

Chapter 1. Purpose and Need for Action

1.1 Introduction

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 (Public Law 94-588) requires the preparation of an integrated land management plan by an interdisciplinary team for each unit of the National Forest System (NFS). In May of 2012, the FS began using new planning regulations (2012 Planning Rule) to guide collaborative and science-based revision of land management plans that promote the ecological integrity of national forests (NFs) while contributing to social and economic sustainability. Public involvement must be provided in preparing and revising forest plans. Forest plans must provide for multiple use and sustained yield of products and services, and include coordination of outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife and fish, and wilderness. The forest plan does not authorize site-specific projects or activities; rather, it establishes broad direction, similar to zoning in a community.

The Helena and the Lewis and Clark NFs were consolidated on December 11, 2015. The official name of the combined forest is the Helena – Lewis and Clark NF. For the purposes of this document, it will be referred to as the HLC NF. Prior to the official combination, each forest had its own land and resource management plan. Part of implementing the consolidation included a combined forest plan revision effort, which includes the preparation of this final environmental impact statement (FEIS).

The forest plan revision process began with preparation of an assessment that summarized the current status and management of various resources on the HLC NF. The Assessment of the HLC NF was published in March 2015. This assessment evaluated existing information about relevant ecological, economic, and social conditions, trends, and sustainability, and their relationship to the land management plan within the context of the broader landscape. This information was used to identify any need for change in forest resources or in the management of those resources, and as a basis for preparing the Draft Forest Plan. The Draft Forest Plan was released as a proposed action for public review and comment (scoping) in the winter of 2016. The comments that were received were used to make changes to the Draft Forest Plan and to develop alternatives to the proposed action that are analyzed in this FEIS.

This FEIS is a programmatic document. It discloses the environmental consequences of implementing the 2020 Land Management Plan (hereinafter referred to as the “2020 Forest Plan”) on a large scale, at the planning level. This is in contrast to analyses conducted for site-specific projects. The FEIS presents a programmatic, forest level analysis but does not predict what would happen each time the standards and guidelines are implemented at the project level. Environmental consequences for individual, site-specific projects on the Forest are not described. The environmental effects of individual projects will depend on the implementation of each project.

1.2 Proposed action

The Forest Service (FS) proposes to revise the 1986 land and resource management plans (hereinafter referred to as the “1986 Forest Plans”) in compliance with the NFS land management planning rule ([U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, 2019](#)) (36 CFR § 219). The area covered under this revision is shown in Figure 1.

To develop a proposed action that makes changes to a forest plan, the management direction in the current plan and its amendments was reviewed. Effective management direction from the current plan may be retained, or it may be modified or augmented by incorporating relevant new scientific information or direction from other regulatory documents. The 2012 Planning Rule requirements also mandate that new management direction be developed to address sustainability. Consideration of ecologic, economic, and social sustainability is required by the 2012 Planning Rule.

On December 1, 2016, the HLC NF released the proposed action with a notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) in the Federal Register. The notice of intent initiated the scoping process, which guided the development of the EIS. The Forest received over 900 public comments on the proposed action during the 120-day comment period that ended March 31, 2017. The HLC NF plan revision team reviewed all the comments, and the responsible official identified the significant issues that were used to frame alternatives for the Draft Forest Plan. The planning team used these issues and public comments to refine the proposed action and build alternatives.

Documentation that describes development of the 2020 Forest Plan, including analyses of project area resources, information about public involvement to date, and other documents used in developing alternatives and as background for the resource specialists' analysis may be found in the planning record located at the HLC NF Supervisor's Office.

1.3 Document organization

The document is organized as follows:

Volume 1 includes the summary, chapter 1 (purpose and need, proposed action, and decision framework), chapter 2 (alternatives, public involvement, and issues), parts of chapter 3 (affected environment and environmental consequences for aquatic ecosystems and soils; air quality; fire and fuels; terrestrial vegetation; old growth; snags, and downed wood; plant species at risk; invasive plants; terrestrial wildlife diversity; terrestrial wildlife species at risk; and elk), an index for the volume, and references for this volume.

