



United States Department of Agriculture

Summary of the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the 2020 Land Management Plan

Helena - Lewis and Clark National Forest



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Final Environmental Impact Statement for the 2020 Land Management Plan for the Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest

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Abstract: This is a summary document of the final environmental impact statement (FEIS). The FEIS contains the analysis of six alternatives developed for the programmatic management of approximately 2,846,606 acres administered by the Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest. It documents the analysis of the preferred alternative, four action alternatives, and one no-action alternative. The Forest Service has identified alternative F as the preferred alternative.

The FEIS incorporates the habitat management direction for the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) grizzly bear population, as analyzed by the Flathead National Forest. For more information, please see volume 3 of the Flathead National Forest Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Forest Plan.

The final environmental impact statement, revised forest plan, draft record of decision, and other supporting documentation are available for review on the Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest's plan revision webpage: www.fs.usda.gov/goto/hlc/forestplanrevision and on the USDA Forest Service Northern Region's species of conservation concern webpage: <http://bit.ly/NorthernRegion-SCC>. The documents can also be reviewed by calling the Forest Supervisors Office at (406) 449-5201 and requesting a thumb drive that contains the documents or other arrangements may be made to review them.

The decision to approve the 2020 Land Management Plan for the Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest is subject to the objection process identified in 36 CFR 219 Subpart B (219.50 to 219.62). Only those individuals and entities who have submitted substantive comments related to the Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest plan revision during the opportunities provided for public comment will be eligible to file an objection (36 CFR 219.52(a)). Objection information can also be found on the forest plan revision webpage.

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Acronyms

BASI	best available scientific information
DEIS	draft environmental impact statement
FEIS	final environmental impact statement
FS	Forest Service
GA	geographic area
HLC NF	Helena - Lewis and Clark National Forest
IRA	inventoried roadless area
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NFMA	National Forest Management Act
NFS	National Forest System
NRLMD	Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction
PTSQ	projected timber sale quantity
PWSQ	projected wood sale quantity
ROD	record of decision
ROS	recreational opportunity spectrum
RWA	recommended wilderness area
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
WSR	wild and scenic river

Purpose and Need for Action

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. 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 final environmental impact statement (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.

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 Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest (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).
- Address changes in economic, social, and ecological conditions, new policies and priorities, and new information from monitoring and research.

Best Available Scientific Information

The 2012 Planning Rule requires the responsible official to use the best available scientific information to inform the development of the plan, including plan components and the monitoring program. The foundation from which the plan components were developed for the plan was provided by the *Assessment of the Helena and Lewis and Clark National Forests* and the best available scientific information and analyses therein. From this foundation, resource specialists used many resources that included peer-reviewed and technical literature; databases and data management systems; modeling tools and approaches; information obtained via 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 draft environmental impact statement, as well as any additional information that may have been used, and included, in the literature cited section of the final environmental impact statement or the planning record prior to the record of decision.

Forest Service planning

FS planning takes place at different organizational levels and geographic scales. Planning occurs at three levels—national strategic planning, NFS unit planning, and project or activity planning. The Chief of the FS is responsible for national planning, such as preparation of the FS strategic plan that established goals, objectives, performance measures, and strategies for management of the NFS. NFS unit planning results in the development, amendment, or revision of a land management plan, such as the HLC NF forest plan. The supervisor of the NF is the responsible official for the development and approval of a plan, plan amendment, or plan revision for lands under the responsibility of the supervisor. The forest supervisor or district ranger is the responsible official for project and activity planning (§ 219.2).

National strategic planning

The USDA FS Strategic Plan: Fiscal Year 2015-2020 contains four outcome-oriented goals for the FS, each with strategic objectives. The strategic plan can be accessed online (www.fs.fed.us/strategicplan). The first two goals and related objectives are directly related to the current planning effort:

1. Sustain our Nation's forests and grasslands
 - Foster resilient, adaptive ecosystems to mitigate climate change
 - Mitigate wildfire risk
 - Conserve open space
2. Deliver benefits to the public
 - Provide abundant clean water
 - Strengthen communities
 - Connect people to the outdoors

The FS continues to use the results of the 2010 Resources Planning Act Assessment, a report on the status and projected future trends of the nation's renewable resources on all forests and rangelands, as required by the 1974 Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act. The assessment includes analyses of forests, rangelands, wildlife and fish, biodiversity, water, outdoor recreation, wilderness, urban forests, and the effects of climate change on these resources. The assessment provides a snapshot of current U.S. forest and rangeland conditions (all ownerships), identifies drivers of change for natural resource conditions, and projects the effects of those drivers on resource conditions 50 years into the future. This assessment uses a set of future scenarios that influence the resource projections, allowing the exploration of a range of possible futures for U.S. renewable natural resources. Alternative future scenarios were used to analyze the effects of human and environmental influences on U.S. forests and rangelands, including population growth, domestic and global economic growth, land use change, and climate change.

In addition, the USDA strategic plan for fiscal year 2014-2018 has specific goals that also align with the 2012 Planning Rule, including (1) assist rural communities to create prosperity so they are self-sustaining, repopulating, and economically thriving; and (2) ensure our NFs and private working lands are conserved, restored, and made more resilient to climate change while enhancing our water resources. The USDA strategic plan can be accessed on the USDA's Web site (www.usda.gov).

National Forest System unit planning

The NFMA of 1976 (Pub. L. 94-588) amended the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974. The NFMA requires the preparation of an integrated land management plan by an interdisciplinary team for each unit of the NFS (national forests and grasslands). The public must be involved 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 prohibitions or activities; rather, it establishes broad direction, similar to zoning in a community.

The 2012 Planning Rule for land management planning for the NFS sets forth process and content requirements to guide the development, amendment, and revision of land management plans to maintain and restore NFS land and water ecosystems while providing for ecosystem services (the benefits people obtain from the NFS planning area) and multiple uses. The final planning directives, effective January 30, 2015, are the key set of agency guidance documents that direct implementation of the 2012 Planning Rule.

Project or activity planning

Project and activity consistency with the forest plan (§ 219.15) will be achieved through (1) application to existing authorizations and approved projects or activities, (2) application to projects or activities authorized after the plan decision, (3) resolving inconsistency, (4) determining consistency, and (5) consistency of resource plans within the planning area with the land management plan. Refer to pages 10-11 of the 2020 Forest Plan for additional information about project and activity consistency. Previously approved and ongoing projects and activities are not required to meet the direction of the 2020 Forest Plan and will remain consistent with the direction in the 1986 Forest Plans, as amended.

The forest plan direction will apply to all projects and or activities that have a decision made on or after the effective date of the final record of decision (ROD). Projects and activities authorized after approval of the forest plan will be consistent with applicable plan components in the forest plan. A project or activity approval document will describe how the project or activity is consistent with the applicable plan components.

Any resource plans developed by the Forest that apply to the resources or land areas within the planning area will be consistent with the plan components. Resource plans developed prior to the plan decision will be evaluated for consistency with the plan and amended if necessary.

When a proposed project or activity would not be consistent with the applicable plan components, the responsible official shall take one of the following steps, subject to valid existing rights (36 CFR § 219.15(c)):

- modify the proposed project or activity to make it consistent with the applicable plan components,
- reject the proposal or terminate the project or activity,
- amend the plan so that the project or activity will be consistent with the plan, as amended, or
- 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.

The forest supervisor or district ranger is the responsible official for project and activity planning. In order for prohibitions or activities that take place on the ground, project or activity decisions will need to be made following appropriate procedures (e.g., site-specific analysis in compliance with National Environmental Policy Act).

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.

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.

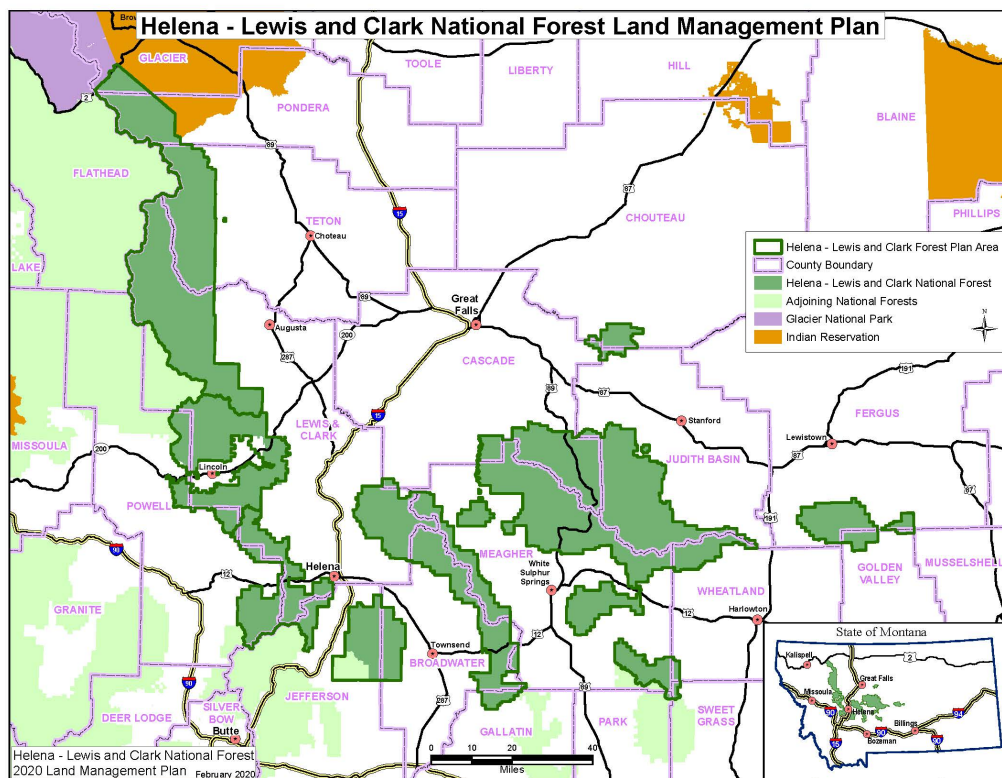


Figure 1. Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest and vicinity

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
Rocky Mountain Range	782,986	777,963	99
Snowies	121,897	117,989	98
Upper Blackfoot	348,185	333,215	96

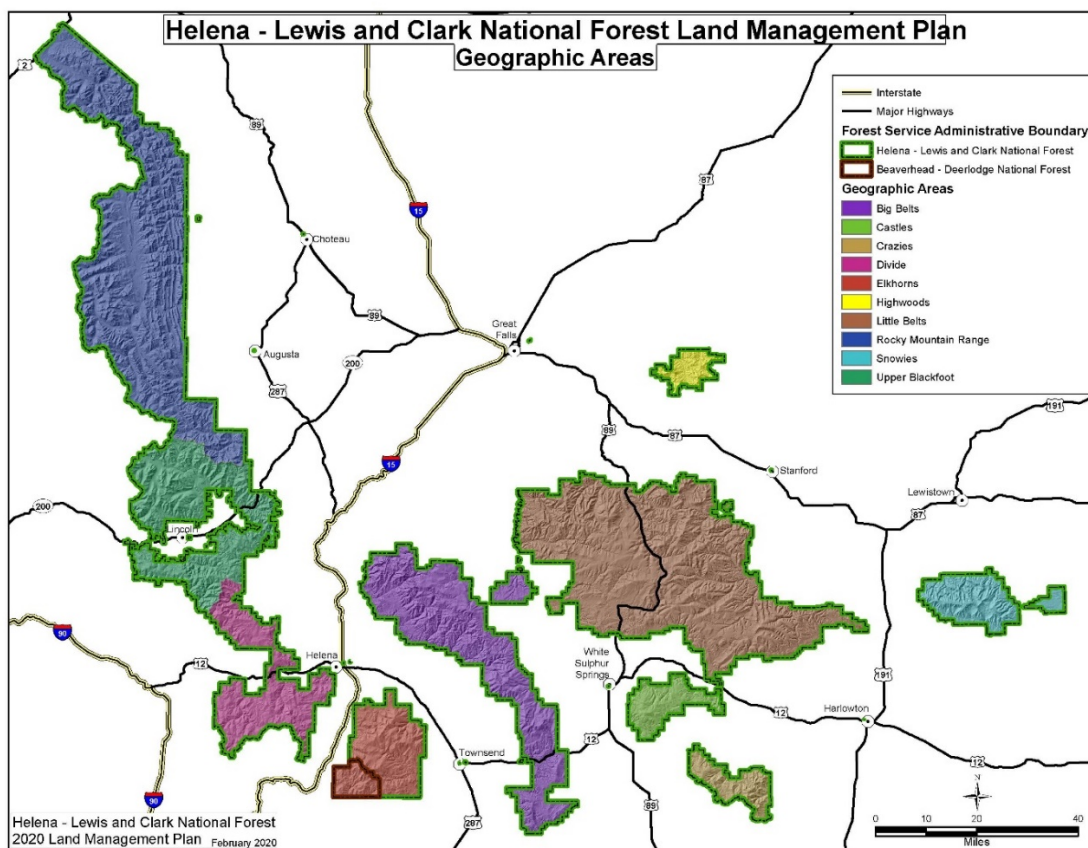


Figure 2. GAs of the HLC NF

Public involvement

The HLC NF began public participation activities prior to the development of the Assessment of the HLC NF. The Forest contracted with the Center for Natural Resources and Environmental Policy at the University of Montana to develop an extensive public engagement process. The Center facilitated numerous public and interagency meetings to bring together information for the HLC NF to consider in preparing the assessment, developing the proposed action, and developing alternatives to the proposed action. There were four rounds of public meetings. The first set of meetings introduced the concepts of forest plan revision to the public. The next meetings discussed the Need to Change, Desired Conditions, and Forest Resource Management (including recommended wilderness and timber suitability). Public input was taken throughout the process. The dialogue and recommendations from this public involvement process were used to help develop the draft proposed action.

In addition to postal mail and email, public meeting information was announced via the forest plan revision website (www.fs.usda.gov/goto/hlc/forestplanrevision). The website also included means for the public to comment (using electronic or printed comment forms, a mapping tool, subscribing to the website, and/or submitting comments via an electronic database) and posted meeting results and other information. Updates were posted and mailed periodically.

The notice of intent for the proposed action to prepare an EIS was published in the Federal Register on December 1, 2016. The notice of intent asked for public comment on the proposal for a 120-day period. The agency held nine public meetings to provide opportunities to better understand the proposed action so that meaningful public comments could be provided by the end of the scoping period. Using the 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, or in analysis of impacts of the proposed action. During the 120-day comment period, over 1100 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, wildlife (primarily related to grizzly bear, lynx, and elk habitat security), livestock grazing, motor vehicle access, weeds, and the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail.

Government agency involvement

The 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR § 219.4(b)) requires the review of the planning and land use policies of other Federal agencies, state and local governments, and Indian tribes. As part of that outreach effort, a number of discussions with representatives from those agencies were initiated, and ongoing dialogue continues. In addition, the Center for Natural Resources and Environmental Policy at the University of Montana organized and facilitated intergovernmental meetings. These meetings enabled the Forest to learn about upcoming plans and projects from other agencies, as well as being able to evaluate whether those planning documents were or were not consistent with the proposed HLC NF plan. These meetings provided agencies an opportunity to exchange updates and information.

The Forest reviewed other agency planning documents that are within or in close proximity to the HLC NF for consistency. Management of public lands adjacent to the HLC NF was considered in the formulation of alternatives and in the analysis of cumulative effects of those alternatives. Land management plans were reviewed for consistency with the forest plan. The draft forest plan is consistent with the majority of these plans. Discrepancies, if any, are described in the cumulative effects sections for specific resources. For example, county wildfire protections plans emphasize protection of values at risk; while the draft plan integrates these values with other resource objectives. While certain components may not be fully consistent, the HLC NF will continue to work with these entities to address the impacts and benefits from forest management.

Changes between draft and final

Changes between the draft and final EIS were incorporated based on public and internal comments. All the changes are within the range of effects disclosed in the draft EIS (DEIS). For specific changes, please see each resource section. Overarching changes include the following:

- Alternative F includes a blend of features from alternatives presented in the DEIS. Analysis for alternative F was added to all sections of the FEIS.
- Numerous minor technical corrections were made throughout the EIS. Additional analysis or explanation was also provided as needed in response to public comments.
- More recent best available scientific information, including but not limited to updated data sources, map products, modeling results, and literature references were added where appropriate.
- Numerous plan components were reworded, modified, or re-organized in the 2020 Forest Plan to improve clarity.

