



Forest Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Flathead National Forest, Tally Lake Ranger District

February 2026

Big Mountain Fuels Reduction Project

Proposed Action



Figure 1. Dense forest along Chair 1 lift line

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Big Mountain Fuels Reduction Project

Project Information

The Big Mountain Fuels Reduction project includes treatments on approximately 200 acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands on the Tally Lake Ranger District of the Flathead National Forest within the Whitefish Mountain Resort (WMR) permit boundary. The entire project area is within the wildland-urban interface (WUI) established by the [Flathead County Community Wildfire Protection Plan \(2021\)](#) (Flathead County Office of Emergency Services 2021) and also meets the WUI definitions set forth in the [Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003](#). The project area is entirely within the Salish Mountains geographic area and is categorized in the 2018 Forest Plan as Management Area (MA) 7, Focused Recreation Area (Big Mountain). While this MA7 area is not suitable for timber production, timber harvest and vegetation management may occur to achieve desired conditions for vegetation, or to achieve other purposes associated with the area such as public safety and health (GA-NF-MA7-SUIT-02). Project activities are designed to protect resort infrastructure and are planned along Chairs 1, 2, and 4, along the NFS/WMR boundary, and within stands adjacent to these areas. Activities will complement recent and planned fuel reduction work on private lands.

On April 3, 2025, the Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture issued a memorandum ([1078-006, Increasing Timber Production and Designating an Emergency Situation on National Forest System Lands](#)) making an Emergency Action Determination (EAD) under section 40807 of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). This EAD encompasses millions of acres of National Forest System lands rated as very high or high wildfire risk, as well as those acres designated under Section 602 of HFRA that are experiencing declining forest health. All lands within the Big Mountain Fuels Reduction project area are covered by this EAD and this project is being proposed and analyzed under this Emergency Action authority.

Purpose and Need

Reduce tree densities and fuel loadings within the wildland-urban interface. According to the forest plan, it is desirable to maintain reduced fuels in areas where wildland fire on NFS lands pose a threat to communities and community assets. The Whitefish Mountain Resort represents a concentration of community assets and infrastructure vital to the local recreation and tourism economy. Tree growth, insect and disease mortality, and understory tree regeneration have resulted in the accumulation of ladder and surface fuels conditions in the project area that could support wildland fire with increased resistance to control, which could threaten life, property, and infrastructure (on private resort property, within the resort permit area boundary on NFS lands, and on other adjacent private lands). There is a need to reduce tree densities and fuel loadings to reduce risk to the recreation infrastructure and adjacent communities.

Improve the growth and resilience of vegetative communities. Vegetation treatments are needed to: 1) reduce moderate and high-density forest conditions, 2) improve stand structure by reducing surface and ladder fuels, and 3) improve species composition to favor long-lived species. Proposed vegetation treatments would maintain or move the forest toward desired conditions of relatively low

levels of insect and disease activity, reduced fuel loading in the wildland urban interface, and diverse patterns of stand density appropriate for the potential vegetation type and management objective (FW-DC-TE&V-07, -11, -13, and -21; FW-DC-FIRE-02; FW-DC-TIMB-01).

Proposed Action

Table 1. Summary of proposed activities

Proposed vegetation treatments	Acres
Improvement cut	150
Individual tree selection	48
Total proposed commercial treatment	198

Table 2. Proposed vegetation treatments by unit

Unit	Acres	Prescription	Logging System
1	17	Improvement Cut	Ground Based
2	3	Improvement Cut	Ground Based
3	19	Improvement Cut	Ground Based
4	7	Improvement Cut	Ground Based
5	6	Improvement Cut	Ground Based
6	27	Individual Tree Selection	Ground Based
7	6	Individual Tree Selection	Ground Based
8	10	Improvement Cut	Ground Based
9	16	Improvement Cut	Combination*
10	12	Improvement Cut	Ground Based
11	11	Improvement Cut	Ground Based
13	14	Improvement Cut	Combination*
14	8	Individual Tree Selection	Combination*
15	2	Improvement Cut	Ground Based
16	4	Improvement Cut	Ground Based
17	5	Improvement Cut	Ground Based
18	1	Improvement Cut	Ground Based
19	7	Improvement Cut	Ground Based
20	8	Improvement Cut	Ground Based
21	8	Improvement Cut	Ground Based
22	7	Individual Tree Selection	Ground Based

