



Record of Decision

Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest

2021 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, Chouteau, Fergus, Gallatin, Glacier, Golden Valley, Jefferson, Judith Basin, Lewis and Clark, Meagher, Park, Pondera, Powell, Sweet Grass, Teton, and Wheatland.



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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 Record of Decision (ROD) documents my decision and rationale for approving the Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest Land Management Plan (referred to as the 2021 Land Management Plan or 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 (referred to as the 1986 Forest 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 ideally 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 Forest’s 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 Forest’s 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 have become major parts 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), Record of Decision (ROD) public notices, and associated documents are all available online at 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 Forest supervisor's office, located in Helena, Montana.

Forest Setting and Distinctive Roles and Contributions

The Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest planning area (Figure 1) is 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.

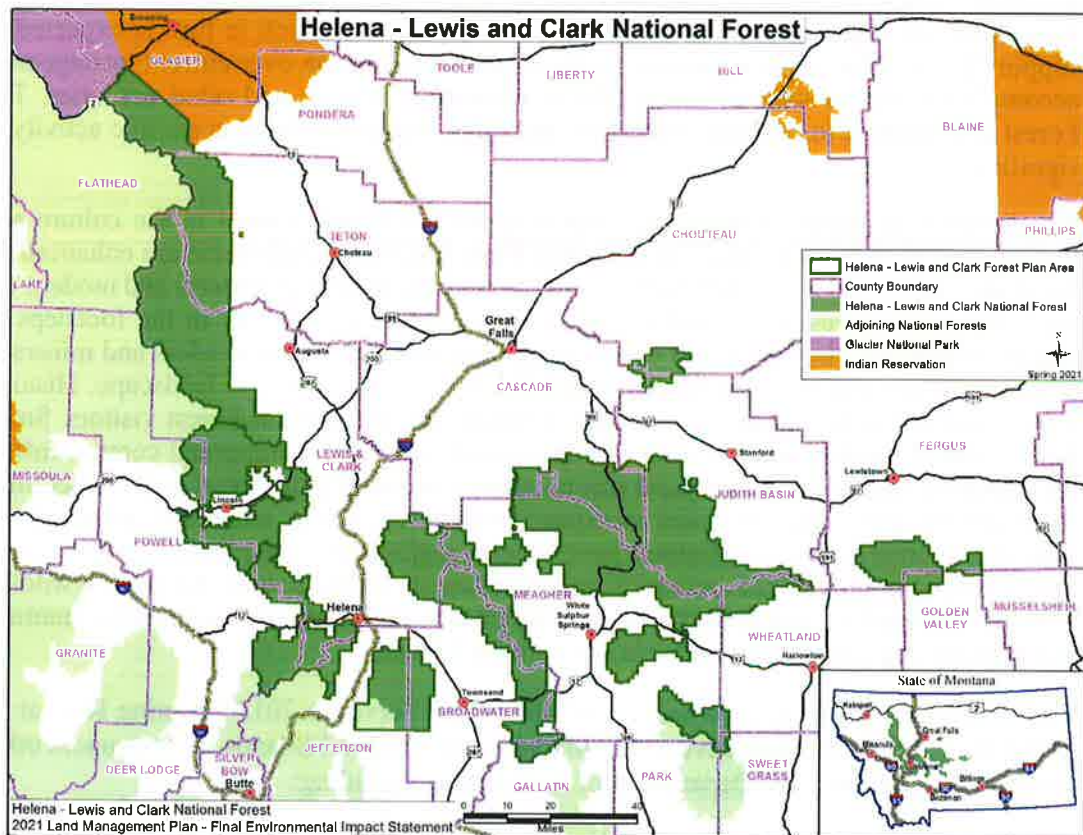


Figure 1. Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest and vicinity

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 grasslands 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 includes the Plan designated Elkhorns Wildlife Management Unit. 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, whitebark pine (proposed), and bull trout.

The Forest's 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 planning area were those historically known as the Blackfoot, 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 and Clark National Forests were prescriptive, inflexible, and redundant with law, regulation, and policy; as a result, they

impeded efficient management of the Forest's resources. At more than 30 years old, these plans exceeded the 10-15 year duration of plans intended by the National Forest Management Act (NFMA). In addition, over the last 30 years, the social, economic, and ecological conditions across the 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 life of the Plan. 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 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. I used the contributions and feedback from these meetings to make adjustments to the Plan and to inform the 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. A review of planning documents for other agencies is summarized in the various resource sections in the final EIS and more detail is provided in final EIS appendix L.

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 Plan components correspond with the adjacent National Forests’ Land Management Plan components, or at a minimum do not conflict.

Other plans that were reviewed and incorporated into the cumulative effects analyses in the final EIS include: plans for adjoining lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and National Park Service, USFWS, 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 complementary.

I consulted with the USFWS on three threatened species (bull trout, Canada lynx, and grizzly bear), and conferenced on one proposed 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: 2020 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 complementary. 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 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 many of our public meetings and interfaced directly with county residents and other forest constituents. My staff also reviewed all 17 adjoining county growth and fire management plans. These plans, where applicable, were generally complementary to the Plan.

The majority of counties supported the Plan throughout the forest plan revision process. However, during scoping and the draft EIS comment period, some counties had concerns about the flexibility of fire and timber management direction as well as fire management in recommended wilderness areas. In addition, some counties did not support additional recommended wilderness areas. Please see final EIS appendix L for more details.

In responses to fire management concerns, the boundaries to all recommended wilderness areas were moved back 300 feet from private land boundaries. The Plan also includes plan components that support collaboration or coordination with counties or other entities (for

examples, see FW-FIRE-GO-01, FW-WL-GO-06, FW-LAND USE-GP-02, FW-CONNECT-GO-04, FW-FAH-GO-03).

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 has been the subject of a support resolution by the Lewis and Clark Board of County Commissioners. Several aspects of this proposal were considered within the range of alternatives in the final EIS, including the preferred alternative.

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 Blackfoot Nation to provide an update on the plan revision process. My staff and I met on several additional occasions with tribal representatives from the Blackfoot 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 Blackfoot Nation is the management of lands in the Badger Two Medicine portion of the Rocky Mountain Geographic Area. The Tribal Preservation Office provided plan component suggestions in their comments on the draft EIS and Proposed Action. Several suggested desired conditions, standards, and suitability plan components were included in the Plan. These primarily dealt with recognizing the Badger Two Medicine as a sacred landscape and the need for the Forest to coordinate its management with the Tribe. Others, such as plan component regarding the suitability of mountain bikes in the Badger Two Medicine, were not included in the final but an explanation was provided to the Tribe through government to government consultation. 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 Blackfoot 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 an emphasis area (see the Badger Two Medicine emphasis areas section on page 16). The Tribe has also expressed an interest in co-management of the area. Although the Forest Service has legal tribal trust and government to government consultation obligations, the Forest Service does not have the authority to delegate or institute shared management of National Forest System lands to another entity, including a tribal government. The authority to delegate management of federal lands is reserved to Congress under the Property Clause of the U.S. Constitution.

