



DECISION NOTICE

2023 Island Lake Fishing Access Site Fuels Reduction

October 27, 2023

ACTION

Decision Notice (DN). Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) shall prepare a DN for the proposed action. The DN must identify the agency decision, the reasons for the decision, and any special conditions surrounding the decision or its implementation.

With this action, FWP hereby adopts the Draft Environmental Assessment or Draft EA as final without modification and approves Alternative 2, the proposed action.

AUTHORITY: MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT

According to the applicable requirements of the Montana Environmental Policy Act or MEPA and its implementing rules and regulations, before a proposed action may be approved, environmental review must be conducted to identify, consider, and disclose any potential impacts of the proposed action on the affected human environment. The level of environmental review will vary with the complexity and seriousness of environmental issues associated with a proposed action. The level of public interest will also vary. The agency is responsible for adjusting public review to match these factors. *Title 75, Chapter 1, Parts 1 through 3, Montana Code Annotated (MCA)*.

Based on these factors, FWP determined a Checklist EA (Draft EA) constitutes the appropriate level of review for the proposed action. Therefore, to assess and disclose potential impacts of the proposed action, FWP prepared a Draft EA for public review and comment. See *Public Participation Process* below.

Further, FWP must consider any substantive comments received in response to an EA and proceed in accordance with one of the following steps: determine the EA did not adequately reflect the issues raised by the proposed action and issue an Environmental Impact Statement or EIS; determine the EA did not adequately reflect the issues raised by the proposed action and issue a supplemental EA; or determine the Draft EA adequately addressed the issues raised by the proposed action and make a final decision, with appropriate modification resulting from the analysis provided in the Draft EA and the analysis of any substantive public comments received. See *Public Comment and FWP Response* below.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

The Draft EA was made available for public review and comment from October 11, 2023 through October 25, 2023. A legal Notice was published in the Daily Interlake and The Western News and the Draft EA was

posted on FWP's Public Notice webpage: <https://fwp.mt.gov/news/public-notice>. The Draft EA was also made available for public review on the Environmental Quality Council or EQC website: <https://leg.mt.gov/mepa/search/>, by individual request, and through notice to identified interested parties. FWP received 1 electronic email comment during the public comment period.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) Region One is proposing forest management treatments on the Island Lake Fishing Access Site (FAS), involving approximately 26 acres, with the primary objective of mitigating hazardous fuels. Island Lake FAS is managed by FWP to provide public access for angling, boating, and other recreation opportunities. The FAS provides fishing, hunting, wildlife viewing, hiking, picnicking, and camping opportunities. Facilities available at the Island Lake FAS include a vault toilet, boat launch, and campsites. FWP's Forest Management Plan directs FWP to manage forested FASs for public use and recreational values. Public safety, aesthetics, and visual screening are priorities for forest management in developed areas. Beyond developed areas and of secondary priority are insect and disease management, fire hazard mitigation, fish and wildlife habitat, and other recreation opportunities.

FWP acquired the Island Lake FAS from Plum Creek Timber Company in 2000. Approximately 27 acres of the 38-acre Island Lake FAS are forested. The forested portion is composed of 50-year-old lodgepole pine that regenerated from a clearcut harvest occurring sometime in the early 1970's. Based on old stumps throughout the site, a previous timber harvest occurred sometime in the early 20th century which removed primarily mature western larch. The site is now dominated by lodgepole pine (95%) and minor amounts of other species (Douglas-fir, western larch, and ponderosa pine). The average density is 330 trees per acre, the average diameter-at-breast-height (DBH) is 9 inches, and the average height is 55 feet tall.

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) identified the Island Lake FAS, and surrounding areas, as a 'Priority Area for Focused Attention' in their 2020 Montana Forest Action Plan². The drivers of risk identified in the plan were wildfire risk and distance to the wildland urban interface (WUI). DNRC – Libby Unit successfully applied for a Montana Forest Action Plan Implementation Grant in 2022 to help pay for fuels reduction treatments to address the wildfire risk concern. FWP was a subrecipient of that grant proposal, receiving \$26,250 in grant funding from DNRC.