*Units may be harvested using a combination of ground-based mechanized systems and cable systems

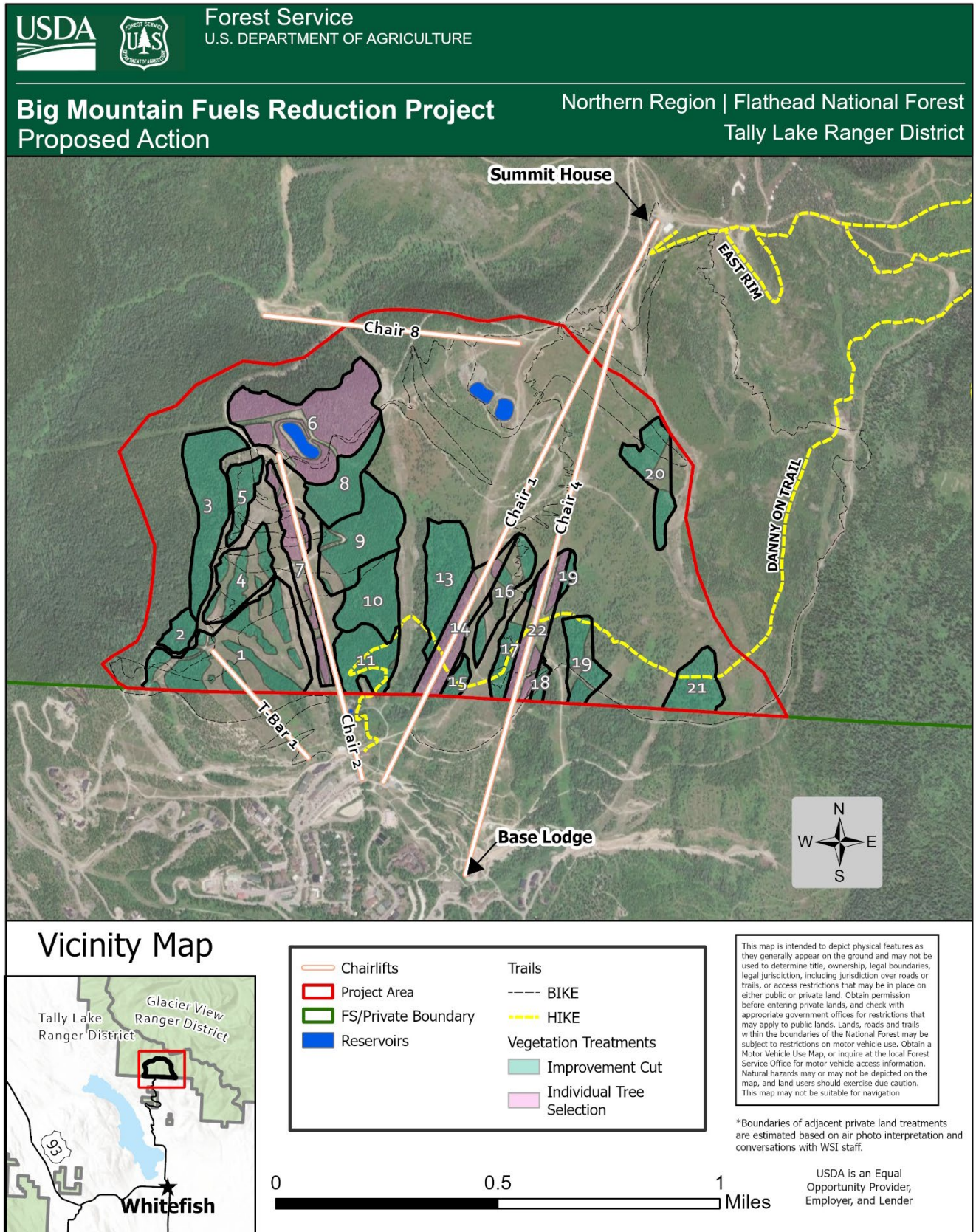


Figure 2. Map of project area and proposed vegetation treatments

Proposed Vegetation Treatment Descriptions

Improvement cut

An **improvement cut** is an intermediate treatment that results in a generally well-stocked stand composed of the healthiest trees with large, well-formed crowns and with reduced fuel loading. The objectives of this treatment are to remove snags and dead trees that may pose hazards and reduce ladder fuels and overall stand density while improving forest growth, resilience, species composition, and structure. Leave tree selection would favor early seral and fire-tolerant species, including western larch and Douglas-fir on most sites. Remaining trees would have more growing space, light, nutrients, and water to allow them to develop more rapidly into large trees with improved insect, disease, and fire tolerance. These activities would be completed using *commercial harvest methods* and *post-harvest fuels methods* (see descriptions in Treatment Methods section below).

Individual Tree Selection

An **individual tree selection** is a highly variable, uneven-aged treatment that results in a variably stocked stand composed of the healthiest trees with large, well-formed crowns, midstory trees, clumps of trees, and small gaps and openings with reduced fuel loading and disconnected fuels continuity. When directly adjacent to improvements, such as lift corridors, trees would be selected based on health and species, as well as height and whether the tree poses a hazard to infrastructure. Similar to the improvement cut, the objectives of this treatment are to remove snags and dead trees that may pose hazards and to reduce ladder fuels and overall stand density while improving forest growth, resilience, species composition, and structure. However, individual tree selection is used in stands where the residual stand will be highly variable with shade-tolerant species present. This includes stands with spruce and fir that are in poor overall health where a more intense treatment such as a clearcut or seed tree harvest is not desirable within the ski area (due to aesthetics, traffic flow management, or other concerns) and areas adjacent to lift corridors where selection criteria will prioritize hazards to infrastructure over species and spacing. Leave tree selection would favor early seral and fire-tolerant species wherever possible, including western larch and Douglas-fir. Leave trees would have more growing space, light, nutrients, and water to allow them to continue to grow, or grow into large trees faster, with improved insect, disease, and fire tolerance. These activities would be completed using *commercial harvest methods* and *post-harvest fuels methods* (see descriptions in Treatment Methods section below).

