January, 2010
Project Scoping

STONEWALL VEGETATION PROJECT

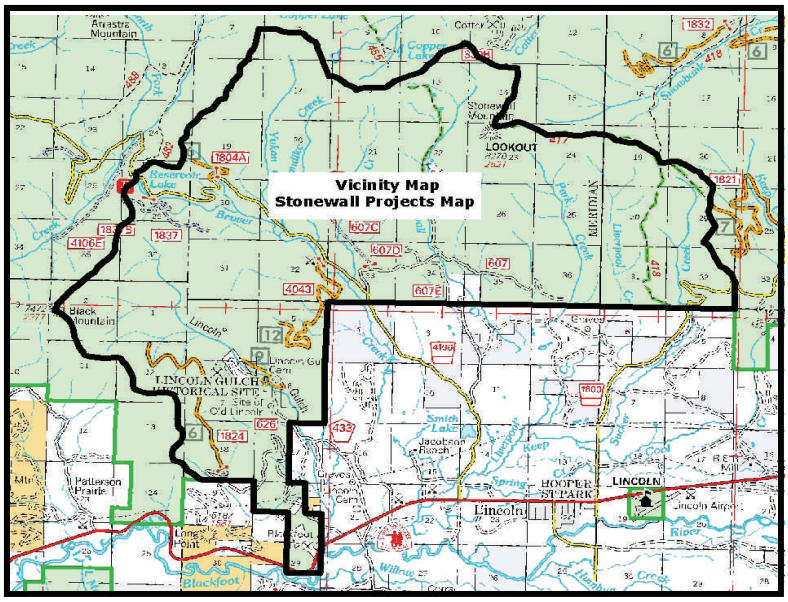
The Helena National Forest (HNF) is proposing the Stonewall Vegetation Project. A watershed analysis was completed by the Forest Service (FS) for the Stonewall vegetation project area. This project is presented as three areas. Two areas were brought forward to the FS by the Lincoln Working Group (LWG) of the Montana Forest Restoration Committee (MFRC) and the third area is a product of the watershed analysis. This analysis covered all three areas. The recommended actions associated with the three areas are consistent with the HNF Forest Plan. The project encompasses approximately 8,640 acres adjacent to the community of Lincoln. This analysis will be documented in an Environmental Impact Statement.

Fire suppression and moist growing conditions through much of this century resulted in a loss of open forest conditions and seral species (aspen, ponderosa pine and western larch). This has created a more uniform landscape comprised of dense forests susceptible to insect and wildfire mortality (Douglas-fir and lodgepole pine). In addition, a large-scale mountain pine beetle epidemic has killed most of the mature lodgepole pine and ponderosa pine. These conditions are elevating fuel levels which pose a wildfire threat to nearby homes and communities in the wildland urban interface (WUI).

Purpose and Need

The purpose and need for the project includes:

- Improve the mix of vegetation composition and structure across the landscape that is diverse, resilient, and sustainable to wildfire and insects.
- Modify fire behavior to enhance community protection while creating conditions that allow the reestablishment of fire as a natural process on the landscape.
- Enhance & restore aspen, western larch, and ponderosa pine species and habitats.
- Utilize economic value of trees with economic removal.
- Integrate restoration with socioeconomic considerations.



The Proposed Action

The proposed action includes using both commercial and noncommercial treatments to accomplish the desired condition. These actions would include: regeneration harvest, intermediate harvest, precommercial thinning, and prescribed burning. The proposed activities are further described in the Proposed Treatment Table. In addition, specific unit-by-unit information can be found on our website or by request.

The proposed action also includes using prescribed fire and tree slashing in two roadless areas (Bear Marshall Scapegoat Swan and Lincoln Gulch). Please see a proximity map on our website.

Approximately five miles of road would be built then obliterated immediately following timber removal. Commercial harvest and road construction would not occur in the two roadless areas.

Implementing the proposed action could include the use of chainsaws, feller bunchers, and cable logging equipment.