PURPOSE AND NEED

FWP is proposing to conduct forest management treatments on 26 acres of the Island Lake FAS for the purpose of reducing hazardous fuels in the wildland urban interface (through treatments such as thinning, pruning, and slash disposal) and selling any resulting merchantable tree byproducts to help offset treatment costs. The project area has been identified as a 'Priority Area for Focused Attention' in DNRC's 2020 Montana Forest Action Plan.

Forest management treatments are expected to benefit:

- Forest conditions within the FAS by promoting healthy and vigorous trees and stand conditions that would be more resilient to stressors and damaging agents (such as insects, diseases, drought, and wildfire).
- Neighboring lands and structures that may be affected by hazardous fuels in the event of a wildfire.
- Aesthetics of the FAS
- A variety of wildlife species that depend on more open stand conditions (such as for foraging on understory grasses, forbs, and shrubs)

If FWP prepared a cost/benefit analysis before completion of the EA, the EA must contain the cost/benefit analysis or a reference to it. ARM 12.2.432(3)(b).

ALTERNATIVES ANALYZED

Alternative 1: No Action

In addition to the proposed action, and as required by MEPA, FWP analyzes the "No-Action" alternative in the EA. Under the No-Action alternative, the proposed action would not occur. Therefore, no additional impacts to the human environment would occur. The No Action alternative forms the baseline from which the potential impacts of the proposed action may be measured.

Under the No Action alternative, FWP would not conduct the proposed forest management activities under this alternative. The Island Lake FAS would remain untreated, creating increased opportunity for continued fuels accumulations in the wildland urban interface. Forest succession and competition amongst trees for limited resources (nutrients, sunlight, and water) would continue, leading to decreased stand vigor and potential for trees and stands to be less resilient to stressors and damaging agents. Maintenance costs may increase over time as more trees die and increasingly pose threats to public safety, property, and improvement. Dead and downed fuels may increase, and as new trees regenerate in gaps created from overstory mortality, ladder fuels may also increase leading to increased hazardous fuel build up. Dead and downed trees may negatively affect the aesthetics of the sites. Higher stand densities and increased dead and downed wood may increase habitat availability for species that depend on that condition while potentially negatively affecting species that depend on more open stand conditions. No timber would be sold to potentially generate revenue for the FWP Forest Management Account.

Alternative 2: Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action, FWP would implement fuels reduction treatments by thinning 26 acres. Treatments would involve tree removal (including removal of both trees with merchantable and nonmerchantable value), pruning tree branches to a height of 6-8 feet within 66 feet either side of existing roads, and follow-up treatments. Trees selected for removal would be based on several factors including:

- Removing suppressed and intermediate trees that are competing with desirable dominant and codominant trees
- Removing trees that contribute to the potential for crown fires (such as ladder fuels which are tree canopies that form vertical layers that can allow surface fires to ascend into overstory tree crowns in the event of a wildfire)

- Removing additional trees to reduce competition stress and create a more vigorous and resilient stand condition overall. The target spacing for leave trees will be 15 to 20 feet between stems, resulting in an average density ranging from 110 to 190 trees per acre.

- Variable spacing and retention clumps (up to ½ acre) would be utilized to maintain the natural character of the stand, reduce sight distance within the stand, and maintain cover for wildlife.

PUBLIC COMMENT AND FWP RESPONSE

One public comment was received during the public comment period. The comment was provided by the Department of Natural Resource's Kalispell Unit, and it was in support of the project.

DECISION

Based on the environmental review provided in the Draft EA, and in accordance with all applicable laws, rules, regulations, and policies, FWP determined the proposed action (Alternative 2), will not have significant adverse impacts on the human environment associated with the proposed action and constitutes a reasonable and appropriate strategy to achieve identified objectives. Therefore, preparation of an EIS is unnecessary. FWP hereby adopts the Draft EA as final and approves the Alternative 2, the proposed action.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lee Anderson".

Lee Anderson
Region 1 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks