



United States Department of Agriculture

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# **Draft Record of Decision**

## **Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest**

### **2020 Land Management Plan**

**The Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest is in central Montana and includes approximately 2,883,227 acres in portions of the following counties: Broadwater, Cascade, Choteau, Fergus, Gallatin, Glacier, Golden Valley, Jefferson, Judith Basin, Lewis and Clark, Meagher, Park, Pondera, Powell, Sweet Grass, Teton, and Wheatland.**



Forest Service

Region 1

[May 2020]

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## List of Acronyms

BLM	Bureau of Land Management
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
EIS	Environmental Impact Statement
ESA	Endangered Species Act
IRA	Inventoried Roadless Area
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NFS	National Forest System
NFMA	National Forest Management Act
ROD	Record of Decision
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USFS	United States Forest Service
USFWS	United States Fish and Wildlife Service

## Introduction

This draft Record of Decision (draft ROD) documents my decision and rationale for approving the Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest Land Management Plan (referred to as the Plan). The decision is consistent with the Forest Service’s 2012 National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule (referred to as the 2012 Planning Rule) and advances goals of the Department of Agriculture, including facilitating rural prosperity and economic development and fostering productive and sustainable use of our National Forest System (NFS) lands.

The Helena and Lewis and Clark National Forests were administratively combined in 2015. This Plan revises and replaces the two existing 1986 Helena and Lewis and Clark National Forest Land Management Plans into one plan that covers the administratively combined National Forests. The Plan describes desired conditions, objectives, standards, guidelines, and land suitability for project and activity decision making and will guide all resource management activities on the Forest for the next 10 to 15 years.

The Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest (referred to as the Forest) plays an important role in local economies across central Montana by providing forest products, mining, grazing, recreational use, and clean water for downstream agricultural uses. These uses also contribute to the sense of place for residents and visitors. The Plan provides the guiding framework for ongoing important operations of the Forest, which in turn is expected to support \$83 million in labor income, an increase of \$11 million over current management accomplishments, as well as 2,000 jobs in recreation, timber, and other activities. The Forest contribution to regional recreation and other resource related economic activity is significant.

The Forests’ recreation settings and opportunities are deeply rooted in the culture and traditions of both Native American and early Euro-American settlers and are enhanced by the many visible and accessible remnants of the past. A network of historic and modern era trails and roads gives both residents and visitors a chance to follow in the footsteps of Native Americans, the Lewis and Clark expedition, and early homesteaders and miners in search of silver and gold found across the Forests’ unique geologic landscape. Historic cabins and lookouts continue to serve as overnight destinations for Forest visitors. Small family owned ranches and livestock grazing on public lands are important components of the backdrop and culture of the rural communities surrounding the forest areas. Over time, these historic uses have continued to expand and evolve. Today, recreation spending and related economic activity in Montana has become a major part of the State’s economy. The Forest is a major provider of recreation opportunities, including fishing, hiking and wildlife viewing, and outfitter and guides provide additional access to unique backcountry, hunting, and floating opportunities in multiple areas on the Forest.

This decision is made in accordance with the Forest Service’s 2012 Planning Rule at 36 CFR Part 219, fosters productive and sustainable use of our NFS lands, and advances other strategic goals of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, including:

- Ensure USDA programs are delivered efficiently, effectively, with integrity and a focus on customer service;
- Facilitate rural prosperity and economic development; and

- Ensure productive and sustainable use of our NFS lands.

The Plan, final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), draft Record of Decision (ROD) public notices, and associated documents are all available online at [www.fs.usda.gov/goto/hlc/forestplanrevision](http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/hlc/forestplanrevision). The planning record includes all documents consulted, prepared and relied upon during the planning process. The planning record is available at the Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest supervisor’s office, located in Helena, Montana.

## Forest Setting and Distinctive Roles and Contributions

The Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest is located in central Montana and encompasses approximately 2.9 million acres of the Helena-Lewis and Clark and 31,000 acres of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forests. The Forest stretches over 150 miles north to south and 200 miles east to west and includes portions of 17 counties. The Forest is comprised of many distinctive landscapes and “island” mountain ranges, identified as geographic areas. It straddles the Continental Divide in southwestern and central Montana and is characterized by the topographical transition between western mountainous terrains and eastern prairie grasslands. The Forest is especially important to local Montanans and is highly valued for premier hunting and fishing, as well as the other recreation opportunities.

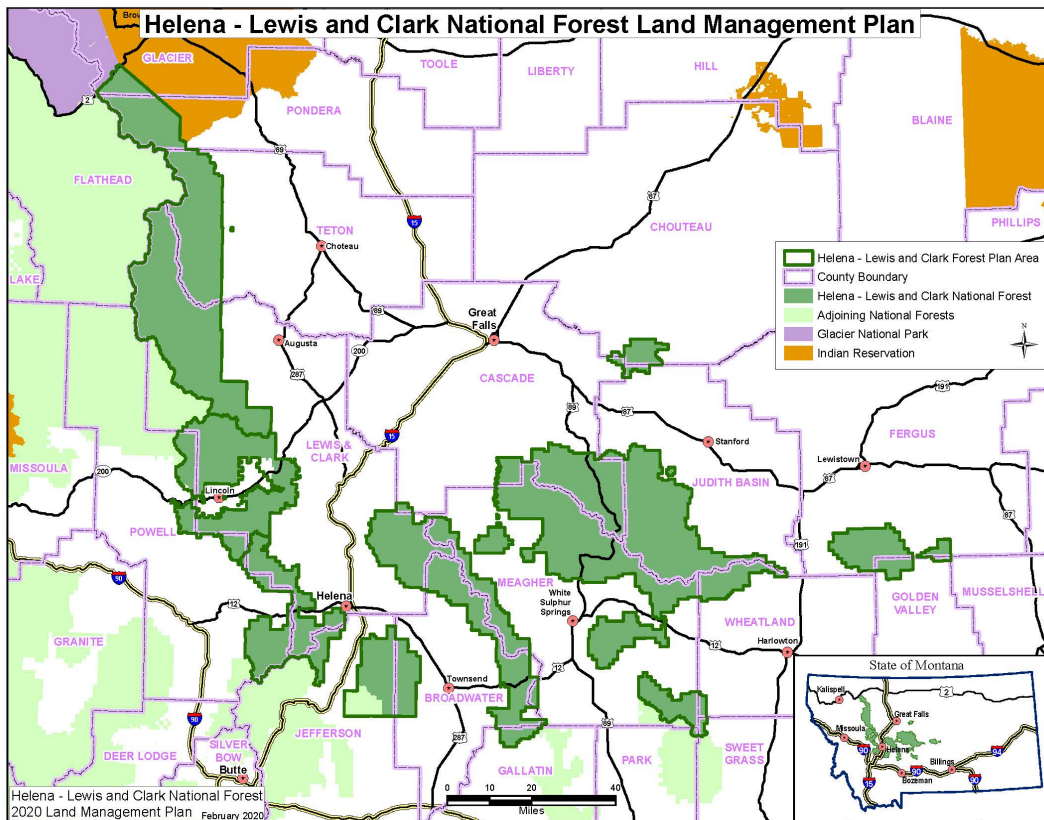


Figure 1. Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest and vicinity



The Forest includes several highly valued rivers and watersheds, with portions west of the Continental Divide draining into the Upper Clark Fork and Blackfoot Rivers and the portions to the east draining into the Missouri River. The networks of streams within the geographic areas are important aquatic ecosystems that support diverse riparian and wetland areas. Several bull trout populations occur on the west side of the divide, and westslope cutthroat trout inhabit multiple streams on both sides of the divide. The diversity of vegetation includes grassland prairie at the low elevations, open savannas and forests on dry foothills, dense coniferous forests and higher elevation grassland and shrublands, and alpine communities on cold, rocky sites at the highest elevations. The Forest is home to a wide diversity of wildlife species and also includes the Elkhorns Wildlife Management Unit, the only one of its kind in the nation. Threatened, endangered, proposed, and candidate species identified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) that occur in the planning area include lynx, grizzly bear, wolverine (proposed), whitebark pine (candidate), and bull trout.

The Forests' recreation opportunities contribute to the economic sustainability of central Montana's rural communities. Similarly, the Forest remains integral to resource-based industries, including the local forest products industry and traditional livestock grazing. Aside from recreation and resources, the Forest operations and management also contribute significantly to local and regional employment, through direct agency funding, as well as through payments made to State and County governments.

The Forest was the ancestral homeland and travel way of native bands now referred to as the Assiniboine, Blackfoot Nation, Chippewa Cree, Confederated Salish and Kootenai, Crow, Eastern Shoshone, Gros Ventre, Sioux, Nez Perce, Northern Arapahoe, Northern Cheyenne, Shoshone-Bannock, and Little Shell Tribes. Most prominent among these groups in the plan area were those historically known as the Blackfeet, Gros Ventre, Salish, Shoshone, Kootenai, and Metis. The Tribes still hold a strong connection to the Forest, and the value is high because of the ancestral connection.

The Forest provides local communities with opportunities to connect with nature and learn about the history and cultural significance of the area through public information, interpretation and education services. These programs enrich the quality of life of participants. Some examples include: the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail Interpretive Center programs, educational lectures with elementary school students, citizen science programs, day camps, star gazing nights, and volunteer programs. Since 2001 over 270,000 people have taken part in Forest programs and volunteer opportunities. The Forest also provides essential safety information to local communities affected by wildfires and protects communities at risk.

Over 500,000 acres of the 2.9 million-acre Forest are designated Wilderness Areas, including portions of the Bob Marshall and Scapegoat Wilderness Areas and the entire Gates of the Mountains Wilderness Area. Additionally, approximately 50% of the Forest is allocated as inventoried roadless areas (IRA). These IRAs, when combined with designated wilderness areas, provide for vast landscapes that allow for more primitive recreation experiences.

## Need for Change

The 1986 Forest Plans for the Helena and Lewis & Clark National Forests were prescriptive, inflexible, and redundant with law, regulation, and policy; as a result, they impeded efficient management of the Forests' resources. At more than 30 years old, these plans exceeded the 10-15 year duration of plans intended by the National Forest Management Act. In addition, over the last 30 years, the social, economic, and ecological conditions across the Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest have changed, resulting in land management plans that are not responsive to the needs of local communities and the relevant land management challenges for the area. Finally, new best available scientific information is available to inform the management of natural resources.

The need for change supporting this plan revision was identified based on assessments and input from State and local governments, other Federal agencies, Tribes, and members of the public. The issues included changed social and ecological conditions, economic contributions to local communities, climate change, invasive species, and increasing use by the public and desire for access to NFS lands. In addition, the Helena and Lewis and Clark National Forests were administratively combined in 2015. Therefore, there was a need to create a single plan for the administratively combined Forests to improve project-level planning and implementation efficiency.

In particular, the plan revision addresses the following topics:

- increasing demand for recreation opportunities and their importance in supporting local economies;
- fire and fuels management direction that emphasizes active vegetation management near communities;
- new analyses needed of timber production opportunities, an important historical driver for local economies;
- conservation of wildlife and aquatic habitat, including updating grizzly bear habitat management direction and Inland Native Fish direction;
- new policy and public interest in identifying areas for recommended wilderness and wild and scenic rivers; and
- consistency with the 2012 Planning Rule and associated directives by using adaptive management, public input, and best available scientific information.

## **Engagement with Federal Agencies, State and Local Governments, and others, including Indian Tribes and the Public**

Local tribes and communities depend on the economic, social, and ecological benefits provided by the Forest. Our public participation efforts ensured engagement and collaboration with a variety of stakeholders throughout the multi-year plan revision process. This provided transparency, understanding of the planning process, regular dialogue among different groups, and resulted in a land management plan that is responsive to State and local governments, other Federal agencies, Indian Tribes and the public. We

will continue to work with these groups to reach our goals over the next 15 years. Some coordination needs identified in the Plan can be found in the Goals sections for the different resources.

## Federal Agencies, State and Local Governments

Desired conditions and objectives in the revised plan promote an “all lands approach” which encourages working with local governments to achieve common goals and maximize resources. The Plan recognizes the importance of rural crossroads and the opportunities to improve the quality of life for people living within the administrative boundary of the national forest. The Forest supports jobs and economies, local traditional ways of life, healthy wildlife populations, and clean air and water, among other benefits. Many of the issues and concerns facing the Forest, such as wildfire, require a cohesive management approach across the landscape. It was therefore essential that the representatives of local tribes, counties, and other Federal agencies were actively involved in the plan revision.

In addition to the opportunities for government entities described in the section on public engagement below, the Forest has worked directly with State and local governments, other Federal agencies, and Indian tribes throughout the planning process. Given their important management role across the broader landscape, the Forest established an Inter-Governmental Working Group with State, County, Local, and Tribal governments, and other Federal Agencies. In meetings held over the planning period between 2015 and 2020, members of the Working Group were able to ask questions and gain a better understanding of the plan revision process and provide feedback on focus, content and changes. The meetings also helped us build a solid foundation for future communication, provided avenues for shared learning, and provided opportunities for broader dialogue on several issues, including water delivery from the Forest, fire management, and wildlife management. We used the contributions and feedback from these meetings to make adjustments to the Plan and to inform our analysis.

Because of the different nature of a Forest Service land management plan with those of other agencies, the review of compatibility focused on higher level desired conditions and goals, rather than more specific standards, guidelines, objectives and suitable uses. This review found the Plan largely compatible with the land use plans of other governments at the level of desired conditions and goals.

## Federal Agencies

Management concerns across boundaries were considered when working with other federal agencies, as well as with adjacent National Forests, including the Custer Gallatin, Beaverhead-Deerlodge, Flathead and Lolo National Forests. These issues included recreation access, recommended wilderness areas, riparian management zones, and other cross-boundary resources. Where possible, the Helena – Lewis and Clark’s Plan components correspond with the adjacent National Forests’, or at a minimum do not conflict.

Other plans that were reviewed and incorporated into the cumulative effects analyses in the final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) include: plans for adjoining lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Montana Army

National Guard Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan for the Limestone Hills Training Area. The Western Montana and North Central District of the BLM are revising their management plans concurrently. All of these plans, where applicable, were complimentary.

We consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on 3 threatened species (bull trout, Canada lynx, and grizzly bear), 1 proposed species (wolverine) and 1 candidate species (whitebark pine).

## **State Agencies**

The Forest coordinated information formally and informally with several state agencies during all phases of the plan revision process. These offices provided formal comments during the public comment period and other public involvement stages. In addition, my staff attended multiple county commissioner meetings and as well as meetings with the Montana State Fish, Wildlife, and Parks and Department of Natural Resources. Specifically, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, the Montana Department of Natural Resource and Conservation, the Montana Department of Commerce, and the Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks worked extensively with us to develop this Plan. Key areas of interest include fuels and fire management, water quality, fish and wildlife resources and recreation management.

The following plans were reviewed by the plan revision team during the analysis: Montana Statewide Forest Resource Strategy, Montana State Parks and Recreation Strategic Plan, Montana State Parks 2014-2018 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, Montana's Statewide Wildlife Action Plan, and the Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation and Management Plans. All of these plans, where applicable, were complimentary. Many of the goals of the Plan involve coordination and cooperation with State and Local agencies with the overarching goal of our all lands approach to management.

We used the Montana Natural Heritage Program data and information to inform our species of conservation concern process. The regional forester's staff used the species of greatest conservation needs from the State's database, along with other sources such as NatureServe, and evaluated if those species met the criteria to be identified as species of conservation concern.

## **County Governments**

Beginning with initiation of the plan revision process, local government officials from the counties surrounding the Forest were regularly updated. Representatives from my staff attended county meetings to provide updates and answer questions. County plans were considered and evaluated for consistency during the planning process. The Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest is committed to working with all local counties to better address the impacts and benefits from management of the Forest. County commissioners and their representatives attended all of our public meetings and interfaced directly with county residents and other forest constituents.

My staff also reviewed all adjoining county growth and fire management plans. These plans, where applicable, were complimentary to the Plan. The majority of counties supported the Plan or were silent. However, Meagher County expressed concerns about the flexibility of fire and timber management direction. Additionally, there were community

initiatives which paralleled the development of this Plan. The most complete and prominent of these is the proposal from the Lincoln Montana working group, which mirrors and supports the Plan and has been the subject of a support resolution by the Lewis and Clark Board of County Commissioners.

## Indian Tribes

We individually contacted the 12 federally recognized tribes that potentially have interest in the Forest and our plan revision efforts. Each tribe was provided copies of all Plan revision documents. Early in the revision process, my staff and I met with the Confederated Salish Kootenai tribe and the Blackfeet Nation to provide an update on the plan revision process. My staff and I met on several additional occasions with tribal representatives from the Blackfeet Nation during development of the Plan and final EIS. Specific tribal comments were considered at all phases of the planning process. Of primary concern to the Blackfeet Nation is the management of lands in the Badger Two Medicine portion of the Rocky Mountain Geographic Area. The Tribe had multiple suggestions for plan components for this section of the Forest and these were incorporated where possible. Recognition of the Badger Two Medicine as a traditional cultural district sacred to the Tribe and working with the Tribe in management of the area were the primary focus of the Blackfeet Nation's interests. Though the area meets eligibility criteria for recommended wilderness, the tribe did not wish to pursue this designation, so the Forest chose to make it a "special emphasis area". The Tribe has also expressed an interest in co-management of the area. However, only Congress has the authority to change Federal land management agency jurisdiction.

Several resource management plans for the Blackfeet Nation were identified to help inform land management planning for the Forest. The Wildland Fire Management Plan for the Blackfeet Agency was provided and reviewed in December 2019. This plan was more tactical in nature than the Plan, but the management approaches included within it are consistent and supported by the Plan components. Other plans identified but not made available for review at the time of the final EIS include the Blackfeet Integrated Resource Management Plan and the Blackfeet Bison Restoration and Conservation Plan.

## Public Involvement

Public engagement is a key part of the 2012 Planning Rule. Modifications to the alternatives, the analysis and the Plan were made throughout the plan revision process in response to public input. The Plan Revision Team began public participation activities prior to the development of the Assessment of the Forest. The Forest also worked with low-income and young people throughout the revision process. Low income and minority populations in the Forest's social area of influence are highly correlated to Indian Reservations.

Youth were involved at several steps in the plan revision process. Conservation education themes for younger students included explaining what a land management plan is, and creating awareness that citizens are involved in their public lands. Older students were engaged with a website logo contest, "Youth Speaking Out". The winning logo was featured on a special Forest web page where youth could learn about the plan revision process through an interactive storyboard and share their thoughts and concerns about places on the Forest using a collaborative map. Youth engagement culminated in a special

youth table at one of the public meeting in Helena, where students participated alongside other community members to share their thoughts about how their national forests should be managed. A presentation was also given to a natural resources class at Carroll College, and the class submitted multiple comments during the draft EIS comment period.

During the plan development phase four rounds of public meetings were conducted in multiple locations across the planning area; all together there were 40 meetings with several hundred participants in total. The first round consisted of open houses across the planning area which introduced the concepts of plan revision to the public, and the second round consisted of community conversations around the Need to Change. The third round centered on desired conditions, and the fourth focused on Forest Resource Management (including recommended wilderness and suitability for timber production and harvest). The plan revision team and I considered all the public input that was taken at each meeting and throughout the process. Shared areas of resource concerns included: access for recreation, road decommissioning, weeds, forest health, timber harvest and fuels management, wilderness, and recreational aviation. There were several issues and concerns that were common to all resource considerations: United States Forest Service (USFS) cooperation with local, state, federal, and tribal government agencies; flexibility and adaptability in the new forest plan; USFS funding limitations and capacity to implement the plan and projects across resource categories; increasing necessity of partnerships and collaboration with other interests; and USFS enforcement of regulations.

All the information gathered during public involvement periods was reviewed by the plan revision team and used in the preparation of the proposed action, which was released on December 1, 2016. The Forest then held nine public meetings to provide the public opportunities to better understand the proposed action so that meaningful public comments could be provided by the end of the scoping period. Using the 1,000 comments from the public, other agencies, tribes, and organizations, the Forest's interdisciplinary team developed a list of issues to address through changes to the proposed action, development of alternatives, and subsequent development of the Draft Plan and draft EIS.

The Draft Plan and draft EIS were released to the public on June 8, 2018. The Forest held nine public meetings to provide opportunities to better understand the alternatives and the planning documents. During the 120-day comment period, over 1,100 comment letters were received, which contained over 5,000 individual comments. The majority of comments (80%) pertained to recommended wilderness areas and motorized/mechanized uses within them. Other emphasis issues included: timber production and harvest, wildlife (primarily related to grizzly bear, lynx, and elk security), livestock grazing, motor vehicle access, weeds, and the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail.

The Forest used the input from all the public meetings and comments in the development of the alternatives considered in the final EIS, including the preferred alternative, alternative F.

## Decision and Rationale for the Decision

### Decision

I have reviewed the environmental analysis in the final EIS, the planning record, comments from our State and local government partners, Indian tribes, other Federal agencies, and the public and considered how the Plan meets the identified need for change and the requirements of 36 CFR 219. Based on this review, I have selected alternative F described in the Plan and the accompanying final EIS. The selected alternative is based on alternative B from the draft EIS, with modifications in response to comments, and includes features of all alternatives considered. It addresses the need for change identified during the assessment, meets the requirements of the Planning Rule, 36 CFR 219, is responsive to local government, tribal, and public engagement, and is based upon over 30 years of knowledge gained from implementation and amendment of the 1986 Land Management Plans.

### Overall Benefits of the Plan

The Plan provides the following benefits:

- Forest management will contribute approximately \$83.7 million in annual labor income and 2,000 annual jobs to the multi-county economy around the Forest. These changes represent an estimated increase of up to \$35 million and 417 jobs as compared to recent years.
- Forest products (primarily from timber harvest) will contribute approximately \$29.7 million in labor income (\$23.7 million more than currently contributed under the 1986 Plans) and 616 jobs. It is vitally important to continue to have a local timber industry that assists the Forest in achieving desired conditions while providing for the commercial sale of forest products.
- Approximately 700,000 annual visits will generate approximately \$7.3 million in local income and 238 jobs. Recreational activities are also vitally important to the local economy and the quality of life of local residents.
- Wood product outputs (similar to or above current levels), which include sawtimber and non-sawtimber, will contribute to social and economic sustainability.
- Management of wildland fire, fuels, and expected fire behavior will address the concerns raised by local governments and the public throughout the planning process. The role of fire, both planned and unplanned ignitions, as a tool to achieve desired vegetation and wildlife habitat conditions is articulated in the Plan, and direction related to its use and management is provided. The Plan includes direction for landscape-scale treatments to broaden the use of prescribed fire and for cooperating on developing community wildfire protection plans.
- Two additional recreation areas will contribute towards managing the increased demands for recreation near local communities and to benefit local economies. These areas will offer mountain bicycling opportunities as well as motorized over-snow use.
- Recreation demands will be addressed, as well as contributions to the recreation economy, while at the same time addressing desired ecological conditions for soils,

water, fish, and wildlife. The Plan maintains the opportunity for motorized vehicle use (suitable on designated roads and trails) on 39% of the Forest, on over 3,000 miles of roads and trails.

- Access to public lands through mechanized means of transportation (e.g., mountain bikes) will be suitable on authorized routes on approximately 75 percent of the Forest. Motorized over-snow vehicle use is suitable on 35 percent of the Forest.
- Key ecosystem services will be provided for, such as clean water and flood control; clean air; cultural/heritage values, inspiration, spiritual values, and solitude; hunting, trapping, fishing, and wildlife viewing; production of wood products and availability of special forest products such as firewood and huckleberries; and research and education.
- Management direction for vegetation will include the identification of desired conditions for species composition and forest structure as well as for landscape patterns and ecological processes such as the role of fire across the Forest. Management direction for vegetation is comprehensive, with the goal of sustaining the full complement of native plant and animal species and their supporting habitats. The plan direction reflects our best estimate of conditions that maintain or restore resilient forest conditions and ecosystem integrity while addressing current and anticipated human uses of and desires for the Forest, such as its timber products and scenic values.
- Management direction for wildlife and aquatic species will be updated, including but not limited to lynx, grizzly bear, and bull trout, which will allow for improved and more effective habitat management while addressing the need to actively manage vegetation within some habitats.
- Forest Plan Amendments to Incorporate Habitat Management Direction for the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Population will maintain on-the-ground habitat conditions that have contributed to and will sustain recovery of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem grizzly bear population.

## Nature of the Decision

A land management plan establishes plan components in the form of desired conditions, goals, objectives, standards, guidelines, and land suitability to ensure ecological integrity while providing people and communities with a range of social and economic benefits. The Plan provides overall guidance for project and activity-level decisions and governs the types of activities permissible on the Forest.

This Plan decision is strategic in nature. The Plan does not authorize projects, activities, or site-specific prohibitions, commit the Forest Service to take action, or dictate day-to-day administrative activities needed to carry on the Forest Service's internal operations (e.g., personnel matters, law enforcement, or organizational changes). The Plan's programmatic management direction will be implemented through the design, execution, and monitoring of site-specific activities such as relocating a trail, conducting a prescribed burn, or harvesting timber. Site-specific analysis in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) will need to be conducted in order for prohibitions or activities to take place on the ground, in compliance with the broader direction of the Plan.



The purpose of the Plan is to guide future projects, practices, and uses to assure sustainable multiple-use management on the Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest over the next 15 years. The Forest will also follow all laws, regulations, and policies that relate to managing NFS land. The Plan is designed to supplement, not replace, these authorities. The final EIS lists and considers applicable authority for each of the revision topics and specific resources, but the Plan does not repeat laws, regulations, or program management policy, practices or procedures.

## Rationale for the Decision

Based upon my review of all alternatives, I have decided to implement alternative F, which provides the best mix of land and resource uses that meets public needs while moving the Forest toward its desired conditions. I have carefully considered the requirements of National Forest Management Act and this alternative reflects the best overall arrangement of multiple uses while maintaining the long-term health and productivity of the land. I also took into consideration the best available science when making my decision.

In response to comments on the draft EIS and further internal review, the following is a summary of the changes to the final EIS and the Plan for preferred alternative F as compared to the proposed action, excluding minor editorial and organization changes, clarifications and typographical errors. This decision:

- Adjusts anticipated acres treated and timber harvest volume outputs to maximize both economic and resource benefits.
- Refines fire management direction allowing natural fire occurrences for resource benefits.
- Refines key wildlife plan components based on input from Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks and others.
- Includes the seven areas that have the most support from local governments and the public to be recommended for wilderness designation.
- Adds recreation emphasis direction in the Big Snowies Wilderness Study Area in currently used snowmobile and mechanized means of transportation (mountain biking) areas.
- Provides primitive recreation opportunities in multiple locations as an alternative to recommended wilderness areas, so that existing mechanized access can remain suitable in those areas.

When compared to the other considered alternatives, the selected alternative will:

- Provide public benefits by supporting 2,000 jobs in the local and regional economies, a projected increase of over 400 jobs from the current plans, provides an estimated \$83 million in labor income across local and regional economies.
- Increase anticipated acres treated and produce more timber volume than the current plan.
- Allow for greater options in managing unplanned naturally ignited wildfires as a tool to help restore ecosystems and reduce the risk future fire.

- Improve project-level planning, and implementation efficiency, by updating outdated management direction that doesn't address landscape level restoration needs.
- Support shared stewardship through increased partnerships and management flexibility.

The decision represents a mix of recommended wilderness areas and lands identified as suitable for timber production and also includes provisions for unique ecological conditions, active management of vegetation including fuel reduction, and eligible wild and scenic rivers. Plan components to guide management of the Forest's resources, including water, fish, wildlife, minerals, and rangelands are also included. The mix of opportunities available for primitive recreation and nonmotorized recreation experiences versus less primitive and more motorized recreation experiences is generally consistent with current travel plans, except in the case of recommended wilderness areas.

The Plan reflects the recommendations from State and local governments, the Blackfoot Nation, other federal agencies, and the public. My decision to develop and select the preferred alternative, alternative F, was based on discussion and comments from these stakeholders. The Plan is generally consistent with the interests of many of these stakeholders, with the exception of the final number and locations of recommended wilderness areas and uses within them. My decision includes the recommended wilderness areas with the most support and also includes some changes to boundaries to accommodate firefighting efforts and existing uses. Another exception was the desire from the Blackfoot Nation to make the Badger Two Medicine area unsuitable for mountain bikes. I decided against this because the issue was already addressed in the travel plan decision for that area. Travel management was not identified as an area needing change because it was recently decided through a thorough public engagement process. Therefore, travel management decisions were outside the scope of this plan revision effort at its outset. There was also a wide array of recommendations around specific sites or plan components for individual issues. Where possible, the Plan was modified to accommodate these requests; otherwise, the Forest determined that the plan components were sufficient to meet our obligations under the 2012 planning rule.

## **Recreation**

Recreation and its importance to people and the economy was addressed throughout the Plan in the recreation sections, the designated areas section (including recommended wilderness and wild and scenic rivers, which are highlighted in the rationale section), and the special emphasis areas. Special emphasis areas include two new recreation areas which are highlighted below.

### **Emphasis Areas**

With this decision, I am also including plan direction for the following emphasis areas in the Plan (see Emphasis Areas map in appendix A of the 2020 Forest Plan). These emphasis areas will be managed for their unique recreation opportunities or to protect the special natural, cultural, or historic resources found in these areas.

#### *Missouri River Corridor*

The Missouri River is nationally recognized for its fishing opportunities, outstanding scenery, and an abundance of historic and cultural significance. Lewis and Clark passed

through this part of the Forest enroute to the Pacific Ocean and back in 1805-06. The historic Mann Gulch Fire Historic Landscape is also in this area. The Missouri River Corridor Emphasis Area (Corridor) is comprised of those parts of the Forest adjacent to and on both sides of the river (3,633 acres). Recreation use within the Corridor is year-round but particularly high during the summer months, when water-based recreation opportunities are highest. There are commercial tour boat trips offered in this area and many developed and dispersed recreation sites along the riverbanks. The Corridor also provides access to the western portions of the Gates of the Mountain Wilderness. The Forest is currently working with Cascade County and Lewis and Clark County, on management of the Missouri River corridor, which is part of a proposed National Heritage Area. Because of the Corridor's significance and its importance to our local communities, the Plan recognizes that the Corridor needs to be managed in a way that respects and perpetuates those values. As such, plan components focus on protecting and enhancing the natural, cultural, and historic values along the Missouri River as well as providing guidance for interpretation and signage (2020 Forest Plan, Big Belts Geographic Area, Missouri River corridor section).

#### *Smith River Corridor*

The Smith River is nationally recognized, famous for its fishing opportunities, outstanding scenery, cultural sites, and impressive geologic features. As such, the Forest wanted to manage the corridor for its unique recreation qualities and so created the Smith River Corridor Emphasis Area (Corridor). It is approximately 3,330 acres in size and consists of the federal lands within ¼ mile on both sides of the river. Managed as a State Park by MT Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks in partnership with the Forest, it provides a 60-mile float through private, state, and NFS lands during the late spring and early summer months. MT Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks oversees river permits, which are highly sought after and cherished by river users across the nation. The Plan includes specific plan components that focus on protecting and enhancing the natural and cultural values along the Smith River, including desired conditions that emphasize compatibility between recreation and ecological sustainability. A goal to work with partners and volunteer programs to enhance delivery of the recreation experience along the Smith River corridor is also included. (2020 Forest Plan, Little Belts Geographic Area, Smith River Corridor plan components).

#### *Elkhorns Wildlife Management Unit*

The Elkhorns Wildlife Management Unit is the only wildlife management unit in the nation and was established in the 1986 Helena NF Plan. The designation continues under this Plan. The Elkhorns Wildlife Management Unit encompasses the entire Elkhorns Geographic Area, which includes portions of both the Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest and the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest. In this Plan, the Elkhorns Geographic Area is synonymous with the Elkhorns Wildlife Management Unit, and the plan components specified for the Geographic Area are designed to meet the purposes for the designation of the wildlife management unit. Habitats are managed in this unit to maintain populations of species associated with the existing ecosystems, including elk and other big game, with emphasis on those for which seclusion is an important requirement. Unlike other mountain ranges where winter range is largely on private land, the Elkhorns GA supports winter range on NFS lands. Collaborative groups (including the Elkhorns Restoration committee and Elkhorns working group) comprising federal, state, and local citizens work toward habitat maintenance and restoration and interpretation of the area's

history. The Elkhorns Wildlife Management Unit is managed cooperatively with the Bureau of Land Management, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Comments almost universally indicated that the current Wildlife Management Unit and associated cooperative working arrangements are successful and thus they are continued in this Plan. Plan components specific to this area are included in the Elkhorns GA section of the Plan. They include goals to work cooperatively with other agencies and the public toward meeting the goals of the Wildlife Management Unit as well as working cooperatively across resource areas in the protection of wildlife habitat in the unit (2020 Forest Plan, Elkhorns Geographic Area).

#### *South Hills Recreation Area*

My decision supports the creation of the South Hills Recreation Area, which is located just to the south and west of Helena, Montana. It is approximately 50,180 acres in size and will be managed as a non-motorized recreation area, providing access primarily for hiking, biking, and equestrian uses. This large landscape includes lands in and around private land ownership, shares boundaries with the City of Helena, and has shared jurisdiction with the City of Helena on many of the trails nearest the community. Additionally, the area includes large portions of nonmotorized IRAs and portions of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail. This area has seen exponential recreational growth over the last 10 years and has been recognized as a key component to both residential and business growth for the City of Helena. The public generally supported this allocation and its recognition of this important lifestyle amenity and economic development engine for the City of Helena and its citizens. Plan components for this area generally direct management actions to be taken with a focus on the recreation opportunity (2020 Forest Plan, Divide Geographic Area, South Hill Recreation Area section).

#### *Grandview Recreation Area*

My decision includes the creation of the Grandview Recreation Area (Area), in the western portion of the Big Snowies Geographic Area south of Lewistown, Montana. Public comment received during the comment period of the draft EIS revealed strong opinions about the designation of the Big Snowies as a recommended wilderness area, with support both for and against designation for this area. Universally, the public agreed that the primitive character of the area should be protected; however, some asserted that motorized and mechanized means of transportation are suitable in this area while others argued that they should not be considered suitable. Alternative F provides a compromise for both strongly held views by including a reduced size recommended wilderness area and creating the Grandview Recreation Area. This area is approximately 32,296 acres and includes the Crystal Lake Campground complex. Outside of the campground complex, the bulk of the area is within the congressionally designated Big Snowies Wilderness Study Area and will be managed for primitive recreation opportunity settings. The Grandview Recreation Area contains several challenging mountain bike trails that lead to prominent features and grand vistas. It also has several popular motorized over-snow areas which provide semi primitive motorized recreation access into portions of the area in winter. We heard consistently of the value that these recreation opportunities provide to local and regional forest users through public meetings and comment (2020 Forest Plan, Snowies Geographic Area, Grandview Recreation Area section).

### *Badger Two Medicine*

The area commonly known as the Badger Two Medicine encompasses approximately 129,591 acres at the northern end of the Rocky Mountain Range. The majority of this area is located within the Badger-Two Medicine Traditional Cultural District, an area acknowledged for its significance to the oral traditions and culture practices of the Blackfeet people. The Blackfeet have used lands within the Forest for traditional purposes for generations and continue to value the area for maintaining their community's continuing cultural identity. This area also falls within the 1895 Agreement with the Indians of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in Montana, which states that the Blackfeet Nation retains rights to extract timber, fish, animals, and other resources in the Badger Two Medicine area. This area is valued highly by the Blackfeet Nation and is also valued equally by many other Montana residents. This allocation reflects the recognition of this area's spiritual, cultural and traditional importance to the Blackfeet Nation and recognizes the value of its primitive qualities to other cultures as well (2020 Forest Plan, Rocky Mountain Geographic Area, Badger Two Medicine section).

### **Recommended Wilderness and Uses within Them**

The Plan includes seven recommended wilderness areas (Big Log, Mount Baldy, Electric Peak, Big Snowies, Silver King, Red Mountain, and Nevada Mountain) for a total of 153,325 acres. I selected these seven areas based on a formal analysis and public comments received on the draft EIS. To address concerns about recommended wilderness areas in the draft Plan from county commissioners, recommended wilderness area boundaries were adjusted to provide a buffer along private land to allow for management flexibility in conducting hazardous fuels treatments. Also, my decision makes motorized and mechanized means of transportation unsuitable in recommended wilderness areas. For more information on the rationale for the recommended wilderness areas as well as the other polygons evaluated for wilderness potential, please see the preliminary administrative recommendations section below.

### **Fire, Fuels and Vegetation Management**

I chose Alternative F because it provides the Forest the ability to produce timber outputs and conduct other vegetation management actions (e.g., prescribed fire) to move vegetation toward desired conditions and protect resources. Several commenters were interested in increased timber outputs, in support of local economies, achieving desired conditions and restoring ecosystem conditions. Similarly, many commenters were supportive of utilizing prescribed fire and wildfire to achieve or maintain desired conditions, and specifically noted desires to mitigate hazardous fuels in the wildland urban interface. These comments were taken into consideration along with those that were not supportive of active vegetation management or use of fire on the Forest.

The expected timber volume outputs and lands suitable for timber production under Alternative F are only slightly lower than the alternative that maximized timber outputs (alternative E). Alternative F moves the Forest towards desired conditions nearly as well as alternatives B, C, and D. Alternative F also predicts similar levels of prescribed fire as the other alternatives. A comprehensive and integrated set of plan components ensure that vegetation management is compatible with other multiple use values and provides for necessary resource protections.

Under alternative F, the Forest expects to produce an estimated average sawtimber volume of 20-35 million board feet per year over the next decade. With a higher budget or other opportunities to increase capacity (i.e., shared stewardship or other partnered efforts), the annual amount of timber volume could increase to approximately 38 million board feet per year. An average of 2,000 to 3,000 acres per year will be treated through commercial timber harvest to achieve these outputs and improve vegetation conditions. In addition, over 3,000 acres of prescribed fire are expected to be conducted per year on average in the first decade in forested ecosystems, in addition to prescribed fire in nonforested ecosystems. As required by the 2012 Planning Rule, the timber objectives in the Plan consider the fiscal capability of the planning unit. Outputs are based on the Forest's average budget levels for fiscal year 2013 through fiscal year 2015. However, the estimates of timber outputs may be larger or smaller on an annual basis, or over the life of the Plan, if budget or other constraining factors change in the future.

The Plan allows for prescribed fire to occur across most NFS lands, provided it is compatible with other plan components. Timber harvest is allowed to occur on the approximately 70 percent of the Forest not allocated as designated wilderness, recommended wilderness area, or wilderness study area. A portion of those lands are suitable for timber production (13 percent of NFS lands), whereas the remainder are areas where harvest may be used to achieve other multiple use purposes. Restoration treatments may be conducted in recommended wilderness areas, and limited amounts of prescribed fire may occur in designated wilderness when consistent with the Wilderness Act, but timber harvest is not allowed. Timber harvest will be emphasized on lands suitable for timber production, and/or lands in the wildland urban interface. In IRAs that do not overlap with recommended wilderness areas (roughly 45% of the Forest), vegetation management activities will be allowed in accordance with the Roadless Area Conservation Rule.

The selected alternative for the Plan reflects the desire to maintain as much management flexibility as possible. This will allow for the provision of societal goods while ensuring that management activities are maintaining and moving towards the desired conditions. The land allocations where active vegetation management is emphasized contribute to resilient forests and ecosystems, while providing social and economic benefits, such as enhancing the diversity of recreational experiences and contributing to a sustainable production of timber. While active vegetation management may have potential for environmental effects and social conflicts, I am confident that the plan components will strike the right balance to ensure long term productivity and sustainability.

#### *Green Timber Basin- Beaver Creek Botanical Area*

My decision also creates the Green Timber Basin-Beaver Creek Botanical Area, which encompasses an area with unusually high orchid diversity area with ten documented orchids present across various habitats. It is approximately 2,910 acres in size and is located entirely within an IRAs and the Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Management Area. Two of the orchid species, the sparrow's egg lady slipper (*Cypripedium passerinum*) and the round-leaved orchid (*Amerorchis rotundifolia*), have been identified as species of conservation concern, are rare in Montana, and exhibit high fidelity to a very narrow range of ecological tolerance. It is uncommon in Montana for conditions to exist that support large populations of these rare species. This area provides a valuable opportunity for plant enthusiasts to enjoy viewing multiple orchid species. With this special allocation, we will manage to avoid or minimize impacts to the botanical resources in this area. (2020 Forest Plan, Rocky Mountain Geographic Area, Green Timber Basin-Beaver Creek area section).

## Wildlife and aquatic habitat

### Grizzly bear habitat management direction

In December 2018, the Forest Plan Amendments to Incorporate Habitat Management Direction for the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Population were signed and became part of the existing (1986) Helena National Forest and Lewis and Clark National Forest Plans. The purpose of the amendments was to “provide consistent direction that will support the continued recovery of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem grizzly population” and provide a regulatory mechanism for management that will sustain a recovered population (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018). The plan components in the amendments are therefore included in their entirety in this Plan (see 2020 Forest Plan, Forestwide, Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Habitat Management section).

### Inland Native Fish direction

The inland native fish direction was amended to the 1986 Helena Forest Plan in 1996 and covered only the portion of the Forest west of the continental divide. The direction in the revised Plan updates and carries forward this direction, and also extends it to portions of the forest east of the continental divide (2020 Forest Plan, Riparian Management Zone and Conservation Watershed Network sections). With the implementation of the Riparian Management Zones and Conservation Watershed Network plan components, future management will focus on key ecological processes and functions, highlight vegetation structure and composition, and provide suitable connected wildlife habitat in these areas. This will continue to protect key aquatic habitat for inland native fish.

### Elk (Big Game) Habitat Security and Distribution

Over the last 30 years, the social, economic, and ecological conditions across the Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest have changed, and the manner in which the Forest manages big game habitat security and distribution during the hunting season has emerged as an area that needed to be updated. Based on input from the State and other publics, my decision provides a guideline to reduce displacement of elk and other big game species from NFS lands during the hunting season across the Forest.

Elk habitat security and hunting season vulnerability and availability has received a great deal of attention for decades. This concern was initially based on observations that in some areas logging roads displaced elk from favored habitats, and also provided increased access to hunters, resulting in higher than desired levels of elk mortality during the general rifle hunting season. Largely because of these concerns, the 1986 Plans included standards and guidelines for establishing and maintaining secure habitat for elk. The purpose of including that direction to provide for elk security was to increase elk numbers and ensure a specific type and duration of hunting opportunity and outcome, while also ensuring elk presence on NFS lands for other types of public enjoyment. The best available scientific information supporting the 1986 plans encouraged forests to manage elk habitat based on the ecological characteristics and management concerns in specific geographic areas and for individual elk herds, rather than adopting a “one size fits all” approach.

Since the 1986 plans were implemented, management issues related to elk and elk habitat have also changed on the Forest. Elk population numbers in most hunting districts on the Forest are above population objectives, indicating that persistence of elk populations in and

around the Forest is no longer a key management concern. Elk movement to private lands with minimal or no hunting opportunity during the archery and general rifle hunting seasons has emerged in recent years as a primary management issue, affecting hunting opportunity and the ability of Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks to manage elk within established population objectives. In 2013, the Forest Service and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks biologists developed a set of recommendations for managing elk habitat, including elk security, based on a review of the current best available scientific information. Those recommendations provide guidance for identifying and managing the type, quantity, characteristics and distribution of various habitat components for elk, and recommend the appropriate scale at which management should occur. Full implementation of this guidance is not possible under the 1986 plans, because it varies from the standards and guidelines in those plans.

The guideline included in the preferred alternative (2020 Forest Plan, Forestwide Benefits to People/Fish and Wildlife guideline #01) allows managers more flexibility than the 1986 plans and is aligned with the 2013 recommendations for managing elk habitat. The guideline directs biologists and managers to use the best available scientific information to develop methods to reduce potential for elk and other big game species' displacement from NFS land during the hunting season. The guideline allows wildlife and habitat managers to employ a variety of approaches to manage elk and other big game species' habitat needs, tailored to specific areas, herds, and land ownership patterns. This guideline also fosters more flexible management approaches that can adapt to changing conditions during the life of the Plan. The Plan also includes guidance for FS biologists and managers to work closely with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks biologists to implement the guideline, as well as during development and implementation of other management actions on NFS lands.

In my decision, I considered points raised by the public and by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks that by managing for elk presence on NFS lands, the Forest can also provide for the presence of a variety of big game and other wildlife species. This guideline is supported by other components in the preferred alternative, including desired conditions for vegetation structure and composition, wildlife habitat characteristics, and standards and guidelines for grizzly bear, lynx, big game winter range, and connectivity, all of which contribute to habitat security for elk and other wildlife species. Also, the amount and distribution of non-motorized recreation opportunity spectrum areas, recommended wilderness areas, and designated wilderness will combine to provide secure habitat for the full array of wildlife species on the Forest. (See Wildlife, Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Habitat Management, Recreation, and Designated Areas section of the 2020 Forest Plan).

## **Requirements of the Planning Rule**

The Plan has been prepared in compliance with the National Forest Management act and its implementing regulations at 36 CFR Part 219. It meets the specific 2012 Planning Rule requirements at sections 219.8 through 219.12 as follows.

### **219.8 Sustainability**

The Plan provides for ecological sustainability by including plan components that collectively ensure the maintenance or restoration of the coarse and fine filter habitat needs of all native species, while allowing for the full array of natural processes and functions on the landscape. More broadly, an "all lands approach" to ecosystem integrity is provided by plan components that allow management to adjust to influences outside the borders of the



Forest, including rapid urban development. This approach is vitally important given that the Forest is made up of a series of distinct geographic areas, many of which are separated by non-NFS lands, and spanning across diverse ecosystems on both sides of the Continental Divide. More specifically, the Plan includes components that:

- Maintain and protect the integrity of aquatic and forested wetland ecosystems and riparian management zones, and associated habitat needs for aquatic species, by limiting management activities in these areas to those that maintain or improve watershed conditions and key habitat characteristics. These components are designed to maintain beneficial uses such as clean water on non-NFS lands, which is particularly crucial given that the mountainous geographic areas of the Forest contain the headwaters of streams utilized for irrigation as well as municipal water supplies. In addition, these components also ensure the quality and availability of the aquatic habitat that is important for several at-risk species. (2020 Forest Plan, Aquatic Ecosystem and Benefits to People/Fish and Wildlife).
- Provide for the integrity of terrestrial ecosystems and wildlife habitat through plan components that describe the desired conditions for the composition, structure, function and connectivity of vegetation types on the Forest. Plan components describe the role of system drivers, ecological processes and stressors and threats. They are based on the natural range of variation and natural disturbances (such as wildfire) that have shaped vegetation conditions on the Forest for millennia. Management on the Forest will be designed to maintain or achieve desired conditions over time, thereby providing the coarse filter habitat conditions required for the persistence of all native species, including Threatened, Endangered, Proposed, and Candidate and Species of Conservation Concern. (2020 Forest Plan, Aquatic Ecosystems, Terrestrial Vegetation, and Wildlife)
- Provide suitable habitat for aquatic, plant, and wildlife Threatened, Endangered Proposed and Candidate and Species of Conservation Concern through the coarse filter aquatic and terrestrial ecosystem plan components described above, and through fine-filter plan components which provide for specific habitat requirements. Collectively, these plan components incorporate a landscape approach to species persistence and recovery. The Forest covers a unique and important linkage area between two large ecosystem areas (the Greater Yellowstone and the Northern Continental Divide), and as such is key to the recovery of several wide-ranging wildlife species (grizzly bear, wolverine, and Canada lynx). It also hosts unique aquatic habitat conditions important for bull trout west of the Continental Divide; and westslope cutthroat trout east of the Continental Divide. Each geographic area is unique due to the presence of whitebark pine, flammulated owl, Lewis's woodpecker, and plant species of conservation concern. (2020 Forest Plan, Fisheries, Threatened, Endangered Proposed and Candidate and Species of Conservation Concern Sections-Plants and Wildlife).
- Maintain and protect long-term site productivity as well as air, soil, and water quality through standards and guidelines that limit the negative impacts of management activities, ensuring these ecosystem characteristics support ecosystem integrity and beneficial uses upon which local communities depend (2020 Forest Plan, Aquatic Ecosystems, Terrestrial Vegetation, and Wildlife).

The Plan also contributes to social and economic sustainability by providing plan components that collectively support an array of public benefits including jobs and income, enhancing quality of life and well-being, and safeguarding the health and safety of the public. Plan components are incorporated to ensure that the Forest will continue to provide, and where ecologically feasible, maximize, the key benefits people rely on, both over the life of the Plan and into the future. These key benefits include: carbon storage and sequestration, clean water, protection of cultural, historic and tribal resources, direct income and jobs, energy and minerals, fire suppression, livestock grazing, ecosystem integrity, infrastructure, timber, forest products, wood for fuel, recreation opportunities, income and jobs. More specifically, the Plan responds to the public desires that include:

- Increased recreation opportunities and socio-economic development is addressed by the array of recreation and benefits to people plan components, as well as the inclusion of two focused recreation areas (South Hills Recreation and Grandview Recreation Area), which provide diverse opportunities for mechanized means of transportation as well as over snow motorized use specifically in the Divide and Snowies Geographic Areas respectively (2020 Forest Plan, Divide and Snowies Geographic Area sections).
- Wilderness and primitive recreation experiences, which is provided by seven (7) recommended wilderness areas and other primitive recreation areas. These areas are in addition to existing designated wilderness, IRAs, and wilderness study areas. Motorized and mechanized means of transportation will not be suitable in the recommended wilderness areas. Mechanized means of transportation is suitable in primitive ROS areas outside of wilderness and recommended wilderness areas. (2020 Forest Plan, Designated Areas).
- Forest products that contribute to the economic sustainability of local economies and support socio-economic initiatives in the region. The Plan includes components that establish suitability areas for timber harvest, livestock grazing and harvest of forest products. These components support an increase in forest products from the Forest that will enhance local economies and support socio-economic initiatives in the region (2020 Forest Plan, Benefits to People—Timber and livestock grazing sections).
- Improved public access, which is met through plan components that provide opportunities to work with adjacent landowners, other agencies, and partners to provide public access to the Forest, including those which establish a variety of recreation opportunity settings across all landscapes of the Forest. (2020 Forest Plan, Recreation access section).
- Support for rural economic development, including engaging youth and underserved populations, is met by plan components that emphasize environmental education, economic development, and citizen monitoring and restoration through projects like the Forest’s ongoing Youth Forest Monitoring Program (2020 Forest Plan, Benefits to People—Public Information, Interpretation, and Education).
- Diverse recreation opportunities that contribute to local and regional economics are supported by plan components that describe the multiple uses opportunities of the Forest’s recreational settings (2020 Forest Plan, Recreation Opportunities).