Post treatment activities would include underburning, site preparation burning, jackpot burning, hand piling/burning, tree planting, and monitoring of natural regeneration.

In all the areas proposed, the opening size may exceed 40 acres due to the amount of mortality created by the bark beetles and the resulting need for regeneration.

Preliminary issues

1. Restoration of vegetation communities
2. Grizzly bear habitat
3. Lynx habitat
4. Wildfire hazard, risk, and fuels
5. Habitats including ponderosa pine, western larch, and aspen

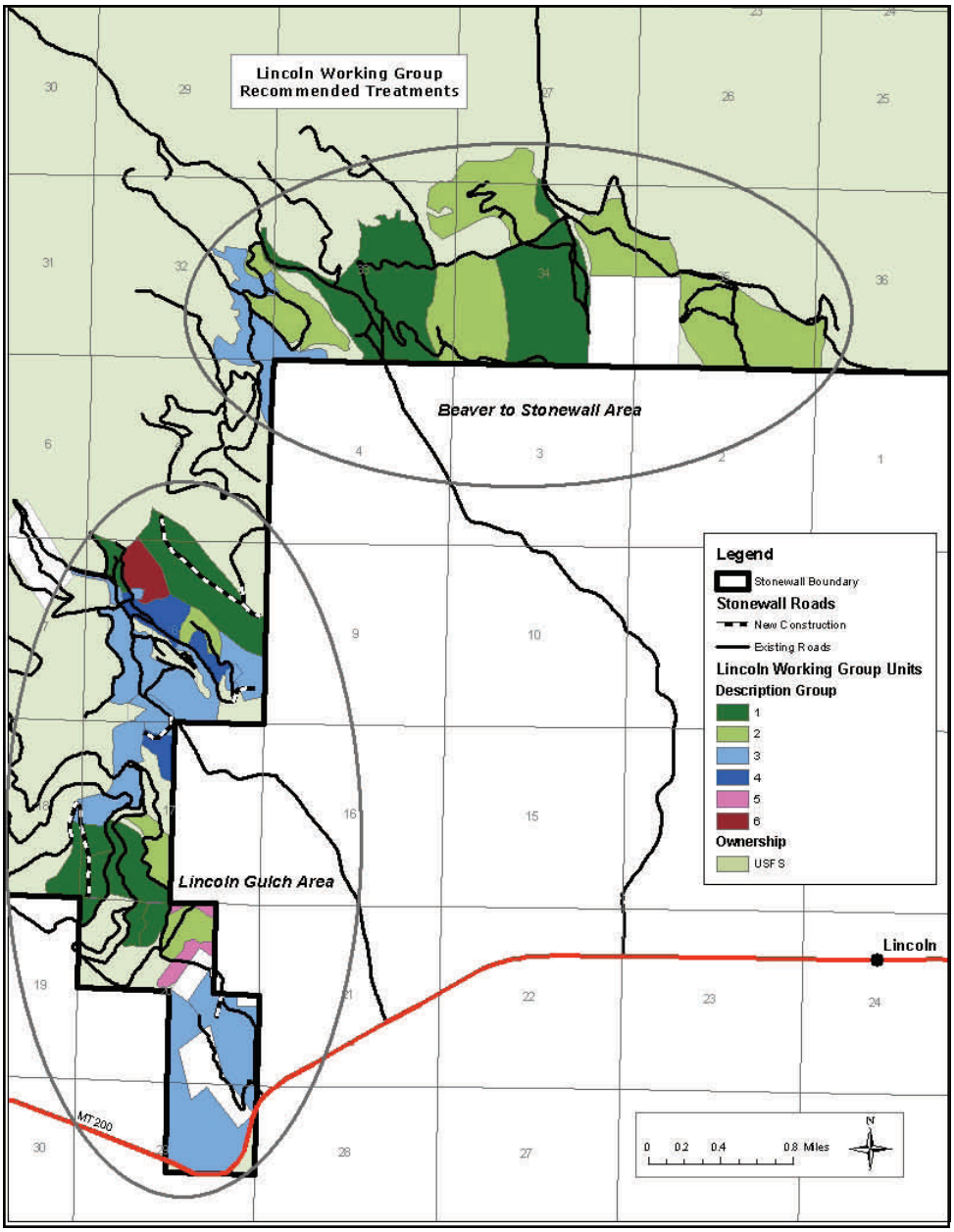
Proposed area for prescribed fire treatment in the Inventoried Roadless Area