Several resource management plans for the Blackfoot Nation were identified to help inform land management planning for the Forest. The Wildland Fire Management Plan for the Blackfoot 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.

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 generally 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 revised land management 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. Most 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. The draft record of decision, land management plan, and associated environmental documents were published on May 21, 2020, initiating a 60-day objection filing period. Eighty-eight eligible objectors filed timely objections. Following an internal objection review, the Northern Regional Forester hosted an objection resolution meeting on September 29, 2020 through October 1, 2020. The Northern Regional Forester's response to the objections was released in February 21. The set of instructions that I received as part of that response and the actions that were taken to resolve them are detailed in appendix A of this document.

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 final EIS, with modifications in response to comments and objections, and includes features of all alternatives considered. It addresses the need for change identified during the assessment, meets the requirements of the 2012 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.
- Habitat Management Direction for the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Population (“Forest Plan Amendments to Incorporate Management Direction for the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Population” (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, 2018)) has been incorporated in the final plan and will be used to direct the Forest to maintain on-the-ground habitat conditions that have contributed to and will sustain recovery of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem grizzly bear population.
- The Plan and final EIS have taken into account the potential impacts of climate change to the degree that programmatic plan components and management approaches can or should incorporate concepts related to the issue. Vegetation and wildlife plan components in the Plan address future uncertainties by focusing on the

development of landscapes and forests that are resilient and resistant to disturbances and drought. Vegetation modeling incorporated future climate scenarios. Appendix C of the Plan and appendix J of the final EIS provides a summary of possible management approaches and climate change adaptation strategies supported by the plan.

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, nor 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 Forest over the life of the Plan. 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 the NFMA 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.

Alternative F:

- Adjusts anticipated acres treated and timber harvest volume outputs to maximize both economic and resource benefits.

- Refines fire management direction allowing natural fire occurrences within resource beneficial parameters and to reduce the impacts of future fires.
- Refines key wildlife plan components based on input from Montana Fish, Wildlife, and 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. I made this choice in response to public desire for primitive recreation settings that are not recommended wilderness. This choice will also maintain existing mechanized access 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 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 Blackfeet 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, except for the final number and locations of recommended wilderness areas and uses within them. I received many comments and objections representing diverse perspectives on this issue. 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 such as mechanized transport (mountain biking), snowmobiling, and/or creating a more manageable boundary.

My decision regarding the suitability of mountain biking in various areas of the forest was another common issue with diverse public perspectives. Some commenters and objectors would prefer mountain biking was suitable in most areas of the Forest, including recommended wilderness areas. Others would prefer mountain biking was not suitable in recommended wilderness and other specific areas of the Forest such as the Badger Two Medicine, the Elkhorn Mountains Wildlife Management Unit, and other primitive recreation settings.

Given the extensive public engagement and environmental review completed for the forest's travel management decisions, most of which are relatively recent, broad changes in motorized and mechanized transport plan-level suitability was not identified as a need for change. In response to scoping comments regarding the management of recommended wilderness areas, I decided it was appropriate to consider narrow changes in plan suitability to manage public uses in recommended areas consistent with a potential future wilderness designation. Thus, I did not vary motorized and mechanized suitability in *all other areas* of the Forest consistent with my communication and commitment to honor the public engagement for the existing travel management decisions from the very onset of the plan revision effort.

However, it's important to note that suitability for a use such as mountain biking does not mean that use must be allowed on every trail throughout the life of the plan. If, during plan implementation, monitoring, public engagement, or input from the Blackfoot Nation or Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks indicates mountain bike use is resulting in adverse impacts to a resource, site-specific NEPA public engagement and decisionmaking could be initiated to modify the travel plan decisions.

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, I determined that the plan components were sufficient to meet the 2012 Planning Rule requirements. In response to objectors' concerns, an item was added to the monitoring plan (2021 Land Management Plan, appendix B) to monitor social conflict regarding mountain bikes.

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 2021 Land Management Plan). Emphasis areas are distinct landscapes with specific management needs. The specific plan components for these emphasis areas are unique from the broader forestwide direction. 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 locally 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 (2021 Land Management 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. (2021 Land Management Plan, Little Belts Geographic Area, Smith River Corridor plan components).

Elkhorns Wildlife Management Unit

The Elkhorns Wildlife Management Unit was established in the 1986 Helena National Forest 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 Geographic Area 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 Geographic Area 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 (2021 Land Management Plan, Elkhorns Geographic Area).

Objections regarding the sufficiency of the plan components for the Elkhorns Geographic Area highlighted a need to provide additional explanation how the Plan will guide management of the area consistent with the administrative designation intent to emphasize wildlife values. Thus, as instructed, a crosswalk between the 1986 plan direction for the Elkhorns Wildlife Management Unit and the 2020 Land Management Plan has been added to the planning record. In addition, the suitability plan component EH-TIM-SUIT-01 was modified to accommodate objector's suggested improvement to the Plan.

In additions, I carefully reviewed the boundary selection for the primitive recreation setting within the area and decided to use the Alternative F core area boundary because the location of the boundary would be much easier to manage into the future.

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 nonmotorized recreation area, providing access primarily for hiking, biking, and equestrian uses. This large landscape includes NFS 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 (2021 Land Management Plan, Divide Geographic Area, South Hill Recreation Area section).

Grandview Recreation Area

My decision includes the creation of the Grandview Recreation 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. 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 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 and in compliance with the Montana Wilderness Study Act. The Grandview Recreation Area contains several challenging trails that lead to prominent features and grand vistas; some of these trails are used by the mountain bike community. It also has several popular motorized over-snow areas which provide semi primitive motorized recreation access into portions of the area in winter. I heard consistently of the value that these recreation opportunities provide to local and

regional forest users through public meetings and comment (2021 Land Management 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. Most of this area is located within the Badger-Two Medicine Traditional Cultural District, an area acknowledged for its significance to the oral traditions and cultural 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 (2021 Land Management Plan, Rocky Mountain Geographic Area, Badger Two Medicine section).

Green Timber Basin- Beaver Creek Emphasis Area

My decision also creates the Green Timber Basin-Beaver Creek Emphasis 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, I will strive to avoid or minimize impacts to the botanical resources in this area. (2021 Land Management Plan, Rocky Mountain Geographic Area, Green Timber Basin-Beaver Creek Emphasis Area section).

Recommended Wilderness and Uses within Them

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 wilderness areas (Big Log, Mount Baldy, Electric Peak, Big Snowies, Silver King, Red Mountain, and Nevada Mountain), representing the potential addition of 152,948 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 in a portion of the Big Snowies wilderness study area. All the recommended wilderness areas

have the social and ecological characteristics that warrant congressional consideration and have received public comment in favor of recommendation.

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.