- Protection of cultural and historic resources is provided through plan components designed to avoid potential damage or impacts to these sites, but also components designed to educate and foster public appreciation of them (2020 Forest Plan, Cultural, Historic, and Tribal Resources).
- Protection of tribal resources and tribal uses through plan components that support tribal rights and consultation with tribes on management of important tribal landscapes (2020 Forest Plan, Cultural, Historic, and Tribal Resources).
- Continuation of opportunities for grazing to support rural economies and heritage, open space and sense of place through plan components that enhance forage production, protect grasslands from conifer encroachment and maintain existing allotments for livestock grazing (2020 Forest Plan, Benefits to People-Livestock Grazing).
- Improving safety of local communities and firefighters, by increasing the pace and scale of fuels treatment, to help reduce the size and severity of wildfire (2020 Forest Plan, Fire and Fuels Management).

### 219.9 Diversity of plant and animal communities

The Plan provides for the diversity of plants and animals and provides for ecological integrity by:

- Supporting ecological integrity through plan components designed to maintain or restore key ecological characteristics for ecosystem composition, structure, ecological processes, and connectivity within the natural range of variation, as well as provides for the retention of key features such as old growth, snags, large trees, and downed woody debris (2020 Forest Plan, Terrestrial Vegetation and Timber).
- Supporting the recovery and persistence of the 5 threatened, endangered, proposed or candidate species (4 animal and 1 plant species) and 35 species of conservation concern (4 animal and 31 plant species) through plan components that promote the necessary habitat conditions and minimize threats/stressors (2020 Forest Plan, Aquatic Ecosystems, Terrestrial Vegetation, and Wildlife).
- Including species-specific plan components to support or promote species whose needs may not be met by ecosystem level plan components, such as Canada lynx, grizzly bear, elk and other ungulates, harlequin duck, bats, western toad, amphibians, bull trout, and westslope cutthroat trout (2020 Forest Plan, Wildlife and Aquatic Ecosystems).

The Plan uses a tiered approach to conserve and maintain species diversity, which first involves an analysis of the ecosystems on the Forest and the species whose habitats are dependent on them. The Plan then further supports species-specific approaches, which includes the protection of sensitive habitats, such as riparian zones and wetlands and habitat for Threatened and Endangered species. I find the Plan has the appropriate components to restore and maintain the diversity of ecosystems. The desired conditions, objectives, standards and guidelines were developed based on best available scientific information and will restore or maintain key habitat characteristics for all vegetation groupings.

The Northern Region Regional Forester identified 35 species of conservation concern on the Forest. Species of conservation concern are species known to occur in the plan area and for which there is substantial concern for the persistence of the species. Most habitat needs

for these species are met through the plan components for aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems and those that promote the key ecosystem characteristics required by each species. For some species or species groups, plan components to meet species-specific habitat needs are included in accordance with 36 CFR 219.9(b).

After review of the Plan and final EIS, I find that the plan components will provide the ecological conditions necessary to maintain viable populations of all identified species of conservation concern within the plan area, with the exception of two terrestrial species—flammulated owl and Lewis’s woodpecker; and two aquatic species—westslope cutthroat trout and western pearlshell mussel. Given the species range and effects to their range-wide habitats, I find it beyond the authority of the Forest Service and not within the inherent capability of the plan area to maintain or restore the ecological conditions to maintain a viable population of these four species of conservation concern in the plan area. However, I find that the Plan includes plan components to maintain or restore ecological conditions within the plan area to contribute to maintaining viable populations of these species within their range. These conclusions are based on the biological analysis and evaluation documented in section 3.5—aquatic species at risk and 3.14.11—wildlife species at risk sections of the final EIS.

#### 219.10 Multiple use

The Plan provides integrated resource management for multiple uses (219.10(a)) by including plan components at the forestwide and the geographic area scale that establish suitability for a variety of compatible uses. Each geographic area has unique characteristics and plan components are specific for providing and managing multiple uses within that area. The Plan provides for multiple uses by:

- Supporting a variety of multiple uses and ecosystem services across the forest and in each geographic area through an array of plan components that establish suitability for various uses and guide those uses so as to be compatible with each other as well as ecosystem integrity and social and economic sustainability (2020 Forest Plan, Chapter 3).
- Providing a supply of forest products in a sustainable manner, which in turn supports local economies and communities, through plan components that establish suitability and guide the extraction of timber from NFS lands (2020 Forest Plan, Timber).
- Providing clean water and water quantity, as well as improving watershed conditions where needed, through plan components that support aquatic ecosystem integrity and limit potential negative impacts to these resources, support important ecological and social services such as productive soils, biological diversity, wildlife habitat, water supplies, and flood control benefits (2020 Forest Plan, Aquatic Ecosystems).
- Providing economically, socially, and ecologically sustainable recreation opportunities through an array of plan components that support a variety of recreation uses. Recreation opportunities also considered tourism, ecosystem integrity and capacity, recreation access, and changes in local demographics (2020 Forest Plan, Recreation Opportunities).
- Including plan components that guide the management of infrastructure and reduce the backlog of accrued facility deferred maintenance, particularly those items associated with health and safety accessibility (2020 Forest Plan, Infrastructure).

- Supporting wildlife habitat management conducted cooperatively with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to enhance habitat for wildlife viewing, restoration and conservation (2020 Forest Plan, Aquatic Ecosystems and Wildlife).
- Including plan components that establish desired scenic integrity (2020 Forest Plan, Scenic Character).
- Including plan components that emphasize land acquisitions to enhance multiple resource values such as recreation, open space, scenery, clean air and water, riparian habitat, wetland ecosystems, and wildlife habitat and explores opportunities for continued land ownership (2020 Forest Plan, Vegetation, Wildlife, Aquatic Ecosystems, Lands).
- Maintaining the wilderness character of the 3 existing designated wilderness areas, the 2 wilderness study areas, and the 7 recommended wilderness areas through plan components that support the regulations found in the Wilderness Act of 1964 and the Montana Wilderness Study Act of 1977 (2020 Forest Plan, Designated Areas).
- Protecting the free-flowing nature and outstandingly remarkable values of 45 rivers eligible for wild and scenic river designation through plan components that support interim protection measures for these rivers (2020 Forest Plan, Designated Areas).
- Providing the public with learning and engagement opportunities of natural, cultural, and historic properties where appropriate and possible; as well as providing for maintenance, conservation, and protection of important cultural resources and historical assets (2020 Forest Plan, Public Information, Interpretation, and Education; and Cultural, Historic and Tribal Resources).
- Providing rangeland for livestock grazing to support livelihoods while also supporting ecological integrity of rangelands, riparian conservation areas and fens (2020 Forest Plan, Livestock Grazing).
- Providing opportunities for the development of mineral resources, where appropriate (2020 Forest Plan, Geology and Minerals).
- Providing opportunities for hunting and fishing, with their associated cultural and socioeconomic benefits (2020 Forest Plan, Benefits to People: Multiple Uses and Ecosystem Services, Fish and Wildlife).

#### **219.11 Timber requirements based on the National Forest Management Act (NFMA)**

The Plan identifies lands suited and not suited for timber production (36 CFR 219.7(c)(2)(vii) and 219.11). The lands suitable for timber production and the role of timber harvest in meeting ecosystem management and social and economic objectives has changed since the 1986 Land Management Plans were developed. The Plan presents new plan components for lands suitable for timber production and for lands where timber harvest is allowed. These plan components will facilitate an active vegetation management program to meet ecosystem and socioeconomic objectives.

The purpose of timber production activities supported by this plan is to restore native forests to desired conditions and provide wood products to local communities. The Plan

also includes standards and guidelines for limits on lands suitable for harvest, as well as limitations on uses or forms of extraction (2020 Forest Plan, Timber).

Lands suitable for timber production were determined following 36 CFR 219.11(a) and Forest Service Handbook direction (1909.12 chap. 61). The Plan also identifies areas not suitable for timber production but where timber harvest is allowed for such purposes as protection or enhancement of biodiversity or wildlife habitat, fuels management, insect and disease mitigation, salvage, recreation or scenic-resource management, or for research or administrative studies. Specifically:

- Under the Plan, approximately 368,814 acres (13 percent of the Forest) are suitable for timber production, while the remaining approximately 2,514,413 acres are not suitable for timber production (2020 Forest Plan, Timber).
- Approximately 1,673,853 acres (58 percent of the Forest) are not suitable for timber production but allow timber harvest. Of these unsuitable lands where timber harvest is allowed, approximately 561,696 acres (19 percent of the Forest) are outside of IRAs (2020 Forest Plan, Timber).

The Plan reflects the desire to maintain as much management flexibility as possible on acres identified as suitable for timber production, while ensuring that management activities on these lands are moving towards desired conditions. It is vitally important to maintain a local timber industry that assists the Forest in this management through the commercial sale of forest products. The selected alternative best provides the needed management flexibility and reliable harvest-levels to sustain local industry. As required by the 2012 Planning Rule, the estimated timber outputs take into account the fiscal capability of the planning unit and are consistent with all plan components. They are based on the Forest's average budget levels for fiscal year 2013 through fiscal year 2015. However, the estimates of timber outputs may be larger or smaller on an annual basis, or over the life of the Plan, if budget or other constraining factors change in the future.

The Plan includes the following features related to timber outputs:

- The timber scheduling model predicted a projected timber sale quantity for the first decade at about 5.7 million cubic feet (27 million board feet) per year and the projected wood sale quantity as about 7.9 million cubic feet per year. Based on this information, the Plan includes an objective for the projected timber sale quantity that may be sold from the Forest as 4-7 million cubic feet (20-35 million board feet) per year; and a projected wood sale quantity of 6-9 million cubic feet per year. By providing a range of outputs in these objectives, the Plan incorporates potential fluctuations that may occur due to factors such as budgets, organizational capacity, and external influences (2020 Forest Plan, Timber).
- If opportunities for shared stewardship, additional legislative authorities, and/or partnerships increase the timber output capacity, modeling of the projected timber sale quantity under an unlimited budget and consistent with all plan components resulted in an average annual volume output in the first decade of 7.9 million cubic feet (38 million board feet) per year and a projected wood sale quantity of 10.5 million cubic feet. This information is included in the Plan as footnotes to the timber objectives. I felt it was important to display these levels of timber outputs that could

be possible while maintaining consistency with all other plan components (2020 Forest Plan, Timber).

- The Plan also includes plan components that ensure the timber sale quantity cannot exceed the Sustained Yield Limit of 10.7 million cubic feet per year (2020 Forest Plan, Timber).

The planning rule also requires land management plans to provide information regarding possible actions that may occur in the plan area during the life of the plan, including the planned timber sale program, timber harvesting levels, and the proportion of probable methods of forest vegetation management practices expected to be used (16 U.S.C. 1604(e)(2) and (f)(2)). The Plan addresses this requirement through objectives reflecting anticipated budget levels, and description of possible management actions and strategies (see appendix C of the 2020 Forest Plan). The Forest anticipates harvesting between 2,000 and 3,000 acres on average annually during the first two decades, given expected budget levels.

### 219.12 Monitoring

The Plan's monitoring program (appendix B of the 2020 Forest Plan) includes a broad range of monitoring questions and associated indicators for specific plan components. A biennial monitoring evaluation report will be prepared to indicate whether a change to the Plan, management activities, or monitoring program may be needed, or whether a new assessment may be warranted based on new information. This report will be made available to inform the public, and to encourage feedback on the methods and how we are doing in meeting our Plan goals.

The monitoring plan will help gauge the Forest's progress toward meeting goals, objectives, and desired conditions. The monitoring plan addresses the eight requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule in the form of questions, indicators, data sources, collection frequency, and associated plan components that are all included in appendix B of the Plan. We made several changes to the monitoring program in response to public input, including informal discussions with stakeholders and formal comments we received on the draft EIS.

The Plan addresses monitoring by:

- Developing a core group of questions and indicators. Many of these build on and use data from existing monitoring programs from other partners or agencies (2020 Forest Plan, appendix B).
- Incorporating monitoring data from other agencies and partners. This will help ensure that we are designing a program that is more independent and objective than solely relying on Forest staff that often have other program priority work.
- Designing the monitoring program to be cost effective and implementable during rising and falling budget cycles.

## Preliminary Administrative Recommendations

### Recommended Wilderness

Which areas, if any, to recommend for wilderness was the most significant issue in this planning process, generating the most comments and interest. Many people favor

recommending additional areas for wilderness while many others oppose any recommendations.

After considering the many comments received, reviewing the evaluations of the social and ecological wilderness characteristics of each area, and reflecting on the management tradeoffs across the Forest, I am recommending to Congress seven (7) wilderness areas, representing the potential addition of 154,325 acres for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. (Please see Map FW-5 in appendix A of the Plan). Three of the recommended areas are adjacent to existing wilderness and one is located in a portion of the Big Snowies wilderness study area. All of the recommended wilderness areas have the social and ecological characteristics that warrant congressional consideration and have received public comment in favor of recommendation.

This wilderness recommendation is a preliminary administrative recommendation that will receive further review and possible modification by the Chief of the Forest Service, the Secretary of Agriculture, and the President of the United States. Congress has reserved the authority to make final decisions on wilderness designation. Plan implementation is not dependent upon subsequent action related to recommendations for wilderness designation. The information considered in making this administrative recommendation for each area recommended for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System is available in appendix E of the final EIS.

Table 1 below identifies the lands I am recommending for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

**Table 1. Recommended wilderness areas with acres<sup>1</sup>**

Recommended wilderness area	Geographic area	Acres
Big Log	Big Belts	7,035
Mount Baldy	Big Belts	8,141
Electric Peak	Divide	18,239
Big Snowies	Snowies	66,894
Silver King	Upper Blackfoot	18,568
Red Mountain	Upper Blackfoot	2,500
Nevada Mountain <sup>2</sup>	Divide and Upper Blackfoot	31,948
Total		153,325

<sup>1</sup>Acres are approximate

<sup>2</sup>Portions of the Nevada Mountain Recommended Wilderness Area are located within both the Divide and Upper Blackfoot Geographic Areas.

The final EIS analyzed a wide variety of alternatives including an alternative with a large amount of recommended wilderness (Alternative D with 474,589 acres) and an alternative with no recommended wilderness (Alternative E with 0 acres). My decision is based on alternative F and identifies 153,325 acres as recommended wilderness.

The recommended wilderness areas are located within existing IRAs and/or a congressionally designated wilderness study area. The undeveloped character of these areas made them good candidates for recommended wilderness because there are few, if any, constructed features or developments within them, and the social and ecological



wilderness characteristics of these areas are intact. Fundamental to the agency's responsibility for recommended wilderness is protection and preservation of wilderness characteristics until either designated by Congress as wilderness or released from wilderness consideration (USFS Manual 1923.03).

A significant issue in the analysis was whether or not motorized and mechanized recreation uses affect wilderness characteristics and the potential for Congress to consider these areas as additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System. I reviewed the alternatives analyzed in the final EIS, some in which mechanized means of transportation in recommended wilderness were suitable and some in which these uses were unsuitable. I decided that motorized uses (including snowmobiles) and mechanized means of transportation (mountain biking) are unsuitable in recommended wilderness. This decision preserves the wilderness characteristics, including the sense of remoteness and the opportunities for solitude in recommended wilderness, recognizing that ample opportunities for motorized uses and mechanical means of transportation (mountain biking) are available outside of recommended wilderness.

I arrived at my decision on recommended wilderness after extensive engagement with my staff, local governments, tribes, commenters, our public and consideration of all sides of the issue. There are those who prefer additional acres recommended as wilderness to protect places they consider special, or because they believe recommended wilderness management is the best strategy to protect wildlife and aquatic resources. There are also those that prefer I don't recommend any additional areas because they believe management and access in recommended wilderness is too restrictive.