Development of the Proposed Action

Two areas were brought forward to the Forest Service by the Lincoln Working Group (LWG) of the Montana Forest Restoration Committee (MFRC). The LWG is a group of private citizens with diverse community interests and was formed in 2008 with the purpose of developing recommendations for restoration projects on the Lincoln Ranger District working within the framework developed by the MFRC. The Helena National Forest has been working with the LWG in compliance with Executive Order 13352 of August 2004—Facilitation of Cooperative Conservation.

The MFRC is a collaborative group with representatives from diverse interests who came together in 2007 to address forest stewardship issues. This group adopted 13 restoration principles for on-the-ground treatments that represented a zone of agreement of all parties:

1. Restore functioning ecosystems
2. Apply adaptive management
3. Use appropriate scale of analysis to prioritize and design activities
4. Monitor restoration outcomes
5. Reestablish fire as a natural process
6. Consider social constraints & seek public support for reintroduction of fire
7. Engage the community & interested parties
8. Improve habitat & connectivity
9. Emphasize ecosystem goods & services & sustainable land management
10. Integrate restoration with socioeconomics
11. Enhance education and recreation activities to build support for restoration
12. Protect and improve overall watershed health
13. Establish & maintain a safe road and trail system that is ecologically sustainable



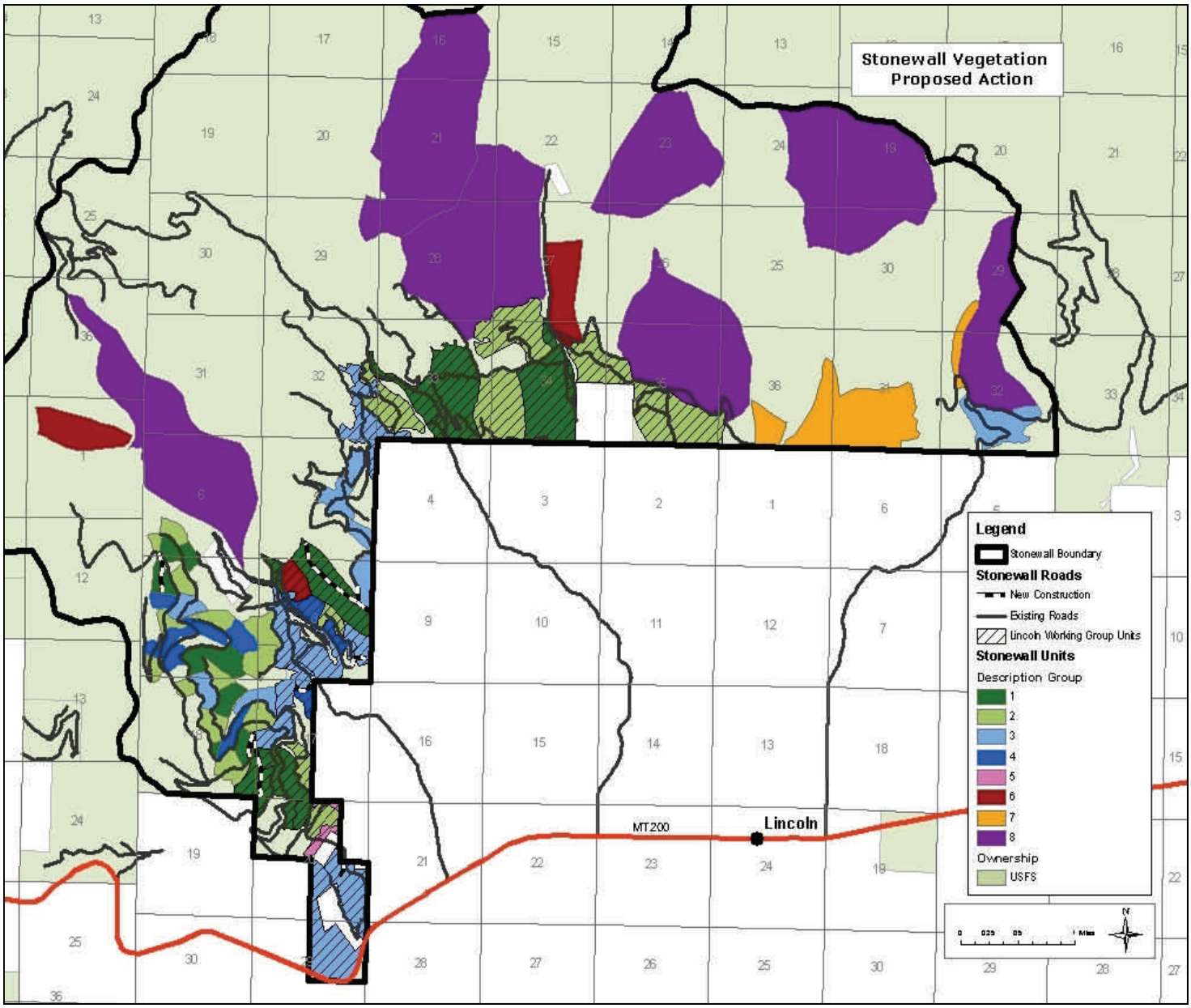
The first area recommended to the Forest Service is called *"Lincoln Gulch Fuels Reduction and Forest Restoration."* The LWG chose to focus on the Lincoln Gulch area for their first recommended project because they felt it offers opportunities for restoration work benefitting ponderosa pine, quaking aspen, fish and wildlife habitat, and separately, fuels reduction in proximity to private residences.