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

Table 1. Recommended wilderness areas with acres¹

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 ²	Divide and Upper Blackfoot	31,571
Total		152,948

¹Acres are approximate

²Portions 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 474,658 acres) and an alternative with no recommended wilderness (Alternative E with 0 acres). My decision is based on alternative F and identifies 152,948 acres as recommended wilderness. Please see final EIS appendix E, which provides detailed descriptions of the final selections.

The recommended wilderness areas are primarily 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).

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.

A significant issue analyzed in the EIS was the use of motorized and mechanized recreation uses in recommended wilderness areas. 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 on the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest. Given expected increases in population and recreation visits to designated areas (final EIS section 3.26.5) and level of interest expressed during the revision effort for the Forest to provide mountain biking and motorized recreation, I find this decision would best protect wilderness characteristics, including the sense of remoteness and the opportunities for solitude in recommended wilderness (final EIS section 3.21.8) over time and would provide management consistent with a future wilderness designation. This decision is aligned with the careful considerations I have given in recommending areas where these recreation uses are not widely established and that ample opportunities for motorized uses and mechanized means of transportation (mountain biking) are available on the Forest outside of recommended wilderness.

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, this does not change current public authorizations as described in the Nature of the Decision section of this ROD. However, I will initiate site-specific NEPA planning to bring the travel plan designations consistent with the Plan suitability direction in the recommended wilderness areas within 3 years from the date of this decision.

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 nonmotorized trails open to mechanized means of transportation (including bicycles). However, these routes receive little, if any, use based upon our monitoring and what I've heard from the public. Given public interest in this issue, I have endeavored to be transparent in describing the scope of change my decision may result in following the future site-specific decisionmaking (Please see final EIS appendix K). However, the areas affected represent little change in the overall forestwide suitability of motorized and mechanized recreation opportunities from current conditions. For example, summer motorized recreation opportunity spectrum settings remain constant at 38 percent of the Forest with a reduction

of only 118 acres (0.004 percent of the plan area). Winter motorized recreation suitability is only reduced by 1 percent across the Forest, from 36 to 35 percent of the plan area.

Although several commenters expressed concern that the Plan’s management direction for recommended wilderness creates “de facto wilderness areas” without Congressional authority, 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. I am not creating wilderness; rather, I am trying not to establish or authorize continued uses that would affect the wilderness characteristics of these areas and possibly jeopardize their designation as wilderness in the future. It’s also important to note, that the plan allows administrative management actions such as restoration activities (FW-RECWILD-SUIT-02) and the use of motorized and mechanized equipment for trail clearing and other management activities (FW-RECWILD-SUIT-03) in recommended wilderness areas that rarely occur in designated wilderness areas. Thus, my decision will not manage recommended wilderness areas as “defacto” wilderness.

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, most of the lands identified in the wilderness inventory are located within IRAs and wilderness study areas. Most 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 direction²
Big Belts	Hogback	5,784	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Trout Creek	39,383	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	North Belts	14,140	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum

Geographic area	Wilderness inventory polygon name	Acres	Plan direction ²
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • forestwide IRA plan components
	Bilk Mountain	25,787	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Camas Creek	23,878	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Grassy Mountain	6,194	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
Castles	Wapiti Peak	33,002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Whetstone Ridge	8,676	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum
Crazies	Loco Mountain	25,605	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Bald Ridge	13,210	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized and semi primitive motorized recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
Divide	Sweeney Creek	7,978	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum
	Colorado Mountain	8,168	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Continental Divide North	4,173	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
Elkhorns	Eagle Basin	57,279	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components • Elkhorns wildlife management unit plan components
	Elkhorn Peak	15,180	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components • Elkhorns wildlife management unit plan components
Highwood	Highwood Baldy	15,824	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Arrow Prospect	26,210	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components

Geographic area	Wilderness inventory polygon name	Acres	Plan direction²
Little Belt Mountains	Deep Creek	89,321	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Big Horn Thunder	45,334	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Sun Mountain	7,965	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	McGee Sawmill	8,355	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Peterson Mountain	6,839	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Taylor Mountain	11,374	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Big Baldy	49,068	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Eagle Creek	6,337	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Calf Creek	12,598	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi primitive motorized and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	North Fork Smith	9,817	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Middle Fork Judith	98,312	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • wilderness study area plan components • primitive, semi primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
Rocky Mountain Range	East Little Belts	106,178	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Badger Two Medicine	125,795	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Teton Blackleaf	56,002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum

Geographic area	Wilderness inventory polygon name	Acres	Plan direction ²
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • forestwide IRA plan components
	Sun Canyon Willow	71,106	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Sawtooth Ridge	15,312	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Elk Smith	30,030	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
Snowies	Big Snowies ³	36,792	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • wilderness study area plan components • semi primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, roaded natural, and rural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
Upper Blackfoot	Stonewall	30,046	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Black Mountain	10,220	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Anaconda Hill	21,539	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Paige Gulch	17,569	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Bear Gulch	5,636	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components
	Nevada Mountain ^{1,3}	20,639	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi primitive motorized, and roaded natural recreation opportunity spectrum • forestwide IRA plan components

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

² All forestwide plan components for other resources also apply.

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

Wilderness Study Areas and Uses within Them

Both the Snowies and Middle Fork Judith Wilderness Study Areas will continue to be managed under the 1977 Montana Wilderness Study Act (Public Law 95-150). Per this act, motorized and mechanized means of transportation are suitable within wilderness study areas, so long as these uses maintain the wilderness character as it existed prior to 1977.

These uses would be monitored to ensure the wilderness study area's potential for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System is retained. In addition, timber harvest is unsuitable in wilderness study areas, but the use of chainsaws for restoration activities and administrative work such as clearing trails is suitable.

While both wilderness study areas will continue to be managed as such, only the eastern part of the Snowies wilderness study area is included as a recommended wilderness area. The western portion of the Snowies and the Middle Fork Judith wilderness study areas were not selected to be recommended wilderness areas. This is primarily because of existing uses occurring adjacent to them that impact solitude.

While less restrictive than the recommended wilderness plan components, I find the wilderness study area plan components meet the intent of the 1977 Wilderness Study Act. As such, the wilderness study areas that are outside of the recommended wilderness areas would remain eligible for inclusion in the wilderness system.

Where plan direction overlaps, generally the most protective plan components take precedence. However, except for the recommended wilderness area plan components, the statutory authority and plan components for wilderness study areas takes precedence over other plan direction such as the primitive recreation opportunity spectrum plan components.

Eligible 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 (Table 1). 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. Eligibility is not a recommendation to Congress, that step would happen after the suitability study.

Table 1 lists the eligible wild and scenic rivers and their segments, preliminary classification, outstandingly remarkable values, and length. The list of streams in the table is organized geographically by watershed from north to south, east to west, in most cases.

