



Categorical Exclusion Review for HFRA Section 603, Insect & Disease Category

PROPOSAL INFORMATION

General Information

Proposal Name: Piper Creek

Proposal Tracking #: 267907

Responsible Official: Sarah Canepa, District Ranger

Unit: Swan Lake Ranger District, Flathead National Forest

Anticipated Implementation: FY2029

General Location of Proposal: Approximately 10 miles north of Condon, Montana and primarily within the Piper Creek watershed. It is roughly bounded on the Swan River on the east and by the Mission Mountains Wilderness boundary on the west.

Applicable Management Areas: MA 5a, Backcountry (nonmotorized year-round); MA 5c, Backcountry (motorized over-snow vehicle opportunities); MA 6b, General Forest (medium-intensity vegetation management); MA 6c, General Forest (high-intensity vegetation management)

Project Webpage: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/r01/flathead/projects/267907>

Applicable Category

This project is categorically excluded from documentation in an EA or EIS because it fits the following category: Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA), Section 603, Insect & Disease (16 U.S.C. 6591b)

This category is applicable for this project because:

- ☒ The project is in an area designated under the authority of section 602(b) and (c) of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act.
- ☒ The proposed treatments are located in wildland urban interface; **or** outside the wildland urban interface in Condition Classes 2 or 3 and Fire Regime Groups I, II, or III that contain very high wildfire hazard potential; **or both**.
- ☒ The project maximizes retaining old-growth and large trees as appropriate for the forest type, to the extent that the trees promote stand resilience to insects and disease; and reduce the risk or extent of, or increase the resilience to, wildfires.
- ☒ The project is not located in:
 - congressionally designated wilderness or wilderness study areas;
 - areas where the removal of vegetation is restricted or prohibited by statute or by Presidential proclamation; or
 - areas where the activities described above will be inconsistent with the applicable land and resource management plan.

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

- ☒ The project's number of acres treated does not exceed 3,000 acres.
- ☒ The project does not establish new permanent roads. Temporary roads may be constructed but must be decommissioned no later than three years after the project is completed.
- ☒ Public notice and scoping has been or will be conducted.
- ☒ The project was developed through a collaborative process.
- ☒ The best available scientific information is being considered to maintain or restore ecological integrity, including maintaining or restoring forested vegetation structure, function, composition and connectivity.
- ☒ All activities proposed under this project are consistent with the land and resource management plan.
- ☒ Extraordinary circumstances are being considered during the analysis and decision-making process.

Supporting Documentation

- **HFRA & ESD Map**
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project File\R_Supporting_Documentation\R003_PiperCreek_ESDMap_20260917.pdf
- **WUI Analysis and Map**
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\F_Fire_Fuels_Air\F004 Piper Creek HFRA WUI Determination.docx; Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\F_Fire_Fuels_Air\F008 Piper Creek HFRA WUI Map.pdf
- **Fire Regime Group and Vegetation Condition Class Maps**
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\F_Fire_Fuels_Air\F009 Piper Creek FRG Map.pdf
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\F_Fire_Fuels_Air\F010 Piper Creek VCC Map.pdf
- **Silviculture Report**
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\E_Silviculture\E002_PC_Veg Report_Final.docx
- **Old Growth & Proposed Treatments Map**
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\E_Silviculture\E008_Stand Exam Old Growth & Potential Old Growth.pdf

Purpose and Need

The 2018 Flathead National Forest Land Management Plan (USDA 2018a), hereafter referred to as “forest plan”, provides management direction for all resources on the Flathead National Forest. The forest plan incorporates an active management strategy that promotes desired vegetation and habitat conditions, contributes economic benefits to local communities through forest management and other activities, and provides for a variety of recreational opportunities. The purpose and need of the Piper Creek project are derived from the differences between the existing landscape conditions and the desired conditions described in the forest plan.

Following field review of the project area and interdisciplinary discussions, the following purposes and needs were identified: 1) improve forest stand conditions and diversify species compositions to be more resilient to natural disturbances; 2) decrease fuel loading and tree densities to reduce fire behavior and minimize impacts to communities from future wildfire; and 3) produce forest products to contribute to economic sustainability of local economies. Each component of the purpose and need is described in more detail below.

Improve forest stand conditions and diversify species compositions to be more resilient to natural disturbances

In 2023, Forest Service silviculturists conducted field visits in the Piper Creek project area that focused on forest health and landscape-scale disturbances. Observations included a relatively high proportion of Douglas-fir and high levels of small and medium sized trees when compared to desired conditions. Several forest stressors were also observed, including: Armillaria root disease and laminated root rot, western larch dwarf mistletoe, Douglas-fir bark beetles, and fir engraver bark beetles. These stressors and a lack of disturbance have caused past mortality in all species present, many of which are now on the ground in the form of coarse woody debris. Conifers throughout the area exposed to root diseases are considered to be pre-disposed to bark beetle attacks and are highly susceptible to mortality. Overall, there is a need to promote stands with reduced densities, and with the retention of large trees these areas will trend towards the larger size class which is under-represented in the project area.

To improve the diversity and resilience of forest stands in the project area, vegetation treatments are needed to shift species composition and increase tree vigor, reduce stand density, and recruit and retain larger trees. Active management is needed to increase the presence of species like ponderosa pine, western larch, and western white pine to maintain and increase the presence of large, long-lived trees over time, and to reduce impacts from insect attack and forest pathogens (including Douglas-fir beetle and root disease). Vegetation treatments are needed to improve species mix, lower stand densities, reduce levels of insect and disease mortality, and decrease the risk of loss due to wildfire in the wildland-urban interface, riparian management zones, timber production lands, and recreation areas (FW-DC-TE&V-07, -08, -11, -12, -13, -14, and -21; FW-DC-RMZ-01).



Figure 1. Over-abundance of shade-tolerant species that are susceptible to forest stressors.

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

Decrease fuel loading and tree densities to reduce fire behavior and minimize impacts to communities from future wildfire

A variety of stand conditions exist across the project area with influences from fire and vegetation management histories. Current stand conditions and fuel loadings influence potential fire behavior. Many stands are growing in high stand density conditions with competition for light, nutrients, and water resulting in decreased tree vigor, decreased resistance to insects and disease, increased tree mortality, and accumulating surface fuel loads. In other stands, overstory mortality and understory tree canopy layers create ladder fuels that would potentially allow a ground fire to move up into the tree canopy. Fuel conditions exist in the project area that could support crown fire and fire spread, which could threaten life and private property within the wildland-urban interface.

According to the forest plan, it is desirable to reduce fuels in areas where wildland fires on NFS lands pose a threat to communities and community assets. The Piper Creek Project area is located adjacent to communities at risk from wildfire and is topographically aligned with prevailing wind patterns that may increase potential fire behavior. Reducing fuels and fuel continuity within the project area would reduce the risk of fire spread within the wildland-urban interface. It is also desirable to locate and maintain strategic fuel breaks across the forest and to improve ingress/egress to create a safer environment for firefighters should a wildfire start (FW-DC-FIRE-01, 02, and 07 and FW-DC-TE&V-13).



Figure 2. High levels of mistletoe-infected trees and hazardous fuels in the project area.

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

Produce forest products to contribute to economic sustainability of local economies

Vegetation treatments produce a variety of timber products while contributing to ecological sustainability and vegetation desired conditions. As described in the National Active Forest Management Strategy (May 2025), timber production contributes to jobs and income in local communities. Active forest management on timber production lands provides sustainable, regularly scheduled timber harvest into the future that result in more resilient conditions with less potential for loss of timber to natural disturbances like wildfire, insects, and disease (FW-DC-TIMB-01, -02, -03, -04, -06, and -07).

Proposed Action

The proposed action is a set of management actions intended to meet the purpose and need described above. Proposed management actions include approximately 2,307 acres of vegetation treatments, the use of 23 miles of NFS roads as haul routes, and construction of 3.5 miles of temporary roads to be decommissioned within three years of project completion.

The tables below provide summaries of the vegetation management (Table 1) and road management (Table 2) components of the proposed action. Proposed vegetation treatment descriptions are also provided in the next section. See Table 3 for a list of proposed treatments by unit and Figure 1 for a map of the proposed action.

