



DECISION NOTICE

RAY KUHN'S WMA FOREST HABITAT IMPROVEMENT AND FUELS REDUCTION PROJECT

3/31/2025

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, with 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 Standard 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 February 20, 2025 – March 21, 2025. 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 six comments during the public comment period.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

FWP proposes implementing a forest habitat improvement and forest fuels reduction project on the Ray Kuhns Wildlife Management Area (WMA). The 1,560-acre WMA, located in the northwestern corner of the Flathead Valley, is managed by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to provide wildlife habitat, particularly white-tailed deer winter range, and compatible public recreational opportunities.

The proposed project area encompasses approximately 358 acres of forest within the east parcel of Ray Kuhns WMA. Within the proposed project area, forest conditions vary according to terrain (e.g., slope, aspect) and legacy forestry actions, but are dominated by second-growth mature Douglas-fir or mixed Douglas-fir/ponderosa pine stands. Tree mortality and degrading forest conditions within the proposed project area have increased due to forest succession, fire exclusion, drought, and increasing occurrence of Douglas-fir bark beetle infestation within the WMA and surrounding area. Stands are at increased susceptibility to Douglas-fir bark beetle infestations and severe fire, and portions of the WMA have been identified as *Priority Areas for Focused Attention* in the [Montana Forest Action Plan](#)¹ (2020) due to wildfire risk, proximity to the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), and insects and disease risk.

The proposed project area is within the *Connecting Fuels Treatments in the Salish Mountains and Whitefish Range Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership Project*². FWP intends to participate with the project partners and implement the priorities identified in the project where they are compatible with FWP objectives. FWP also intends to seek grant funding through the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership Project.

FWP's objective is to begin forest treatment efforts during summer 2025. Primary project completion would be completed by December 2027. Follow-up treatments such as prescribed fire and noxious weed control are expected to be necessary and may occur until December 2030.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of the proposed project is to improve forest habitat conditions and reduce hazardous fuels on portions of the Ray Kuhns WMA where the long-term health of the forest stand is declining and/or progressing towards a state that has relatively low value to wildlife. The benefits of the proposed action include:

- Managing forest stands towards a desired condition that promotes and maintains long-term canopy cover for white-tailed deer winter range.
- Reduce hazardous fuels that could result in severe fire.
- Increase understory forage production.
- Reduce the treated stands' susceptibility to bark beetle infestation.
- Reduce threats to conifer-dominated forest and woodland (xeric-mesic), a Tier 1 Community Type

¹ Montana Forest Action Plan: <https://www.montanaforestactionplan.org/pages/forest-action-plan> (last accessed March 29, 2023)

² Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Project: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/joint-chiefs-landscape-restoration-partnership/montana/connecting-fuels> (last accessed March 29, 2023)

of Greatest Conservation Need (Montana's State Wildlife Action Plan 2015).

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 status quo forest management on Ray Kuhns WMA would continue, with no direct manipulation of overstory or understory existing condition. Forest stands will continue the successional trajectory set by legacy forestry actions in the absence of natural fire regimes. Stands predominantly composed of densely stocked, mature (~100-year-old) Douglas-fir overstory will continue to degrade due to competition stress and resultant susceptibility to Douglas-fir beetle. Under the no-action alternative, existing canopy cover that buffers snow accumulation and thermal stress for white-tailed deer would be maintained in the short-term but would decline as trees continue to die. Understory treatments would not be implemented, and rough fescue bunchgrass communities will continue to be supplanted by more shade-tolerant grasses, shrubs (e.g., snowberry), and trees. Aspen stands in units 4 and 8 will degrade and eventually be replaced by the conifers. Forest fuels will not be reduced and the risk of severe wildfire will increase as dead fuels accumulate. The no action alternative would result in FWP not fulfilling its statutory obligation to §87-1-201(10)(a)(iv), MCA at this time. FWP will continue to monitor and control noxious weeds, maintain administrative roads, and remove individual hazard trees per WMA management objectives.

Alternative 2: Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action, FWP would implement direct manipulation on approximately 358 acres of forest on the Ray Kuhns WMA. Proposed treatments would vary by unit but include activities such as commercial thinning (removal of merchantable trees), non-commercial thinning (removal of sub-merchantable trees), prescribed burning, rehab (such as grass seeding and noxious weed control), and minor road maintenance and improvements to facilitate access to the treatment units. Detailed unit descriptions of proposed treatments are included in the Draft EA, Appendix A.

Tree removal would be accomplished through a combination of mechanized and non-mechanized methods. Merchantable trees would be treated with ground-based logging equipment, such as feller-bunchers and skidders, that would cut and skid trees to designated roadside locations (called "landings"). Tree stems would be delimbed and processed into logs. Logs would be loaded onto log trucks and hauled to local forest product manufacturing facilities. Nonmerchantable trees (trees too small to be manufactured into forest products) would be treated by mastication or felled with chainsaws. Slash (the nonmerchantable limbs and treetops) and cull material generated from this process would be treated either by piling and burning, grinding or chipping, and/or removing the material from the site.

Ground disturbance is expected on skid trails and landing areas. Any ground disturbance (exposed, displaced, or compacted soils) would be rehabbed and seeded with a native grass seed mix. Contractors hired to do this work would be required to adhere to Montana Forestry Best Management Practices³

³ Available online: <https://dnrc.mt.gov/Forestry/Forest-Management/best-management-practices> (last accessed August 8, 2023)

(BMPs). FWP would develop a site-specific treatment plan for the site with contractors hired to do this work. This plan would identify resource protection measures to minimize impacts to the site. FWP would oversee the activities while they are on-going to ensure compliance with the plan and to minimize resource impacts.

Access to the project areas would be from existing roads (4.2 miles) and new temporary roads (1.0 miles; Figure 3). Roads would be upgraded to the minimum extent necessary to facilitate logging and log hauling while meeting BMPs. Temporary “jump-up” roads (relatively short spur roads) may be needed in some areas. These would be located on flat ground and where excavation could be avoided. Ground impacts, such as more severe soil compaction or soil exposure, may be greater on these spur roads. These would be reclaimed and blocked to prevent unauthorized motorized use. Road work would be short duration (3-4 weeks) and would be done during periods when the soil moisture is adequate to allow for adequate shaping and compaction.

The operating period for the proposed treatments would be from July 15 to October 15 and/or December 1 through March 15. Ground based logging equipment would be restricted to periods when soil is relatively dry, frozen, and/or snow-covered conditions to minimize impacts to soil and vegetation. Other clean-up and rehab activities, such as slash treatment, grass seeding, and noxious weed control would be short duration (1 to 2 weeks) and could potentially occur throughout the year. If slash is piled and burned, burn piles would be in openings away from residual trees and neighboring property lines. Burning would be conducted in accordance with open burning seasons and applicable state and county regulations.

Road work and logging activities would comply with Montana Forestry BMPs and the Montana Streamside Management Zone⁴ law. To minimize the spread of noxious weeds, all equipment would be cleaned and inspected by FWP before moving onto the FWP lands. Exposed bare mineral soils would be reseeded immediately, and any weed infestations would be treated with herbicides indefinitely through annual WMA weed management efforts.

Broadcast burning would be used to reduce surface fuel loading, promote aspen regeneration, and benefit fire-adapted grasses, forbs, and shrubs. Further evaluations of the proposed treatment units for suitability, feasibility, and risk of broadcast burning would be conducted following mechanical treatments and burn plans would be developed in conjunction with the U.S. Forest Service, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, and/or with qualified contractors prior to implementing burns.

PUBLIC COMMENT AND FWP RESPONSE

FWP received substantive public comments on the Draft EA. A substantive public comment was defined as the identification of a specific issue or impact. The following provides the public comments received and FWP response(s).

Comment 1:

I recently saw the announcement seeking public input on habitat improvement proposals for the Ray Kuhns WMA. I just wanted to voice my support for any such work at this WM to keep the forest there healthy. It is

⁴ Available online: <https://dnrc.mt.gov/docs/forestry/SMZFullcopy.pdf> (last accessed August 8, 2023)

a popular area and I have hunted it many times and enjoy having access to such a place so close to Kalispell. It would be a shame to see it degrade.

I will try to make the meeting on this but in case I can't, wanted to just share my thoughts. Thanks for the opportunity

FWP Response: No Response

Comment 2:

Hey just wanted to comment on the Ray Kuhns project.