I considered the existing uses, current allowable uses, and the protections afforded by other management overlays. I decided on recommending wilderness areas that are manageable, currently have little to no motorized and/or mechanized means of transportation uses, and which truly add value if designated as wilderness by Congress in the future.

Although several commenters expressed concern that the management of recommended wilderness creates "de facto wilderness areas" in lieu of action by Congress, the Plan does not create wilderness. The Forest Service has an affirmative obligation to manage recommended wilderness areas for the social and ecological characteristics that provide the basis for their recommendation until Congress acts.

There is currently limited motorized and mechanized use within recommended wilderness areas. I have determined that this use is inconsistent with a future wilderness designation. The areas I have recommended for wilderness currently have 8 miles of open road, <1 mile of motorized trail, 8,046 acres of motorized over snow use, and 135 miles of non-motorized trails open to mechanized means of transportation (including bicycles). However, these routes receive little, if any, use based upon our monitoring and what we've heard from the public. This decision reflects public comment in favor of ensuring these areas remain suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System, should Congress make that decision. While motorized and mechanized uses are unsuitable under the Plan, I will initiate site-specific NEPA decision per the Plan's suitability direction to close these uses within the recommended wilderness areas within 3 years from the date of this decision.

*Plan direction for lands within the wilderness inventory that are not recommended*

All lands within the wilderness inventory were evaluated for wilderness characteristics, and the final EIS analyzed alternative plan direction for the wilderness inventory lands, with the final allocations identified in Table 1 above.

Overall, the majority of the lands identified in the wilderness inventory are located within IRAs and wilderness study areas. The majority of these relatively undeveloped lands provide for semi primitive motorized and semi primitive nonmotorized recreation opportunity settings.

The initial wilderness inventory was intended to be broad and inclusive, based upon the inventory criteria. The inventory is not a designation that conveys or requires a particular kind of management. Table 2 describes each of the wilderness inventory polygons that were not chosen as recommended wilderness, and the plan direction for each. Timber harvest is suitable in wilderness inventory polygons that were not chosen as Recommended Wilderness Areas (except in wilderness study areas), although the majority of those areas are located in IRAs where harvest would be governed by the Roadless Area Conservation Rule. For more specifics on the evaluation and maps of the polygons, please see appendix E of the final EIS.

**Table 2. Plan direction for wilderness inventory polygons not selected as recommended wilderness**

Geographic area	Wilderness inventory polygon name	Acres	Plan direction <sup>2</sup>
Big Belts	Hogback	5,784	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Trout Creek	39,383	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	North Belts	14,140	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Bilk Mountain	25,787	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Camas Creek	23,878	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Grassy Mountain	6,194	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
Castles	Wapiti Peak	33,002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>

<b>Geographic area</b>	<b>Wilderness inventory polygon name</b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>Plan direction<sup>2</sup></b>
	Whetstone Ridge	8,676	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> </ul>
Crazies	Loco Mountain	25,605	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Bald Ridge	13,210	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized and semi primitive motorized recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
Divide	Sweeney Creek	7,978	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> </ul>
	Colorado Mountain	8,168	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Continental Divide North	4,173	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
Elkhorns	Eagle Basin	57,279	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> <li>• Elkhorns wildlife management unit plan components</li> </ul>
	Elkhorn Peak	15,180	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> <li>• Elkhorns wildlife management unit plan components</li> </ul>
Highwood	Highwood Baldy	15,824	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Arrow Prospect	26,210	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
Little Belt Mountains	Deep Creek	89,321	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Big Horn Thunder	45,334	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Sun Mountain	7,965	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	McGee Sawmill	8,355	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>

Geographic area	Wilderness inventory polygon name	Acres	Plan direction <sup>2</sup>
	Peterson Mountain	6,839	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Taylor Mountain	11,374	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Big Baldy	49,068	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Eagle Creek	6,337	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Calf Creek	12,598	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi primitive motorized and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	North Fork Smith	9,817	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Middle Fork Judith	98,312	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• wilderness study area plan components</li> <li>• primitive, semi primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	East Little Belts	106,178	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
Rocky Mountain Range	Badger Two Medicine	125,795	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Teton Blackleaf	56,002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Sun Canyon Willow	71,106	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Sawtooth Ridge	15,312	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Elk Smith	30,030	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
Snowies	Big Snowies <sup>3</sup>	36,792	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• wilderness study area plan components</li> </ul>

Geographic area	Wilderness inventory polygon name	Acres	Plan direction <sup>2</sup>
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
Upper Blackfoot	Stonewall	30,046	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Black Mountain	10,220	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Anaconda Hill	21,539	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Paige Gulch	17,569	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Bear Gulch	5,636	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>
	Nevada Mountain <sup>1,3</sup>	20,639	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum</li> <li>• forestwide IRA plan components</li> </ul>

1 Inventory polygon and recommended wilderness area is located on both the Upper Blackfoot and Divide Geographic Areas.

2 All Forest-wide plan components for other resources also apply.

3 Portion of wilderness inventory polygon that was NOT identified as a recommended wilderness area.

### Wild and Scenic Rivers

The Plan includes 45 rivers (approximately 361 miles) identified as eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System (36 CFR 219.7(2)(v) and (vi)). The National Wild and Scenic River System was created by Congress in 1968 (Public Law 90-542; 16 U.S. C. 1271 et seq.) to preserve certain rivers in a free-flowing condition for the enjoyment of present and future generations.

Selected river segments possess outstandingly remarkable values, which include scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, and other similar values. Eligible rivers or river segments are preserved in their free-flowing condition and are not dammed or otherwise impeded.

Eligible wild and scenic rivers (or river segments) are assigned one or more preliminary classifications: wild, scenic, or recreational. These preliminary classifications are based on the developmental character of the river on the date of designation and dictate the level of interim protection measures to apply. Wild rivers are the most remote and undeveloped, whereas recreational rivers often have many access points and nearby roads, railroads, and bridges and may have undergone some impoundment or diversion in the past. A river’s

classification is not necessarily related to the value that made it worthy of designation. That is, a river with a scenic classification does not necessarily have scenery as an outstandingly remarkable value.

I have determined that the following 45 rivers (approximately 361 miles) are free-flowing and have outstandingly remarkable values and are eligible wild and scenic rivers or river segments (see Table 3). For a detailed description of the eligibility wild and scenic rivers study, please see appendix F of the final EIS. A wild and scenic river suitability study has not been conducted on these rivers, so all eligible rivers will be protected until a suitability study is completed.

Table 3 lists the eligible wild and scenic rivers and their segments, preliminary classification, outstandingly remarkable values, and length.

**Table 3. Eligible river segments by geographic area**

River name	Segment description	Preliminary Classification	Outstanding remarkable values	Miles
<b>Big Belts Geographic Area</b>				
Beaver Creek	<u>Segment 1:</u> From mouth to private land boundary.	Recreational	Recreation Geology Cultural	3.4
	<u>Segment 2:</u> From private boundary to private boundary.	Recreational		0.7
	<u>Segment 3:</u> From private boundary to Bridge Creek, west of Nelson.	Recreational		1.4
	<u>Segment 4:</u> From Sheep Gulch to Pike Creek.	Recreational		3.7
White Creek	From USFS boundary west to private boundary.	Recreational	Fish	3.0
Missouri River	From Hauser Dam to Cochran Gulch.	Recreational	Recreation (Fishing) Geology Wildlife	2.2
Ray Creek	From USFS boundary to headwaters.	Scenic	Fish	3.4
<b>Divide Geographic Area</b>				
Little Blackfoot River	<u>Segment 1:</u> From private boundary to private boundary near Charter Oaks.	Recreational	Fish Cultural	0.8
	<u>Segment 2:</u> From private land boundary south to the next private land boundary.	Recreational		0.5
	<u>Segment 3:</u> From private land boundary south and west to the private land boundary north of Kading campground.	Recreational		4.4
	<u>Segment 4:</u> From private land boundary near Kading campground south to the confluence with a no name stream near the intersection of Trail 329 with Trail 326.	Recreational		1.3

River name	Segment description	Preliminary Classification	Outstanding remarkable values	Miles
	<u>Segment 5:</u> From the confluence with a no name stream near the intersection of Trail 329 with Trail 326 to the headwaters.	Wild		7.7
High Ore Creek	From USFS boundary to headwaters.	Scenic	Fish	1.0
Kady Gulch	From USFS boundary to mining claim boundary.	Recreational	Fish	1.1
South Fork Quartz	From mouth to mining claim boundary.	Recreational	Fish	2.2
Skelly Gulch	From USFS boundary to headwaters.	Scenic	Fish	2.5
<b>Elkhorns Geographic Area</b>				
Staubach Creek	From USFS boundary to headwaters.	Scenic	Fish	2.4
<b>Highwoods Geographic Area</b>				
North Fork Highwood Creek	From fish barrier to headwaters.	Scenic	Fish	3.4
Big Coulee Creek	<u>Segment 1:</u> From the natural cascade fish barrier to the confluence with a no name stream from the east.	Scenic	Fish	0.4
	<u>Segment 2:</u> From the confluence with the no name creek to the upper tributary fork.	Wild	Fish	1.6
Cottonwood Creek	From USFS boundary to headwaters.	Scenic	Fish	2.5
North Fork Little Belt Creek	From USFS boundary to headwaters.	Wild	Fish	2.1
<b>Little Belts Geographic Area</b>				
Pilgrim Creek	<u>Segment 1:</u> From cascade fish barrier to private land boundary.	Scenic	Fish	7.0
	<u>Segment 2:</u> From private land boundary to the headwaters.	Scenic	Fish	3.7
Middle Fork Judith River	<u>Segment 1:</u> From USFS boundary to private land boundary.	Recreational	Cultural	1.6
	<u>Segment 2:</u> From private land boundary to Arch Coulee.	Recreational		3.0
South Fork Judith River	<u>Segment 1:</u> From Bower Creek to Dry Pole Creek.	Recreational	Fish Cultural	3.6
	<u>Segment 2:</u> From Bluff Mountain Creek to a no name creek.	Scenic		7.4
	<u>Segment 3:</u> From no name creek to the headwaters.	Recreational		3.9

River name	Segment description	Preliminary Classification	Outstanding remarkable values	Miles
Smith River (USFS lands only)	The Smith River is comprised of 17 small segments of Forest Service lands interspersed with private lands. Only Forest Service lands are considered for eligibility. To view individual segments, see detail maps located in the summary.	Scenic	Scenic Recreation Geology Wildlife Cultural	17.9
Tenderfoot Creek	Segment 1: From USFS boundary to private land boundary.	Scenic	Recreation Fish	14.6
	Segment 2: From private land boundary to private land boundary	Scenic		0.7
	Segment 3: From private land boundary to private land boundary.	Scenic		0.1
	Segment 4: From private land boundary to Iron Mines Creek.	Scenic		4.9
<b>Rocky Mountain Range Geographic Area</b>				
South Fork Two Medicine River	<u>Segment 1:</u> From USFS boundary to Box Creek.	Wild	Scenery Cultural	3.4
	<u>Segment 2:</u> From private land boundary to headwaters.	Wild		9.5
Badger Creek	From USFS boundary to confluence with North and South Badger Creeks.	Wild	Cultural Scenery	7.3
North Badger Creek	From confluence with main Badger and South Badger Creeks to headwaters.	Wild	Fish Cultural	10.4
South Badger Creek	From confluence with main Badger and North Badger Creek to headwaters.	Wild	Cultural	10.9
Lee Creek	From mouth to headwaters.	Wild	Fish	4.6
Badger Cabin Creek	From mouth to headwaters.	Wild	Fish	3.2
Red Poacher Creek	From confluence with North Badger Creek to headwaters.	Wild	Fish	3.1
North Fork Birch Creek	From USFS boundary to headwaters.	Wild	Cultural Scenery	7.8
Middle Fork Birch Creek	From confluence to the headwaters.	Wild	Scenery Cultural	5.2
South Fork Birch Creek	From mouth of Swift Reservoir to the headwaters.	Wild	Scenery Recreation Fish Wildlife Cultural	9.8
North Fork Deep Creek	From USFS boundary to headwaters.	Wild	Scenery	5.5
North Fork Teton River	<u>Segment 1:</u> From USFS Boundary to road crossing above Elko Campground (bottom of the box canyon).	Recreation	Recreation Scenery Wildlife Fish	5.5



River name	Segment description	Preliminary Classification	Outstanding remarkable values	Miles
	<u>Segment 2:</u> From road crossing above Elko Campground to the wilderness boundary (through the box canyon).	Scenic		5.3
	<u>Segment 3:</u> From the wilderness boundary to the headwaters.	Wild		6.4
Middle Fork North Fork Teton River	From the confluence with North Fork Teton River to headwaters.	Scenic	Fish	6.8
Waldron Creek	From the confluence with North Fork Teton River to headwaters.	Recreational	Fish	4.3
North Fork Sun River	From wilderness boundary to the headwaters.	Wild	Scenery Recreation	26.1
South Fork Sun River	From wilderness boundary to headwaters.	Wild	Recreation Wildlife	26.2
West Fork South Fork Sun River	From mouth to junction with Ahorn Creek.	Wild	Recreation Wildlife	8.4
Green Fork Straight Creek	From mouth to headwaters.	Wild	Scenery Geology	5.9
Wood Creek	From below the dam on Wood Lake to the confluence with Straight Creek.	Recreational	Wildlife	7.1
Dearborn River	From USFS boundary to Whitetail Creek.	Wild	Scenery	6.5
<b>Snowies Geographic Area</b>				
Swimming Woman Creek	From USFS boundary to headwaters.	Scenic	Scenery Geology	3.9
East Fork Big Spring Creek	From south end of Section 33 to headwaters.	Wild	Fish	5.3
<b>Upper Blackfoot Geographic Area</b>				
Alice Creek	From USFS boundary to headwaters.	Recreational	Cultural	6.5
Copper Creek	<u>Segment 1:</u> From USFS boundary to private land boundary.	Recreational	Fish	1.1
	<u>Segment 2:</u> From private land boundary to the headwaters.	Recreational		12.0
Landers Fork	Segment 1: From USFS boundary to private land boundary.	Scenic	Fish	0.3
	Segment 2: From private land boundary to the headwaters.	Wild		18.5
Snowbank Creek	From confluence with Copper Creek to headwaters.	Scenic	Fish	4.4
<b>Total Miles of eligible sections of wild and scenic rivers</b>				360.8

## Changes between draft and final EIS

The preferred alternative in the final EIS was based on the proposed action, with some changes based upon interagency and public engagement including: (1) moving the recommended wilderness area boundary 300' from all private land boundaries to address concerns related to fire and fuels; (2) changing the boundaries of several recommended wilderness areas to accommodate existing recreation uses; (3) selecting plan components that makes motorized and mechanized methods of transportation not suitable in areas being recommended wilderness areas.

Other prominent comment topics resulted in minor changes or updates to plan components or other aspects of the 2020 Forest Plan and the EIS analysis, including:

- General support/opposition to various alternatives or plan components
- Use of Best Available Scientific Information
- Climate change
- Ecosystem diversity and ecological integrity
- Riparian Management Zones
- Vegetation, timber and wildlife modeling and analysis
- Wildlife connectivity
- Grizzly Bear and lynx
- Elk habitat security
- Recreation opportunity spectrum and its application
- Continental Divide National Scenic Trail
- Badger Two Medicine traditional cultural district, bison reintroduction and tribal involvement
- Livestock grazing and invasive species
- Oil and Gas and mineral activities

## Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered 5 other alternatives which are discussed below. Alternative F was the environmentally preferred alternative. A more detailed comparison of these alternatives can be found in Chapter 2 of the final EIS.

## Alternatives Analyzed in Detail

The range of alternatives developed and presented in the final EIS is based on a preliminary evaluation of the information gathered from public and internal comments and the purpose and need associated with the Plan. While all alternatives provide a wide range of ecosystem services and multiple uses, some give greater emphasis to selected resources based on the theme of the alternative and response to revision topics.

The action alternatives were developed based on the Forest's assessment (2015), the need for change, desired conditions, implementation and monitoring of the 1986 Plans, public meetings, and comments received during the public involvement period, interagency meetings, and meetings with tribal partners. The alternatives represent a range of possible

management options from which to choose. Each alternative emphasizes specific land and resource uses and de-emphasizes other uses in response to the revision topics. Some components may vary between alternatives to address the issues identified during scoping; see the description of the alternatives for specific details. Plan direction for desired conditions, standards, and guidelines remains constant for all action alternatives, with the exceptions noted.

In addition to the no-action alternative (A) and the proposed action that was released for public scoping in 2016 (alternative B), three additional alternatives (C, D, and E) were developed based on the issues identified during the scoping period. Alternative F, the preferred alternative, was developed based on comments received on the draft Plan/draft EIS. Each alternative emphasizes specific land and resource uses and de-emphasizes other uses in response to the revision topics. Some components vary between alternatives to address issues identified during scoping. Plan direction for desired conditions, standards and guidelines are generally constant for all action alternatives, exceptions are noted. The general theme and intent of each alternative is summarized below.