Table 1. Eligible river segments by geographic area

River name	Segment description	Preliminary classification	Outstanding remarkable values	Miles
Big Belts Geographic Area				
Beaver Creek	<u>Segment 1:</u> From the mouth to the private land boundary.	Recreational	Recreation Geology Cultural	3.4
	<u>Segment 2:</u> From the private boundary to the private boundary.	Recreational		0.7
	<u>Segment 3:</u> From the private boundary to the confluence with Bridge Creek, west of Nelson.	Recreational		1.4
	<u>Segment 4:</u> From the confluence with Sheep Gulch to the confluence with Pike Creek.	Recreational		3.7
White Creek	From where the stream crosses section line between T20N R2E Sections 19 and 20 west to the private land boundary.	Recreational	Fish	3.0
Missouri River	From Hauser Dam to the confluence with Cochran Gulch.	Recreational	Recreation (Fishing) Geology Wildlife	2.2
Ray Creek	From the USFS boundary to the headwaters.	Scenic	Fish	3.4
Divide Geographic Area				
Little Blackfoot River	<u>Segment 1:</u> From the private boundary to the private boundary near Charter Oaks.	Recreational	Fish Cultural	0.8
	<u>Segment 2:</u> From the private land boundary south to the next private land boundary.	Recreational		0.5
	<u>Segment 3:</u> From the private land boundary south and west to the private land boundary northeast of Kading campground.	Recreational		4.4
	<u>Segment 4:</u> From the private land boundary south to the confluence with a no name stream near the intersection of Trail 329 and Trail 326.	Recreational		1.3
	<u>Segment 5:</u> From the confluence with a no name stream near the intersection of	Wild		7.7

River name	Segment description	Preliminary classification	Outstanding remarkable values	Miles
	Trail 329 and Trail 326 to the headwaters.			
High Ore Creek	From the USFS boundary to the headwaters.	Scenic	Fish	1.0
Kady Gulch	From the USFS boundary to the private land boundary.	Recreational	Fish	1.1
South Fork Quartz Creek	From the mouth to the private land boundary.	Recreational	Fish	2.2
Skelly Gulch	From the USFS boundary to the headwaters.	Scenic	Fish	2.5
Elkhorns Geographic Area				
Staubach Creek	From the private land boundary to the headwaters.	Scenic	Fish	2.4
Highwoods Geographic Area				
North Fork Highwood Creek	From the fish barrier to the headwaters.	Scenic	Fish	3.3
Big Coulee Creek	<u>Segment 1:</u> From the fish barrier to the confluence with a no name stream from the east.	Scenic	Fish	0.3
	<u>Segment 2:</u> From the confluence with the no name creek to the upper tributary fork.	Wild	Fish	1.6
Cottonwood Creek	From the USFS boundary to the headwaters.	Scenic	Fish	2.5
North Fork Little Belt Creek	From the USFS boundary to the headwaters.	Wild	Fish	2.1
Little Belts Geographic Area				
Pilgrim Creek	<u>Segment 1:</u> From the fish barrier south to the private land boundary.	Scenic	Fish	7.2
	<u>Segment 2:</u> From the private land boundary to the headwaters.	Scenic	Fish	3.7
Middle Fork Judith River	<u>Segment 1:</u> From the USFS boundary to the private land boundary.	Recreational	Cultural	1.6
	<u>Segment 2:</u> From the private land boundary to the confluence with Big Arch Coulee.	Recreational		3.0
South Fork Judith River	<u>Segment 1:</u> From the confluence with Bower Creek to the confluence with Dry Pole Creek.	Recreational	Fish Cultural	3.6
	<u>Segment 2:</u> From the confluence with Bluff Mountain Creek to the confluence with a no name creek.	Scenic		7.4
	<u>Segment 3:</u> From the confluence with a 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 NFS lands interspersed with private lands. Only NFS lands are considered for eligibility. To view individual segments, see detail maps located in the summary.	Scenic	Scenic Recreation Geology Wildlife Cultural	17.8
Tenderfoot Creek	Segment 1: From the private land boundary to the private land boundary.	Scenic	Recreation Fish	14.6
	Segment 2: From the private land boundary to the private land boundary	Scenic		0.7
	Segment 3: From the private land boundary to the private land boundary.	Scenic		0.1
	Segment 4: From the private land boundary to the confluence with Iron Mines Creek.	Scenic		4.9
Rocky Mountain Range Geographic Area				
South Fork Two Medicine River	<u>Segment 1</u> : From the USFS boundary to the confluence with Box Creek.	Wild	Scenery Cultural	3.4
	<u>Segment 2</u> : From the private land boundary to the headwaters.	Wild		9.5
Badger Creek	From the USFS boundary to the confluence with North and South Badger Creeks.	Wild	Cultural Scenery	7.3
North Badger Creek	From the mouth to the headwaters.	Wild	Fish Cultural	10.4
South Badger Creek	From the mouth to the headwaters.	Wild	Cultural	10.9
Lee Creek	From the mouth to the headwaters.	Wild	Fish	4.6
Badger Cabin Creek	From the mouth to the headwaters.	Wild	Fish	3.2
Red Poacher Creek	From the mouth to the headwaters.	Wild	Fish	3.1
North Fork Birch Creek	From the USFS boundary to the headwaters.	Wild	Cultural Scenery	7.8
Middle Fork Birch Creek	From the mouth to the headwaters.	Wild	Scenery Cultural	5.2
South Fork Birch Creek	From the entrance into Swift Reservoir to the headwaters.	Wild	Scenery Recreation Fish Wildlife Cultural	9.8
North Fork Deep Creek	From the USFS boundary to the headwaters.	Wild	Scenery	5.5
North Fork Teton River	<u>Segment 1</u> : From the USFS Boundary to FSR# 114 road crossing north of Elko Campground (bottom of the box canyon).	Recreation	Recreation Scenery Wildlife	5.5

River name	Segment description	Preliminary classification	Outstanding remarkable values	Miles
	<u>Segment 2</u> : From FSR# 114 road crossing north of Elko Campground to the Bob Marshall Wilderness boundary	Scenic	Fish	5.3
	<u>Segment 3</u> : From the Bob Marshall Wilderness boundary to the headwaters.	Wild		6.4
Middle Fork North Fork Teton River	From the mouth to the headwaters.	Scenic	Fish	6.8
Waldron Creek	From the mouth to the headwaters.	Recreational	Fish	4.3
North Fork Sun River	From the Bob Marshall Wilderness boundary to the headwaters.	Wild	Scenery Recreation	26.1
South Fork Sun River	From the Bob Marshall Wilderness boundary to the headwaters.	Wild	Recreation Wildlife	26.2
West Fork South Fork Sun River	From the mouth to the confluence with Ahorn Creek.	Wild	Recreation Wildlife	8.4
Green Fork Straight Creek	From the mouth to the headwaters.	Wild	Scenery Geology	5.9
Wood Creek	From the dam on Wood Lake northwest to the confluence with Straight Creek.	Recreational	Wildlife	7.1
Dearborn River	From the USFS boundary to the confluence with Whitetail Creek.	Wild	Scenery	6.5
Snowies Geographic Area				
Swimming Woman Creek	From the private land boundary to the headwaters.	Scenic	Scenery Geology	3.9
East Fork Big Spring Creek	From the confluence with a no name stream in T13N R19E Section 33 to the headwaters.	Wild	Fish	5.3
Upper Blackfoot Geographic Area				
Alice Creek	From the private land boundary to the headwaters.	Recreational	Cultural	6.5
Copper Creek	<u>Segment 1</u> : From the USFS boundary to the USFS boundary.	Recreational	Fish	1.1
	<u>Segment 2</u> : From the USFS boundary to the headwaters.	Recreational		12.0
Landers Fork	Segment 1: From the USFS boundary to the confluence with Byrnes Creek	Scenic	Fish	0.3
	Segment 2: From the confluence with Byrnes Creek to the headwaters.	Wild		18.5
Snowbank Creek	From the mouth to the headwaters.	Scenic	Fish	4.4
Total Miles of eligible sections of wild and scenic rivers				360.7