I think that the forestry project is much needed for the area and is well overdue. I skimmed through the proposal and saw that the large, northern part of the WMA isn't part of the plan. Is there a plan for the future to have another forestry project out there?

FWP Response: The proposed project focuses on forest stands in either a declining condition, or on a successional trajectory that would provide little long-term value to wildlife. FWP evaluated forest conditions across the WMA and determined that those in the northern portion of the WMA were not in need of direct manipulation at this time.

Comment 3:

Flathead Wildlife has reviewed the Draft Environmental Assessment for the Ray Kuhns Wildlife Management Area (RKWMA) Forest Habitat Improvement and Fuels Reduction Project and offers the following comments.

The EA is substantive and covers the management issues well.

Section X.A.1 covers an evaluation and summary of potential impacts to Aquatic Life and Habitats on page 19. It is stated that the northwest corner of RKWMA is adjacent to the Stillwater River which provides habitat for bull trout. It is highly unlikely there are bull trout in the vicinity. The Stillwater Lakes upstream of RKWMA warm the Stillwater River above the preferred temperature range of bull trout. The Stillwater River all the way from Stillwater Lakes to the confluence with the Flathead River is generally warm, low gradient with a silty bottom. The fishery is dominated by northern pikeminnow and northern pike with occasional short forays out of the Flathead River by westslope cutthroat trout. The only bull trout in the system are upstream of the Stillwater Lakes and Highway 93 where the river is colder, steeper gradient and more dominated by cobble/gravel.

Ray Kuhns WMA is an important whitetail deer winter range with deer migrating from 30 miles or more to winter there. As noted in the EA, there has been a large amount of recent logging with 1700 acres of DNRC land to the west recently logged. Treatment Areas 5 and 6 are shown as moderately high to high winter deer winter use but will also get some of the more intensive treatment. The EA shows that out of the 358 acres being treated (about 24% Of RKWMA East), about 1/3 of the acres are in Treatment Areas 5 and 6. The amount of winter use may reflect a relatively dense overstory that in turn attracts overwintering deer. The EA also states those stands are most at risk for Douglas Fir Pine Beetle and for fire so treatment may be unavoidable. But wintering whitetail deer use may be reduced near term and for a fair time into the future.

Ray Kuhns WMA is very popular for a variety of recreational activities. The EA states most management will take place 7/15 to 10/1 when soils are dry. Those are heavy recreational use periods but there are many nearby alternative areas to recreate. Ceasing logging before the start of general firearms season seems prudent and may attract deer in short term to respond to fallen tree tops. The EA notes some work may occur 12/1 to 3/15 when the ground is frozen. Given the high importance of RKWMA as winter range, that would seem to be counter-productive.

RKWMA is an asset to the Flathead both for recreation and for wintering habitat for whitetail deer and other wildlife. We wish you success with the project.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

FWP Response: FWP concurs that Stillwater River adjacent to RKWMA is unlikely to support bull trout. As evaluated in EA Section X.A.1 no direct, secondary, or cumulative impacts are expected to bull trout because of the proposed project.

As determined in EA Section X.A.1, FWP acknowledges that the proposed project will result in some immediate degradation to existing white-tailed deer winter range in favor of long-term persistence of that habitat function and forest health. To further reduce the short-term impacts to winter range FWP may also incorporate small (1-3 acre) untreated patches, within identified units.

As described in EA Section X.A.1, FWP expects that direct impacts to wintering wildlife to be short-term and minor. Wintering white-tailed deer may be temporarily displaced during active logging, but the negative impacts may be offset through increased on-the-ground winter forage availability of Douglas-fir and beard lichens (*Usenea spp.*) produced as litterfall during proposed actions.

Comment 4:

Thank you for stopping out the other day to discuss the timber harvest planned for the Ray Kuhns Wildlife Refuge. As a neighbor that borders the Ray Kuhns WMA on 3 sides we had a few concerns. There are two patches of sever dead down fall in very close proximity to our fence lines. One on the west side of the WMA and one on the NW side of the WMA. These pose 2 threats in our opinion. 1 extreme fire hazard and 2 the accesses to be able to control the massive amount of Bull thistle weeds. These big patches of weeds have gone years without control. As I mentioned in our meeting we are more than willing to help in any way possible to address these issues. As you know there is no way for us to control these weeds on our side of the fence in our hay fields without some kind of help on the other side of the fence.