Table 1. Summary of proposed vegetation management activities

Proposed Vegetation Treatments	Acres
Commercial Treatments	1,415
Commercial thin	330
Improvement cut	354
Seed tree	731
Non-Commercial Treatments	892
Aspen improvement	40
Precommercial thin	430
Prescribed burn	128
Understory removal	294
Total Treatments	2,307

Table 2. Summary of proposed road management activities

Proposed Road Management	Miles
National Forest System haul routes	23
Temporary road construction	3.5

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

Table 3. List of proposed vegetation treatments by unit

Unit	Acres	Harvest Treatment	Harvest System
001	38	Seed Tree	Ground
003	45	Seed Tree	Ground
003A	34	Seed Tree	Skyline
003B	11	Commercial Thin	Ground
003C	17	Prescribed Burn	Hand
003D	11	Commercial Thin	Ground
004	42	Seed Tree	Skyline
004A	8	Seed Tree	Ground
004B	8	Seed Tree	Ground
004C	6	Seed Tree	Ground
005	76	Commercial Thin	Ground
006	16	Improvement Cut	Mechanical/Hand
007	17	Seed Tree	Ground
007A	10	Seed Tree	Ground
007B	18	Seed Tree	Ground
009	39	Seed Tree	Ground
009A	32	Seed Tree	Ground
009B	29	Improvement Cut	Ground
010	19	Seed Tree	Ground
012	19	Precommercial Thin	Mechanical
014	26	Seed Tree	Ground
014A	18	Commercial Thin	Ground
015	20	Commercial Thin	Ground
015A	14	Seed Tree	Ground
015B	17	Seed Tree	Ground
015C	18	Seed Tree	Ground
019	49	Commercial Thin	Ground
019A	18	Seed Tree	Ground
021	21	Commercial Thin	Ground
022	39	Seed Tree	Ground
026	15	Precommercial Thin	Mechanical
030	39	Improvement Cut	Ground
041	92	Improvement Cut	Ground
042	34	Commercial Thin	Ground
044	15	Seed Tree	Ground
059	9	Improvement Cut	Ground
059A	2	Improvement Cut	Ground
061	17	Seed Tree	Ground

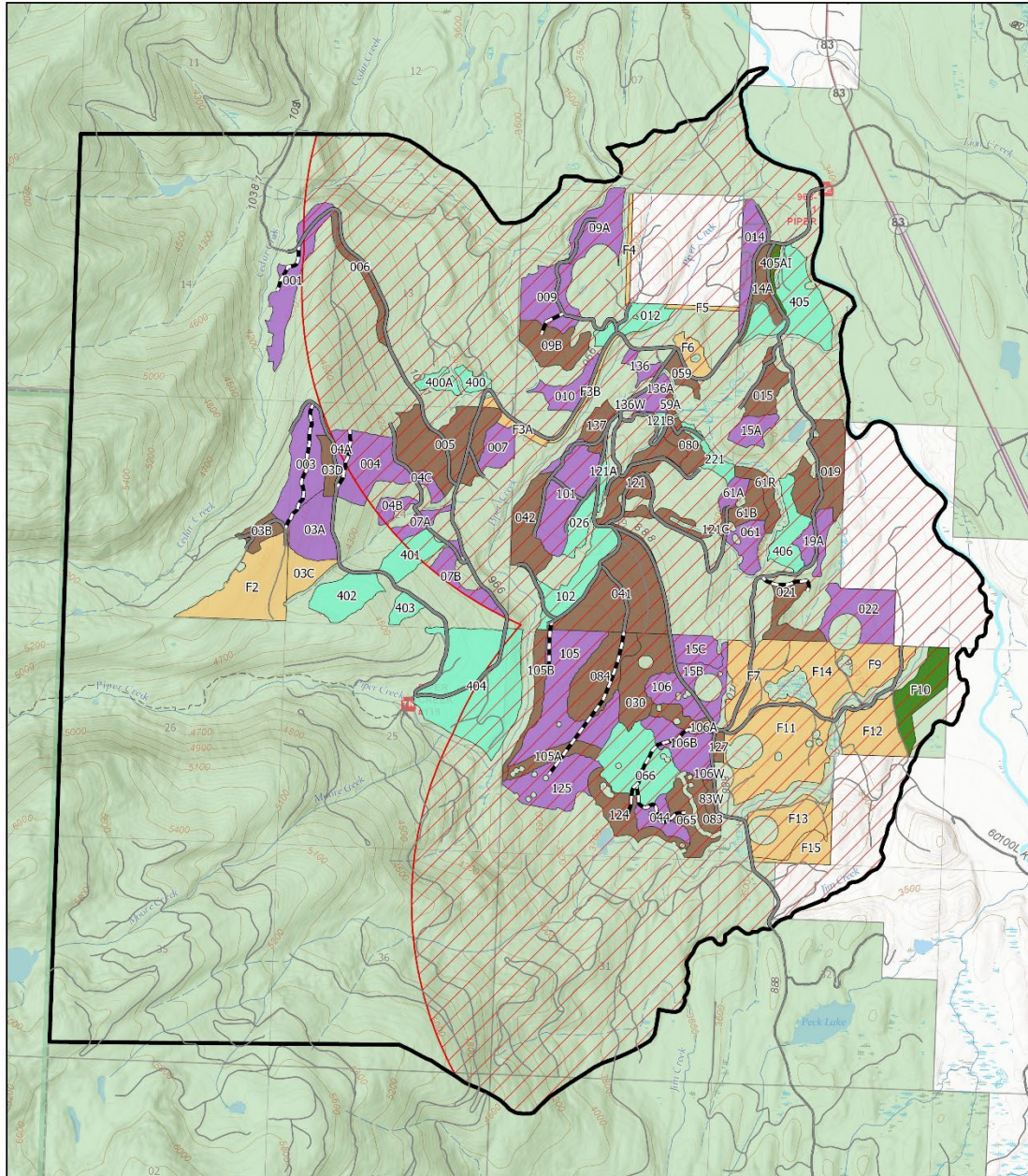
Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

Unit	Acres	Harvest Treatment	Harvest System
061A	8	Seed Tree	Ground
061B	14	Improvement Cut	Ground
061R	12	Improvement Cut	Ground
065	18	Commercial Thin	Ground
066	57	Precommercial Thin	Mechanical
080	14	Commercial Thin	Ground
083	11	Improvement Cut	Ground
083W	5	Improvement Cut	Ground
084	45	Improvement Cut	Ground
101	53	Seed Tree	Ground
102	36	Precommercial Thin	Mechanical
105	79	Seed Tree	Ground
105A	15	Improvement Cut	Ground
105B	17	Improvement Cut	Ground
106	19	Seed Tree	Ground
106A	12	Commercial Thin	Ground
106B	31	Seed Tree	Ground
106W	2	Seed Tree	Ground
121	43	Commercial Thin	Ground
121A	7	Precommercial Thin	Mechanical
121B	2	Precommercial Thin	Mechanical
121C	3	Commercial Thin	Ground
124	27	Improvement Cut	Ground
125	41	Seed Tree	Ground
127	5	Improvement Cut	Ground
136	7	Seed Tree	Ground
136A	12	Seed Tree	Ground
136W	2	Seed Tree	Ground
137	14	Improvement Cut	Ground
221	11	Precommercial Thin	Mechanical
400	8	Precommercial Thin	Mechanical
400A	8	Precommercial Thin	Mechanical
401	22	Precommercial Thin	Mechanical
402	30	Precommercial Thin	Mechanical
403	9	Precommercial Thin	Mechanical
404	127	Precommercial Thin	Mechanical
405	56	Precommercial Thin	Mechanical
405AI	6	Aspen Improvement	Mechanical/Hand
406	24	Precommercial Thin	Mechanical

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

Unit	Acres	Harvest Treatment	Harvest System
F2	66	Prescribed Burn	Hand
F3A	9	Understory Removal	Mechanical
F3B	7	Understory Removal	Hand
F4	6	Understory Removal	Hand
F5	4	Understory Removal	Hand
F6	12	Prescribed Burn	Hand
F7	52	Understory Removal	Hand
F9	33	Prescribed Burn	Hand
F10	34	Aspen Improvement	Hand
F11	86	Understory Removal	Hand
F12	38	Understory Removal	Hand
F13	36	Understory Removal	Hand
F14	37	Understory Removal	Hand
F15	19	Understory Removal	Hand
Total	2,307		

Piper Creek CE Swan Lake Ranger District



Vicinity Map



0 0.5 1 Miles

	HFRA WUI (16 U.S.C. 6511(16)(B))		Fuels
	Project Area		Noncommercial
	Haul Routes		Restoration
	Temporary Roads		Intermediate
	Other Roads (Existing)		Regeneration
Ownership Title			
	Private		
	Forest Service		
	State		

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Swan Lake Ranger District

Figure 1. Quill Pig Proposed Action

Proposed Vegetation Treatment Descriptions

Intermediate Treatments

Intermediate treatments in the proposed action include commercial thinning, improvement cutting, precommercial thinning, understory removal, and aspen improvement. The main goal of intermediate treatments is to improve individual tree health, vigor, and growth while guiding stand structure and species composition toward desired conditions. This is accomplished by reducing tree densities which increases the availability of resources like light, water, and soil nutrients to the residual trees and improves their ability to withstand insect and disease attacks, wildfire, and environmental stressors. These treatments also reduce fuel loadings, canopy continuity, and increase crown base height which lower potential wildfire severity. In addition, the reduction in density increases light availability to understory plants and shrubs which can improve wildlife forage and deciduous tree sprouting and growth.