Volume 2 includes the remainder of chapter 3 (affected environment and environmental consequences for recreation settings; recreation opportunities; recreation special uses; recreation access; scenery; administratively designated areas, congressionally designated areas, cultural, historical, and tribal resources; lands; infrastructure; social and economics; livestock grazing; timber and other forest products; geology, minerals, and energy; and carbon and climate), an index for this volume, references for this volume, the glossary, and a list of preparers.

Volume 3 includes appendix A Maps, appendix B Methodologies, appendix C Aquatic Ecosystems BASI, appendix D Supplemental Species Information, and appendix E Recommended Wilderness Analysis Process.

Volume 4 includes appendix F Wild and Scenic Rivers Eligibility Study Process; appendix G Response to Comments; appendix H Terrestrial Vegetation, Wildlife, and Timber Methodologies and Results; appendix I Natural Range of Variation Analysis and Results; appendix J Climate and Carbon Supplemental Information; and appendix K Potential Recreation Direct Effects.

1.4 The planning area

The planning area is the HLC NF, which is in central Montana in the Rocky Mountains and includes approximately 2,846,606 acres of public NFS land within its administrative boundaries. In addition, the planning area includes approximately 30,973 acres of NFS land on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge NF that is guided by the Helena NF plan and about 2,308 acres of NFS lands that exist as isolated parcels outside of the administrative boundaries. Therefore, the NFS lands considered in this planning effort total 2,879,887 acres. Inholdings of other ownerships occur within the HLC NF's administrative boundaries. These lands are not included in the acreages listed above and are not subject to FS management. The Forest includes portions of 17 counties. The planning area encompasses six ranger districts: Lincoln, Helena, Townsend, Judith/Musselshell, Rocky Mountain, and Belt Creek/White Sulphur Springs. The Forest Supervisor's offices are in Helena and Great Falls, Montana. See Figure 1.