Treatment Methods

Commercial harvest methods

Commercial harvest methods consist of tree removal through ground-based mechanized systems, cable systems, or a combination of those systems. Ground-based mechanized systems include cutting and staging trees with tracked mechanized felling equipment and moving cut trees to landings for processing with rubber-tired skidders; and using cut-to-length equipment where a harvester fells and processes trees and a forwarder carries processed logs to a landing. Cable systems include skyline harvest systems where trees are mechanically or manually felled and then dragged to the landing via a suspended cable for processing; and use of cable-tethered ground-

based equipment to fell, yard, and complete other post-harvest project activities. Landings are areas adjacent to roads where logs are sorted, processed, and loaded for hauling.

Post-harvest fuels methods

Once harvest activities are completed, post-harvest fuels treatments would occur. Understory trees, damaged trees, and brush would be slashed. Downed wood (in excess of retention requirements) may be excavator-piled, chipped, masticated, burned, or removed from the site to be chipped or burned.

Project Design Features

These design features are an integral part of the proposed action and are considered requirements should the proposed action be selected. They are developed to avoid or reduce potential environmental impacts. **Prior to a final decision, these design features may be refined and additional design features may be added in response to public comments or further resource analysis.**

Forest Service directives (manual and handbook), forest plan standards and guidelines, and all other laws, regulations, and policies that relate to managing National Forest System lands apply to the proposed activities and are repeated here only if clarification is required.

Air Quality

PDF-AIR-01: Prescribed burning requires a permit from the Montana DEQ and must be implemented within the regulatory framework. This includes daily approval from the Flathead County Air Quality hotline and the Montana/Idaho Airshed Group. More information on the Montana/Idaho Airshed Group can be found online at <http://mi.airshedgroup.org>.