Intermediate treatments can be either commercial or non-commercial, commercial treatments will remove some trees greater than 7 inches diameter at breast height (DBH), while non-commercial treatments remove trees smaller than 7 inches DBH. Following each treatment the residual stands will be fully stocked and have minimal canopy gaps. Trees designated for removal will be selected based on desired species composition, health, form, and vigor.

Regeneration Treatments

Regeneration treatments in the proposed action include seed tree treatments where the objective is specifically designed to create a new age class of tree species. Seed trees are retained in a fairly uniform distribution ensuring the entire unit area is within the distance of a seed source. These trees are retained based on maturity (cone bearing), species, size and potential wildlife characteristics. Species which will remain following harvest include ponderosa pine, western white, and Douglas-fir. Some units proposed for regeneration harvest treatments may create openings larger than 40 acres in size, but none of them will exceed the maximum opening size specified in the forest plan (FW-STD-TIMB-07).

Units may reforest naturally or may be scheduled for reforestation where there are either too few desirable overstory trees or in cases where diversity planting would create desirable species composition in the new age class. A range of large trees are retained in seed tree units to provide locally adapted seed, forest structure, and future large snags and down logs.

Treatment in Riparian Management Zones

Riparian management zones (RMZs) are areas adjacent to and surrounding streams, wetlands, and other water features. The project includes approximately 120 acres of commercial treatment and 198 acres of noncommercial treatment within riparian management zones. These treatments would improve tree growth, improve species composition, and reduce fuel loads in upland stands. There are no commercial treatments proposed within inner riparian management zones. Project activities in riparian management zones would follow forest plan standards.

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

Treatment Methods

Commercial harvest methods

Commercial harvesting is primarily done using ground-based logging equipment like feller bunchers and rubber-tired skidders. This type of equipment allows for the removal of commercial sized trees (greater than 7 inches DBH) with low operational costs. Once the trees have been felled and sorted at a central location they are loaded on trucks and made into forest products.

Noncommercial treatment methods

Precommercial thinning is similar to commercial thinning except that it would occur in high density young - growth stands less than 35 years old. A portion of the smaller, existing trees (less than 6 inches DBH) would be removed to leave a relatively well-stocked forested condition. Benefits of precommercial thinning include the maintenance of stand densities, species compositions, and an overall reduction in insect and disease hazard ratings. Stands proposed for this treatment will increase in size class following implementation. Precommercial thinning would achieve fuels reduction objectives through density and crown reduction, piling of forest fuels and the burning of the piles.

Prescribed fire is proposed to reduce fuel loadings, increase nutrient availability, and reintroduce natural disturbance to the landscape. Fire would be applied at a low to moderate intensity, designed to reduce density of understory shade tolerant species, maintain existing grass/shrub/forb dominated openings, create conditions more suited to the establishment of ponderosa pine, and western larch, reduce surface fuel accumulations and ladder fuels, and stimulate the growth and establishment of grasses, forbs, and shrubs. Treatment may include slashing of trees and shrubs, followed by hand or aerial ignition of prescribed fire.

Understory fuels reduction is proposed to reduce high densities of sapling- to pole-sized trees (ladder fuels; 5 to 35 feet tall), and existing dead and down fuel loading in the wildland-urban interface (WUI). The overstory will remain intact. Material will be lopped and scattered, or hand piled, and the piles will be burned. Hand piling with pile burning will be implemented adjacent to private property and roads.

Non-commercial treatments in aspen stands are proposed to reduce coniferous vegetation competition and encourage aspen sprouting, which would increase ungulate forage once regeneration is established. Ungulates would be temporarily excluded from identified aspen restoration areas using methods such as fencing or use of on-site materials (e.g., directional felling of encroaching conifers).

Post-harvest fuels methods

Following timber harvest activities, a variety of methods are proposed to reduce both naturally occurring fuels and those created by timber harvest. The most common method of treating fuels is through the piling of slash by an excavator type machine and burning of the piles one year later. Other proposed fuels reduction methods include broadcast burning and prescribed burning.

Site preparation and reforestation methods

Site preparation is an important silvicultural method that occurs post-harvest in regeneration units to help ensure that an area reforests either naturally or through tree planting. Site preparation includes: the harvesting itself, excavator piling in the units, broadcast burning, and prescribed burning. All of these methods have been used in the project area in the past and have proven to be successful

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

when creating a new age class of seedlings. The primary objectives of site preparation are to reduce competition and to expose bare mineral soil for seeds to successfully germinate. Reforestation (tree planting) in the project area will mostly take place in areas that have root diseases or other forest damages that could cause mortality to the younger age class. Planting species that are tolerant to these diseases is a way to successfully reforest a regeneration cutting unit.

Descriptions of Proposed Road Management

Haul routes on National Forest System roads

National Forest System roads used as haul routes would be maintained in accordance with best management practices (BMP) both prior to and after use for project activities. The objectives of road maintenance are reducing concentrated runoff, minimizing road surface erosion, filtering ditch water before it enters streams, and decreasing risk of culvert failures during peak runoff events.

Maintenance work could include installing culverts, replacing existing culverts with larger culverts, installing drainage dips and surface water deflectors, placing riprap to armor drainage structures, replenishing road surface aggregate, placing aggregate to reinforce wet areas, constructing and cleaning ditches, and blading road surfaces. These actions would maintain the roads to current BMP standards, better accommodate public and project-related traffic, and reduce deferred maintenance. Log hauling on forest roads may result in a temporary increase in traffic and dust during project implementation.

Temporary roads

Temporary roads would be constructed to the minimum standards necessary for log hauling on NFS roads. Approximately 3.5 miles of temporary roads are proposed to conduct activities. All temporary roads would be rehabilitated following timber harvest activities and would cease to function as roads.

Project Design Features

Air Quality

PDF-AIR-01: Prescribed fire should only occur when the Montana/Idaho Airshed Group and Missoula County determine that airshed conditions are within acceptable dispersion parameters. Prescribed burning requires a permit from the Montana DEQ and the burn must be implemented within the regulatory framework. This includes daily approval from Missoula County 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 fire.

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, and Montana Forestry BMPs.

(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 actions.

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

PDF-AQ-02: Hand treatment in inner RMZs as allowable through the forest plan would avoid saturated areas and riparian vegetation while also being consistent with the State Streamside Management Zone Law & Rules (MTDNRC 2006).
(FW-GDL-WTR-01, FW-STD-RMZ-01, FW-STD-RMZ-02, FW-STD-RMZ-06, FW-GDL-RMZ-01)
Applies to all hand treatments within RMZs (units: F3B, F5, F6).

PDF-AQ-03: Treatment in previously unmapped or newly discovered RMZs would be consistent with the forest plan and RMZ treatment elsewhere in the unit, unless otherwise prescribed by the Forest Hydrologist.
(FW-STD-RMZ-01, FW-STD-RMZ-02, FW-STD-RMZ-05, FW-STD-RMZ-06)
Applies to all treatments.

PDF-AQ-04: 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.

PDF-AQ-05: If prescribed fire activities occur, ignition should take place outside the riparian management zone and fire should be allowed to naturally spread into the riparian management zones. The intent is to allow fire to enter and cross the zone at predominantly low to moderate intensity and create vegetation conditions consistent with natural fire regimes.
(FW-STD-RMZ-01, FW-STD-RMZ-02)
Applies to prescribed fire.

