



File Code: 1950-1

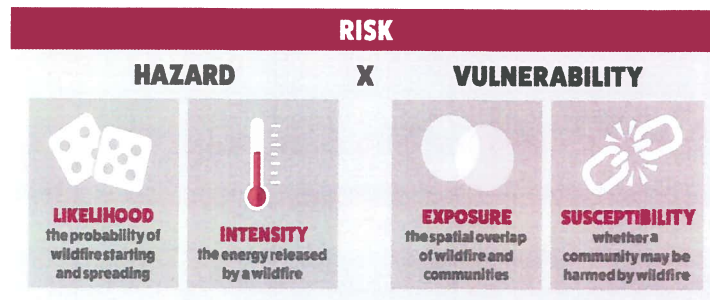
Date: October 6, 2020

Dear Interested Party,

The Missoula Ranger District on the Lolo National Forest (NF) is seeking public comments on the proposed **Wildfire Adapted Missoula (WAM)** project that surrounds the communities of Missoula, Lolo, East Missoula, Bonner, Clinton, and Turah (approx. 158,725 acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands). We are contacting you based on your interest in past projects on the Lolo NF or because you own property adjacent to the area. This letter and attachment are a very brief overview of the project and proposed action. The bulk of the content and details of WAM are on our story map¹ (<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/ea1f3b22598441bb9adfc2740200a57b>) and NEPA Projects webpage (<http://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/lolo/landmanagement/projects>). Please access the web if you are looking for more information about the project (story map, proposed treatment descriptions, and maps).

In 2018, Missoula County adopted a revised Community Wildfire Protection Plan (MCCWPP) <https://www.missoulacounty.us/government/public-safety/office-of-emergency-management/community-wildfire-protection-plan>. This updated plan was collaboratively developed by many stakeholders representing different areas of expertise and perspectives. The CWPP includes a wildfire hazard and risk assessment that identified a significant area at high or very high hazard to wildfire. Given the vast area around Missoula with fuel buildups, and constraints that limit the amount of area that can be treated, a more fine-scale strategic wildfire risk-assessment was needed to prioritize potential fuel treatment areas to implement the CWPP. The Lolo NF, in partnership with the Rocky Mountain Research Station (RMRS), Fire Modeling Institute (FMI), and Pyrologix LLC, used state-of-the-art wildfire simulation modeling and wildfire risk assessment approaches to identify and prioritize areas for fuels reduction treatments to lessen the intensity, severity and likely impacts of future wildfires. The wildfire risk assessment is a snapshot of the landscape conditions and associated wildfire risks.

Wildfire Risk is a science-informed measure of the likelihood (probability) and consequences of future wildfires. For any location in Missoula County, wildfire risk depends on the likelihood (chance) of a fire happening there, the potential fire intensity, and the susceptibility or vulnerability of something of value at that site (e.g., houses). A wildfire risk-assessment provides insight on the wildfire behavior areas of a landscape can produce and is used to identify where future wildfires could exceed certain fire behavior thresholds. Once identified, area risk-mitigating fuels reduction treatments can be designed to reduce fire intensity and severity within treated areas, as well as, reduce the likelihood of fire reaching vulnerable sites or communities (www.wildfirerisk.org).



¹ Graphically organized text and interactive maps that tell the story of the need for the projects and other information



QR code for story map



Purpose and Need

Wildfire Adapted Missoula is a risk-based strategic fuels management project designed to implement the MCCWPP. It proposes vegetation and fuel treatments to reduce wildfire hazard and associated risk in strategic locations where wildfire risk: 1) is moderate to high and may be effectively treated to lower it; or, 2) is low to moderate and may be lowered or maintained through fuel treatments. The need for the WAM was identified in the MCCWPP (pg. 44) to:

- ✓ Design and prioritize fuel treatments to reduce wildfire intensity, structure ignition, and negative impacts to values
- ✓ Where feasible, implement strategically placed fuel treatments to interrupt fire spread across landscapes
- ✓ Use and expand fuel treatments where economically feasible and sustainable, and where they align with landowner objectives
- ✓ Reduce wildfire risk by removing fuels, especially small diameter trees, while maintaining forest structure to protect ecosystem components

The purpose of this project is to reduce wildfire hazard and risk to communities and emergency response personnel. Specifically, the project is designed to:

- Reduce high hazard (high intensity) wildfire potential to enable wildfire response where suppression resources can safely access and anchor their actions with an increased likelihood of success. Fuel treatments that provide access and create or maintain low wildfire hazard provide firefighters more decision space while responding to wildland fires in the forest and wildland-urban interface.
- Reduce wildfire hazard and risk by reducing fire intensity and severity within treated areas and reducing the likelihood of fire (and embers) from reaching communities. Wildfire hazard is the potential for a wildfire to cause harm or damage. The higher the wildfire hazard the greater the likelihood of high-intensity fire with torching, crowning, and extreme wildfire behavior.
- Thrive with wildland fire and its natural ecological role on the landscape, including prescribed fires and wildfires.
- Increase the effectiveness of all wildfire risk reduction actions by working across boundaries with all jurisdictional partners to implement the objectives from the 2018 MCCWPP.