FWP Response: The area described in the comment is located in the southeast corner of the WMA near proposed unit 8. The described area is small (< 5 acres) and contains a large amount of downed dead timber which also contains large patches of weeds, primarily thistle. The level of downed trees severely limits FWP's ability to manage weeds. This area is not considered an important wintering area for white-tailed deer. FWP will modify the EA to include the described areas and develop treatments to reduce/remove dead downfall to such an extent that weed management can effectively be implemented.

Comment 5:

On behalf of our 400+ members of the Flathead Audubon Society, we support Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposed Forest Habitat Improvement Plan for the Ray Kuhns WMA as it will help provide long-term habitat diversity, reduce risk of high intensity wild fires, help restore and maintain seral ponderosa pine trees and stands, and maintain improve health of older trees and stands. We encourage retention and recruitment of larger Ponderosa pines and Western Larch as these trees and future snags are extremely important for a wide variety of nesting birds from American Goshawk and Great Gray Owls, to a wide variety of woodpeckers, to songbirds such as Western Bluebirds and Black-capped and Mountain Chickadees.

As you know, we were aware of a nesting pair of Great Gray Owls on the Ray Kuhns WMA but were not aware that one of the pair was likely killed in a vehicle collision. We understand you will be monitoring the area for nesting Great Gray Owls to help reduce impacts from the habitat improvement activities. However, it would be great if you could maintain the silvicultural prescriptions for Great Gray Owls in the unit(s) where the pair was likely nesting and in other suitable areas. Based on verbal information from our members, the pair was historically located near the northern end of the Kuhns WMA of Kuhn Rd (Unit 4 or 5) and was often seen or heard in the meadow habitat.

Below are forest silvicultural recommendations for Great Gray Owl nesting territories:

Nest habitat requires large, broken-topped snags, usually greater than 24 inches in diameter, within 600 to 845 feet of meadows or large meadow complexes (e.g. >26 acres), and within forest canopy cover of at least 60% canopy closure immediately around the nest site. (USFS) and from E. Bull et al. technical paper: <https://www.sierraforestlegacy.org/Resources/Conservation/SierraNevadaWildlife/GreatGrayOwl/GGO-Henjum90.pdf>

Great Gray Owls will also use artificial nest structures. Flathead Audubon would be willing to help with construction of such a structure if suitable nesting habitat is limited. <https://nestwatch.org/learn/all-about-birdhouses/birds/great-gray-owl/>

We appreciate FWP's efforts to locate the Great Gray Owl and other nesting sites & trees with excavated cavities prior to implementing the proposed plans.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

FWP Response: As per EA Section X.A.1., the proposed prescription for snags is to retain snags greater than 16 inches DBH, and to retain trees with visible nesting cavities; and trees with dead, deformed or multiple tops. Observed nests would be avoided and reported to FWP. FWP will conduct Great Gray Owl monitoring prior to project initiation and, if nesting behavior is observed, implement additional mitigations around the nest site.

Comment 6:

On behalf of the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, please accept the following comments in support of Alternative 2 in the draft environmental assessment for the proposed Ray Kuhns Wildlife Management Area (WMA) Forest Habitat Improvement and Fuels Reduction Project. Founded in 1989, the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation (CSF) is the informed authority across outdoor issues and serves as the primary

conduit for influencing public policy. Working with the Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus (CSC), the Governors Sportsmen's Caucus (GSC), and the National Assembly of Sportsmen's Caucuses (NASC), CSF gives a voice to hunters, anglers, recreational shooters, and trappers on Capitol Hill and throughout state capitols advocating on vital outdoor issues that are the backbone of our nation's conservation legacy. We strongly support the proposed project on the Ray Kuhns WMA to improve forest health and wildlife habitat and reduce hazardous fuel loads. The proposed commercial and non-commercial thinning treatments and prescribed burning will address the declining forest health on the WMA, improve habitat for a range of wildlife species, and reduce the risk for severe wildfire. Broadcast burning, where feasible and appropriate following the mechanical treatments, would promote the regeneration of quaking aspen and enhance fire-adapted, early seral browse for wildlife. Without these treatments to thin overstocked stands, reduce Douglas-fir bark beetle infestation, and improve the vigor of overstory trees, winter range thermal cover for white-tailed deer will decline and severe wildfire risk will not be mitigated.