PDF-AQ-06: Best management practices for protecting water resources from prescribed fire activities would follow guidance detailed in Volume 1 of the National Core BMP Technical Guide (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2012). Ground disturbing fireline construction within RMZs should be avoided when practicable to do so. Any fireline constructed within RMZs would be fully rehabilitated. All fireline constructed outside of RMZs would be stabilized with suitable water and erosion control measures. Pile burns shall not be located within 50 feet of any water body.
(FW-GDL-WTR-01, FW-GDL-RMZ-13, FW-GDL-RMZ-15)
Applies to prescribed fire.

PDF-AQ-07: Portable pumps and associated fuel utilized for prescribed fire would be fitted with spill containment kits adequately sized and installed per manufacturer's recommendations.
(FW-STD-WTR-03, FW-GDL-RMZ-15)
Applies to prescribed fire.

PDF-AQ-08: All drafting hoses would be fitted with a minimum quarter-inch screen to prevent intake of fish and other aquatic species. During the spawning season for native fish, pumping sites should be located away from spawning gravels. Prior to drafting, sites shall be approved by the Forest Hydrologist or Fish Biologist.
(FW-GDL-WTR-05, FW-STD-WTR-01)
Applies to all activities, particularly prescribed fire and dust abatement.

PDF-AQ-09: To protect spawning fish, eggs, and embryos, in-stream management activities (culvert installation, replacement, or removal) that may disturb native salmonids or that have the potential to directly deliver sediment to their habitats should be limited to times outside of spawning and incubation seasons for those species: Westslope cutthroat trout (known spawning streams include

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

Cedar, Jim and Piper Creeks) inoperable activity period is May 1 through July 15. Bull trout (known spawning streams include Jim and Piper Creek) inoperable activity period is September 1 through March 15.

(FW-GDL-WTR-05)

Applies to all road, BMP and culvert-related activities in Cedar, Jim, and Piper Creeks.

PDF-AQ-10: All drafting equipment would be cleaned prior to use within the project area. Guidelines and recommendations can be found at <https://westernregionalpanel.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/WRP-Template-Protocol-for-Fire-AIS-June-2023-Updated.pdf>.

(FW-GDL-WTR-07)

Applies to all activities, particularly prescribed fire, stream dewatering (for culvert work), and dust abatement.

Botany

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 2001 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., 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 seed mixes.

(FW-GDL-NNIP-01)

Applies to all project activities.

At-Risk Plant Species

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.

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

PDF-PLANTS-02: Protect water howellia (*Howellia aquatilis*) habitat, which includes documented occupied and unoccupied water howellia ponds, located near haul routes and in treatment units by a 300-foot buffer. Activities in the 300-foot buffer shall create near-zero ground disturbance. Hand treatment activities and understory burning are permitted within the 300-foot buffer as long as they maintain at least 50% canopy cover within the buffer zone and create no gaps larger than one acre. (FW-DC-PLANT-01, FW-DC-PLANT-02, FW-GDL-PLANT-01)

PDF-PLANTS-03: Prescribed fire activities are permissible within the 300-foot buffer, depending on the slope surrounding the water howellia pond edge.

- If the slope surrounding the pond edge is greater than 35%, avoid prescribed fire activities.
- If the slope surrounding the pond edge is less than 35%, spring burn only. Fall burning is not permitted to avoid the risk of burning seed in dried ponds.
- If the slope surrounding the pond edge is level with the pond or slopes away from the pond, spring or fall burning is permissible.

(FW-DC-PLANT-02, FW-GDL-PLANT-01)

Applies to prescribed fire.

PDF-PLANTS-04: Prescribed fire activities determined permissible within the 300-foot buffer would be low intensity and must promote habitat conditions that support the recovery and long-term persistence of water howellia. Fire activities must avoid removing substantial forest canopy cover and avoid piling slash in the 300-foot buffer. No ground-disturbing fire lines shall be constructed within the 300-foot buffer, except for hose lays and/or construction of fuel breaks by limbing trees or clearing sticks.

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

Applies to prescribed fire.

PDF-PLANTS-05: Equipment and fire activities shall avoid weed infestations that are in the travel path to the water howellia 300-foot buffer and/or within the buffer zone.

(FW-DC-PLANT-02, FW-GDL-PLANT-01)

Applies to all units.

PDF-PLANTS-06: There would be no new landings or areas of compaction (e.g., system roads, temp roads, skid trails) in the water howellia 300-foot buffer. Road maintenance activities performed within 5 feet along either side of the road shoulder may be permissible on existing roads that occur within the 300-foot buffer zones.

(FW-DC-PLANT-02, FW-GDL-PLANT-01, FW-GDL-PLANT-02, GA-SV-DC)

PDF-PLANTS-07: In locations where existing roads bisect the 300-foot buffer, treatment activities may be permissible on the opposite side of the road from the water howellia pond. Treatment activities in these specific locations shall use the least impactful logging equipment.

(FW-DC-PLANT-02, FW-GDL-PLANT-01, FW-GDL-PLANT-02)

Applies to units 83W, 106W, 136W.

PDF-PLANTS-08: Four populations of clustered lady's-slipper (*Cypripedium fasciculatum*) are documented in the project area and are protected by a 150-foot buffer as they are excluded from unit boundaries. Within the buffer zones, prescribed fire activities cannot occur, all ground-disturbing activities shall be avoided from May 15 to August 15, and unit overstory canopy cover shall be maintained at 60-75%.

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

(FW-GDL-PLANT-DIV-02)

Applies to units 005, 006, 07A, 07B, 030, 401.

PDF-PLANTS-09: Do not spray at-risk plant populations with herbicide. Consult the Forest Botanist and Forest Invasive Species Coordinator prior to timber sale-related spraying to determine locations of at-risk plant populations along designated haul routes that must be avoided. To protect habitat conditions for water howellia, avoid water drafting (for invasive plant control or fire management activities) in occupied or unoccupied water howellia ponds.

(FW-GDL-PLANT-03)

Cultural Resources

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

(FW-DC-CR-01)

Applies to all project activities.

PDF-CR-02: To protect cultural resources, provisions shall be included in applicable contracts, agreements, and special-use permits for properties that are unevaluated, eligible for, or listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

(FW-STD-CR-01)

Applies to all project activities.

PDF-CR-03: One heritage avoidance area has been identified in Unit 59 (mechanical harvest). The property will be marked and buffered by 50 feet for avoidance for any mechanical activities.

(FW-DC-CR-01)

Applies to all project activities.

Fuels

PDF-FUELS-01: Hazard trees, defined as a tree that has potential to cause property damage, personal injury or fatality in the event of failure, should be removed within two tree lengths of structures, private property, administrative sites, fuel breaks, and portions of units along open roads to increase suppression safety and effectiveness.

(FW-DC-FIRE-01, FW-DC-FIRE-05, FW-DC-FIRE-07, FW-GDL-FIRE-04)

Applies to units: 001, 005, 006, 07A, 07B, 010, 012, 014, 14A, 15B, 15C, 019, 022, 026, 030, 041, 059, 83W, 102, 106, 106A, 106B, 106W, 121A, 121, 127, 136, 136A, 136W, 137, F3A, F4, F5, F6, F7, F9, F10, F11, F12, F13, F14, F15, 404, 405AI.

PDF-FUELS-02: To prevent unauthorized motorized travel routes, newly constructed fire lines will be rehabilitated for the first 100 feet or to a distance that is effective where fire lines intersect with trails or open roads, or border private land.

(FW-GDL-FIRE-03)

Applies to units: 005, 010, 041, 106, 106B, F6, F9.

PDF-FUELS-03: Burn plans will be prepared prior to the use of prescribed fire. These plans will determine the environmental conditions and resources necessary to meet objectives and minimize the possibility of escape.

(FW-DC-FIRE-05)

PDF-FUELS-04: To prevent flammable conditions that could hamper control efforts during prescribed burning, non-commercial thinning units that border broadcast burn units would require a

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

50-foot slash pullback along the adjacent portions of units unless the broadcast burning has been completed prior.

(FW-DC-FIRE-05)

Applies to units: 026, 066, 102, 121A, 221, F3A, F14.