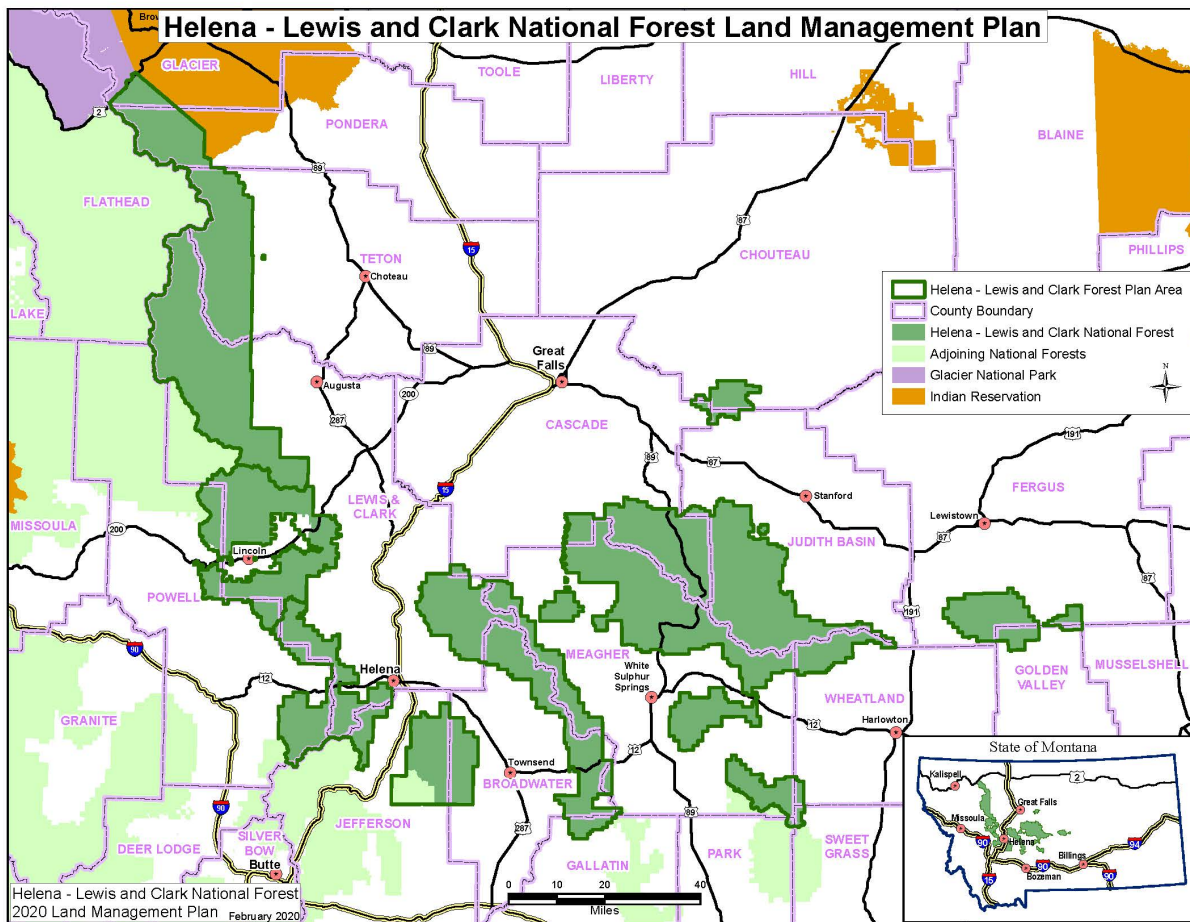


Figure 1. Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest and vicinity

1.4.1 Geographic areas

The HLC NF straddles the Continental Divide and includes several island mountain ranges. Because of its diversity and extent, and because the island mountain ranges each include unique ecological and social context, the planning area is divided into ten geographic areas (GAs). GAs provide a means for describing conditions and trends at a more local scale if appropriate. The GAs identified in the 2020 Forest Plan correspond to the island mountain ranges and/or district or watershed boundaries. Table 1 displays the acres of the HLC NF by GA, and Figure 2 displays the GAs.

Table 1. Acres within the ten GAs on the HLC NF, within the administrative boundary

GA	Total Acres (all ownerships)	NFS acres within the GA	% of GA in NFS lands
Big Belts	452,292	312,983	69
Castles	79,862	69,610	87
Crazies	70,036	57,618	82
Divide	232,890	202,577	87
Elkhorns	175,259	160,599	92
Highwoods	44,495	42,315	95
Little Belts	900,961	802,711	89

GA	Total Acres (all ownerships)	NFS acres within the GA	% of GA in NFS lands
Rocky Mountain Range	782,986	777,963	99
Snowies	121,897	117,989	98
Upper Blackfoot	348,185	333,215	96