(FW-DC-AQ-01, FW-DC-AQ-02, FW-DC-AQ-03)

Applies to prescribed burning and post-harvest burning.

Aquatics

PDF-AQ-01: Application of site appropriate best management practices (BMPs) for water quality and forestry management would follow guidance detailed in volume 1 of the National Core BMP Technical Guide (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2012) and associated Forest Service manual and handbook direction, Montana Guide to the Streamside Management Zone Law & Rules (MTDNRC 2006), and Montana Forestry BMPs (Ziesak et al. 2015). If necessary, exceptions to the SMZ rules through application of alternative practices may be granted through MTDNRC.

(FW-STD-WTR-02, FW-GDL-WTR-01, FW-STD-RMZ-01, FW-STD-RMZ-02, FW-STD-RMZ-06, FW-STD-IFS-06, FW-STD-IFS-07, FW-GDL-IFS-03, FW-GDL-IFS-04, FW-GDL-IFS-05, FW-GDL-IFS-06, FW-GDL-IFS-07, FW-GDL-IFS-09, FW-GDL-IFS-10)

Applies to all activities.

PDF-AQ-02: Equipment storage, storage of fuels and toxicants, maintenance, or refueling (other than for portable pumps associated with prescribed fire) would not be permitted within the RMZ.

(FW-STD-RMZ-01, FW-STD-RMZ-03)

Applies to all activities.

Cultural Resources

PDF-CR-01: If any newly discovered heritage resources are identified during project implementation, work in the area would stop and heritage staff would be contacted. Applies to all project activities.

Non-native Invasive Plant Species

PDF-NNIS-01: Off-road equipment would be power-washed or steam cleaned on the undercarriage and chassis before transport to the project area. Off-road equipment includes all logging and construction machinery for vegetation treatments, except for log trucks, chip vans, service vehicles, water trucks, pickup trucks, cars, and similar vehicles. This cleaning shall remove all soil, plant parts, seeds, vegetative matter, or other debris that could contain or hold seeds. All subsequent equipment entries from outside the project area back to the project area shall be treated in the same manner as the initial entry.

(FW-DC-NNIP-02)

Applies to all project activities.

PDF-NNIS-02: Herbicides will be sprayed within the road prism along designated haul routes before log hauling begins and after all purchaser activities are completed. Treatments would only occur from June 1 to July 15 or September 1 to September 30. Treatment of invasive plants would be consistent with the strategy outlined in the Noxious and Invasive Weed Control Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact. Specific roads and mileage would be prepared in consultation with the Forest Invasive Species Coordinator.

(FW-DC-NNIP-02)

Applies to all project activities.

PDF-NNIS-03: To reduce the probability of establishment of new non-native invasive plant populations, areas where soils are disturbed by construction activities (e.g., temporary road construction, landings, and skid trails) conducted or authorized by the Forest Service, should be reseeded as soon as practical, during the appropriate time of year, using certified weed-free native seed mixes. These seed mixes would not, by definition, contain non-native species like clover (*Trifolium* spp.), which are palatable to grizzly bears.

(FW-GDL-NNIP-01, FW-GDL-WL-03)

Applies to all project activities.

At-Risk Plant Species

At-risk plant species include those listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (i.e., whitebark pine (*Pinus albicaulis*) and Spalding's catchfly (*Silene spaldingii*)), all plant species of conservation concern (SCC), and state-listed plant species of concern (SOC) documented in the Montana Natural Heritage Program database (e.g., water howellia (*Howellia aquatilis*)).

PDF-PLANTS-01: If individuals or populations of any undocumented at-risk plant species are discovered during implementation, work will immediately stop in that area until the Forest Botanist can evaluate the site. Newly discovered individuals or populations will be protected as necessary to retain population viability.

(FW-GDL-PLANT DIV-02, FW-DC-PLANT-01, FW-DC-PLANT-03, FW-DC-PLANT-04)

Applies to all project activities.