PDF-FUELS-05: Should aerial ignition be used for prescribed burn operations, which involves multiple trips/passes each day consisting of low-altitude flights (< 500 meters above ground level), they shall not continue for a duration longer than 48 consecutive hours (FW-GDL-E&M-01).

Applies to all prescribed fire units.

PDF-FUELS-06: To ensure public safety, appropriate signing or other cautionary measures will be implemented in conjunction with prescribed burning. The Swan Lake Ranger District will notify the local public of prescribed burning by posting news releases on social media sites, displaying maps and burn information at the local Forest Service office, and/or preparing a list of contacts for each prescribed burn to be notified by phone, site visit, or mail.

(FW-DC-FIRE-01)

PDF-FUELS-07: To minimize fire behavior adjacent to non-NFS lands, slash pullback for 50 feet into the unit along the shared landowner boundary is required within pre-commercial thinning units, and understory removal units.

(FW-DC-FIRE-05, FW-DC-FIRE-07, FW-GDL-FIRE-05)

Applies to units: 012, F4, F5, F12, F15.

PDF-FUELS-08: Reforestation activities in regeneration units will lower stocking densities to maintain fuel breaks within 200 feet of a primary control line, open road, or private property boundary.

(FW-DC-FIRE-07, FW-GDL-FIRE-05, FW-STD-TIMB-02)

Applies to units: 001, 07A, 07B, 09A, 010, 014, 15B, 15C, 022, 101, 106, 106B, 136, 136A, 136W.

PDF-FUELS-09: Reforestation activities in the WUI will favor late seral, fire adapted species, such as Ponderosa Pine, Western Larch, and Western White Pine.

(FW-DC-FIRE-07, FW-GDL-FIRE-05)

PDF-FUELS-10: To ensure no loss to reforestation investments, reforestation activities adjacent to units that have broadcast burning as part of the fuel treatment plan will not be reforested until prescribed fire activities are completed.

Applies to units: 003, 03A, 004, 04A, 04C, 007, 022, 105.

Recreation

PDF-REC-01: For public safety, workers will be required to post signs at access points warning the public of vegetation management activities and any closures.

Soil

PDF-SOIL-01: Winter logging is required in units 010, 059, 105, and 124 to minimize detrimental soil disturbance and protect long-term soil productivity. Winter logging will be restricted to frozen or snow cover conditions. Winter logging requires that there be enough snow to prevent muddy water from mixing into the snow where equipment operates. This will require about ten inches of snow. The depth of snow varies with the snow conditions. It takes more dry powder snow than wet dense snow to protect the soil surface. Soils must be frozen enough to prevent deformation of the soil surface where equipment operates.

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

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

Applies to units 010, 059, 105, 124, and all other units utilizing winter logging.

PDF-SOIL-02: Units not harvested under winter conditions will be harvested when soils are dry as determined by the hand feel method. Sale administrators will monitor soil moisture disturbances prior to allowing equipment to begin operations in summer. This monitoring will be documented in the Timber Sale Daily Report.

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

Applies to all mechanized units.

PDF-SOIL-03: Summer harvest activities will utilize designated skid trails. Equipment may 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 units.

PDF-SOIL-04: All existing roads and skid trails will be reused to the extent feasible. 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 units.

PDF-SOIL-05: Skid trail spacing must average at least 75 feet in all summer harvest units. The goal is to occupy less than 15 percent of the treatment area, which includes soil disturbance from skid trails, landings, and temporary roads associated with past or proposed activities.

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

Applies to all mechanized units.

PDF-SOIL-06: All temporary roads constructed for this project will be reclaimed by site-appropriate combinations of the following:

- Removing any culverts or temporary bridges;
- Recontouring the entire template to natural ground line;
- Where recontouring is unnecessary due to lack of slope, scarifying with excavator to a depth equal sufficient to ameliorate the presence of detrimental soil compaction (usually between 2 and 12 inches);
- Seeding with plant mix as specified by the Forest Botanist;
- Placing woody material on the template.

(FW-DC-SOIL-01, FW-STD-SOIL-01, FW-STD-SOIL-02, FW-STD-SOIL-03, FW-STD-SOIL-04)

Applies to all temporary and obliterated roads.

PDF-SOIL-07: All mechanical fuel piling will be accomplished with excavator-type machines. These machines will, to the extent feasible, remain on skid trails.

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

Applies to all mechanized units.

PDF-SOIL-08: Prescribed burning prescriptions would be prepared and implemented to not exceed moderate burn severity conditions.

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

Applies to all prescribed fire units.

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

Transportation

PDF-TRANS-01: NFS roads closed by barriers (Maintenance Level 1) that are opened for project use will receive road storage treatments upon completion of activities to protect forest infrastructure and aquatic resources. Treatments will be applied based on site-specific vulnerability and may include: installing waterbars near stream-aligned/cross-drain culverts, partial re-contouring to fill ditches or remove unstable shoulders, outsloping the road prism, and seeding/fertilizing disturbed soil.

(FW-STD-WTR-02, FW-STD-IFS-07)

PDF-TRANS-02: New or replacement culvert installations on system roads shall be designed to accommodate a 100-year flood event. Structures will match channel width and align with the natural stream course. Inlet and outlet elevations will be placed at or below the natural stream grade. Disturbed areas will be stabilized using native seed and straw/wood-chip mulch. Geotextile silt fences will not be utilized in stream channels.

(FW-STD-WTR-02, FW-STD-IFS-06, FW-STD-IFS-07)

Applies to all new replacement and/or reconstructed stream crossings.

PDF-TRANS-03: Public motorized access will be prohibited on all roads and temporary routes currently designated as closed to the public. The timber purchaser will be required via contract provisions to maintain the integrity of existing gates, re-establish physical barrier closures daily during non-operational periods, and install effective physical closures (e.g., berms, boulders, root wads) immediately upon completion of active use. If berms are removed for access to treatment units, temporary gates will be installed.

(FW-DC-IFS-12)

Vegetation

PDF-TE&V-01: To increase patch size and promote development of future old growth, harvest units adjacent to existing old growth stands will leave all live trees greater than 17 inches DBH of western white pine, western larch, ponderosa pine, and Douglas-fir within 300 feet of the shared boundary. Exceptions to this limitation may occur if a tree has unacceptable impacts to future stand conditions such as, but not limited to, dwarf mistletoe infection.

(FW-GDL-TE&V-06)

Applies to units: 09, 09A, 042.

PDF-TE&V-02: There are no timber harvest units within inner RMZs. Portions of timber harvest units are within outer RMZs, in these units, retain all snags greater than or equal to 12 inches DBH. Upon agreement by the Forest Service, exceptions can be made where snags pose a threat to human health and safety.

Applies to portions of units: 001, 004, 005, 009, 009B, 010, 014, 015, 019, 021, 022, 042, 044, 04B, 059, 061, 065, 07A, 080, 083, 09A, 101, 105, 105A, 105B, 106B, 106W, 121, 121C, 124, 125, 127, 136, 136A, 136W, 137, 15A, 15B, 15C, 19A, 59A, 61A, 61B, 61R, 83W.

PDF-TE&V-03: Retain all snags of western larch, ponderosa pine, and black cottonwood trees greater than 20 inches DBH if available. Additional snag retention minimums are in Table 1 below. If sufficient snags are not available, substitute with live replacement trees. Snags should not be retained within two tree lengths of structures, private property, administrative sites, fuel breaks, and portions of units along open roads to increase suppression effectiveness and safety (see PDF-Fuels-01). Upon agreement by the Forest Service, exceptions can be made where snags pose a threat to human health and safety. Snags or live replacement trees designated for retention that fall or are

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

felled for safety reasons shall not be removed.