Fire, Fuels and Vegetation Management

I chose alternative F because it provides the Forest the ability to produce timber 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 volume, in support of local economies and to increase the pace at which desired conditions are achieved ecosystems are restored. Similarly, many commenters were supportive of using 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 projected timber volume and lands suitable for timber production under alternative F are only slightly lower than the alternative that maximized timber volume (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, based on modifications made during the Objection process, the Plan identifies 368,563 acres of lands suitable for timber production, and 1,674,482 acres that are unsuitable for timber production but where harvest can occur for other multiple use purposes. On these lands, 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. Projected volumes are based on the Forest's average budget levels for fiscal year 2013 through fiscal year 2015. However, the estimates of timber volume 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 (alternative F) 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.

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 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 2021 Land Management 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 Plan updates and carries forward this direction and extends it to portions of the forest east of the continental divide (2021 Land Management 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 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 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 ensure project activities are designed to reduce displacement of elk and other big game species from NFS lands during the hunting season.

Elk habitat security and hunting season vulnerability and availability have received a great deal of attention for decades. These concerns were initially based on observations that in some areas logging roads displaced elk from favored habitats, and 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. At the time the 1986 Forest Plans were signed, elk management standards were focused more on road density and cover standards applied unilaterally across the forest, regardless of the availability of secure habitat blocks and the unique characteristics of different landscapes and specific elk herds. Much has been learned about elk habitat needs since 1986. Current best available scientific information calls for more flexibility across the entire forest landscapes focused on providing security blocks of habitat instead of the one size fits all approach of the 1986 Forest Plans.

Since the 1986 forest 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 and best available scientific information is not possible under the 1986 forest plans without amendment or revision, because it varies from the standards and guidelines in those plans.

The guideline included in the final Plan (2021 Land Management Plan, Forestwide Benefits to People/Fish and Wildlife guideline #01) allows managers more flexibility to design vegetation management activities to achieve ecosystem desired conditions, while also achieving desired elk distribution on NFS lands. The 2013 interagency recommendations would be used as a management approach to guide project design. The guideline directs biologists and managers to use current 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 Forest Service 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 ecosystem and species-specific plan 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 nonmotorized 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 2021 Land Management Plan).

Requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule

The Plan has been prepared in compliance with the NFMA 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. (2021 Land Management 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. (2021 Land Management 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 aquatic and terrestrial ecosystem plan components described above, and through species-specific 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. (2021 Land Management 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 (2021 Land Management 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 following public desires.

- 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 (2021 Land Management Plan, Divide and Snowies Geographic Area sections).
- Wilderness and primitive recreation experiences are 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 Recreation Opportunity Spectrum areas outside of wilderness and recommended wilderness areas. (2021 Land Management 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 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 (2021 Land Management Plan, Benefits to People—Timber and livestock grazing sections).

- Improved public access opportunities, 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. (2021 Land Management 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 (2021 Land Management 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 (2021 Land Management 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 (2021 Land Management Plan, Cultural, Historic, and Tribal Resources).
- Protection of tribal resources and tribal uses is provided through plan components that support tribal rights and consultation with tribes on management of important tribal landscapes (2021 Land Management Plan, Cultural, Historic, and Tribal Resources).
- Continuation of opportunities for grazing to support rural economies and heritage, open space and sense of place is provided through plan components that enhance forage production, protect grasslands from conifer encroachment and maintain existing allotments for livestock grazing (2021 Land Management Plan, Benefits to People-Livestock Grazing).
- Improving safety of local communities and firefighters by increasing the pace and scale of fuels treatment helps reduce the size and severity of wildfire (2021 Land Management 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 (2021 Land Management Plan, Terrestrial Vegetation and Timber and final EIS).
- Supporting the recovery and persistence of the 4 threatened, endangered, proposed or candidate species (3 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 (2021 Land Management 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, harlequin duck, bats, western toad, amphibians, bull trout, and westslope cutthroat trout (2021 Land Management 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 planning 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).

The species of conservation concern list can change as needed over time. If a species is added, I will evaluate whether the plan provides the ecological conditions to maintain a viable population (or contribute to it). If it does, the I'll provide notice of the no changes to the Plan are needed. If it does not, I will amend the plan.

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 planning area, with the exception of two terrestrial species—flamulated 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 planning area to maintain or restore the ecological conditions to maintain a viable population of these four species of conservation concern in the planning area. However, I find that the Plan includes plan components to maintain or restore ecological conditions within the planning 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 (2021 Land Management 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 (2021 Land Management 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 (2021 Land Management 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 (2021 Land Management 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 (2021 Land Management 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, including elk and other ungulates, (2021 Land Management Plan, Aquatic Ecosystems and Wildlife).
- Including plan components that establish desired scenic integrity (2021 Land Management 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 (2021 Land Management Plan, Vegetation, Wildlife, Aquatic Ecosystems, Lands).
- Maintaining the wilderness character of the three existing designated wilderness areas and the two wilderness study areas, and the wilderness characteristics of the seven recommended wilderness areas. (2021 Land Management Plan, Designated Areas).
- Guiding management to protect the nature and purposes of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail per the National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978. (2021 Land Management 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 (2021 Land Management 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 (2021 Land Management 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 (2021 Land Management Plan, Livestock Grazing).
- Providing opportunities for the development of mineral resources, where appropriate (2021 Land Management Plan, Geology and Minerals).
- Providing opportunities for hunting and fishing, with their associated cultural and socioeconomic benefits (2021 Land Management 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 harvest (2021 Land Management 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 (2021 Land Management 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 (2021 Land Management 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 consider 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 (2021 Land Management 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 (2021 Land Management 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 (2021 Land Management Plan, Timber).

Some objectors expressed concern that the potential timber sale quantity is not sufficient to address insect and disease mortality on the Forest and achieve vegetation desired conditions in a timely manner. They requested harvest levels closer to the sustained yield limit to accelerate restoration and contribute to the sustainability of Montana's mill infrastructure. However, I've determined the Plan's potential timber sale quantity is appropriate to provide for sustainable levels of timber harvest while incorporating reasonable constraints to achieve the desired conditions for all other resources. In addition, I've evaluated the potential for additional timber volume in anticipation of added capacity through Good Neighbor authorities and other partnerships, and recent increases in Agency planning efficiencies.