Given extensive public engagement and environmental reviews associated with recent travel management decisions, I did not identify a need for broad changes in motorized or mechanized suitability during this plan revision effort. Therefore, motorized and non-motorized recreation opportunity settings do not vary widely from the current designated route system. However, in response to public comment, I considered some modifications in desired recreation opportunity spectrum settings in the mix of areas considered for recommended wilderness or primitive recreation opportunity settings.

### **Elements common to all alternatives**

All alternatives considered in the final EIS adhere to the principles of multiple use and the sustained yield of goods and services required by the Multiple Use and Sustained Yield Act as described at 36 CFR 219.1 (b)). All the alternatives are designed to:

- contribute to ecological, social, and economic sustainability;
- meet the purpose and need for change and address one or more significant issues;
- provide integrated direction as included in the forestwide desired conditions, objectives, standards, guidelines, and sustainability;
- provide sustainable levels of products and services; and
- allow reasonable access and mineral development for private mineral rights (locatable mining claims, reserved and outstanding rights) and existing oil and gas leases on the national forest and consistent with subject laws and regulations.

In addition, the following elements are also consistent across all alternatives:

- Motorized and mechanized recreation settings support current route and area designations, except in areas recommended for wilderness designations and within the Divide and Elkhorns Geographic Areas.
- Existing developed recreation sites and recreation residence special use permits are allowed; alternatives do not remove or create developed recreation sites.
- Management direction for and location of utility and rights-of-way, easements, and communication sites.

- National Wilderness System plan components.
- IRAs and wilderness study areas and plan components.
- Neither oil and gas leasing nor mineral withdrawal decisions are made.
- Eligible wild and scenic rivers and their plan components.
- Recent and updated multi-region management direction for Canada lynx, and the Forest Plan Amendments to Incorporate Habitat Management Direction for the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Population are incorporated.
- Mechanized means of transportation would be suitable in all areas except those designated as wilderness or recommended wilderness.

### **Elements common to all action alternatives**

All action alternatives (B, C, D, E, and F) are consistent with the NFMA, 2012 Planning Rule and associated directives and emphasize adaptive management and the use of best available scientific information. All action alternatives include maintaining the Elkhorns Wildlife Management Unit designation in the Elkhorns GA. They also include designation of the Badger Two Medicine as a special emphasis area; the Missouri River Corridor Recreation Area; and the Smith River Corridor Recreation Area. All action alternatives also include 45 Eligible Wild and Scenic rivers.

All action alternatives address the need for change to meet:

- increasing demand for recreation opportunities and their importance in supporting local economies;
- fire and fuels management direction that emphasizes active vegetation management near communities;
- conservation of wildlife and aquatic habitat, including the Forest Plan Amendments to Incorporate Habitat Management Direction for the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Population and Inland Native Fish direction;
- new policy and public interest in identifying areas for recommended wilderness and wild and scenic rivers; and
- consistency with the 2012 Planning Rule and associated directives by using adaptive management, public input, and best available scientific information.

The action alternatives vary based on 3 issues that drove alternatives:

- Recommended wilderness and undeveloped areas
- Motorized and mechanized means of transportation in recommended wilderness areas; and
- Timber harvest and timber production

### **Alternative A – No action, existing plans**

Alternative A, the no-action alternative, reflects current management practices under the 1986 Forest Plans, as amended, and provides the basis for comparing alternatives to current management and levels of output. The Council on Environmental Quality regulations (40 CFR 1502.14d) requires that a “no action” alternative be analyzed in every EIS. This does not mean that nothing would occur under alternative A. The current conditions described in Chapter 3 would continue. Under this alternative, the 1986 Forest Plans, as amended,

would continue to guide management of the plan area, and ongoing work or work previously planned and approved would continue. Alternative A does not address some of the elements associated with the 2012 Planning Rule, such as riparian management zones. Laws and regulations that have been adopted since the 1986 Forest Plans are analyzed as part of the no-action alternative (for example, the designation of IRAs). With respect to the identified issues, the alternative is described as follows:

- There would be three recommended wilderness areas (Big Log, Mount Baldy, and Electric Peak; total of 34,265 acres).
- There would be no changes to existing travel plans.
- Mechanized means of transportation would be suitable in all areas, except designated wilderness.
- Lands suitable for timber production would be based on the 1986 Forest Plans as amended and implemented, and in accordance with current regulation and policy. When consistent with other plan components, harvest for purposes other than timber production could occur on a subset of unsuitable lands.
- Specific, prescriptive standards for elk habitat security would be included that would differ between the former Helena National Forest lands and the former Lewis and Clark National Forest lands.
- Eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers would be included.
- The Elkhorns Wildlife Management Unit designation would be maintained.
- None of the other special emphasis areas identified in one or more of the action alternatives would be included (e.g., Missouri River Corridor, Smith River Corridor, South Hills Recreation Area; Poe-Manley proposed research natural area; Green Timber Basin-Beaver Creek botanical area; or Grandview Recreation Area).

## **Alternative B**

Alternative B, identified as the proposed action in scoping, represents a mix of recommended wilderness areas and lands identified as suitable for timber production. The mix of opportunities available for primitive recreation and nonmotorized recreation experiences versus less primitive and more motorized recreation experiences is generally consistent with current travel plans, except in the case of recommended wilderness areas. With respect to the identified issues, the alternative is described as follows:

- Nine areas would be recommended for wilderness designation: Big Log, Mount Baldy, Electric Peak (previously known as Blackfoot Meadows), Deep Creek, Big Snowies, Silver King, Red Mountain, Arrastra Creek, and Nevada Mountain. This represents a total of 213,076 acres.
- Motorized and mechanized transportation would not be suitable in recommended wilderness areas.
- All lands that are not withdrawn from timber suitability due to legal or technical factors are suitable for timber production except for: areas with primitive and semi-primitive nonmotorized recreation opportunity spectrum; recommended wilderness areas; and the Elkhorns Geographic Area, South Hills Recreation Area, Badger Two Medicine area, Highwoods Geographic Area, Snowies Geographic Area, and Dry

Range. When consistent with other plan components, harvest for purposes other than timber production could occur on other lands not suitable for production.

- Plan components that address elk habitat security would be included that are based on the best available scientific information and allow flexibility based on specific area needs and characteristics.
- The South Hills Recreation Area would be included.
- The Poe-Manley proposed research natural area would not be included.
- The Green Timber Basin-Beaver Creek botanical area would not be designated.
- The Grandview Recreation Area would not be designated.

### **Alternative C**

Alternative C is a modified proposed action, which also represents a mix of recommended wilderness areas and lands identified as suitable for timber production. The mix of opportunities available for primitive recreation and nonmotorized recreation experiences versus less primitive and more motorized recreation experiences would be generally consistent with current travel plans, except in the case of recommended wilderness areas. In the Divide and Elkhorn Geographic Areas some additional changes to the recreation opportunity spectrum would be included. This is proposed for areas where desired future management would require changes to the travel plans. With respect to the identified issues, the alternative is described as follows:

- Nine areas would be recommended for wilderness designation; the same as listed for alternative B.
- Motorized and mechanized means of transportation would be suitable within recommended wilderness areas.
- Approximately 20,000 acres of recreation settings in the Elkhorns and Divide Geographic Areas would shift from semi-primitive motorized to semi-primitive non-motorized recreation opportunities.
- An area within the Elkhorns “core” would be identified where mechanized means of transportation would not be suitable.
- Timber suitability determinations would be the same as described for alternative B.
- Plan components that specifically address management of elk habitat security or displacement of elk during hunting season are not included.
- The South Hills Recreation Area would be included.
- The Poe-Manley proposed research natural area would not be included.
- The Green Timber Basin-Beaver Creek botanical area would not be designated.
- The Grandview Recreation Area would not be designated.

### **Alternative D**

Alternative D was developed in to address comments and themes associated with limiting human influences and impacts on the landscape. This alternative would be responsive to commenters who desire more undeveloped recreation areas and includes the greatest amount of recommended wilderness areas and the least amount of lands suitable for timber production. Recommended wilderness areas and primitive or semi-primitive nonmotorized recreation areas were selected where consistent with current travel plans, with emphasis

given to areas where decreased human presence would enhance connectivity for wildlife. In this alternative, mechanized transportation is not suitable in the core of the Elkhorn Mountains. The alternative also provides:

- Sixteen areas would be recommended for wilderness designation. These would include the nine areas listed for alternatives B and C in addition to the following 7 areas: Camas Creek; Wapiti Peak; Loco Mountain; Colorado Mountain; Tenderfoot Creek; Big Horn Thunder; and Middle Fork Judith. Recommended wilderness areas would be identified with consideration given to maintaining or enhancing potential habitat connectivity for large, wide-ranging wildlife species within and among geographic areas. It includes additions to the original Blackfoot Meadows and Nevada Mountain Recommended Wilderness Areas. Total of 474,589 acres.
- Motorized and mechanized means of transportation would not be suitable in recommended wilderness areas.
- Additional primitive recreation areas, outside of recommended wilderness would be identified in the Elkhorns Geographic Area, the Highwoods Geographic Area, and the Badger Two Medicine areas of the Rocky Mountain Range Geographic Area to provide additional undeveloped areas.
- In addition to the lands excluded from timber production in alternative B, this alternative would exclude recommended wilderness areas and primitive/semi-primitive non-motorized lands from production. When consistent with other plan components, harvest for purposes other than timber production could occur on lands not suitable for production.
- Plan components that specifically address management of elk habitat security or displacement of elk during hunting season are not included.
- The South Hills Recreation Area would be included.
- The Poe-Manley proposed research natural area would be included in the Elkhorns GA (4,505 acres).
- The Green Timber Basin-Beaver Creek botanical area would not be designated.
- The Grandview Recreation Area would not be designated.

## **Alternative E**

Alternative E was developed in response to comments that would like to see increased timber production from NFS lands and no recommended wilderness areas. All lands that may be suited for timber production would be included, except for the Badger Two Medicine area and the Elkhorns Geographic Area, which both have other special emphasis management. The recreation settings that are the most compatible with harvest activities would be selected where consistent with current travel plans. No recommended wilderness areas would be included. With respect to the identified issues, the alternative is described as follows:

- No areas would be recommended for wilderness designation.
- Suitability for motorized and mechanized means of transportation will not change from existing conditions.

- Mechanized means of transportation would be suitable in all locations on the forest, except within designated wilderness, and/or where prohibited.
- All lands not withdrawn from timber suitability due to legal or technical factors would be suitable for timber production except for those lands within the Elkhorns Geographic Area and the Badger Two Medicine area. When consistent with other plan components, harvest for purposes other than timber production could occur on a subset of unsuitable lands.
- Plan components that address elk habitat security would be included that are based on the best available scientific information and allow flexibility based on specific area needs and characteristics.
- The South Hills Recreation Area would not be included.
- The Poe-Manley proposed research natural area would be not included.
- The Green Timber Basin-Beaver Creek botanical area would not be designated.
- The Grandview Recreation Area would not be designated.

## Alternative F

Alternative F, which is the preferred alternative, represents a mix of recommended wilderness areas and lands identified as suitable for timber production. The mix of opportunities available for primitive recreation and nonmotorized recreation experiences versus less primitive and more motorized recreation experiences would be generally consistent with current travel plans, except in the case of recommended wilderness areas. With respect to the identified issues, the alternative is described as follows:

- Seven areas are recommended for wilderness designation (Big Log, Mount Baldy, Electric Peak, Big Snowies, Silver King, Red Mountain, and Nevada Mountain). Total 153,325 acres.
- Motorized and mechanized means of transportation would not be suitable in recommended wilderness areas.
- Primitive recreation opportunity settings outside of recommended wilderness areas would be identified in the Little Belt Mountains, Rocky Mountain Range, Snowies, and Elkhorns Geographic Areas.
- Approximately 20,000 acres of recreation settings in the Elkhorns and Divide Geographic Areas would shift from semi-primitive motorized to semi-primitive non-motorized or primitive recreation opportunities.
- All lands not withdrawn from timber suitability due to legal or technical factors would be suitable for timber production except for: areas with primitive and semi-primitive nonmotorized recreation opportunity spectrum; recommended wilderness areas; and the Elkhorns Geographic Area, South Hills Recreation Area, Badger Two Medicine area, Highwoods Geographic Area, Snowies Geographic Area, and the Dry Range. When consistent with other plan components, harvest for purposes other than timber production could occur on other lands not suitable for production.
- Plan components that address the potential for displacement of elk during the hunting season would be included that are based on the best available scientific information and allow flexibility based on specific area needs and characteristics.
- The South Hills Recreation Area would be included.



- The Poe-Manley proposed research natural area would be included in the Elkhorns GA, with a smaller delineation than the area included in Alternative D (1,578 acres).
- The Green Timber Basin-Beaver Creek botanical area would be designated in the Rocky Mountain Range Geographic Area to protect and emphasize a unique ecological habitat that supports over 10 separate orchid populations.
- The Grandview Recreation Area would be designated in the west end of the Big Snowies Geographic Area to allow for continued existing semiprimitive motorized uses (primarily snowmobiles) in the winter. It would also provide a primitive recreation opportunity for mechanized means of transportation on the existing trail system surrounding the Crystal Lake Campground Complex.

## Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study

Federal agencies are required by the NEPA to rigorously explore and objectively evaluate all reasonable alternatives and to briefly discuss the reasons for eliminating any alternatives that were not developed in detail (40 CFR 1502.14). Public comments received in response to the proposed action provided suggestions for alternative methods of achieving the purpose and need. Some of these may have been outside the scope of what can be included in the Plan or duplicative of the alternatives considered in detail. Thirteen alternative(s) were considered but eliminated from detailed consideration. A full description of the suggested alternatives and the rationale for not considering them can be found in the final EIS. Reasons why these alternatives were eliminated include:

- The alternative was not consistent with law, regulation or policy, including the 2012 Planning Rule and USFS Handbook 1909.12.
- The alternative would not meet the multiple use mandate of the Forest Service.
- Suggested land allocations may have been beyond the authority of a land management plan, inconsistent with the intent of a land management plan land allocation or result in an unmanageable land allocation.
- Inadequate detail was provided by public comments for some suggestions, and in some cases forest-wide plan direction adequately covered a suggested land allocation.
- The alternative was considered within the range of alternatives analyzed in detail.

## Environmentally Preferable Alternative

NEPA regulations require agencies to specify the alternative or alternatives that are considered to be environmentally preferable (40 CFR 1505.2(b)). The environmentally preferable alternative is “the alternative that will best promote the national environmental policy as expressed in NEPA’s section 101 (42 U.S.C. 4321). Ordinarily, the environmentally preferable alternative is that which causes the least harm to the biological and physical environment; it is also the alternative which best protects and preserves historic, cultural, and natural resources” (36 CFR 220.3).

I find, based upon the laws and regulations guiding NFS lands management, that alternative F is the environmentally preferred alternative. When compared to the alternatives analyzed in detail, it best contributes to, and moves the Forest towards, ecological, social, and

economic sustainability and desired conditions that will benefit future generations (see the explanation of how the plan components meet the requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule, in the section titled “Findings required by other laws and regulations” of this ROD). Although alternative D would allow the fewest acres available for mechanical ground-disturbing activities and the fewest acres allowing motorized use, it does not address the six goals of NEPA as well as alternative F does. I base my finding on the following comparison showing how the alternatives address the goals of section 101 of NEPA.

### **Fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustees of the environment for succeeding generations.**

Alternative F emphasizes moving forest conditions towards desired future conditions while contributing to ecological, social, and economic sustainability. Alternative F provides the most movement towards vegetation desired conditions while providing sustainable levels of timber harvest similar to or greater than current levels. The higher timber harvest levels under Alternative F versus alternatives B/C/D provides the Forest’s sustainable share of products and uses demanded by the public, with a higher probability of improving and restoring vegetation for future generations than alternative B/C/D. Alternative A would provide the least improvement towards desired conditions. There are more acres suitable for timber production in Alternative E, with an expected higher level of management intensity and more timber production. However, because of an emphasis on production of wood products, it does not move towards vegetation desired conditions as much as alternative F. Alternative F provides more acres of recommended wilderness area than alternatives E and A and provides plan components to protect the wilderness characteristics of these areas.