(GA-SV-STD-01; FW-GDL-TE&V-06; FW-GDL-TE&V-10, FW-DC-TE&V 15,16)

Forest type	Potential vegetation type	Units	Average minimum number of snags or live replacement trees (LRTs) per acre
All	All	009, 09A, 042	13 snags or LRTs greater than 10" DBH All snags greater than 15" DBH 3 snags or LRTs greater than or equal to 20" DBH
All except lodgepole pine	Warm Moist	03A, 03D, 004, 04A, 04B, 04C, 005, 007, 07A, 010, 15A, 041, 044, 059, 59A, 080, 084, 101, 105, 105A, 105B, 106, 106A, 106B, 106W, 124, 125, 137	13 snags or LRTs greater than 10" DBH 3 snags or LRTs greater than or equal to 20" DBH
All except lodgepole pine	Cool Moist/ Warm Dry	014, 014A, 019, 19A, 121, 121C	10 snags or LRTs greater than 10" DBH 2 snags or LRTs greater than or equal to 20" DBH
Lodgepole Pine	All	001, 003, 03B, 006, 07B, 009, 015, 15B, 15C, 021, 022, 030, 061, 61A, 61B, 61R, 065, 083, 83W, 127, 136, 136A, 136W	7 snags or LRTs greater than 10" DBH 1 snag or LRTs greater than or equal to 20" DBH

PDF-TE&V-04: Approximately 8-12 tons of downed wood per acre should be retained where available for units inside or bisected by the HFRA-defined WUI. Approximately 12-25 tons of downed wood per acre should be retained where available for units outside of the HFRA-defined WUI. For all units retained downed wood should be greater than 3 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 9 inches in diameter intact where possible.

(FW-DC-TE&V-17, FW-GDL-TE&V-06, FW-GDL-TE&V-08)

PDF-TE&V-05: Hardwood trees should not be targeted for removal and should be left intact to the extent possible, considering operational feasibility. The intent is for diverse restoration of native hardwoods.

(FW-OBJ-TE&V-04)

Wildlife

Operations

PDF-WL-01: 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 Sale Administrator is notified, and activities are modified if necessary with the inclusion of the Wildlife Biologist:

- Active denning sites used by grizzly bears, wolves, lynx, fishers, or wolverines,
- Active nesting sites used by bald eagles, golden eagles, American goshawks, common loons, black-backed woodpeckers, or flammulated owls
- Active rendezvous (pup rearing) sites used by wolves.

(FW-GDL-WL DIV-05)

PDF-WL-02: Contractors, operators, and their employees should be informed of procedures for safely working and recreating in grizzly bear country and of food and wildlife attractant storage special order prior to beginning work and annually thereafter, in order to reduce the risk of grizzly

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

bear-human conflicts. Documentation of a discussion between the contractor/purchaser and a Forest Service representative (e.g. Sale Administrator or C.O.R.) regarding the requirements/responsibilities relative to the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem Food Storage Order shall be provided to the District Ranger.

(FW-GDL-WL-01, FW-GDL-REC-01, FW-STD-WL-02)

PDF-WL-03: If a contractor or others implementing the project elects to camp on NFS 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)

PDF-WL-04: In order to resolve a grizzly bear-human conflict situation, project activities would be modified, cancelled, suspended, or temporarily ceased, as needed.

(FW-STD-REC-02, FW-GDL-TE&V-04)

PDF-WL-05: Personal use firewood gathering will not be allowed by contractors or other workers on newly constructed temporary roads or any other roads not open to motorized use by the general public.

(FW-STD-IFS-01, 02, 03, 04, FW-GDL-IFS-02, FW-GDL-LSU-01)

PDF-WL-06: To reduce likelihood of interaction between people and bears, the project will avoid seeding or planting palatable forage species to grizzly bear in areas of high human activities (e.g. trailheads, campgrounds, around the lodge area, along open roads).

(FW-GDL-WL-03)

PDF-WL-07: Provisions will be included in the contract to cease activity or otherwise protect populations and individuals of threatened, endangered, or sensitive species. This allows for modification of the project should an unforeseen issue(s) be identified during operations. Standard contractual requirements used in all contracts provide for modification or termination of the contract to avoid impacts and protect threatened, endangered, and sensitive species.

(FW-GDL-TE&V-04)

PDF-WL-08: Approved weed free seed mixes would be used as part of this project will not include attractants or non-natives. Native seed mixes or those that are less palatable to grizzly bears would be used so that seeded areas do not become an attractant.

(FW-GDL-WL-03)

PDF-WL-09: Most activities should not occur between April 1 and June 30, to minimize effects to grizzly bears during the critical spring use period in spring habitats for grizzly bears. Exceptions to this restriction include activities occurring on roads open to the public, prescribed burning, sale preparation, planting, and noxious weed spraying activities. On closed or temporary roads, exceptions may be granted, in consultation with the wildlife biologist, if deemed necessary to reduce soil erosion and protect water quality or other resource values.

(FW-STD-E&M-05, FW-GDL-TE&V-01)

Applies to units: 001, 009, 021, 03D, 04A, 044, 065, 066, 084, 105, 105A, 105B, 124, and 125.

PDF-WL-10: Regeneration units in ungulate winter range should favor retention of full-crowned species (western white pine, ponderosa pine, Douglas fir), where available.

(FW-GDL-WL-DIV-01)

Applies to units: 15B, 15C, 19A, 022, 044, 61, 61A, 101, 105, 106, 106B, 125.

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

Roads, Trails, and Infrastructure

PDF-WL-11: Access management conditions (OMRD and TMRD) in project subunits should be restored to pre-project levels within one year after completion of project activities in order to reduce the duration of grizzly bear displacement or disturbance due to project-related activities. Exceptions may be made to accommodate prescribed burning, best management practices to protect water quality and required reforestation activities.

(FW-STD-IFS-01,02,03)

PDF-WL-12: Contractors on Forest Service lands are prohibited from hunting, transporting hunters, or transporting game on roads closed to public motorized use.

(FW-GDL-IFS-01,02,03)

PDF-WL-13: Barriers (e.g., rows of immature trees, rocks, logs, mounded earth) will be retained around berms and gates on roads in units and on roads used for project motorized access, where needed, to maintain closure effectiveness.

(FW-STD-IFS-03)

PDF-WL-14: All temporary roads will be rehabilitated following project activities. Rehabilitated temporary roads will be left in manner that meets the LMP definition of impassable. If berms are removed for access to treatment units, temporary gates will be installed. Berms will be re-installed after project activities.

(FW-STD-IFS-03)

PROJECT SCREENING

Legal and Regulatory Considerations

Given the nature of the project, the responsible official is requesting documentation to demonstrate compliance with the following legal and regulatory considerations:

Law, Regulation, Policy:

- ☒ NFMA/Land Management Plan
- ☒ Endangered Species Act (ESA)
- ☒ National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA)
- ☒ Tribal Consultation
- ☒ Clean Air Act (CAA)
- ☒ Clean Water Act (CWA)
- ☐ Pertinent Executive Orders

Special Management Areas:

- ☐ Wilderness
- ☐ Roadless
- ☐ Wild & Scenic River Corridor
- ☐ Recommended Wilderness
- ☐ Research Natural Areas
- ☐ National Scenic & Historic Trails
- ☐ National Recreation Areas

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

Agencies, Organizations, and Persons Contacted

Given the nature of the project, the responsible official requested the following agencies, organizations and/or persons be contacted to provide input to, or to be made aware of, the project. A brief overview of feedback or comments received is included.

Collaboration

To meet the requirements for projects categorically excluded from documentation in an EA or EIS under Section 603 of HFRA (16 U.S.C. 6591b), this project was developed through “a *collaborative process that is transparent and non-exclusive and includes multiple interested persons representing diverse interests*”.

Table 4. Summary of collaboration and public engagement

Group/Organization	Description of Collaborative Engagement
Southwest Crown Collaborative (SWCC)	April 2026: District fuels staff presented an overview of the Piper Creek project to the collaborative and answered questions regarding windthrow, vegetation treatment types, and Canada lynx critical habitat.
Swan Valley Community Council	April & May 2026: The district ranger announced the Piper Creek Project and discussed public engagement opportunities at the monthly community council meetings.
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP)	May 2026: District wildlife, fuels, silviculture, and planning staff joined an FWP wildlife biologist for a field visit in the Piper Creek project area to discuss wildlife objectives and aspen restoration treatments.
Public field trip	May 2026: The district ranger and staff attended a public field trip held by Swan Valley Connections in the Piper Creek project area. Forest Service staff gave an overview of the proposed action and made several stops to discuss commercial harvest, fuel breaks, and aspen improvement opportunities. The field trip was attended by local organizations (SWCC, Stewards of the Swan, Clearwater Resource Council), Montana DNRC, Missoula County Fire Mitigation, timber industry representatives (F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber, Weyerhaeuser, local contractors), adjacent private landowners, and members of the public.