Decision framework

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

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.

Issues

Issues serve to highlight effects or unintended consequences that may occur from the proposed action or alternatives, giving opportunities during the analysis to reduce adverse effects and compare trade-offs for the decision maker and public to understand. Issues were identified through scoping. Significant issues were defined as those directly or indirectly caused by implementing the proposed action, involve

potentially significant effects, and could be meaningfully and reasonably evaluated and addressed within the programmatic scope of a Forest Plan. Some issues are best resolved at finer scales [subsequent National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis] where the site-specific details of a specific action and resources it affects can be meaningfully evaluated and weighed. Conversely, some issues have already been considered through broader programmatic NEPA analysis [e.g. the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction (NRLMD) FEIS]. In these cases, the issues focus on evaluating the effects unique to and commensurate with the decisions being considered here.

Alternatives were developed around those significant issues that involved unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources (40 CFR 1500.2(e)). The HLC NF identified the following significant issues during scoping that drove alternative development.

Recommended wilderness and undeveloped areas

The allocation of recommended wilderness areas (RWAs) was a primary issue for most of the public commenters. The range of public comments regarding RWAs was vast. On one end of the spectrum, commenters asked the Forest to consider all existing inventoried roadless areas (IRAs) for RWAs. At the other end of the spectrum, commenters desired no RWAs. Many commenters recommended the consideration of additions or deletions to specific areas that were identified in the proposed action. Commenters also provided recommendations on areas they wished to remain undeveloped where primitive recreation opportunities are provided.

Measurement indicators: number of RWAs, acres of RWAs, and acres of additional undeveloped areas (represented by primitive recreation opportunities).

Motorized and mechanized means of transportation in recommended wilderness areas

In addition to the issue of the amount and location of RWAs, whether motorized recreation uses and mechanized means of transportation are suitable within RWAs was also a primary concern of many public comments. Comments included those in favor of motorized recreation uses and mechanized means of transportation are suitable within RWAs, as well as those that feel these uses would be suitable within RWAs until these areas are formally designated by Congress. The motor vehicle and mountain bike communities were most vocal on this issue. Some motorized users do not want to see further restrictions on motorized access. The mountain bike community was concerned about the potential loss of access to areas that they currently use.

Increasing population, with resulting increasing demands and pressures on public lands, may potentially have impact on recommended wilderness areas. These changes may lead to increased demands for recreational use, including motorized and mechanized means of transportation in recommended wilderness areas. This pressure elevates the importance of protecting wilderness characteristics by prohibiting uses within these areas, specifically motorized recreation uses and mechanized means of transportation.

To address these public concerns, alternatives were created that analyzed the effects of the suitability of allowing, as well as not allowing, motorized recreation uses and mechanized means of transportation on wilderness characteristics within RWAs.

To address additional concerns about wildlife habitat in the core of the Elkhorns wildlife management unit, one alternative analyzed closing the core of the Elkhorns to mechanized means of transportation (mountain bikes).

Measurement indicators: miles of trail no longer available to mechanized means of transportation, miles of road no longer open for motorized access, acres of motorized over-snow use no longer available, and miles of motorized trail no longer available.

Timber harvest and timber production

Timber harvest and production was raised as an issue by many public commenters. This topic includes the identification of lands suitable for timber production, estimated volume outputs of timber, and timber harvest conducted both for timber production and for other purposes. The comments included requests to increase the amount of lands suitable for timber production, increase timber volume offered from NFS lands, and/or increase the number of acres treated with harvest. Conversely, other commenters requested that few or no lands be suitable for timber production, and/or that less timber harvest occurs on NFS lands.

Measurement indicators: acres suitable for timber production, acres unsuitable for timber production where harvest may occur for other purposes, volume for projected timber sale quantity (PTSQ) and projected wood sale quantity (PWSQ), acres of projected harvest.

Alternatives

The range of alternatives developed and presented is based on information gathered from public and internal comments and the purpose and need for the project. While all alternatives provide a wide range of ecosystem services and multiple uses, some give slightly 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 current forest plan, 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 (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 Forest Plan/Draft EIS. 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. The general theme and intent of each alternative is summarized below.

Given the extensive public engagement and environmental review recently completed for the forests' travel management decisions, all action alternatives would be generally consistent with the current travel plans, which are primarily reflected by motorized versus nonmotorized recreation opportunity spectrum (ROS) settings. To respond to the issues, ROS settings would be adjusted by alternative where the shift remains consistent with the travel plans.

Elements common to all alternatives

All alternatives in this document adhere to the principles of multiple use and the sustained yield of goods and services required by the CFR (36 CFR § 219.1 (b)). All the alternatives are designed to:

- meet law, regulation, and policy;
- 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
- comply with existing travel plans, except in RWAs and other limited locations.

In addition, the following would be the same for all alternatives:

- Existing developed recreation sites and recreation residence special use permits would be allowed; alternatives do not make decisions to remove or create developed recreation sites.
- Management direction for and location of utility and road rights-of-way, easements, and communication sites would remain constant.
- National Wilderness Preservation System lands and plan components would remain constant.
- Oil and gas leasing decisions would not be made.
- Eligible wild and scenic rivers (WSRs) would remain constant.
- Recent and updated multi-region management direction for Canada lynx; and new management direction for grizzly bear would be 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 designed to be consistent with the 2012 Planning Rule and associated directives and emphasize adaptive management and the use of best available scientific information.