The treatment areas they recommended were built with consensus to meet multiple goals consistent with the 13 Montana Forest Restoration Committee principles. The LWG spent almost one full year, including field verification, devoted to assessing where and how these principles might be applied in ways that are beneficial to the Lincoln community, the broader public, and the health of the land. Their recommended treatments include prescribed fire, ponderosa pine and aspen restoration, and fuels reduction. This includes approximately 1,049 acres of total treatment. Please see the LWG's letter of October 9, 2009 located on our website at: www.fs.fed.us/r1/helena/projects/stonewall

The second area recommended to the Forest Service is called *"Beaver to Stonewall"* or *"Project 2"*. The LWG, in looking for another area to apply principles for restoration, adopted a process recommended by The Wilderness Society where specific criteria were utilized using a mapping technique to locate where low severity fire regime and the presence of ponderosa pine occurred.

The *"Beaver to Stonewall"* area was identified and endorsed by the LWG after a field trip was conducted to verify the sites met their restoration goals and had a need for restoration treatment. Their recommended treatments are similar to *"Lincoln Gulch,"* benefiting ponderosa pine, aspen, fish and wildlife habitat, and separately, fuels thinning in proximity to private land. This includes approximately 1,240 acres of total treatment. Please see the LWG's letter of December 10, 2009 located on our website at: www.fs.fed.us/r1/helena/projects/stonewall

The Helena National Forest has included the two areas recommended by the Lincoln Working Group and are proposing them as actions because they are consistent with the Helena National Forest's Land Management objectives, the Helena National Forest Plan, and support by watershed analysis work.