The proposed action was posted to the Flathead National Forest’s public-facing project webpage (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/r01/flathead/projects/267907>) on April 21, 2026, for a 14-day comment period. The Forest Service received 14 comment letters from the Alliance for the Wild Rockies, American Forest Resource Council, Friends of the Wild Swan, Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Montana Native Plant Society, Swan Valley Connection, Swan View Coalition, Wild Montana, and the general public. Comment letters were parsed into 140 individual comments and then summarized into 60 comments by resource: aquatics, botany, fisheries, fuels/fire, heritage, planning/NEPA, recreation, scenery, silviculture, soils, timber, transportation, and wildlife. Copies of all comment letters and consideration of comments by specialists are available in the project record.

Supporting Documentation

- Comment Summary & Consideration
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\S_Public_Involvement\S001_Piper Creek_Comment Summary.pdf; Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\S_Public_Involvement\S002_Piper Creek_Comment Consideration.pdf
- Public comments and attachments
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\S_Public_Involvement\Scoping Comments
- Collaboration materials
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\S_Public_Involvement\Collaboration

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

Consultation with Federally Recognized Tribes

The Flathead National Forest heritage program initiated program-to-program level consultation regarding the Piper Creek project with respective Tribal Historic Preservation Offices in May 2022 and May 2025. No areas of concern or inherent issues with the project location or proposed activities were identified at that time. In April 2026, the district ranger initiated project-specific tribal consultation by sending emails to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and the Blackfeet Nation to provide project information and solicit feedback on the project and the consultation process. No comments were received from tribes.

Supporting Documentation

- Tribal consultation materials
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\C_InterAgencyGov\C1_TribalConsultation

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

The following documents compliance with relevant environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

National Forest Management Act (NFMA) Land Management Plan Consistency

The pertinent specialist has reviewed the proposed action including design features and provided supporting analysis and rationale for determinations in the project record. The following are specialist determinations regarding project consistency with applicable land management plan direction, standards, and guidelines:

Botany: Consistent	Range: N/A
Cultural/Heritage: Consistent	Recreation: Consistent
Engineering: Consistent	Scenic Resources: Consistent
Fisheries: Consistent	Soils: Consistent
Fuels: Consistent	Silviculture: Consistent
Hydrology: Consistent	Special Management Areas: N/A
Lands and Special Uses: Consistent	Wildlife: Consistent
Minerals: N/A	Other Resources: N/A

Supporting Documentation

- Piper Creek Project Consistency with the 2018 Forest Plan
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\R_Supporting_Documentation\
R001_PiperCreek_Forest Plan Consistency Table.pdf
- Regulatory Consistency – Wildlife
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\D_Wildlife\D001_PC_WildlifeRegulatoryConsistency.pdf
- Regulatory Consistency – At-Risk Plant Species
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\H_Botany\H001_PC_PlantsFPConsist.pdf

Other Law, Regulation, and Policy Consistency

Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act

This project falls within the Emergency Situation Determination under Section 40807 of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), as determined under the Secretary’s Memorandum 1078-006 signed on April 3, 2025, by Secretary of the U.S Department of Agriculture, Brooke L. Rollins. The Secretary delegated authority to the forest supervisor to approve a project’s use of this emergency situation determination. On September 17, 2026, the Flathead National Forest Supervisor, Anthony Botello, approved its use for the Piper Creek project. This project qualifies because the majority (96%) of areas proposed for treatment fall within the landscape identified in the Secretary’s Memorandum. In addition, the proposed actions align with the emergency determination as they will improve forest health and resilience and reduce potential wildfire impacts to important values at risk.

Supporting Documentation

- HFRA & ESD Map
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\R_Supporting_Documentation\R003_PiperCreek_ESDMap_20260917.pdf
- ESD Portal Approval Letter
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\R_Supporting_Documentation\R004_PiperCreek_ESDApproval_Botello_20260917.pdf
- Secretarial Memo 1078-006
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\R_Supporting_Documentation\R005_USDA_SecretarialMemo1078-006_20250403.pdf

Endangered Species Act

The pertinent specialists reviewed the proposed action and made the following determinations for threatened, endangered and/or proposed species (Table 5). Project file references for the species’ biological assessments are listed in the Supporting Documentation section below.

Table 5. Threatened, endangered, proposed or candidate species and critical habitat effect determinations

Species/Habitat	Status	Proposed or Designated Critical Habitat Present?	Determination
Grizzly bear	Threatened	No	LAA
Canada lynx and critical habitat	Threatened	Yes	NLAA
Wolverine	Threatened	No	NLAA
Yellow-billed cuckoo	Threatened	No	NE
Bull trout	Threatened	Yes	NLAA
Meltwater Lednian stonefly	Threatened	No	NE
Spalding’s catchfly	Threatened	No	NE
Whitebark pine	Threatened	No	NE
Monarch butterfly	Proposed Threatened	No	NE
Suckley’s cuckoo bumblebee	Proposed Endangered	No	No Jeopardy

NE – no effect; **NLAA** – may affect, not likely to adversely affect; **LAA** – may affect, likely to adversely affect; **No Jeopardy** – not likely to jeopardize the continued existence or adversely modify critical habitat.

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

Forest Service biologists have made a determination of “*may affect, likely to adversely affect*” (LAA) for grizzly bears due to the environmental baseline, including low amounts of secure habitat and existing levels of motorized use in the analysis area (Island Unit GBAU). Given these factors and the rare occurrence of grizzly bears in the project area, potential for disturbance or displacement of bears is low. Under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the “*likely to adversely affect*” determination is made if any adverse effect to a listed species may occur as a direct or indirect result of the proposed action, even if the overall effect of the proposed action is beneficial to the listed species. A “*likely to adversely affect*” determination requires formal consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) but does not preclude the use of a categorical exclusion under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Based on the emergency action determination under USDA Secretarial Memorandum 1078-006, the Forest has requested emergency consultation procedures under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Under emergency circumstances, the consultation with the USFWS can occur informally through alternative procedures prior to implementation. The informal consultation facilitates compliance with section 7(a)(2) but does not replace the formal consultation requirement. Formal consultation is still required and must be completed, but federal actions to alleviate the emergency can occur prior to formal consultation being completed. When using emergency consultation procedures, agencies must still comply with section 7(a)(2) of the ESA by ensuring their actions are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of listed species or result in the adverse destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat. Pursuant to emergency consultation procedures, the Forest has provided the USFWS with Biological Assessments for the Piper Creek project (listed below), which include a detailed description of the project activities, an evaluation of the impacts to affected species, and a detailed list of design features to minimize the impact of activities to affected listed species.

Supporting Documentation:

- USFWS Consultation Cover Letter
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\C_InterAgencyGov\C2_ USFWSConsultation\20260812_PiperCreek_BA_CoverLetter.pdf
- Emergency Consultation Request Letter
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\C_InterAgencyGov\C2_ USFWSConsultation\20261016_PiperCreek_EmergencyConsultation.pdf
- Aquatics Biological Assessment
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\C_InterAgencyGov\C2_ USFWSConsultation\PiperCreek_BA_BullTrout.pdf
- Botany Biological Assessment
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\C_InterAgencyGov\C2_ USFWSConsultation\PiperCreek_BA_Botany.pdf
- Terrestrial Wildlife Biological Assessment
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\C_InterAgencyGov\C2_ USFWSConsultation\PiperCreek_BA_TerrestrialWildlife.pdf
- Other Biological Assessments
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\C_InterAgencyGov\C2_ USFWSConsultation\PiperCreek_BA_SuckleysCuckooBumblebee.pdf
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\C_InterAgencyGov\C2_ USFWSConsultation\PiperCreek_BA_MonarchButterfly.pdf
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\C_InterAgencyGov\C2_ USFWSConsultation\PiperCreek_BA_StoneflyProgrammatic.pdf
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\C_InterAgencyGov\C2_ USFWSConsultation\PiperCreek_BA_YellowBilledCuckoo.pdf

National Historic Preservation Act – Section 106 Review

Compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act required heritage inventory of the proposed area of potential effect and documented several heritage resources. Consultation with the Montana State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) has determined that two sites within the APE are “Eligible” for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Montana SHPO also

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

concurrent with both determinations recommended in the submitted heritage reports: “No Historical Properties Affected” (J001) and “No Adverse Effects to Historic Properties” (J002).