### **Assure for all Americans safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings.**

Alternative F achieves maintenance of a safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically and culturally pleasing Forest better than the other alternatives because it provides the best mix of resource utilization, active and passive management, and motorized and nonmotorized recreation uses along with the safeguards provided by standards and guidelines for maintaining water quality, scenery, and wildlife habitat. Alternative F provides recommended wilderness areas with additions and reductions as suggested by the public. Alternative F also provides timber harvest levels similar to or greater than current alternative A levels and maintains multiple-use access to important recreational areas better than alternative B/C/D. Although alternative E provides higher levels of timber harvest and access opportunities, it does not provide the levels of recommended wilderness area that are currently enjoyed and desired on the Forest.

### **Attain the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk to health or safety, or other undesirable and unintended consequences.**

The beneficial uses that are most varied between alternatives and that I considered in this finding are wood fiber production and a reasonable range of motorized and nonmotorized recreation opportunities. Alternative F achieves a higher level of reasonable, sustainable beneficial uses than alternative B, C or D. Alternative E provides higher levels of wood

fiber production and motorized recreation allocations, but it does so at the expense of nonmotorized recreation allocations. Although the beneficial uses of alternative A are similar, alternative F also provides the most movement of vegetation towards desired conditions, which will provide for more resistant and resilient forests. This improves the health of our forests and watersheds, enhances wildlife habitat, and reduces undesirable and unintended consequences.

### **Preserve important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage and maintain, wherever possible, an environment that supports diversity and variety of individual choice.**

I find that the best way to preserve this heritage, and an environment that supports diversity and variety of choice, is to manage for a national forest that provides for physical resource use and the appropriate protection of cultural resources. Based on the final EIS, I find that alternative F meets this goal better than the other alternatives. It improves on alternative A and provides the best assortment of multiple uses between alternative D's emphasis on wilderness values and alternative E's emphasis on achieving desired conditions through mechanical means.

### **Achieve a balance between population and resource use, which will permit high standards of living and a wide sharing of life's amenities.**

The public demands a variety of products and uses that can be provided by their national forests. NFS lands and resources are important local resources that contribute to the quality of life in the region. The final EIS alternative analysis compares the various values the public uses to determine their quality of life, from economic resource extraction (timber harvest and minerals) to less tangibly defined resources such as wilderness character and primitive and semi-primitive non-motorized recreation opportunities. The challenge is to achieve a balance, and I find that alternative F achieves this balance. Alternative F provides more resource use than alternative D but more opportunities for primitive recreation than alternative E.

### **Enhance the quality of renewable resources and approach the maximum attainable recycling of depletable resources.**

I find alternative F enhances the quality of renewable resources and provides sustainable use of renewable resources. The standards and guidelines and the land allocations under alternative F provide levels of resource use similar to current levels of alternative A while providing protection measures through additional recommended wilderness areas. Alternative D emphasizes more passive management and has a greater amount of primitive areas and recommended wilderness areas, but it does so at the expense of resource utilization and does not achieve as much vegetation restoration as alternative F.

## Best Available Scientific Information

The 2012 Planning Rule (§219.6(a)(3) and 219.14(a)(4)) requires the responsible official to use the best available scientific information to inform the development of the proposed Plan, including plan components, the monitoring program, and plan decisions. The foundation from which the plan components were developed for the proposed action was provided by the Assessment, the best available scientific information, and analyses therein. In developing the Plan and related environmental analyses, specialists used many resources such as peer-reviewed and technical literature, databases and data management systems, modeling tools and approaches, information obtained through participation and attendance at scientific conferences, local information, workshops and collaborations, and information received during public participation periods for related planning activities. Resource specialists considered what is most accurate, reliable, and relevant in their use of the best available scientific information. The best available scientific information includes the publications listed in the literature cited sections of the Assessment and final EIS, as well as those used in specialist reports noted in the project record. In addition, all the scientific information submitted by the public is listed in appendix G of the final EIS, along with how the plan revision team used the information.

My staff utilized and updated a geographic information system database to evaluate complex spatial effects resulting from implementation of the alternatives (such as the recreation opportunity spectrum and effects to wildlife habitat by species). The team also used an optimization model that is widely used and accepted by private and State land managers, to estimate the long-term flow of timber from the plan area. In addition, a dynamic state and transition model developed in Region One was used in conjunction with the timber optimization model to incorporate expected effects of vegetation successional processes and natural disturbances on the landscape.

Cooperation among county, State, and Federal agencies and tribes contributed to the best available scientific information. For example, the Forest coordinated with other national forest and regional specialists; Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; the Montana Natural Heritage Program, and the USFWS on lists of species known to occur on NFS lands managed by the Forest, species habitat associations, and development of the Plan and its alternatives.

Much of the recreation and roads information and plan direction is derived from the Forest Service Infrastructure database as well as the National Visitor Use Monitoring surveys. The infrastructure database is a collection of web-based data entry forms, reporting tools, and mapping tools that enable national forests to manage and report the best available information about their inventory of constructed features (e.g., roads, trails). The National Visitor Use Monitoring data is an NFS-wide monitoring survey that collects forest-specific recreation use surveys every five years through the use of exit surveys.

Social and economic conditions and trends contained in the assessment and final EIS were taken from the Economic Profile System-Human Dimensions Toolkit (Headwaters Economics), which was developed in partnership with the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service. This database uses published statistics from Federal data sources, including but not limited to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the U.S. Census Bureau. Other significant sources of information used in developing social and economic plan direction included: publications on Montana's

forest products industry developed by the University of Montana Bureau of Business and Economic Research; Northwest Economic Development District publications; data on Forest Service programs, salary and non-salary expenditures, and employment from Forest Service corporate databases; and the results of an analysis of the contribution of Forest programs and expenditures to jobs and labor income using Forest Service corporate data and data from IMPLAN (an economic impact model) for the year 2015. Public comments and expert input contributed to the development of these plan components.

For these reasons, and based on my review of the final EIS and the planning record, I have determined that the most accurate and reliable scientific information available that is relevant to the issues considered in this plan revision has been used to inform the planning process and has been applied to the issues considered in the revision, as required by 36 CFR 219.3.

## **Research Station Director Concurrence**

Consistent with 36 CFR 219.2(b)(4), the acting director of the Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Research Station has affirmed by letter (February 11, 2020) that the Forest and the Rocky Mountain Research Station have worked in unison on the plan components applicable to the Tenderfoot Experimental Forest. Nothing in the proposed plan direction changes the requirement to consult with the station director regarding proposed activities that may affect ongoing research within the experimental forest.

## **Findings Required by Other Laws**

The Forest Service manages the Forest in conformance with many laws and regulations. I have considered the statutes specific to individual resources as described in the final EIS, and I find that this decision meets our obligations to the current statutory duties of the Forest Service. Following are summaries of how the Plan addresses the relevant laws and regulations.

### **American Indian Religious Freedom Act**

Federal Agencies must make a good faith effort to understand how Indian religious practices may come into conflict with other Forest uses and consider any adverse impacts on these practices in their decision making. The Forest is within the territory of the 12 Federally recognized Indian tribes: Blackfeet, Northern Cheyenne, Confederated Salish and Kootenai, Chippewa Cree of Rocky Boy, Crow, Eastern Shoshone, Nez Perce, Northern Arapahoe, Little Shell, Fort Belknap (Assiniboine and Gros Ventre) community, Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux, Shoshone-Bannock.

No effects on American Indian social, economic, or subsistence rights are anticipated as a result of the land management plan revision. Regardless of which alternative is chosen, the Forest Service is required to consult with tribes when management activities may impact treaty rights and/or cultural sites and cultural use. Desired conditions for areas of tribal importance for all action alternatives of the Plan are:

1. Healthy, sustainable, and harvestable populations of culturally significant flora and fauna are available to ensure the rights reserved by Native Americans. See FW-OFP-DC-01.
2. Tribal members' access to the Forest for the exercise of treaty rights is recognized and accommodated. Opportunities exist to practice traditional, cultural, and religious activities, such as plant gathering and ceremonial activities, which are essential to sustaining their way of life, cultural integrity, social cohesion, and economic well-being.

Therefore, I find the Plan is compliant with this act.

## Archaeological Resources Protection Act

This act protects archaeological resources found on public lands and Indian lands of the United States. The legislation provides civil and criminal penalties for those who remove or damage archaeological resources in violation of the prohibitions contained in the act. The act prohibits the removal of archaeological resources on public lands or Indian lands without first obtaining a permit from the affected Federal Land Manager or Tribe and requires federal agencies to develop plans to survey lands under their management to determine the nature and extent of archaeological and cultural resources. The act also protects the confidentiality of the nature and location of archaeological resources on federal land.

The Plan is strategic and programmatic in nature, providing guidance and direction to future site-specific projects and activities. The plan components include provisions that take into consideration American Indian rights and interests and cultural resources. Therefore, I find that the Plan is compliant with this Act.

## Clean Air Act

In accordance with the Clean Air Act of 1990 and the Organic Administration Act of 1897, the Forest Service has the responsibility to protect the air, land, and water resources from the impacts of air pollutants produced within the boundaries of NFS lands and to work with states to protect air resources from degradation associated with the impacts of air pollution emitted outside of NFS lands. The final EIS, Chapter 3, Air Quality and Fire and Fuels sections disclose potential impacts to air resources from program activities that are approved by the Plan, including the use of prescribed fire.

The Plan includes desired conditions and strategies for maintaining air quality and monitoring questions for gathering information (2020 Forest Plan, Air Quality section). It also includes plan components that direct the USFS to work with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality on activities affecting air quality, including prescribed fire. The plan components require the USFS to work with other state, county and local cooperators to meet goals in community wildfire protection plans (2020 Forest Plan, Fire and Fuels Goals section). Conformity determinations and more detailed air quality impact analyses will be made at subsequent levels of planning and analysis where emissions can be more accurately quantified, reasonably forecasted, and local impacts can be assessed. Therefore, I find the Plan to be in compliance with the Clean Air Act.

## Clean Water Act

The Clean Water Act (33 U. S. C. § 1251 et seq.) establishes the basic structure for regulating discharges of pollutants into the waters of the United States and regulating quality standards for surface waters.

Implementation of the Plan is expected to maintain and improve water quality and satisfy all State water quality requirements. This finding is based on direction contained in the Plan, application of “best management practices” specifically designed to protect water quality, and the discussions of water quality and beneficial uses addressed in Chapter 3, Aquatic Ecosystems Section of the final EIS. Management direction protecting water quality can be found in many locations throughout the Plan, including Aquatic Ecosystems and Soil. Project-level analysis required for land management plan implementation will be required to demonstrate compliance with the Clean Water Act. I find that the Plan is compliant with this act.

## Endangered Species Act

The purpose of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is to provide for the conservation of endangered species by conserving the ecosystems on which these species rely. Section 7(a)(1) of the Act requires Federal agencies to carry out programs for the conservation of listed species. In addition, the ESA requires Federal agencies to ensure that any agency action does not jeopardize the continued existence of the species (ESA, section 7(a)(2)). The ESA also requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Forest Service to base their biological opinion and subsequent agency action, respectively, on the use of the best scientific and commercially available information 916 U.S.C. 1536(a)(2)).

In June 2018 the Forest notified the USFWS of the land management plan revision process and requested lists of federally listed threatened and endangered species, species proposed for Federal listing, and candidate species to be considered for further evaluation throughout the land management plan revision process. In accordance with section 7(c) of the ESA, the Forest obtained a final list of proposed, threatened, endangered, and candidate species identified by the USFWS on January 13, 2020 as published at [https://www.fws.gov/montanafieldoffice/Endangered\\_Species/Listed\\_Species/Forests/Helena-L&C\\_sp\\_list.pdf](https://www.fws.gov/montanafieldoffice/Endangered_Species/Listed_Species/Forests/Helena-L&C_sp_list.pdf). Based on standard implementing procedures for compliance with with Section 7(c) of the ESA and with Forest Service policy, a Biological Assessment was prepared evaluating the effects of implementing the Plan on 5 federally listed threatened, endangered, proposed species or designated critical habitat known or likely to occur on the Forest in Montana.

The biological assessment concluded that implementation of the Plan *may affect, and is likely to adversely affect* Canada lynx, Canada lynx designated critical habitat, grizzly bear, and bull trout and bull trout critical habitat. The biological assessment also determined that implementation of the Plan is *not likely to jeopardize the continued existence* of the federally proposed threatened distinct population segment of wolverine in the action area, which is the entire Forest. It also determined that implementation of the Plan is *not likely to jeopardize* the continued existence of whitebark pine in the plan area.

The Forest Service is expecting a biological opinion from USFWS for the grizzly bear, Canada lynx, bull trout, Canada lynx critical habitat, and bull trout critical habitat in late May 2020. It will be posted on the HLC NF website at that time. Additional detail regarding

the analysis of effects, requirements of the incidental take statement, and conservation recommendations in the biological opinion for each of these species will also be included.

The Plan includes desired conditions, standards and guidelines, objectives and provides broad management direction that meets our responsibilities under the ESA Section 7(a)(1). These plan components comply with the requirements of the ESA and the recovery plans for each federally listed species. For these reasons, I find this Plan in compliance with the requirements of the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

## Environmental Justice

Executive Order 12898 (Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations) environmental justice populations, minority and low-income populations, are present in the areas surrounding the Forest. The following three counties were identified as environmental justice counties in the Assessment: Glacier County (North area), Pondera County (North area) and Choteau County (Central area), each meeting the definition of an environmental justice county under the “minority population” and “low-income population” tests. In all three of these counties, the minority and low-income populations are Native American. All alternatives considered in the final EIS would contribute to social and economic sustainability by providing benefits to environmental justice communities, improving the quality of life, and providing opportunities for income and jobs. The Forest will continue to provide for traditional, cultural, and spiritual values that are of particular interest to Native American tribes. No populations in the plan area will experience significant adverse human health impacts or environmental effects due to management actions proposed under any of the alternatives considered. Therefore, I find that the Plan is in compliance with this executive order.

## Federal Land Policy and Management Act

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act allows for the granting of easements across NFS lands. The Plan is strategic and programmatic in nature. It provides guidance and direction to future site-specific projects and activities, but does not create, authorize, or execute any site-specific activity, although it does provide for the consideration of granting easements and rights-of-way. Therefore, I find that the Plan is consistent with this Act.

## Invasive Species

Executive Order 13751, which amends Executive Order 13112, directs Federal agencies to prevent the introduction of invasive species; to detect and respond rapidly to and control populations of such species in a cost-effective and environmentally sound manner, to monitor invasive species populations accurately and reliably; to provide for restoration of native species and habitat conditions in ecosystems that have been invaded; to conduct research on invasive species and develop technologies to prevent introduction; to provide for environmentally sound control of invasive species; and to promote public education on invasive species and the means to address them. All of these actions are subject to the availability of appropriations to support this work. Forest Service Manual 2900, Invasive Species Management, sets forth Forest Service policy, responsibilities, and direction for the prevention, detection, control, and restoration of effects from aquatic and terrestrial invasive species (including vertebrates, invertebrates, plants, and pathogens).



The Plan is strategic and programmatic in nature, providing program-level guidance and direction for future site-specific projects and activities. It does not create, authorize, or execute any ground-disturbing activity, although it does provide for the consideration of certain types of activities that may have the potential to affect the dispersal of invasive species. The Plan includes Forestwide desired conditions, objectives, and management approaches that stress the use of best management practices to limit the introduction of new species and limit the spread of existing populations due to management activities. Additionally, other direction provides protection of watershed, soil, riparian, and aquatic conditions in ways that will reduce management-related disturbances that might introduce new populations or increase existing ones. Plan monitoring also includes indicators associated with invasive species, and the effectiveness of treatments. Therefore, I find that the Plan is compliant with this Executive Order.

## Migratory Bird Treaty Act

Executive Order 13186, Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds, was issued in furtherance of the purposes of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Acts, the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the NEPA. This order requires including the effects of Federal actions on migratory birds as a part of the environmental analysis process. On December 8, 2008, the Forest Service signed a memorandum of understanding with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to complement the Executive order (USDI-USFWS, 2008), and the Forest Service agreed to incorporate migratory bird habitat and population objectives and recommendations into the agency planning process, in cooperation with other governments, State and Federal agencies, and non-Federal partners, and strive to protect, restore, enhance, and manage the habitat of migratory birds, and prevent the further loss or degradation of remaining habitats on NFS lands. The Council for the Conservation of Migratory Birds was established in 2009 by the Secretary of the Interior to oversee Executive Order 13186. More than 20 Federal agencies, including the Forest Service, currently participate in and have representation on the Council for the Conservation of Migratory Birds.

The Plan includes forestwide direction related to key stressors for migratory birds and their habitats, including direction to maintain or improve forest resilience, composition, and structure. Future site-specific activities or projects with the potential to impact migratory bird habitat will be analyzed with site-specific analysis under the NEPA process and will comply with Plan direction. Therefore, I find that the Plan is compliant with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and Executive Order 13186.