The third area, called "*Stone Dry*" is a result of the watershed analysis completed in 2009 by the Forest Service. Specialists applied the *National Forest Management Act* and an *Ecosystem Analysis at a Watershed Scale* for the entire 42,002 acre watershed that includes Lincoln Gulch, Stonewall Creek, Keep Cool Creek and Beaver Creek. The analysis included the areas recommended by the LWG. The findings include a decline of ponderosa pine, western larch, and aspen habitats, elevated fuels in the wildland urban interface, and a landscape level departure from natural fire processes. The fire risk and fuels concerns for this area were also identified in the Community Wildfire Protection Plan as the highest priority need for treatment. After the 2003 Lincoln Complex Fires that burned approximately 36,000 acres and required a partial evacuation of the community of Lincoln, residents expressed a desire to see forest management occur to reduce the risk of future catastrophic events.

In addition, a Forest-wide landscape-level assessment of insect conditions and predictions was done in 2008 which identified the Stonewall area as a high priority for management. The Lincoln community is very aware of the mountain pine beetle epidemic and high levels of western spruce budworm activity across the landscapes in the Upper Blackfoot Valley and east-side of the Continental Divide. In particular, the Upper Blackfoot Valley Community Council and the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce have strongly encouraged the Forest Service to engage in the removal of dead and dying trees as a means of recovering economic value, reducing fuel loadings, and improving forest health.

Aspen stand with conifer encroachment

Proposed Action Treatments

Group	Acres All Areas	Treatment Descriptions
1	1161	Group One consists of units with dense mixed forests where intermediate harvest is proposed to create open mature forest dominated by Douglas-fir and ponderosa pine where present. The mountain pine beetle has killed most of the lodgepole pine. After treatment, trees would be spaced 20ft to 40ft apart. The treatment would provide wood products while lowering fuels, restoring open habitat, and leaving a mature forest and the largest trees behind. Many of these sites would be burned with low intensity prescribed fire following harvest to further reduce fuels and increase the resiliency of the mature trees.
2	1087	Group Two consists of units with dense young forests established in areas of past harvest where pre-commercial thinning is proposed to favor desirable species and ensure they grow to maturity. These forests are generally less than 40 years old and 6" in diameter at breast height. Ponderosa pine, aspen, and western larch would be maintained and restored where they occur. Thinning would enhance the vigor of the residual trees and over time change the fire behavior. Fuels may be piled and burned in some areas.
3	770	Group Three consists of units with mature lodgepole or ponderosa pine dominated forests where the mountain pine beetle has caused high mortality. There are scattered live trees of other species (primarily Douglas-fir). The proposed treatment is a regeneration harvest which leaves behind live trees to provide shelter and seed, and establish a new stand of young trees. Regeneration of seral species would be targeted and may be achieved with tree planting. Treatment would provide wood products while reducing fuels and ensuring a new forest is established. Many sites would have a prescribed burn following harvest to help achieve objectives.
4	223	Group Four consists of units with dense, mature lodgepole pine forests where the mountain pine beetle has killed most of the trees, and there are very few trees of other species. The proposed treatment is a regeneration harvest that leaves the few live trees onsite and establishes a new stand of young trees. Regeneration of seral species would be targeted as much as possible and may be achieved with tree planting. Treatment would utilize wood products while reducing fuels and ensuring a new forest is established. Many sites would have a prescribed burn following harvest to help achieve objectives.
5	25	Group Five consists of units with mixed forest of lodgepole pine, Douglas-fir, Engelmann spruce, and subalpine fir. The lodgepole pine has been killed by mountain pine beetle. The proposal is an intermediate harvest to remove the dead and dying trees, leaving much of the existing stand intact. Treatment would utilize wood products while reducing fuels. Piling and burning of excess fuels could occur.
6	304	Group Six consists of units with mixed mature forests, generally dominated by Douglas-fir with some ponderosa pine with areas of dead lodgepole. These sites are proposed for low severity prescribed fire treatment. Slashing of small diameter trees may occur to prepare the site for burning. Direct mortality from the fire would be low, but with some patches of overstory mortality up to 5 or 10 acres in size. The treatment would create a mosaic of conditions on the landscape to reduce fuels and favor seral species where they occur. Units or portions of units could occur in roadless.
7	410	Group Seven consists of units with mixed forests generally dominated by Douglas-fir with ponderosa pine, aspen, whitebark pine, and patches of dead lodgepole pine. The proposal is for mixed severity prescribed fire. Slashing of small diameter trees may occur to prepare the site for burning. Some patches of overstory mortality up to 5, 10, or 20 acres in size could occur. The treatment would create a mosaic of conditions on the landscape to reduce fuels and favor seral species where they occur. Units or portions of units could occur in roadless.
8	4658	Group Eight consists of units with mixed forests generally dominated by Douglas-fir with ponderosa pine, aspen, whitebark pine, and patches of dead lodgepole pine. The proposal is for mixed severity prescribed fire. Slashing of small diameter trees may occur to prepare the site for burning. Some patches of overstory mortality up to 30 or 75 acres in size could occur. The treatment would create a mosaic of conditions on the landscape to reduce fuels and favor seral species where they occur. Units or portions of units could occur in roadless.
Total	8,638	