Additional design features will be included to reduce the impact of proposed activities in whitebark pine habitat. These design features will incorporate the mandatory conservation measures specified in the Biological Opinion (BO) for the Rangelwide Whitebark Pine Programmatic for Forest Management Activities: Forest Service Regions 1, 2, 4, and 5 (FWS 2025).

Recreation

PDF-REC-01: Whitefish Mountain Resort will develop a comprehensive plan to provide for visitor safety during active operations. Trail closures, reroutes, signage, and physical presence at key access points during operations may be necessary.

Applies to all project activities.

PDF-REC-02: For public safety, any hazard trees along system trails resulting from project activities would be felled.

Applies to all units.

Soils

PDF-SOILS-01: All mechanized units that remove commercial products will be logged using designated skid trails. Equipment would occasionally leave the trails to access trees or accomplish other activities.

(FW-DC-SOIL-01, FW-STD-SOIL-01, FW-STD-SOIL-02)

Applies to all mechanized treatment units.

PDF-SOILS-02: Skid trail spacing must average at least 75 feet in all tractor harvest units. The goal is to occupy less than 15 percent of the treatment area including soil disturbance from skid trails and landings associated with past and proposed activities.

(FW-DC-SOIL-01, FW-STD-SOIL-01, FW-STD-SOIL-02)

Applies to all mechanized treatment units.

PDF-SOILS-03: All existing roads and skid trails will be reused to the extent feasible unless doing so would adversely affect resources. If roads or trails cannot be reused, their extent and location must be considered when laying out additional skid trails.

(FW-DC-SOIL-01, FW-STD-SOIL-01, FW-STD-SOIL-02)

Applies to all mechanized treatment units.

PDF-SOILS-04: Sustained slopes greater than 40% will be: 1) excluded from unit boundaries; 2) treated by hand; or 3) completed with cable systems or other mechanized approaches that adequately protect soils.

(FW-DC-SOIL-01, FW-STD-SOIL-01, FW-STD-SOIL-02, FW-GDL-SOIL-01)

Applies to all mechanized treatment units.

PDF-SOILS-05: Mechanical harvest will occur when soils are dry as determined by the hand feel method.

(FW-DC-SOIL-01, FW-STD-SOIL-01, FW-STD-SOIL-02)

Applies to all mechanized treatment units.

PDF-SOILS-06: Sale Administrators or Contracting Officer's Representatives will monitor soil moisture conditions prior to allowing equipment to begin operations in summer. This monitoring must be documented in the Timber Sale Daily Report/Daily Diary.

(FW-DC-SOIL-01, FW-STD-SOIL-01, FW-STD-SOIL-02)

Applies to all mechanized treatment units.

PDF-SOILS-07: Machine piling treatments to reduce fuel loadings shall be implemented to minimize soil disturbance as follows:

- All mechanical piling will be accomplished with excavators.
- Restrict piling machinery to designated routes used for harvest operations where fuel loads are moderate or low. Where fuel loads are high (or designated routes do not exist), limit off-trail machine travel to no more than two passes on any piece of ground.
- Operators shall plan travel paths to make full use of the machine’s capability (e.g., using full boom reach of machine) to limit ground disturbance and minimize number of off-trail passes needed to achieve treatment objectives.
- Where feasible, pile fuels on existing disturbances (e.g., skid trails and landings) to minimize additional detrimental soil impacts from burning.

(FW-DC-SOIL-01, FW-STD-SOIL-01, FW-STD-SOIL-02)

Applies to all mechanized treatment units.

PDF-SOILS-08: Mastication treatments to reduce fuel loadings shall be implemented to minimize soil disturbance as follows:

- When using a boom-mounted implement, operator shall plan necessary off-trail travel paths to make full use of the machine’s capability (e.g., using the full boom reach of the machine) to limit ground disturbance and minimize the number of passes needed to achieve treatment objectives.
- When using a machine with a front-mounted fixed masticating head, work in long, linear swaths to the extent practicable to avoid unnecessary pivoting and turning, which results in soil displacement damage. Excavator-mounted implements are preferred.
- Operator should not allow masticating heads to contact the soil surface, which can result in detrimental churning and mixing of the soil.
- Machines shall make no more than two passes over any piece of ground (when not on primary skid trails or landings).
- Depth of masticated material should not exceed three to six inches depth, on average, to allow regeneration of the herbaceous layer and prevent detrimental soil heating in the event of wild- or prescribed fire. If greater depths are expected, use another removal method.