Supporting Documentation:

- SHPO Concurrence Letters
Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\J_Heritage\J001_MT SHPO Concurrence_Piper 1&3_20221228.pdf; Box\Planning\SLRD\Piper Creek\Project_File\J_Heritage\J002_MT SHPO Concurrence_Piper 2_20260826.pdf

Clean Water Act

All required permits will be acquired prior to project implementation. To comply with State and local nonpoint pollution controls, the Forest Service implements best management practices (BMPs) which are the primary mechanism to achieve water quality standards and included through design features of the proposed action (PDF-AQ-01). Where work is needed within a streambed, stream banks, floodplain, or wetland the Forest Service will submit a Joint Application (310 form 270) to all appropriate local, State and Federal agencies to acquire necessary permits. Exemptions from Clean Water Act permitting exist for “normal farming, silviculture, or ranching activities” as defined in Section 404(f)(1)(A) of the Clean Water Act.

These exemptions do not preclude the Forest Service from obtaining required non-Federal permits such as SPA 124 permits from Montana FWP, Floodplain Permits from City or County Floodplain Administrators, or Navigable Rivers Land Use License/Easements from Montana DNRC. Properly following the joint permitting process ensures compliance with applicable local, State and Federal laws that relate to protection of streams, wetlands, floodplains, and other water-related features.

Clean Air Act

The project will not result in permanent air emissions and no modifications or further coordination needs to occur to ensure compliance. The Flathead National Forest participates in the Montana-Idaho Airshed Group, which regulates prescribed burning within the state of Montana. Burning would occur when smoke dispersion forecasts were within Airshed Management Guidelines (PDF-AIR-01).

Special Management Area Considerations

No activities are proposed within or in the vicinity of special management areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, wild and scenic rivers, inventoried roadless, or national recreation areas.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Consideration of Extraordinary Circumstances

This categorical exclusion has been prepared in compliance with USDA NEPA requirements at 7 CFR 1b.3. Pertinent specialists have reviewed the proposed action and informed the following determinations made by the responsible official with regards to degree of potential effects for the resource conditions considered:

Table 6. Resource conditions considered for extraordinary circumstance determinations

Resource Conditions Considered for Extraordinary Circumstances	Is there a degree of potential effect that raises uncertainty over its significance? Briefly explain.
Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat or species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat [7 CFR 1b.3(f)(1)(i)]	Botany: NO, there is no uncertainty Rationale: There are no known occurrences or suitable habitat for federally listed plant species within the project area.
	Fisheries: NO, there is no uncertainty Rationale: Effects to federally listed aquatic species were analyzed and considered in the biological assessment. Due to the location, scale, and

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

Resource Conditions Considered for Extraordinary Circumstances	Is there a degree of potential effect that raises uncertainty over its significance? Briefly explain.
	intensity of the proposed action, as well as compliance with state SMZ laws and application of design features, the ESA determinations are “May Affect, Not Likely to Adversely Affect” for bull trout and critical habitat and “No Effect” for Lednian meltwater stonefly. Wildlife: NO, there is no uncertainty Rationale: Effects to federally listed species were analyzed and considered in biological assessments completed for this project. ESA determinations for all terrestrial species and critical habitats present are “May Affect, Not Likely to Adversely Affect”, “No Effect”, or “Not Likely to Jeopardize”, with the exception of the grizzly bear determination described below. The grizzly bear determination is “May Affect, Likely to Adversely Affect” due to the environmental baseline, including low amounts of secure habitat and existing motorized use in the project area. Given the existing level of human activity, low habitat security, and rare occurrence of grizzly bears in the project area, the potential for disturbance or displacement of bears is low. The project activities and design features were developed to further minimize potential effects to the grizzly bear. Therefore, the proposed action would have minor impacts to grizzly bears due to the influence of project activities, and there is no uncertainty regarding the degree of effects.
Flood plains, wetlands, or other such sensitive areas; Special sources of water, such as sole-source aquifers, wellhead protection areas, municipal watersheds, or other water sources that are vital in a region [7 CFR 1b.3(f)(1)(ii), (iii)]	NO, there is no uncertainty Rationale: Wetlands have been excluded from treatment unit boundaries. There are no FEMA mapped floodplains in the project area. There are no municipal watersheds or other special sources of water present in the project area.
Areas having formal Federal or state designations, such as wilderness areas, parks, or wildlife refuges; wild and scenic rivers; marine sanctuaries; national natural landmarks; inventoried roadless areas; or national recreation areas [7 CFR 1b.3(f)(1)(iv)]	N/A, not present Rationale: There are no congressionally designated areas within the project area.
Specially managed areas, such as designated research or experimental areas, coral reefs, coastal barrier resources, or, unless exempt, coastal zone management areas [7 CFR 1b.3(f)(1)(v)]	NO, there is no uncertainty Rationale: There are no research natural areas or other specially managed areas within or near the project area.
Prime, unique, or important farmland as defined by and subject to the provisions of the Farm Protection Policy Act [7 CFR 1b.3(f)(1)(vi)]	N/A, not present Rationale: There is no farmland within the project area.
Property (e.g., sites, buildings, structures, and objects) of historic, archeological, or architectural significance, as designated by Federal, Tribal, State, or local governments, or property eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places; or American Indian and Alaska Native	NO, there is no uncertainty Rationale: Cultural resource survey and review found two sites Eligible for listing in NRHP; however, there would be no adverse effect on new or previously recorded sites with application of design features. Consultation between the Forest and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and the Blackfeet Nation did not identify any tribal cultural concerns or traditional cultural properties within the project area.

Piper Creek CE
Swan Lake Ranger District

Resource Conditions Considered for Extraordinary Circumstances	Is there a degree of potential effect that raises uncertainty over its significance? Briefly explain.
religious or cultural sites [7 CFR 1b.3(f)(1)(vii), (viii)]	

REFERENCES

- USDA. 2012. National Best Management Practices for Water Quality Management on National Forest System Lands. Volume 1: National Core BMP Technical Guide. FS-990a. April 2012. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. Washington, DC. 165 p.
- USDA. 2018a. Flathead National Forest Land Management Plan. November 2018. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Flathead National Forest. Kalispell, MT. 170 p.
<https://www.fs.usda.gov/r01/flathead/planning/forest-plan>
- USDA. 2018b. Volume 1 – Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Land Management Plan, Flathead National Forest. Vol. 1, Final Environmental Impact Statement. December 2017. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. Kalispell, MT. 422 p.
- USDA. 2018c. Volume 4 – Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Land Management Plan, Flathead National Forest. Vol. 4, Appendices and Glossary. December 2017. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. Kalispell, MT. 963 p.
- USDA. 2025. National Active Forest Management Strategy. FS-1268a. May 2025. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. Washington, DC. 20 p.



Finding of Applicability and No Extraordinary Circumstances

This Finding of Applicability and No Extraordinary Circumstance (FANEC) incorporates the Categorical Exclusion Review form and relies on documentation in the associated proposal record.

Proposal Information

Proposal Name: Piper Creek (#267907)

Unit: Swan Lake Ranger District, Flathead National Forest

Responsible Official: Sarah Canepa, Swan Lake District Ranger, sarah.canepa@usda.gov

Contact: Alyssa Worsham, Planning Team Leader, alyssa.worsham@usda.gov

Categorically Excluded Activities

I have determined that the actions described in the "Proposed Action" section of the Categorical Exclusion Review form fit the HFRA Section 603 (16 U.S.C. 6591b), Insect & Disease, category.

Decisions that are categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement are not subject to an administrative review process (Agriculture Act of 2014 [Pub. L. No. 113-79], Subtitle A, Sec. 8006).

Determination of No Extraordinary Circumstances

As informed by an interdisciplinary review of all resources listed at 7 CFR 1b.3(f)(1), I have determined that no extraordinary circumstances exist based on the rationale provided in the "Consideration of Extraordinary Circumstances" section of the Categorical Exclusion Review form.

Decision

I am authorizing all project activities described under the Proposed Action in the CE Review Form, including the changes documented since the proposal was released for public comment. Authorized activities include 2,307 acres of vegetation treatments, use of 23 miles of National Forest System haul routes, and construction of 3.5 miles of temporary roads. Implementation may begin immediately.

Signature and Authorization Date

SARAH
CANEPA

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Date: 2026.10.16 12:45:59
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October 16, 2026

SARAH CANEPA

District Ranger



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