The 2012 Planning Rule also requires land management plans to provide information regarding possible actions that may occur in the planning 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 2021 Land Management Plan). The Forest anticipates treating 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 2021 Land Management 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 (2021 Land Management 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.

Changes between draft and final EIS

The Council on Environmental Quality's regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act require an agency to assess and consider comments on a draft environmental impact statement, both individually and collectively; and for the final environmental impact statement, respond to substantive comments by:

1. modifying alternatives,
2. developing and evaluating new alternatives not previously given serious consideration,
3. supplementing, improving, or modifying the analyses,
4. making factual corrections, or

5. explaining why comments do not warrant further agency response.

After carefully considering the comments received on the draft EIS, modifications were made to plan components in all alternatives; and the analyses were clarified or corrected as needed and described in the individual resource sections of chapter 3 in the final EIS. In addition, alternative F was developed for the final EIS based on alternative B, including features from all alternatives considered in the draft 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) selecting plan components that makes motorized and mechanized methods of transportation not suitable in areas being recommended wilderness areas (3) changing the boundaries of several recommended wilderness areas to accommodate existing recreation uses, including:

- Nevada Mountain Recommended Wilderness Area: the northern boundary of the recommended wilderness area was moved south to accommodate existing bicycle use on the Helmville-Gould trail, which was kept open to bicycles in recent site-specific travel plan decisionmaking. The eastern boundary was modified to match the IRA boundary.
- Big Snowies Recommended Wilderness Area: creation of the Grandview Recreation Area in the western portion reduced the size of the recommended wilderness area by 32,300 acres.
- Red Mountain Recommended Wilderness Area: added approximately 500 acres to incorporate the entire drainage to the south (instead of cutting off in the middle).

Other prominent comment topics resulted in minor changes or updates to plan components or other aspects of the 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

I find the variations in alternative F and the other alternatives are minor and are qualitatively within the spectrum of alternatives discussed in the draft environmental impact statement. Appendix F of the final environmental impact statement includes the summary response to the substantive comments received.

Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered 5 other alternatives which are discussed below. Alternative F is 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 nonmotorized 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 Geographic Area. They also include designation of the Badger Two Medicine as an 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 planning 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 34,212 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 NFS lands and the former Lewis and Clark NFS lands.
- Eligible wild and scenic rivers would be included.
- The Elkhorns Wildlife Management Unit designation would be maintained.

- None of the other 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 Emphasis 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 213,170 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 Emphasis Area would not be designated.
- The Grandview Recreation Area would not be designated.

Alternative C

Alternative C 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 Elkhorn Geographic Area 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 18,752 acres of recreation settings in the Elkhorns Geographic Area would shift from semi-primitive motorized to semiprimitive nonmotorized recreation opportunities.
- An area within the Elkhorns core area would be identified where mechanized means of transportation would not be suitable. This area is approximately 49,229 acres in size.
- 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 Emphasis 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 Elkhorns core area. 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 474,658 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 nonmotorized 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 Geographic Area (4,505 acres).
- The Green Timber Basin-Beaver Creek Emphasis 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 acres of lands suitable for timber production 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 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 Emphasis 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 152,948 acres.
- Motorized and mechanized means of transportation would not be suitable in recommended wilderness areas.
- Additional primitive recreation opportunity settings outside of designated areas would be identified in the Little Belt Mountains (including part of the Tenderfoot and Deep Creek drainages), Rocky Mountain Range, Snowies, and Elkhorns Geographic Areas.
- Approximately 18,752 acres of recreation settings in the Elkhorns Geographic Area would shift from semiprimitive motorized to semiprimitive nonmotorized and 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 Geographic Area, with a smaller delineation than the area included in alternative D (1,578 acres).
- The Green Timber Basin-Beaver Creek Emphasis 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.
- Mechanized means of transportation would be suitable within the area within the Elkhorns Geographic Area known as the Elkhorns core area. However, a monitoring item (MON-EH-01) was added to the monitoring plan to track social conflicts in the core area (2021 Land Management Plan, appendix B).

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 forestwide 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 provide 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 nonmotorized 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 (§219.3) and 219.14(a)(3)) requires the responsible official to use the best available scientific information to inform the development of the Plan, including the assessment, plan components, and the monitoring program. 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 planning 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 EIS.

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 database is a 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.

The best available scientific information is described in many different places throughout the planning record in different levels of detail. Every topic in the final EIS also contains a section with more detail on what was considered the best available scientific information for that topic area. For example, Section 3.13.4 of the final EIS describes in some detail the criteria used to determine what information was the most accurate, reliable, and relevant for wildlife resources. Appendix B describes how plan components were developed by using that information to identify key ecosystem characteristics and system drivers and stressors. Appendices H and I contain more detail on how the best available scientific information was used to develop the ecosystem-level plan components that support most terrestrial wildlife species. While individual sources are cited throughout the assessment, final EIS, and planning record, in many cases the information was considered more holistically in developing a suite of plan components that collectively provide for the needs of wildlife while supporting the Forest Service multiple use mandate.

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 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 EIS 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 (2021 Land Management 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 (2021 Land Management 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. Based on standard implementing procedures for compliance 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 4 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. It also determined that implementation of the Plan is *not likely to jeopardize* the continued existence of whitebark pine in the planning area.

The Forest Service received a biological opinion from USFWS for the grizzly bear, Canada lynx, and Canada lynx critical habitat in February 2021 and the bull trout and bull trout critical habitat biological opinion in October 2021. They are posted on the forest plan revision website. 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 are also 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

This decision is consistent with Executive Order 12898, which requires that all Federal actions consider potentially disproportionate effects on minority and low-income

communities, especially if adverse effects to environmental or human health conditions are identified. The following three counties were identified as environmental justice counties in the Assessment: Glacier County (North area), Pondera County (North area) and Chouteau 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 planning 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 regarding 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 planning 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 2012 Planning Rule section of this document, my review of the planning process, the final EIS, and the information provided in the 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, also known as significant cultural resources.

The Plan is a result of a programmatic level planning effort that will not directly authorize any activities or projects that would have potential to cause effects to cultural resources. 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 the result of the direction in the Plan and are considered undertaken, per 36 CFR 800.3(a)(1) of Section 106 of the NHPA, will comply with laws and regulations that ensure protection of cultural 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, tribes, and other interested parties. Therefore, I find that the Plan is in compliance with this act.

National Trails Act

As directed by the National Trails System Act (Public Law 90-543), Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan amendment (2009) sets forth direction to guide the development and management along the trail and within the corridor of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail. The intent of the 2009 Comprehensive Plan is to provide a uniform CDNST program that reflects the purposes of the National Scenic Trail System and allows for the use and protection of the natural and cultural resources found along the rights-of-way and located route on lands of all jurisdictions. It replaces the 1985 CDNST Comprehensive Plan.