(FW-DC-SOIL-01, FW-STD-SOIL-01, FW-STD-SOIL-02)

Applies to all mechanized treatment units.

Terrestrial Ecosystems and Vegetation

PDF-TEV-01: Snag retention will include only trees not deemed a hazard and include older relic trees with broken tops, trees not located within striking distance of a trail, road, ski run, chairlift or other infrastructure.

(GA-SM-STD-02, FW-GDL-RMZ-10, FW-GDL-TEV-10)

Applies to all harvest units.

Forest type	Potential vegetation type	Snag retentions/snag recruitment prescription ¹
All	All	Retain all hardwood snags and live trees. Retain all western larch and ponderosa pine snags over 20” DBH.

¹Upon agreement by the Forest Service, dead trees may be felled when necessary for safety under the State Safety Code. All dead trees which are required to be left standing and are felled for safety reasons shall be left on site.

PDF-TEV-02: It is preferable to grind, chip, or remove landing piles from the site if feasible. All piles would be built in a fashion to facilitate full consumption, be free of dirt to the extent practical and built with an excavator-based machine.

Applies to post-harvest fuels treatments.

PDF-TEV-03: A minimum of approximately eight tons of downed wood per acre should be retained for units inside the HFRA-defined WUI (all units). Retained downed wood should be greater than three inches in diameter and should consist of the longest and largest pieces present and, where possible, should include intact pieces of a variety of species, sizes, and stages of decay, including cull treetops and cull logs. Leave all downed logs greater than nine inches in diameter intact where possible.

(FW-DC-TE&V-17, FW-GDL-TE&V-08, FW-GDL-RMZ-01, FW-GDL-WL-DIV-06)

Applies to all units.

Wildlife

PDF-WLD-01: Hunting, transporting of hunters, and transporting of game would be prohibited by timber, road maintenance, or other contract workers while working on or off roads closed to motorized vehicle use by the public.

Applies to all project activities.

PDF-WLD-02: Personal use firewood gathering would not be allowed by contractors or other workers on any roads not open to public motorized use.

Applies to all project activities.

PDF-WLD-03: All existing roads currently closed to public motorized use would remain closed during implementation of all proposed activities.

(GA-SM-STD-01)

Applies to transportation management.

PDF-WLD-04: Motorized public access would remain restricted on existing closed roads on Forest lands during administrative use. If berms are removed or gates opened to access treatment units, the purchaser would install temporary gates or effective barriers as needed and berms or gates would be reinstalled once project activities are complete.

(GA-SM-STD-01)

Applies to transportation management.

PDF-WLD-05: If any of the following are found within 0.25 miles of any vegetation management or burn unit or road location, operations within that unit or on that road would cease until the wildlife biologist is notified, and activities would be modified, if necessary:

- Active denning sites used by grizzly bears, wolves, lynx, fishers, or wolverines.
- Active nesting sites used by bald eagles, northern goshawks, black-backed woodpeckers, or flammulated owls; and/or
- Active rendezvous (pup rearing) sites used by wolves.

(FW-GDL-WL DIV-05)

Applies to all project activities.

PDF-WLD-06: All contractors and others implementing the project will be required to comply with a food-storage and sanitation order. Documentation of a discussion between the contractor/purchaser and a Forest Service representative (e.g., sale administrator or contracting officer representative) regarding the requirements/responsibilities relative to the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem Food Storage Order would be provided.

(FW-GDL-WL-01)

Applies to all project activities.

PDF-WLD-07: If a contractor or others implementing the project elects to camp on Forest lands other than in a developed recreation site, the site should be evaluated and written authorization (i.e., a campsite agreement that includes the food/attractant storage special order) should be provided before the campsite is established to reduce the risk of grizzly bear-human conflict.