This project is bringing landowners and stakeholders together across boundaries to decide on common goals to achieve long-term outcomes for the landscapes they share (i.e., an “all lands” approach). It takes into consideration resilient landscapes, fire-adapted communities, and coordinated response - the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Strategy. While the proposed activities may complement fuel treatments on adjacent private land, WAM only proposes treatment on the Lolo NF.

This project recognizes that we live in a fire-dependent landscape and that there may be cases where even with fuel treatments we may experience loss due to wildfire. It also stresses the need to re-introduce fire on the landscape, prescribed and natural, as an important way to maintain forests and reduce fire hazard and risk. The WAM project acknowledges that a community-wide comprehensive approach is required to effectively reduce and manage wildfire risk and become more fire-adapted.

Proposal

The following proposed *non-mechanized* wildfire risk reduction fuel treatments could occur on up to 90,000 acres of



NFS lands within the project area depending on conditions. This conditional strategy allows predetermined treatments to be aligned, prior to implementation, with current conditions on the ground. These are forests with low to moderate wildfire hazard potential because they have open to moderately open tree canopies or have young or small trees; or they are they are in wildland-urban interface. Depending on site conditions one of these treatments could occur (see attachment for treatment narrative details):

- Young forest - small tree thinning and prescribed burning
- Hand thinning, piling, and prescribed burning
- Hand thinning and prescribed burning
- Prescribed burning (> 300 acres)
- Restoration of acquired lands (e.g., prescribed burning, weed treatment, tree planting)
- Meadow restoration (e.g., weed treatment)
- Managed wildfire

Treatments that modify fuels along existing roads, trails, and strategic locations to reduce fire intensity (i.e., shaded fuelbreaks) are proposed throughout the WAM project area and include a combination of mechanized and non-mechanized treatments (108 miles/4,092 acres).

In the Blue Mountain area, the following *mechanized* wildfire risk reduction fuel treatments are proposed:

- Mechanized thinning and prescribed burning (1,688 acres)
- Hand thinning and prescribed burning with incidental mechanized fuel treatments (856 acres)

The proposed treatments in the Blue Mountain area are driven by current risk mapping and analysis that has shown it to be one of the highest priority treatment areas that is nested within the greater WAM project boundary. In coming years, the Missoula RD will work with local communities on additional priority treatment areas to plan and implement similar treatments.

While no changes to public access are proposed, this project includes road and trail proposals for: project implementation (e.g., accessing treatment units); facilitating future wildfire suppression (e.g., building roads that may be needed for first responder access and evacuation routes); and, removing unneeded roads from the transportation system to reduce undesirable resource impacts and future maintenance costs and offset project impacts on watersheds (i.e., decommissioning and storing roads). To facilitate the treatments in the Blue Mountain area and to provide long-term access for wildland fire management, 2.6 miles of temporary roads and 6.2 miles of permanent roads are proposed.

See attached maps and treatment descriptions for more information on locations and specific treatment types.

Collaborative Project Development

Collaboration with communities and the public has been, and will continue to be, important for this project. The Missoula District partnered with the National Forest Foundation (NFF) who served as a convener and coordinator of a series of “Learning Labs”, or interactive conversations with the Missoula community, in spring, summer, and fall 2019. The purpose of the Learning Labs was to enhance community knowledge and understanding of fire risk and mitigation measures on surrounding NFS lands. They were designed to reach businesses, people who serve as connectors or thought leaders in Missoula, fire professionals, elected officials, conservation organizations, the media, neighborhoods with high fire risk, and recreation organizations and permittees. These meetings provided opportunities for various stakeholder groups to learn, ask questions, and provide feedback concerning fire-adapted ecosystems, the WAM landscape, and forest management techniques.

Your Involvement

This letter initiates this 30-day scoping period, and we encourage your participation during this process. This comment period provides those interested in or affected by these proposals an opportunity to make their concerns known prior to our analysis and the subsequent decision which will be made by the Responsible Official.

Please submit written comments to Tami Paulsen, Planning Team Leader, Missoula Ranger District, 24 Fort Missoula Road, Missoula, Montana, 59804. The office business hours for those wishing to comment in person or by phone are: 8:00 am – 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays (phone 406-329-3750). Comments may be faxed to (406) 329-1049. Electronic comments should be submitted in rtf, MS Word, or Word Perfect format to comments-northern-lolo-missoula@usda.gov. Please include the name of the project (WAM) in the subject line.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record and will be available for public inspection.

Those who respond to this invitation for comments will be notified when the analysis document is available, which is anticipated in summer 2021. If you do not respond to this scoping comment invitation, your name will be removed from this mailing list for future correspondence concerning this project.

Due to concerns related to COVID-19 an in person public meeting will not be held. Instead we will likely provide an online recorded venue, to answer specific questions about the proposals.

For more information, please contact the Missoula Ranger District at (406) 329-3750. Because most of our staff are not working in the office at this time, the front desk staff will pass any inquiries that they cannot address to the appropriate team member(s).

Thank you for your interest and involvement with this important project!

Sincerely,



JENNIFER J. HENSIEK
District Ranger

Enclosure: WAM Project Treatment Descriptions and Scoping Maps