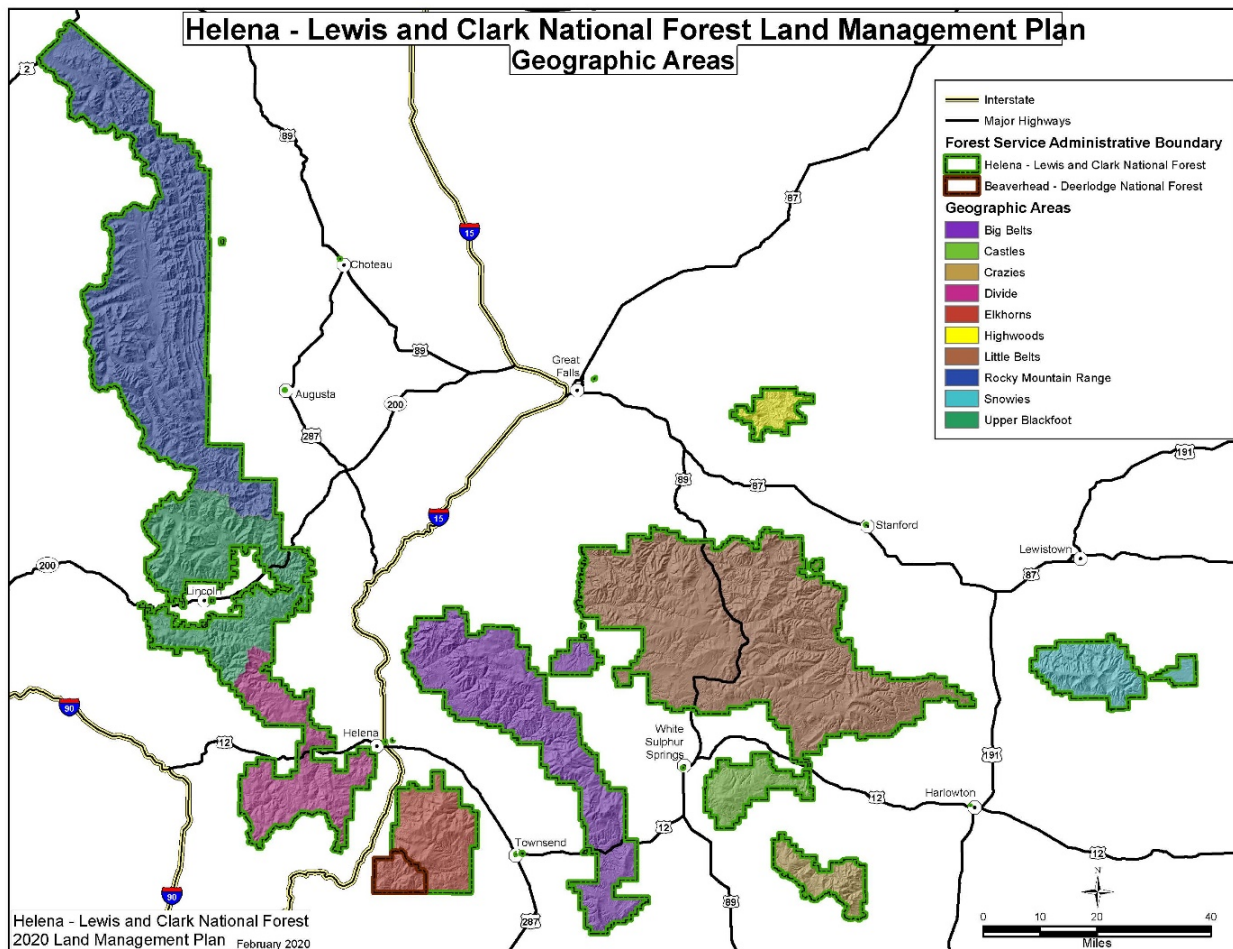


Figure 2. GAs of the HLC NF

1.5 Purpose and need for action

The purpose of the 2020 Forest Plan is to provide an integrated set of plan directions for social, economic, and ecological sustainability, and multiple uses of the HLC NF lands and resources. The requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule, findings from the assessment, changes in conditions and demands since the 1986 Forest Plans, and public concerns highlighted several areas where changes are needed to the current plan. After a series of public meetings, as well as discussions with resource specialists, the Preliminary Need to Change Report identified a variety of subjects for which change was needed. Those 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.

More specifically there is a need to revise the existing forest plans to:

- Create one forest plan to manage the HLC NF that is consistent across two formerly separate NFs.
- Address changes that have occurred in the conditions and demands since the 1986 Forest Plans including: changes in forested conditions due to bark beetles and drought-related tree mortality, development in the wildland urban interface, changes in recreation demands, and increasing public use of the Forest.
- Be consistent with the 2012 Planning Rule and associated directives by using adaptive management, public input, and best available scientific information (BASI). Key differences from the former planning rule that are in the new rule and directives include, but are not limited to requirements to:
 - a. Identify plant and animal species of conservation concern (SCC) and one or more focal species.
 - b. Use a coarse filter approach to provide for ecological sustainability and species diversity that includes the development of desired conditions that are based on the natural range of variation (NRV).
 - c. Identify priority watersheds to focus efforts on the integrated restoration of watershed conditions.
 - d. Provide contributions to social and economic sustainability by managing for multiple uses and ecosystem services.
 - e. Estimate potential timber outputs using concepts described in the 2012 Planning Rule and associated directives.
 - f. Provide for a range of recreation opportunities using the recreation opportunity spectrum (ROS) to display the allocations.
 - g. Use the scenery management system to identify scenic integrity objectives (SIOs).
 - h. Conduct a wilderness inventory and evaluation using procedures described in the 2012 Planning Rule and associated directives.
 - i. Study and identify eligible wild and scenic rivers (WSRs) using procedures described in the 2012 Planning Rule and associated directives.
 - j. Develop a monitoring plan.
- Address changes in economic, social, and ecological conditions, new policies and priorities, and new information from monitoring and research. Such considerations include but are not limited to:
 - a. Emerging information about climate change and carbon stocks.
 - b. New science and better understanding regarding the natural role of fire on the landscape as well as the need to manage fuels and protect values at risk.
 - c. The listing of whitebark pine as a candidate species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).
 - d. Recent and updated multi-region management direction for Canada lynx
 - e. New management direction for grizzly bears in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem
 - f. Increased recreational use of the forest, and the need for flexible management strategies to address emerging technologies and potential future uses.
 - g. An increased focus on
 - adaptive management for livestock grazing,
 - invasive species management, and
 - watershed condition and restoration