(FW-GDL-WL-02)

Applies to all project activities.

PDF-WLD-08: If needed to resolve grizzly bear-human conflict situations, activities would be modified, cancelled, suspended, or temporarily ceased.

(FW-GDL-TE&V-04)

Applies to all project activities.

PDF-WLD-09: Retain up to 20% of the area with dense untreated clumps where low live branches are present at snow level. Retention should favor full crowned species, such as subalpine fir, Engelman spruce, and Douglas-fir dispersed throughout the unit.

(GA-SM-DC-05, FW-GDL-WL-DIV-01, FW-DC-WL-DIV-01)

Applies to unit: 6

Categorical Exclusion (CE)

This project is expected to be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement. The project is anticipated to be authorized under Section 605 of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) (16 U.S.C. 6591d) (Wildfire Resilience).

To meet the requirements of the Wildfire Resilience Categorical Exclusion (CE), projects must fall within a landscape designated prior to March 23, 2018 by the Secretary under HFRA Section 602(b) as experiencing declining forest health. Within these designated landscape areas, projects must occur in the Wildland Urban Interface; or if outside the wildland urban interface be in Condition Classes 2 or 3 and Fire Regime Groups I, II, or III that contain very high wildfire hazard potential. Projects must maximize the retention of old-growth and large trees, as appropriate for the forest type, to the extent that the trees promote stands that are resilient to insect and disease, and reduce the risk or extent of, or increase the resilience to, wildfires. Treatment acres must not exceed 3,000, and projects must not establish new permanent roads. Temporary roads are permissible but must be decommissioned no later than three years after the project is completed. Projects using this CE must be developed and implemented through a collaborative process that includes multiple interested persons representing diverse interests and is transparent and nonexclusive.

This category would be applicable because the project area falls entirely within areas designated under HFRA 602(b) and is fully within the Wildland Urban Interface, planned treatments favor retention of large trees where retention meets the purpose and need of the project, and treatments

are designed to reduce wildfire risk and increase resilience to wildfires, insects, and diseases. No new roads (system roads or temporary roads) are proposed. The proposed action was developed through collaborative discussions with WMR staff and Firesafe Flathead (a diverse group of individuals, neighborhoods/homeowners associations, local/state/federal agencies, and nonprofit organizations working to create fire adapted communities and resilient landscapes in the Flathead Valley).

Implementation of the proposed action could begin as soon as the Finding of Applicability and No Extraordinary Circumstance (FANEC) is signed (as early as May 2026).

How to Provide Input

We value input from stakeholders and the public. We are sharing the project's proposed action to keep you informed about our proposed management activities and to ensure that we are considering any relevant local knowledge, potential concerns, or opportunities for collaboration. We are accepting public comment on this project proposal and the use of the Fuels and Forest Health Emergency Action Determination (EAD). Please review the project information and share your input on the Big Mountain Fuels Reduction Project and use of the EAD authority with Bill Mulholland, Tally Lake District Ranger and decision-maker for this project. Comments will be accepted **through March 6, 2026**. Our CE documentation and FANEC will be available for public review in the spring of 2026. The following options are available for submitting input:

Electronic comments: Submit to: comments-northern-flathead-tally-lake@usda.gov, with "Big Mountain Fuels Reduction" in the subject line.

Mail or hand-deliver hardcopy comments:

U.S. Forest Service, Tally Lake Ranger District
Attn: Sarah Hash (Big Mountain Fuels Project)
650 Wolfpack Way,
Kalispell MT 59901

Current information about the project is available on the Flathead National Forest project webpage: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/r01/flathead/projects/217605>.

If you have questions regarding the Big Mountain Fuels Reduction Project, contact Project Leader Sarah Hash at sarah.hash@usda.gov or (406) 758-3508.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project and will be available for public inspection. If you cite literature in your comments, please provide us with a complete bibliography and a copy of the referenced materials.

Thank you for taking the time to review the project proposal.

References

- Flathead County Office of Emergency Services. 2021. Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) 2021 for Flathead County Montana. Dated: April 2021. Kalispell, MT. 107 p.
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