Alternative A – no action

Alternative A, the no-action alternative, reflects current management practices under the 1986 Forest Plans, as amended and implemented, and provides the basis for comparing alternatives to current management and levels of output. Alternative A does not address some of the elements associated with the 2012 Planning Rule, such as timber suitability or riparian management zones (RMZs). 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 as described by each resource in chapter 3 would continue. Under this alternative, current management plans would continue to guide management of the planning area, and ongoing work or work previously planned and approved would occur under that guidance. Laws and regulations that have been adopted since the 1986 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 RWAs (Big Log, Mount Baldy, and Electric Peak).
- There would be no changes to existing travel plans.
- Existing mechanized means of transportation would be suitable in all areas except designated wilderness.
- Lands suitable for timber production would be based on the 1986 plans as amended and implemented, 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.

Alternative B

Alternative B, which was scoped as the proposed action, represents a mix of RWAs and lands identified as suitable for timber production. The balance 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 RWAs. With respect to the identified issues, the alternative is described as follows:

- There would be nine (9) RWAs: Big Log, Mount Baldy, Electric Peak (previously known as Blackfoot Meadows), Deep Creek, Big Snowies, Silver King, Red Mountain, Arrastra Creek, and Nevada Mountain).
- Motorized recreation uses and mechanized means of transportation would not be suitable within RWAs.
- All lands that are 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 ROS; RWAs; and the Elkhorns GA, South Hills Recreation Area, Badger Two Medicine area, Highwoods GA, Snowies GA, 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.

Alternative C

Alternative C is a modified proposed action, which also represents a mix of RWAs and lands identified as suitable for timber production. The balance 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 RWAs. In the Divide and Elkhorn GAs some changes to the ROS 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:

- There would be nine (9) RWAs; the same as listed for alternative B.
- Motorized recreation uses and mechanized means of transportation would be suitable within RWAs.
- Approximately 19,000 acres of Recreation settings in the Elkhorns Geographic Area 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.

Alternative D

Alternative D was developed to address comments and themes of limiting human influences on the landscape. This alternative would be responsive to commenters who desire more undeveloped recreation areas and includes the greatest amount of RWAs and the least amount of lands suitable for timber production. RWAs and primitive or semi-primitive nonmotorized ROS areas were selected where consistent with current travel plans, with emphasis given to areas where decreased human presence would enhance connectivity for wildlife. With respect to the identified issues, the alternative is described as follows:

- There would be sixteen (16) RWAs. These would include the nine areas listed for alternatives B and C in addition to the following seven areas: Camas Creek; Wapiti Peak; Loco Mountain; Colorado Mountain; Tenderfoot Creek; Big Horn Thunder; and Middle Fork Judith. RWAs were identified with consideration given to maintaining or enhancing potential habitat connectivity for large, wide-ranging wildlife species within and among GAs. Alternative D includes additions to the original Blackfoot Meadows and Nevada Mountain RWAs.
- Motorized recreation uses and mechanized means of transportation would not be suitable within RWAs.
- Additional primitive ROS areas would be identified in the Elkhorns, Highwoods, and Badger Two Medicine areas of the Rocky Mountain Range to provide additional undeveloped areas.
- In addition to the exclusions from alternative B, lands would not be suitable for timber production within additional RWAs, or where the ROS settings are modified to be primitive or semi-primitive nonmotorized. 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.

Alternative E

Alternative E was developed to address comments and themes of increasing timber production from NFS lands. All lands that may be suited would be included as suitable for timber production, except for the Badger Two Medicine area and the Elkhorns GA. The recreation opportunities spectrum classes that are the most compatible with harvest activities would be selected where consistent with current travel plans. No RWAs would be included. With respect to the identified issues, the alternative is described as follows:

- There would be no RWAs.
- There would be no changes to suitability to motorized and mechanized means of transportation relative to the existing condition.
- Mechanized means of transportation would be suitable anywhere except designated wilderness.
- All lands that are not withdrawn from timber suitability due to legal or technical factors would be suitable for timber production except for those lands within the Elkhorns GA 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.

Alternative F

Alternative F, which is the preferred alternative, represents a mix of RWAs and lands identified as suitable for timber production. The balance of opportunities available for primitive recreation and semiprimitive nonmotorized recreation experiences versus less primitive and more motorized recreation experiences would be generally consistent with current travel plans, except in the case of RWAs. A map of the designated areas for the preferred alternative can be found at the end of the document. With respect to the identified issues and other key features, the alternative is described as follows:

- There would be seven (7) RWAs: Big Log, Mount Baldy, Electric Peak, Big Snowies, Silver King, Red Mountain, and Nevada Mountain.
- Motorized recreation uses and mechanized means of transportation would not be suitable within RWAs.

- Additional primitive ROS areas would be identified in the Elkhorns GA, the Tenderfoot and Deep Creek areas of the Little Belt Mountain GA, and the Badger Two Medicine areas of the Rocky Mountain Range GA to provide additional undeveloped areas outside of RWAs.
- All lands that are 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 ROS; RWAs; and the Elkhorns GA, South Hills Recreation Area, Badger Two Medicine area, Highwoods GA, Snowies GA, 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 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 Green Timber Basin-Beaver Creek botanical area would be designated in the Rocky Mountain Range GA to protect and emphasize an ecological habitat that supports uniquely diverse orchid populations.
- The Grandview Recreation Area would be designated in the west end of the Big Snowies GA 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.
- Approximately 19,000 acres of recreation settings in the Elkhorns Geographic Area would shift from semi-primitive motorized to semi-primitive non-motorized recreation opportunities.