The Plan would provide for the nature and purposes of the CDNST, in accordance with the programmatic requirements of the National Trails System Act, as amended, and the 2009 CDNST Comprehensive Plan. It would also carry forward the need for rehabilitation of any impacted sites along the trail, education and interpretation along the trail, and implementation of Continental Divide National Scenic Trail management plans. 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 (2021 Land Management 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 achieving the policy objectives at 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-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 and in this ROD under the Nature of the Decision section, 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-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-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-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 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 2021 Land Management Plan direction within the first decade.

Project and Activity Consistency

As required by the NFMA and the 2012 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 26 of this 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

The 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 was subject to the objection process identified in 36 CFR Part 219 Subpart B (219.50 to 219.62). A 60-day objection period on the draft records of decision, land management plan, and final EIS ran concurrently with an objection period for the Regional Forester's species of conservation concern for the Forest. The objection period was initiated on May 21, 2020 with the publication of the notice of the opportunity to object in the newspapers of record. The Forest Service received 88 timely objections. Interested parties and objectors attended a series of meetings, September 29 through October 1, 2020 via Zoom to discuss objection issues. The reviewing officers issued their written responses to the objection issues on February 19, 2021. The written responses set forth the reasons for the response and contained instructions to the responsible officials. The written responses are the final decision by the U.S. Department of Agriculture on the objections.

The reviewing officer found that for most issues, the final EIS, the land management plan, the draft ROD, and associated planning record established that the responsible official sufficiently addressed the objection issues and is in compliance with current law, regulation, and policy. For those issues that required additional clarification or modifications, the reviewing officer issued instructions to the Forest. These are detailed in appendix A of this ROD.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this 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) 449-5201.

Signature and Date


William Avey

10/29/21
DATE

Forest Supervisor
Helena – Lewis and Clark National Forest

Appendix A - Objection Instructions

Table 2 documents changes that were made in response to the reviewing officers’ letter to the objectors. The first column displays the instructions from the reviewing officer. The second column displays how the instructions were addressed. The following columns display which documents [Plan, final EIS, and/or ROD] contain the changes. The following additional acronyms are used in the tables:

BASI – best available scientific information

SCC – species of conservation concerns

ROS – recreation opportunity spectrum

ESA – endangered species act

Table 2. Objection instructions

Instructions from reviewing officer	How instructions were addressed	Plan	Final EIS	ROD
<p><u>Overall Scientific Integrity</u> Include a summary explanation in section 3.2 of the final EIS to provide clear documentation of what constituted the best available scientific information. I am also instructing him clarify how that information it was used to reach the final plan decision.</p>	<p>Information added to Section 3.2 of the final EIS and to the Best Available Scientific Information section of the Record of Decision.</p>		<p>X</p>	<p>X</p>
<p><u>Coordination with Other Planning Efforts</u> Summarize the reviews from the environmental consequences’ sections of each resource area in an appendix to the EIS. In addition, section 2.4 of the final EIS should be clarified to describe the extent to which any inconsistencies remain and how the plan provides for opportunities to resolve or reduce conflicts.</p>	<p>Summarized in final EIS and ROD, detailed in final EIS appendix L</p>		<p>X</p>	<p>X</p>
<p><u>Timber Harvest Suitability in the Elkhorns Geographic Area</u> Incorporate a portion of the suggested rewording of the plan component EH-TIM-SUIT-01 as follows: “The Elkhorns</p>	<p>Change was made in the 2021 Land Management Plan</p>	<p>X</p>		

Instructions from reviewing officer	How instructions were addressed	Plan	Final EIS	ROD
Wildlife Management Unit is not suitable for timber production. However, timber harvest is suitable to provide for other multiple use purposes when compatible with wildlife values and habitats.”				
<p><u>Oil and Gas Leasing</u> Clarify and differentiate the effects to leasable minerals management based upon the no surface occupancy plan standard for recommended wilderness areas versus the effects of future Congressional designation.</p>	<p>This was changed in multiple places in document except in wilderness study areas. If these administratively designated areas were to become Congressionally designated, they would be discretionarily unavailable for mineral leasing.</p>	X	X	
<p><u>Geographic Area Recreation Opportunity Spectrum Setting Changes</u> Correct the assigned recreation setting in the Nevada mountain area between Gould-Helmville and South Fork Poorman Creek consistent with the rationale to remain consistent with current travel plan decisions.</p>	Correction was made	X		
<p><u>Mountain Biking in Primitive Settings</u> Clarify the text description of how the national recreation opportunity spectrum protocol and manual direction was used in the final EIS.</p>	<p>In response to comments on the draft EIS, the Forest misrepresented national direction guiding management of primitive ROS settings. The response to comments was corrected to clarify allowing mountain bike use in primitive recreation settings is consistent with national direction, which allows all forms of nonmotorized recreation uses within primitive ROS settings, including mountain bikes, outside of designated wilderness areas. Although, national direction allows me the discretion to make mountain bikes unsuitable in primitive settings outside of designated wilderness, I have chosen not to do so, except within recommended wilderness areas.</p>		X	

Instructions from reviewing officer	How instructions were addressed	Plan	Final EIS	ROD
<p><u>Outfitter and Guide Permitting</u> Add clarification why a comprehensive capacity analysis was not conducted for the plan revision by providing additional explanation in the alternative not considered in detail section of the EIS.</p>	<p>Additional information was added in the final EIS, section 2.7.9</p>		<p>x</p>	
<p><u>Elk Habitat</u> Review Lowrey et al. 2019 and determine if it would lead to any changes in plan components.</p>	<p>This research took place in the Elkhorns Geographic Area on the Forest in 2015-2017 and evaluates impact of beetle-kill-related canopy reduction on elk security and use of public lands during hunting seasons. The paper supports the plan by acknowledging the need to manage for security where cover is present rather than arbitrarily on the landscape, because cover is a dynamic feature that may change over time. It also notes differences with other study areas as to what habitat features, area size, etc., function as secure areas for elk, lending support to the plan’s focus on flexibility based on local or area conditions or needs. The paper supports the analyses in the final EIS and Elk Status Report by noting that the nature of elk security and landscape use varies according to local or area conditions, hunting pressure, and other factors. The programmatic nature of the final EIS analysis does not lend itself to use of the more fine-grained findings of this research, which is based on a relatively short period within a longer process (infestation and recovery). The paper adds to a body of research that should be used during project planning in order to determine the most appropriate means of achieving desired conditions. However, it does not require any change in plan components.</p>			
<p><u>Wolverine</u></p>	<p>Trapping is regulated by the State of Montana, but access to public lands could affect the amount or distribution of trapping</p>			

