife Biologist Ethan Lula visited the area on December 2, 2019 has been working with neighbors and local authorities to deal with the immediate impacts of the blowdown. Trees were blocking Burma Road and Moore Lane, which cross the WRWMA and provide access to neighboring residences. Power lines located on the WRWMA that are managed by Lincoln Electric Cooperative were knocked down. The roads have been cleared by local authorities and power has since been restored. The area wildlife biologist and FWP Forester, Jason Parke, visited the site again on December 20, 2019 to evaluate the extent and severity of blowdown across the WMA.

FWP is evaluating the potential of proposing a salvage timber sale of the blown down trees. Some of the considerations for salvaging the blowdown are:

- Heavy accumulations of downed trees preclude wildlife movement through, and use of the area
- Downed trees will attract bark beetles which may result in an outbreak affecting adjacent stands of live trees if not removed before the bark beetles complete their life cycle (1 year).
- Salvage of down trees is an economically-viable option only if it is completed within the first year, as timber value rapidly declines from decay and wood boring insects.

Timeline

FWP will seek Fish and Wildlife Commission endorsement of this proposal in February 2020. If endorsed, FWP would develop a Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) and seek public input. Contingent on the outcome of the EA process, FWP would potentially submit a final recommendation to the Commission in April 2020 for further consideration. If approved, the project could commence in the summer of 2020.