Comparison of alternatives

Forestwide comparison of alternatives by issue

Table 2 displays the range of alternatives with respect to the issues that drove development of alternatives.

Table 2. Comparison of issues (and their measurement indicators) by alternative

Issue	Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative C	Alternative D	Alternative E	Alternative F
Recommended wilderness and undeveloped areas						
1) Number of RWAs	3	9	9	16	0	7
2) Acres of RWAs	34,265	213,076	213,076	474,589	0	153,325
3) Acres of additional Primitive ROS areas	0	0	0	175, 598	0	216,866
Suitability of motorized and mechanized means of transportation in recommended wilderness						
1) Miles of trail no longer suitable for mechanized means of transportation	0	204	59	328	0	135
2) Miles of road no longer suitable for motorized use	0	13	0	34	0	8
3) Acres no longer suitable for motorized over-snow use	0	24,404	25,349	79,194	0	8,046
4) Miles of trail no longer suitable for motorized use	0	0.1	0	60.1	0	0.1
Timber harvest						
1) Acres suitable for timber production	414,936	356,633	356,633	348,586	384,199	368,814
2) Acres unsuitable for timber production where harvest may occur	1,654,916	1,654,935	1,654,935	1,455,781	1,749,318	1,673,853
3) Projected timber sale quantity (PTSQ) Decade 1	4.70 mmcf (22 mmbf)	4.85 mmcf (23 mmbf)	4.85 mmcf (23 mmbf)	4.87 mmcf (23 mmbf)	6.7 mmcf (33 mmbf)	5.7 mmcf (27 mmbf)
4) Projected wood sale quantity (PWSQ) Decade 1	6.76 mmcf (26 mmbf)	6.92 mmcf (27 mmbf)	6.92 mmcf (27 mmbf)	6.95 mmcf (27 mmbf)	9.06 mmcf (38 mmbf)	7.91 mmcf (31 mmbf)
5) Projected average annual acres of timber harvest Decade 1	2,072 acres	2,176 acres	2,176 acres	2,101 acres	2,134 acres	2,279 acres

Recommended wilderness and primitive ROS areas

The amount and location of RWAs encompassed some of the primary issues that drove the development of alternatives. Three areas are recommended as wilderness in alternative A, under the existing 1986 Forest Plans. In alternatives B and C, 9 areas are recommended which represent an area about 6 times greater than the total included in alternative A. Alternative D was designed to respond to public desires for more RWA to the greatest degree and includes 16 RWAs. In addition, several other areas were designated with a primitive ROS in this alternative, in response to public comments requesting additional undeveloped areas. Alternative E does not recommend any wilderness or additional undeveloped areas and responds to public comments and desires to decrease the amount of RWAs and other undeveloped lands. In alternative F 7 RWAs are included, as well as several areas with a primitive ROS setting.

In all alternatives, including alternative E, there are additional lands that have an undeveloped character based on legal designations which do not vary by alternative (such as designated wilderness and IRAs).

Motorized recreation uses and mechanized means of transportation in RWAs

Whether or not continuation of existing motorized recreation uses and mechanized means of transportation is suitable within RWAs also varies by alternative in response to public comments. In alternatives A and C, these uses are suitable within RWAs. In alternatives B, D, and F these uses would not be suitable within RWAs. There are no RWAs in alternative E.

Timber harvest and timber production

Alternative A has the most lands suitable for timber production (14% of NFS lands on the HLC NF), in large part because riparian management zones are not established east of the continental divide. All of the action alternatives exclude riparian management zones from the lands suitable for timber production, although some harvest may occur. Of the action alternatives, Alternative E has the most lands suitable for timber production, followed closely by alternative F; both of these alternatives include roughly 13% of the NFS lands on the HLC NF as suitable for timber production. Alternative D has the least amount but is similar to alternatives B and C; with these alternatives, roughly 12% of the HLC NF is suitable for timber production. The lands suitable for timber production do not vary greatly across alternatives because the primary factors that drive this determination are not subject to change, including land allocations such as designated wilderness and IRAs. The RWAs identified in alternatives A, B, C, D, and F are almost exclusively in IRAs, and therefore would not be considered for timber production in any alternative. PTSQ and PWSQ are similar for alternatives A, B, C and D. These volumes are roughly 40% higher with alternative E, and 20% higher with alternative F as compared to these alternatives. Under alternative E the greatest volume would be produced because the types and locations of treatment would capitalize on stands with the highest volume available. Alternative F represents a blend of objectives to both produce timber volume and maximize attainment of desired conditions on the landscape. In Decade 1 of the planning period, all alternatives would result in a similar amount of harvest acres on the landscape.

Geographic area comparison of alternatives

The following tables display the preferred alternative with respect to the issues that drove the development of that alternative.

Table 3. Big Belts GA¹, alternative F

Issue	Alternative F
Recommended wilderness and additional primitive ROS areas	
1) Number of RWAs	2
Big Log (acres)	7,035
Mount Baldy (acres)	8,141
2) Total Acres of RWAs	15,176
3) Acres of additional primitive ROS areas	0
Suitability of motorized and mechanized means of transportation in recommended wilderness areas	
1) Miles of trail no longer suitable for mechanized means of transportation	18.6
2) Miles of road no longer suitable for motorized access	<0.1
3) Acres of motorized over-snow areas no longer suitable for motorized use	0
4) Miles of motorized trail no longer suitable for motorized use	0
Timber harvest	
1) Acres suitable for timber production	54,701
2) Acres unsuitable for timber production where harvest may occur	213,692
Missouri River Corridor (acres)	3,633

¹ The Smith River Corridor is also present in this GA; however, it is primarily located in the Little Belts GA. Refer to the acreages provided for that GA.