1.6 Decision framework

The 2012 Planning Rule specifies the following eight primary decisions that are to be made in forest plans:

- Forestwide components to provide for integrated social, economic, and ecological sustainability, and ecosystem integrity and diversity, while providing for ecosystem services and multiple uses.

Components must be within FS authority and consistent with the inherent capability of the Forest [36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 219.7 and §§219.8–219.10].

- Identification of GAs and/or management area specific components (36 CFR 219.7(d)).
- Identification of suitability of areas for the appropriate integration of resource management and uses, including lands suited and not suited for timber production (36 CFR 219.7(c)(2)(vii) and 219.11).
- Identification of the maximum quantity of timber that may be removed from the Forest (36 CFR 219.7(c)(2)(ix) and 219.11 (d)(6)).
- Identification of watersheds that are a priority for maintenance or restoration (36 CFR 219.7(f)(i)).
- Recommendations to Congress (if any) of lands suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System and/or rivers eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System (36 CFR 219.7(c)(2)(v) and (vi)).
- Identification or recommendation (if any) of other designated areas (36 CFR 219.7(c)(2)(vii)).
- Plan monitoring program (36 CFR 219.7 (c)(2)(x) and 219.12).

The responsible official for the 2020 Forest Plan is the forest supervisor. After reviewing the results of the analysis evaluated in the FEIS, the responsible official will issue a draft record of decision (ROD), in accordance with agency decision making procedures (40 CFR § 1505.2) that will:

- disclose the decision (identifying the selected alternative) and reasons for the decision,
- discuss how public comments and issues were considered in the decision, and
- discuss how all alternatives were considered in reaching the decision, specifying which one is the environmentally preferable alternative (defined in 36 CFR § 220.3).

The 2020 Forest Plan identifies GAs and includes recommendations for areas that can only be designated by statute, such as wilderness.

Most effects discussed in this document are indirect and cumulative effects. However, there are some direct effects associated with recreation uses in recommended wilderness and in the Elkhorns GA under some alternatives. The analysis of these direct effects would support a site-specific decision concurrent with the forest plan decision.

The 2020 Forest Plan provides a set of integrated plan direction for managing the Forest for the next 10 to 15 years. However, even after approval of the plan, project level environmental analysis will still need to be completed for specific proposals to implement the direction in the forest plan.

Forest plans do not make budget decisions. Should Congress emphasize specific programs by appropriation, a redistribution of priorities would follow, regardless of the alternative implemented.

The 2020 Forest Plan and associated decision would establish the suitability for various types of recreation access across the Forest. The programmatic effects of these suitability determinations are disclosed throughout the EIS, to support the decision on the 2020 Forest Plan. The decision for the 2020 Forest Plan does not include changes to existing travel plans nor result in an issuance of closure orders based on the suitability for various uses. Appendix K provides an analysis of the potential direct effects of the changes to access that may occur as a result of the suitability plan components, by alternative. The direct effects described in appendix K would not occur as a result of the 2020 Forest Plan and associated ROD; rather, they may occur as a result of subsequent decisions and/or closure orders that are made to meet the suitability requirements in the 2020 Forest Plan.