The LWG proposes to monitor restoration outcomes by including baseline measurements, project monitoring, and relevant research needed to enable information feedback in future projects.

Seral species *are those species established and/or maintained by disturbances such as wildfire. These species are generally shade-intolerant and over time are replaced by more shade-tolerant species in the absence of disturbance.*

Total acres where western larch is present: 450

*For more about the **MRFC and LWG,** please check out the website:*

www.montanarestoration.org

If you have specific questions about the Lincoln Working Group, please contact the co-chairs:

KD Feeback 406-362-4832 or Paul Roos 406-362-3008

Project Benefits

In addition to the project purpose and need:

- Restore ponderosa pine, dry Douglas-fir, and western larch sites to a more natural fire regime condition.
- Maintain vigor and restore aspen groves
- Enhance wildlife habitat conditions

The Forest Supervisor will make the following decisions

and document them in an Environmental Impact Statement:

- Whether to implement the proposed action or an alternative to the proposed action
- What monitoring requirements are appropriate to evaluate implementation of this project
- Whether a Forest Plan amendment is necessary as a result of the decision for this project

It's easy to stay involved! The Forest Service is just beginning the environmental analysis process and we would like your participation.

Here's how the process works:

1. We are sending you this proposal in order to get your thoughts about, and alternative suggestions to, the proposal.
2. Once we receive your comments or concerns, we will incorporate them into the proposal where possible. Alternatives to the proposal will be developed as appropriate.
3. We will then analyze the environmental effects of all the alternatives and send you a copy of the analysis.

Let's work together and incorporate your ideas at this very important stage of the process. Please visit the Forest website for more information on how this process works.

Mark your calendar for these upcoming events!

An Open House will be held on Wednesday, February 3, from 4-6:30 p.m. at the Lincoln Ranger District Office, 1569 Hwy 200 Lincoln, MT.

Unit descriptions, photos, and a detailed proposed action map will be available on the Forest webpage at :

www.fs.fed.us/r1/helena/projects/Stonewall

Comments: Written comments may be mailed to: Helena National Forest, Attn: Amber Kamps, 1569 Hwy 200 Lincoln, MT 59639 or emailed to **comments-northern-Helena@fs.fed.us**. Please include the word Stonewall in the subject line. Comments received by February 16 would assist us in developing alternatives to the Proposed Action. The formal comment period will occur upon release of the draft EIS.

We know it takes an effort to participate in these projects. Thanks for being involved and having an interest in ***YOUR*** public lands.

Sincerely,
Amber Kamps,
Lincoln District Ranger

Caring for the land and serving people

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Lincoln Ranger District
1569 Hwy 200
Lincoln, MT 59639

Help us plan for the forests of tomorrow, today.