Table 4. Castles GA, alternative F

Issue	Alternative F
Recommended wilderness and additional primitive ROS areas	
1) Number of RWAs	0
2) Acres of RWAs	0
3) Acres of additional primitive ROS areas	0
Suitability of motorized and mechanized means of transportation in recommended wilderness areas	
1) Miles of trail no longer suitable for mechanized means of transportation	0
2) Miles of road no longer suitable for motorized access	0
3) Acres of motorized over-snow areas no longer suitable for motorized use	0
4) Miles of motorized trail no longer suitable for motorized use	0
Timber harvest	
1) Acres suitable for timber production	15,084
2) Acres unsuitable for timber production where harvest may occur	54,625

Table 5. Crazyes GA, alternative F

Issue	Alternative F
Recommended wilderness and additional primitive ROS areas	
1) Number of RWAs	0
2) Acres of RWAs	0
3) Acres of additional primitive ROS areas	0
Suitability of motorized and mechanized means of transportation in recommended wilderness areas	
1) Miles of trail no longer suitable for mechanized means of transportation	0
2) Miles of road no longer suitable for motorized access	0
3) Acres of motorized over-snow areas no longer suitable for motorized use	0
4) Miles of motorized trail no longer suitable for motorized use	0
Timber harvest	
1) Acres suitable for timber production	5,353
2) Acres unsuitable for timber production where harvest may occur	52,315

Table 6. Divide GA, alternative F

Issue	Alternative F
Recommended wilderness and additional primitive ROS areas	
1) Number of RWAs	2
Electric Peak (acres)	18,239
Nevada Mountain (split with Upper Blackfoot, see acres in table below)	
2) Acres of RWAs	18,239
3) Acres of additional primitive ROS areas	0
Suitability of motorized and mechanized means of transportation in recommended wilderness areas	
1) Miles of trail no longer suitable for mechanized means of transportation	16.6
2) Miles of road no longer suitable for motorized access	0
3) Acres of motorized over-snow areas no longer suitable for motorized use	11.1
4) Miles of motorized trail no longer suitable for motorized use	0
Timber harvest	
1) Acres suitable for timber production	54,387
2) Acres unsuitable for timber production where harvest may occur	114,072
South Hills Recreation Area (acres)	50,180

Table 7. Elkhorns GA, alternative F

Issue	Alternative F
Recommended wilderness and additional primitive ROS areas	
1) Number of RWAs	0
2) Acres of RWAs	0
3) Acres of additional primitive ROS areas	49,229

Issue	Alternative F
Suitability of motorized and mechanized means of transportation in recommended wilderness areas	
1) Miles of trail no longer suitable for mechanized means of transportation	0
2) Miles of road no longer suitable for motorized access	0
3) Acres of motorized over-snow areas no longer suitable for motorized use	0
4) Miles of motorized trail no longer suitable for motorized use	0
Timber harvest	
1) Acres suitable for timber production	0
2) Acres unsuitable for timber production where harvest may occur	159,673
Elkhorns Core Area, Acres where Mechanized Means of Transportation Unsuitable	0
Poe Manley proposed RNA (acres)	1,578

Table 8. Highwoods GA, alternative F

Issue	Alternative F
Recommended wilderness and additional primitive ROS areas	
1) Number of RWAs	0
2) Acres of RWAs	0
3) Acres of additional primitive ROS areas	0
Suitability of motorized and mechanized means of transportation in recommended wilderness areas	
1) Miles of trail no longer suitable for mechanized means of transportation	0
2) Miles of road no longer suitable for motorized access	0
3) Acres of motorized over-snow areas no longer suitable for motorized use	0
4) Miles of motorized trail no longer suitable for motorized use	0
Timber harvest	
1) Acres suitable for timber production	0
2) Acres unsuitable for timber production where harvest may occur	42,291

Table 9. Little Belts GA, alternative F

Issue	Alternative F
Recommended wilderness and additional primitive ROS areas	
1) Number of RWAs	0
2) Acres of RWAs	0
3) (a) Acres of additional primitive ROS areas	101,382
(b) Acres of additional primitive ROS areas in winter	98,208
Suitability of motorized and mechanized means of transportation in recommended wilderness areas	
1) Miles of trail no longer suitable for mechanized means of transportation	0
2) Miles of road no longer suitable for motorized access	0
3) Acres of motorized over-snow areas no longer suitable for motorized use	0
4) Miles of motorized trail no longer suitable for motorized use	0

Issue	Alternative F
Timber harvest	
1) Acres suitable for timber production	187,412
2) Acres unsuitable for timber production where harvest may occur	530,646
Smith River Corridor (acres)	3,330

Table 10. Rocky Mountain Range GA, alternative F

Issue	Alternative F
Recommended wilderness and additional primitive ROS areas	
1) Number of RWAs	0
2) Acres of RWAs	0
3) Acres of additional primitive ROS areas	129,740
Suitability of motorized and mechanized means of transportation in recommended wilderness areas	
1) Miles of trail no longer suitable for mechanized means of transportation	0
2) Miles of road no longer suitable for motorized access	0
3) Acres of motorized over-snow areas no longer suitable for motorized use	0
4) Miles of motorized trail no longer suitable for motorized use	0
Timber harvest	
1) Acres suitable for timber production	0
2) Acres unsuitable for timber production where harvest may occur	324,932
Green Timber Basin-Beaver Creek Botanical Area (acres)	2,942

Table 11. Snowies GA, alternative F

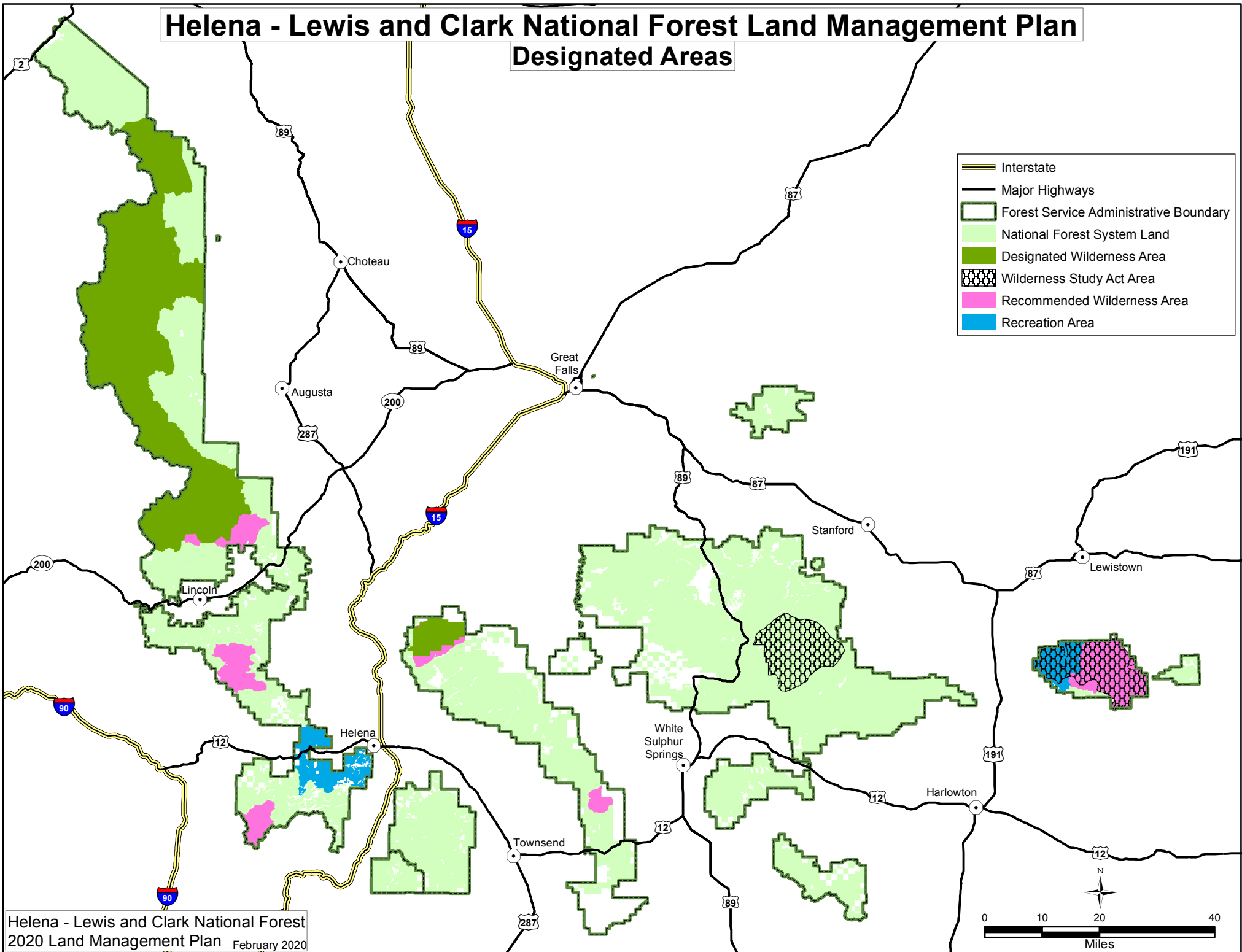
Issue	Alternative F
Recommended wilderness and additional primitive ROS areas	
1) Number of RWAs	1
2) Acres of Big Snowies RWA	66,894
3) Acres of additional primitive ROS areas	32,296
Suitability of motorized and mechanized means of transportation in recommended wilderness areas	
1) Miles of trail no longer suitable for mechanized means of transportation	59.3
2) Miles of road no longer suitable for motorized access	6.2
3) Acres of motorized over-snow areas no longer suitable for motorized use	0
4) Miles of motorized trail no longer suitable for motorized use	0.1
Timber harvest	
1) Acres suitable for timber production	9,531
2) Acres unsuitable for timber production where harvest may occur	14,084
Grandview Recreation Area (acres)	32,296

Table 12. Upper Blackfoot GA, alternative F

Issue	Alternative F
Recommended wilderness and additional primitive ROS areas	
1) Number of RWAs	3
Silver King (acres)	18,568
Red Mountain (acres)	2,500
Nevada Mountain (total acres Divide and Upper Blackfoot GAs)	31,948
2) Acres of RWAs	53,016
3) Acres of additional primitive ROS areas	0
Suitability of motorized and mechanized means of transportation in recommended wilderness areas	
1) Miles of trail no longer suitable for mechanized means of transportation	40.3
2) Miles of road no longer suitable for motorized access	0
3) Acres of motorized over-snow areas no longer suitable for motorized use	7,358
4) Miles of motorized trail no longer suitable for motorized use	0.1
Timber harvest	
1) Acres suitable for timber production	42,348
2) Acres unsuitable for timber production where harvest may occur	167,524

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Designated Areas



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Figure 3. Preferred alternative designated areas