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<p>Clarify how plan allocations that affect access might influence potential mortality from incidental trapping.</p>	<p>that occurs. Under all alternatives the acreage and distribution of Congressionally designated wilderness, conservation management area, and IRA would not change from the existing situation, so all alternatives would have the same very limited potential for trappers to access the majority of wolverine habitat. The amount, pattern, and timing motorized access is determined by travel plans that would not change under any alternatives. Therefore, access by trappers into wolverine habitat would be the same under all alternatives. This is documented in the project record.</p>			
<p><u>Changes to the Inland Native Fish Strategy</u> Identify the purpose and intent of the supplemental response to comment planning record document, and any clarify or correct any response that is unclear or unfinished.</p>	<p>The supplemental response to comments in the planning record was meant to be an iterative draft that informed the development of the response to comments in appendix G in the final EIS. Not every comment or concern/response category has a detailed response, as they were not necessary, but the level of detail that was captured by some specialists for the more detailed and complex comments could be helpful in the understanding of the final response so was preserved in the record. The responses have been updated to make them clearer.</p>		x	
<p><u>Conservation Watershed Network</u> Clarify the final EIS to address the different purposes of Watershed Condition Framework priority watersheds and the conservation watershed network, as well as providing an explanation of how the conservation watershed network relates to priority watersheds under the INFISH in alternative A. Clarify the methodology used to identify the conservation watershed network including connectivity.</p>	<p>Clarified the hierarchy and methodology within the CWN, described the differences between WCF, CWN, and INFISH priority watersheds. Added to the final EIS and appendix E of the 2021 Land Management Plan</p>	x	x	

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<p>Clarify how plan components will be applied to support the effects conclusions for at-risk aquatic species including the determination timber production is compatible with achieving desired conditions.</p>				
<p><u>Adequacy of Plan Direction to Contribute to [Grizzly Bear] Recovery</u> Clarify the final EIS effects analysis by summarizing information from the grizzly bear amendment final EIS and biological assessment, together with the new information from the literature provided by this objector.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarize potential effects of mountain biking on grizzly bear and consider whether any changes are needed in the plan based on this review. • Add a monitoring indicator to track illegal motorized access on the Forest. 	<p>Added to final EIS, section 3.14.6. Monitoring indicator added to Plan appendix B</p>	x	x	
<p><u>Lynx</u> Review the new literature on beetle-killed spruce-fir stands published by Thomas et al. (2019) to determine whether any changes in the land management plan are necessary, or whether additional analysis is warranted prior to signing the final record of decision.</p>	<p>Completed review. Article provides information about potential impacts of salvage logging in northern boreal forest of northern Canada. Study was carried out in summer, during a peak of the 10-year hare cycle. Findings suggest that salvage logging may decrease hare and lynx use of salvaged areas but recommend studies to understand impacts in winter and at other point in hare cycle where relative influences of predation risk and forage needs may be different. Authors highlight some differences with studies from lower latitudes in which retained forest structure appears to influence hare use. Other work at lower latitudes shows differences in hare cycle (not as pronounced as in the north), importance of winter habitat over summer, and different suite of both predators and prey. Study</p>			

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	makes some recommendations about spatial aspects of salvage logging in this environment that should be considered along with other research when planning projects and analyzing impacts to Canada lynx at the project level. I have determined that no changes are warranted in the plan, nor is additional analysis in the EIS required to support that finding.			
<p><u>Connectivity</u> Add a Connectivity sub-section to the Terrestrial Wildlife Diversity section of the final EIS (section 3.13.6). This section should integrate information from other sections of the final EIS to provide a more comprehensive analysis of how plan direction will support connectivity.</p>	Added as Section 3.13.7 in the final EIS, part 1.		x	
<p><u>Plants</u> Correct the contradictory information in the final EIS to clearly disclose the effects of the plan components for plant species of conservation concern.</p>	Corrected in Section 3.10.6 of the final EIS		x	
<p><u>Carbon Storage and Sequestration</u> Add an explanation in the final EIS that expands on response to comments by noting that because the land management plan does not authorize any actions, it cannot be an irreversible and irretrievable commitment of resources.</p>	Added this to section 3.1 in the final EIS		x	
<p><u>Badger Two Medicine Plan Components</u> Provide an explanation for the plan component changes made per objector’s proposed remedy and ensure the effects described in table 211 are adjusted accordingly.</p>	Adjusted Table 211 in the final EIS, part 2 and added explanation in the changes between draft and final EIS in section 3.23.1.		x	

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<p><u>Motorized Means of Transportation in Badger Two Medicine</u> Clarify a portion of the area is in a roaded natural recreation setting in the response to comment.</p>	<p>Updated in the final EIS, appendix G, Response to Comments: CR14, 102, 144, 150, and 151. Also added monitoring item RM-BTM-01 to 2021 Land Management Plan appendix B.</p>	<p>x</p>	<p>x</p>	
<p><u>Amount and Location of Recommended Wilderness</u> Provide additional specificity rationale for the selected recommended wilderness area boundaries where different from the draft EIS alternatives in the final record of decision.</p>	<p>Added to ROD and final EIS Section 3.21.1</p>		<p>x</p>	<p>x</p>
<p><u>Management of Wilderness Study Areas</u> Provide additional explanation in the record of decision how mountain biking and administrative chain saw suitability in wilderness study areas complies with the requirement to maintain the areas' potential for wilderness designation.</p>	<p>Information added to ROD, page 22-23</p>			<p>x</p>
<p><u>Suitability for Motorized and Mechanized Means of Transportation [in Recommended Wilderness Areas]</u> Ensure all descriptions of the plan decision effects to current travel plan decisions are consistent throughout the planning record.</p>	<p>All documents have been reviewed and the descriptions have been made consistent.</p>	<p>x</p>	<p>x</p>	<p>x</p>
<p><u>Regulatory Framework [for the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail]</u> Include a description of the compatibility of the 2021 Land Management Plan with the 2009 Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan and indicate if any updates to the comprehensive plan would be needed upon approval of the land management plan.</p>	<p>Added to Section 3.22 of final EIS and the National Trails Act section of this ROD, page 57.</p>		<p>x</p>	
<p><u>Inadequate Plan Components [for the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail]</u> Clearly describe the trail corridor in the land management plan and the final EIS and add the corridor to the designated</p>	<p>Added to Section 3.22 of final EIS.</p>		<p>x</p>	

Instructions from reviewing officer	How instructions were addressed	Plan	Final EIS	ROD
<p>area map. Also see issues summaries for the recreation opportunity spectrum for related concerns.</p>				
<p><u>Elkhorns Wildlife Management Unit</u> Bring the draft EIS boundaries for alternatives C and D forward in the final EIS for a clear comparison of effects. The final record of decision should provide rationale for the final boundary determination.</p> <p>Provide a crosswalk between the 1986 plan direction for the Elkhorns Wildlife Management Unit and the 2021 Land Management Plan. This should help communicate how the land management plan components provide comparable direction to the 1986 Forest Plan.</p>	<p>Done</p> <p>Added to record</p>		<p>X</p>	

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