Specifically, we support the following proposed treatments:

- Unit 1 (39 acres) – Variable density thinning and group selection in the late seral, closed canopy Douglas-fir and western larch stand to reduce density from an average of 160 square feet BA/acre to an average of 110 square feet BA/acre and address Douglas-fir bark beetle infestation while retaining snags and cavity trees for wildlife and maintaining overstory cover for white-tailed deer cover.
- Unit 2 (14 acres) – Variable density thinning and group selection in the late seral, closed canopy Douglas-fir and western larch stand to reduce density from an average of 140 square feet BA/acre to an average of 110 square feet BA/acre and address Douglas-fir bark beetle risk while retaining snags and cavity trees for wildlife and prioritizing crown health for snow intercept and white-tailed deer thermal cover.
- Unit 3 (16 acres) – Variable density thinning and group selection in the late seral, open canopy Douglas fir, western larch, and ponderosa pine stand to reduce density from an average of 110 square feet BA/acre to an average of 90 square feet BA/acre and address Douglas-fir bark beetle risk while retaining snags and cavity trees for wildlife and retaining trees with the highest crown ratios to support winter range habitat for white-tailed deer.
- Unit 4 (47 acres) – Thin-from-below, group selection, and overstory thinning in the mid seral, closed canopy Engelmann spruce, quaking aspen, Douglas-fir, western larch, and ponderosa pine stand to promote quaking aspen growth and regeneration while retaining snags and cavity trees for wildlife.
- Unit 5 (78 acres) – Thin-from-below and overstory thinning in the mid seral, open canopy ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir stand to reduce fuel ladders and promote rough fescue bunchgrass for big game winter range forage.
- Unit 6 (105 acres) – Variable density thinning and group selection in the Douglas-fir, western larch, and ponderosa stand to reduce overstory density from an average of 180 square feet BA/acre to an average of 110 square feet BA/acre and reduce Douglas-fir bark beetle infestation while retaining snags and cavity trees for wildlife and favoring trees with dense crowns and higher crown ratios for long-term white-tailed deer winter range.

- *Unit 7 (42 acres) – Thin from below and overstory thinning in the mid seral, closed canopy two-storied ponderosa and Douglas-fir stand to reduce ladder fuels and support rough fescue growth that is being outcompeted by shade-tolerant understory species.*
- *Unit 8 (16 acres) – Thin-from-below, group selection, and overstory thinning in the mid seral, closed canopy Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, western larch, Engelmann spruce, and quaking aspen stand to support quaking aspen growth and regeneration for wildlife while also retaining snags and cavity trees for wildlife.*

We additionally support the proposed noxious weed control treatments, road improvements, and seeding of disturbed areas with native grasses. CSF represents the interests of Montana’s sportsmen and women, the primary funders of state based conservation efforts and significant contributors to Montana’s economy, that depend on access to WMAs to pursue their outdoor pastimes. Hunters in Montana support 12,100 jobs, \$334 million in salaries and wages, \$47 million in state and local taxes, with a total economic effect of \$1.125 billion.¹ In 2020 alone, Montana’s sportsmen and women generated more than \$80.83 million for conservation funding, supporting the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks through the “user pays – public benefits” American System of Conservation Funding.

We look forward to seeing the project move forward as proposed to support forest resilience, wildlife habitat, and the outdoor sporting traditions of Montanans. Thank you for considering our comments.

FWP Response: No Response

DECISION

ADOPT DRAFT EA AS FINAL EA

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), as modified, 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 Draft EA as final and approves the Alternative 2, the proposed action, with the following changes. FWP will incorporate actions to reduce dead downfall in a small (<5 acre) area near the southeastern boundary of the WMA facilitate weed management activities.

With this DN, FWP hereby adopts the Final EA, with modifications, and approves the proposed action. A summary of major conclusions and supporting information from the Draft EA stating where such conclusions and information were changed from those which appeared in the Draft EA is included above in FWP’s responses to comments. The DN, including the modifications identified in the DN, and the adopted action from the Draft EA comprises the Final EA.

Sincerely,



Amber Steed
Region 1 Supervisor