## Multiple-Use Sustained Yield Act

The Forest Service manages NFS lands to sustain the multiple use of its renewable resources in perpetuity while maintaining the long-term health and productivity of the land. Resources are managed through a combination of approaches and concepts for the benefit of human communities and natural resources. As demonstrated in the final EIS and as required by the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960 (16 U.S.C. 528-531), the Plan guides sustainable and integrated management of Forest resources in the context of the broader landscape, giving due consideration to the relative values of the various resources in particular areas. Therefore, I find that the Plan is compliant with the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act.

## National Environmental Policy Act

The NEPA requires that Federal agencies prepare detailed statements on proposed actions that may significantly affect the quality of the human environment. The Act's requirement is designed to serve two major functions:

- to provide decision makers with a detailed accounting of the likely environmental effects of proposed actions prior to adoption
- to inform the public of, and allow comment on, such efforts

The Forest Service has developed, gathered, and reviewed an extensive amount of information regarding the potential effects of each of the alternatives considered in the final EIS. This information expands and refines the data, analyses, and public input described in the NEPA documents associated with the draft Plan and draft EIS. My decision also considers the large amount of public input, including public meetings, comments on public-facing website, and comments received during the 120-day comment period for the draft EIS.

All substantive comments, written and oral, made in regard to the draft EIS have been summarized and responded to in appendix G of the final EIS. I find that the environmental analysis and public involvement process the final EIS is based on complies with each of the major elements of the requirements set forth by the Council on Environmental Quality regulations for implementing the NEPA (40 CFR 1500-1508). My conclusion is supported by the following findings.

- The final EIS considered a range of reasonable alternatives based on the issues identified during scoping. The six alternatives considered in detail in the final EIS cover a range of possible management allocations based on revision topics identified through public involvement and scoping.
- The final EIS reflects consideration of cumulative effects of the alternatives by evaluating past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions in the plan area, including Federal, State, tribal, and private lands. The environmental effects analysis estimates the potential effects of timber activities and timber-associated activities. The analysis of effects to wildlife was based on the assumption that these activities take place with management constraints to ensure habitat availability at certain thresholds. Moreover, although non-Federal lands are outside the scope of this decision, effects from their management have been thoroughly considered and coordinated, to the extent practicable, in the final EIS.
- The final EIS uses scientific integrity to support the conclusions made. The decision here does not authorize timber sales or any other specific activity on the Forest. Site-specific decisions will be made on projects in compliance with the NEPA, the Endangered Species Act, and other environmental laws following applicable public involvement and appeal procedures.

## National Forest Management Act

The NFMA requires the development, maintenance, amendment, and revision of land management plans for each unit of the NFS. These land management plans help create a dynamic management system, so an interdisciplinary approach to achieve integrated

consideration of physical, biological, economic, and other sciences will be applied to all future actions on the unit. Under the Act, the Forest Service is to ensure coordination of the multiple uses and sustained yield of products and services of the NFS.

The NFMA requires the Secretary of Agriculture to promulgate regulations for developing and maintaining land management plans. On April 9, 2012, the Department of Agriculture issued a Final Planning Rule for NFS land management planning (36 CFR Part 219; refer to the Federal Register at 77 FR 68, pp. 21162-21276).

As discussed in detail in the requirements of the planning rule section of this document, my review of the planning process, the final EIS, and the information provided in the draft ROD, the Plan and its preparation meet requirements for revising plans under the provisions of the 2012 Planning Rule and is compliant with the NFMA.

## National Historic Preservation Act

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires each Federal agency to take into account the effects of its actions on historic properties, prior to approving expenditure of Federal funds on an undertaking or prior to issuing any license; while Section 110 of the Act outlines the Federal agency responsibility to establish and maintain a preservation program for the identification, evaluation, and nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, and protection of historic properties.

The Plan is a result of a programmatic level planning effort that will not directly authorize any ground disturbing activities or projects. The Plan includes desired conditions, goals, objectives, standards, guidelines, management strategies, and monitoring requirements for managing and protecting cultural resources listed or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Site-specific projects that are undertaken as a result of the direction in the Plan will comply with laws and regulations that ensure protection of heritage resources. Significant cultural resources will be identified, protected, and monitored in compliance with the Act. Any consultation that will occur for proposed activities will be coordinated with the Montana State Historic Preservation Office. Therefore, I find that the Plan is in compliance with this act.

## Roadless Area Conservation Rule

Management direction for IRAs is compliant with the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (36 CFR 294 Subpart B, published at 66 FR 3244-3273). The 2001 Roadless Conservation Rule includes a prohibition on road construction and road reconstruction in IRAs and prohibitions on timber cutting, sale, or removal except in certain circumstances. The Plan is a programmatic-level planning effort and does not directly authorize any road construction, reconstruction, or timber removal; and the plan includes specific components for IRAs that support the current regulation. Therefore, I find that the Plan is compliant with the Roadless Area Conservation Rule.

## Travel Management Regulations – 36 CFR Part 212, Subparts A, B, and C

Subpart A of these regulations establishes requirements for administration of the Forest transportation system, including roads, trails, and airfields, and contains provisions for acquisition of rights-of-way. Subpart A also requires identification of the minimum road system needed for safe and efficient travel and for administration, utilization, and protection of NFS lands and use of a science-based roads analysis at the appropriate scale in determining the minimum road system. This portion of the rule is intended to help ensure that additions to the NFS network of roads are those deemed essential for resource management and use; that construction, reconstruction, and maintenance of roads minimize adverse environmental impacts; and, finally, that unneeded roads are decommissioned and restoration of ecological processes are initiated (66 Federal Register 3206, Jan. 12, 2001).

The Forest completed a forestwide road analysis in 2004 as required by subpart A and has continued project level travel analysis with subsequent travel management planning. The report provides an assessment of the road infrastructure and a set of findings and opportunities for change to the Forest's transportation system. Those findings are being used under the current plan and will continue to be used under this Plan to prioritize ongoing road maintenance and inform project development as the Forest works to effectively manage an efficient transportation system.

Together with the assessment, the travel analysis report was used to inform the forest plan components such as the objectives for miles of roads and trails to be maintained, reconstructed, and decommissioned or placed into stored service in the forest plan (2020 Forest Plan, Infrastructure section). Objectives such as these provide measurable actions the Forest may take over the life of the Plan per the findings in the travel analysis report consistent with subpart A of the Travel Management Rule.

Subpart B and C describe the requirements for designating roads, trails, and areas for motor vehicle use; and for identifying designated roads, trails, and areas on a motor vehicle use map and an over-the-snow vehicle use map. It is important to note that Subpart B and C of the Travel Management Rule and the associated Executive Order 11644, Use of Off-Road Vehicles on the Public Lands, as amended by Executive Order 11989, apply to site-specific designations of motor vehicle use. As stated in the 2012 Planning Rule, the Plan does not authorize projects or activities or commit the Forest Service to take action (36 CFR 219.2(b)(2)), nor does it either designate or prohibit public uses such as motor vehicle use.

Prior to this revision, the Forest designated the specific roads, areas, and trails for the use of motor vehicles that are displayed on the motor vehicle use and over-the-snow vehicle use maps as required by 36 CFR 212 subparts B and C. Although the Plan identifies landscape level suitability for motor vehicle use (including over-the-snow), this programmatic plan decision does not designate any additional roads, trails, or areas for motor vehicle use, or prohibit existing motor vehicles uses, therefore those maps remain unchanged. Plan suitability alone, does not mandate off-road vehicle use or indicate an area is subject to unmanaged off-road vehicle use. Public use must continue to adhere to the current motor vehicle and over-the-snow vehicle use maps until site-specific planning is completed.

I recognize that site-specific changes in current motor vehicle use designations will occur over the life of this Plan. I expect the landscape level suitability plan components, together with the suite of desired conditions, standards, and guidelines that provide for ecological integrity and sustainable recreation will provide the guidance that will be used when considering the effects on (with the objective of minimizing) forest resources and recreation conflicts as described at 36 CFR 212.55. These include the plan components associated with the recreation opportunity settings, infrastructure, and those that address management risks and stressors to wildlife habitat, connectivity, soil productivity, and aquatic resources.

Therefore, I find this decision complies with the Travel Management Rule to the extent it applies at the land management planning level – that is the Plan will appropriately guide future site-specific decision making per the requirements of subparts A, B, and C.

## Wetlands and Floodplains

Executive orders 11990 (Protection of Wetlands) and 11988 (Floodplain Management) require Federal agencies to avoid, to the extent possible, short- and long-term effects resulting from the modification or destruction of wetlands and the occupancy and modification of floodplains. Forestwide standards and guidelines are provided for soil, water, wetlands, and riparian areas to minimize effects to wetlands and floodplains. Therefore, I find that the Plan is compliant with these executive orders.

## Wild and Scenic Rivers Act

This act establishes a National Wild and Scenic Rivers System with three classifications of rivers: wild, scenic, and recreational. The purpose of the act is to protect the designated rivers “for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations” and to preserve the rivers’ free-flowing condition, water quality, and outstandingly remarkable values. In addition, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act requires an evaluation of eligible wild, scenic, or recreational rivers in land management planning. This was completed for the Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest, and the 45 eligible (361 miles) rivers that were identified through the eligible wild and scenic river study process were analyzed in the final EIS. Management direction in the Plan provides protection of free-flowing conditions and the outstandingly remarkable values identified for the eligible segments of rivers on the Forest until such time that a suitability study is completed and/or Congress designates them. Therefore, I find that the Plan is compliant with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

## Wilderness Act

The Wilderness Act of 1964 established a National Wilderness Preservation System to be administered in such a manner as to leave these areas unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness. It provides the statutory definition of wilderness, how areas are assessed for addition to the wilderness preservation system, and management requirements for congressionally designated areas.

Evaluation of existing wilderness and recommended wilderness area were included in the final EIS for the Plan. The Plan provides direction for designated wilderness through goals, desired conditions, standards, guidelines, and suitability that preserves the wilderness character of designated wilderness. Therefore, I find that the Plan is compliant with this act.

## Plan Implementation

### Existing Authorizations

Resource plans (such as travel management plans) developed by the Forest that apply to the resources or land areas within the planning area must be consistent with the plan components. Resource plans developed prior to this plan decision will be evaluated for consistency with the Plan and updated if necessary.

Authorizations for occupancy and use made before this plan approval may proceed unchanged until time of reauthorization. At time of reauthorization, all permits, contracts, and other authorizing instruments must be made consistent with the forest plan, subject to existing valid rights, as provided at §219.15(d).

Forest plan components applicable to livestock grazing (including the end of season stubble height guideline) will be incorporated through permit modification(s), reissuance of existing term permits, issuance of new term grazing permits, and/or as allotment management plan revisions and sufficiency reviews occur. Monitoring data will be used to prioritize both allotments and stream reaches. It is expected that all allotments will be consistent with the 2020 Forest Plan direction within the first decade.

### Project and Activity Consistency

As required by NFMA and the Planning Rule, subject to valid existing rights, all projects and activities authorized by the Forest Service after approval of this plan must be consistent with applicable plan components (16 U.S.C. 1604(i)) as described at 36 CFR 219.15. Previously approved and ongoing projects and activities are not required to meet the direction of the Plan and will remain consistent with the direction in the 1986 plans, as amended (USDA, 1986).

All project or activity approval documents, made after the effective date of the Plan, will describe how the project or activity is consistent with the applicable plan components per section 1.1.1 of the Plan. When a proposed project or activity is not consistent with the applicable plan components, the responsible official shall take one of the following steps, subject to valid existing rights:

1. Modify the proposed project or activity to make it consistent with the applicable plan components;
2. Reject the proposal or terminate the project or activity;
3. Amend the Plan so that the project or activity will be consistent with the Plan as amended;
4. Amend the Plan contemporaneously with the approval of the project or activity so that the project or activity will be consistent with the Plan as amended. This amendment may be limited to apply only to the project or activity.

### Maintaining the Plan

A land management plan is an integral part of an adaptive management cycle, including assessment, plan revision or amendment, and monitoring. This adaptive management cycle enables the Forest to identify and respond to changing conditions, changing public desires,

and new information (e.g., obtained through research and scientific findings). The Plan monitoring program is an integral part of this adaptive management cycle (see page 25 of this draft ROD and appendix B of the Plan for additional information about the monitoring plan).

A land management plan may be amended at any time based on a preliminary identification of the need to change the plan. The preliminary identification of the need to change the plan may be based on a new assessment, land management plan monitoring, or other documentation of new information, changed conditions, or changed circumstances. The amendment and administrative change process is described at 36 CFR 219.17(b)(2) of the 2012 Planning Rule.

## Implementation Date

This revised plan becomes effective 30 calendar days after publication of the notice of its approval in the Federal Register (36 CFR 219.17(a)). This approval will not occur until the pre-decisional objection process is complete and a final ROD is issued.

## Administrative Review

The decision to approve the Plan for the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest is subject to the objection process identified in 36 CFR Part 219 Subpart B (219.50 to 219.62). The responsible official who will approve the final ROD for the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest revised plan is William Avey, Forest Supervisor for the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest, 2880 Skyway Drive, Helena, MT (406) 495-3712. The regional forester is the reviewing officer for the revised forest plan since the forest supervisor is the responsible official (36 CFR 219.56(e)(2)). Objections, including attachments, must be filed within 60 days of the publication date of the legal notice published in the newspapers of record: The Helena Independent Record. Objections, including attachments, received after the 60-day objection period will not be considered. The publication date in the newspapers of record is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an objection. Those wishing to object should not rely upon dates or time frame information provided by any other source. It is the responsibility of the objector to ensure that the reviewing officer receives the objection in a timely manner. The regulations prohibit extending the length of the objection filing period.

An objection must include the following (36 CFR 219.54(c)): (1) The objector's name and address along with a telephone number or email address if available—in cases where no identifiable name is attached to an objection, the Forest Service will attempt to verify the identity of the objector to confirm objection eligibility; (2) A signature or other verification of authorship upon request (a scanned signature for electronic mail may be filed with the objection); (3) Identification of the lead objector when multiple names are listed on an objection. The Forest Service will communicate to all parties to an objection through the lead objector. Verification of the identity of the lead objector must also be provided if requested; (4) The name of the Helena – Lewis and Clark plan or the Helena – Lewis and Clark species of conservation concern being objected to and the name and title of the responsible official; (5) A statement of the issues and/or parts of the plan revision to which the objection applies; (6) A concise statement explaining the objection and suggesting how the proposed plan decision may be improved. If the objector believes that the plan revision is inconsistent with law, regulation, or policy, an explanation should be included; (7) A

statement that demonstrates the link between the objector's prior substantive formal comments and the content of the objection, unless the objection concerns an issue that arose after the opportunities for formal comment; and (8) All documents referenced in the objection (a bibliography is not sufficient), except that the following need not be provided: a. All or any part of a Federal law or regulation, b. Forest Service Directive System documents and land management plans or other published Forest Service documents, c. Documents referenced by the Forest Service in the planning documentation related to the proposal subject to objection, and d. Formal comments previously provided to the Forest Service by the objector during the plan revision comment period.

This is also an opportunity to object to the Regional Forester's list of species of conservation concern for the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest. The Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest has provided the regional forester with public comments received on species of conservation concern. The regional forester considered comments received and reviewed the documentation, rationale, and best available scientific information. If necessary, changes were made to the list. The identification of the species of conservation concern list is subject to a separate objection process. The Chief of the Forest Service is the reviewing officer for species of conservation concern identification since the regional forester is the responsible official (36 CFR 219.56(e)(2)). Information about species of conservation concern is available at <http://bit.ly/NorthernRegion-SCC>.

Electronic objections must be submitted to the Objection Reviewing Officer via the CARA objection webform at <https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public/CommentInput?project=44589>. Electronic submissions must be submitted in a format (e.g. Word, PDF, Rich Text) that is readable with optical character recognition software and be searchable.

Objections may be submitted by regular mail, private carrier, or hand delivery: Objection Reviewing Officer, USDA Forest Service, Northern Region, 26 Fort Missoula Road, Missoula, MT 59804. Office hours are Monday through Friday, 8:00am to 4:30pm, excluding Federal holidays. Please be explicit as to whether the objection is for the Helena-Lewis and Clark Plan or the Helena-Lewis and Clark species of conservation concern.

Objections can be faxed to the Objection Reviewing Officer at (406) 329-3411. The fax cover sheet must include a subject line with "Helena-Lewis and Clark Forest Plan Objection" or "Helena-Lewis and Clark Species of Conservation Concern" and should specify the number of pages being submitted.



## Contact Person

For additional information concerning this draft decision or the objection process, please contact Deborah Entwistle, Forest Plan Revision Team Leader at Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest- Forest Supervisor’s Office, 2880 Skyway Drive, Helena, MT or by phone at (406) 495-3774.

## Signature and Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
William Avey

\_\_\_\_\_  
DATE

Forest Supervisor  
Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest