Introduction

The District Ranger on the White Sulphur Springs Ranger District of the Lewis & Clark National Forest invites those whom are interested to provide comment on the Sheep South Road Obliteration Project. Please be advised that this document helps achieve the requirement for both 36 CFR 220.4(e) where scoping is required for all Forest Service proposed actions, including those that would appear to be categorically excluded from further analysis and documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), and for 36 CFR 215.3 where notice, comment, and appeal procedures for national forest system projects and activities are required.

Project Location

General Description: The Sheep South Road Obliteration Project area is located in the Little Belt Mountains on the White Sulphur Springs Ranger District, approximately 20 miles southeast of Neihart, Montana in the headwaters of Sheep Creek.

Legal Description: This project is located in Township 11 North, Range 7 East, Sections 1, 2, 3, 10, 11, and 12; Township 11 North, Range 8 East, Sections 1-20; Township 12 North, Range 7 East, Sections 34-36; Township 12 North, Range 8 East, Section 33.

Background and Purpose and Need

High road densities have displaced wildlife, reduced elk security, disrupted natural flow regimes, and contributed to chronic sediment delivery to upper Sheep Creek and its tributaries. Additionally, Sheep Creek has been identified as a State water quality-limited watershed. This project would help improve water quality.

Project Description

We are proposing to decommission, using obliteration, approximately 100 miles of unneeded road as described by the Little Belt, Castle, and North Half Crazy Mountains Travel Plan ROD in the upper Sheep Creek watershed. The Deciding Officer has taken into consideration the implementation of the 2007 travel plan decision and resource specialist input regarding resource conditions, recreation use, and administrative access needs. This proposal addresses routes identified in the travel plan as needing additional action to hasten regrowth of vegetation, restore soil productivity, and mitigate resource degradation.

Proposed Decision(s)

The responsible official is considering approving the project as it is currently proposed.

Resource Protection Measures

General implementation features would include:

- Scarification/ripping to a minimum depth of 12 inches (to remove soil compaction);
- Recontouring (when cut and fill slopes are present);
– When drainages/riparian areas are encountered, overlying fill material would be pulled back to a more natural channel configuration;
– Culverts would be removed when applicable;
– Revegetation using local, on-site, sod (vegetative islands of native species) and a native seed mix when a cut slope greater than 5 feet or areas otherwise identified (old landings) are encountered; and
– Woody debris and slash would be pulled onto the roadbed after obliteration is complete to provide additional water dispersion.

Additional resource protection measures described below would be incorporated into project implementation.

**Soils**
1. Minimize the extent and duration of disturbance. If possible, schedule operations during periods when soil conditions are dry (as determined by the Forest Service).
2. As much as reasonable, erosion control measures shall be installed concurrent with obliteration activities.
3. Effective erosion control measures (i.e., drainage features limiting flows directed toward streams, wood mulch) must be in place if break or over-wintering period in the obliteration process cannot be avoided.

**Range**
1. Monitor noxious weed spread, and re-vegetation efforts with timely treatment of problem areas as guided by the Region 1 Noxious Weed BMPs and Lewis and Clark Noxious Weed Control Record of Decision.
2. Remove all mud, dirt, and plant parts from all contract equipment before moving into project area. Cleaning must occur off National Forest System lands. This does not apply to service vehicles that would stay on the open public roadway and travel frequently in and out of the project area.

**Sensitive Plants**
1. Whitebark pine located within road obliteration sites should be avoided to the extent possible.
2. If any new sensitive plant species or population is located in treatment areas prior to or during implementation of the project, the population would be evaluated, delineated, and avoided.

**Wildlife**
1. To mitigate potential impacts to the northern goshawk in the Cascade Creek Goshawk territory, project implementation would follow the limited operating period of no activity from April 15th to August 15th within ¼ mile of the nest.
2. To mitigate potential impacts to the black-backed and northern 3-toed woodpecker, larger dbh trees and dead snags that could be used by the black-backed and northern 3-toed woodpecker would not be used or fallen within the project area for road obliteration restoration purposes.

**Categorically Excluding from Documentation in an EA or EIS**
Pursuant to 36 CFR 220.6, a proposed action may be categorically excluded from further analysis and documentation in an EA or an EIS if there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the action and if:

1. The proposed action is within one of the categories established by the Secretary at 7 CFR part 1b.3; or,
2. The proposed action is within a category listed in §220.6 (d) or (e).

After review and analysis it is my preliminary determination that this project meets the category of actions referenced above and listed at:

36 CFR 220.6(e)(6) - Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction. This project would improve wildlife and fisheries habitat, reduce sedimentation to stream channels, restore soil productivity, re-establish native vegetation and does not include use of herbicides or construction of new roads.

36 CFR 220.6(d)(4) - Repair and maintenance of roads, trails and landline boundaries. The project would repair disturbance at system road junctions and intersections with treated sections. This may include a combination of drainage features, erosion control, road narrowing, widening, reshaping, seeding, stabilization or similar

Preliminary analysis indicates that no extraordinary circumstances to resource conditions have been identified as outlined at 36 CFR 220.6(b) that would warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS. Resource reports and conclusions would be available in the project record.

The following resource conditions identified in Agency procedures have been considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances might exist and have been accounted for:

- **Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species.**
  
  A. Plants – Due to a lack of presence in the project area except for whitebark pine, a **No Impact** to Sensitive Plants determination has been made therefore no extraordinary circumstances exist. Road obliteration activities **May Impact** whitebark pine individuals or habitat, but would not likely result in a trend toward federal listing or reduced viability for the population or species. This determination does not constitute an extraordinary circumstance because implementation of the resource protection measures would minimize impact to the species and road removal would create available habitat for species establishment.

  B. Wildlife - A **No Effect/No Impact** to Wildlife determination has been made therefore no extraordinary circumstances exist. A Biological Evaluation (BE) for impacts on sensitive wildlife was conducted by the project wildlife biologist. The evaluation (located in the Project Case File) found that this project **May Impact** individuals or habitat, but would not likely contribute to a trend towards federal listing for the western toad, and would have **No Impact** on any of the remaining wildlife species listed as sensitive by the R1 Regional Forester.

  C. Fisheries - A **No Effect** determination to any threatened, endangered, proposed, and candidate species has been made, because none are located in the project area. A **No Impact** to Fisheries determination has also been made because any short-term increases in sediment production would be too minimal to affect the...
population dynamics of the exotic fish that supports the small recreational fishery. The long-term sediment reductions from road obliteration would persist through perpetuity; therefore no extraordinary circumstances exist.

- **Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds** – Flood plains and wetlands are both present in the project area and would be improved by proposed activities because of reduced sediment delivery and natural channel condition restoration. There are no municipal watersheds in the project area. As a result, there are no extraordinary circumstances to flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds.

- **Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas** – The project area is not within or adjacent to a wilderness area, wilderness study area, or a national recreation area, therefore no extraordinary circumstances exist.

- **Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas** – Approximately 1.5 miles of road segments are located within the North Fork Smith IRA (1-744). The proposed action would return the roadbeds to a more natural state by obliterating the road templates, scarifying or ripping compacted soils to allow for more productive plant growth, and placement of natural vegetation or seeding to establish natural vegetation. These actions would improve roadless character above the currently existing situation. No new road construction would occur.

- **Research natural areas** – There are no research natural areas in or near the project area therefore no extraordinary circumstances exist.

- **American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites and Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas** – No site-types that are identified as ‘sensitive’ to Tribes are known to exist in the upper Sheep Creek area. No prehistoric sites are known to exist in the project area. One historic site has been identified in the project area. Potential impacts would be addressed by following provisions of the Programmatic Agreement between Region One of the Forest Service and the Montana State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). The Forest plans to use a phased approach to complete fieldwork and SHPO consultation ahead of project implementation.

**Findings and Consistency of Forest Plan**

The proposed project is consistent with Forest Plan management direction, standards, and guidelines. No potential effects to Lewis & Clark National Forest Management Indicator Species (MIS) have been identified in our preliminary analysis.

**Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations**

The project meets the requirements found in but not limited to the National Forest Management Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act.

**Public Involvement**

This project appears on the Lewis & Clark National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) webpage. Input has been considered from an interdisciplinary team and through preliminary project analysis. The following interested and affected agencies, organizations, and persons were contacted regarding the proposal: MT DEQ, MT Fish Wildlife and Parks, EPA, Montana Wilderness Association, and Wildlands CPR. A legal notice will be published in the *Great Falls Tribune* newspaper notifying the public of a 30-day public comment period. All
comments received during the public comment period will be considered and analyzed before a final decision is made.

The comment period provides those interested in or affected by this proposal an opportunity to make their concerns known prior to a decision being made by the responsible official. Comments must meet the information requirements of 36 CFR 215.6(3). Only those who provide timely comments will be eligible to appeal the decision pursuant to 36 CFR part 215 regulations. Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record and will be available for public inspection.

How to Comment

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments will be accepted for 30 calendar days following publication of the legal notice in the Great Falls Tribune newspaper. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period for this proposal. You should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names, addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers of those who comment will be considered part of the public record and will be available for public inspection. An individual or organization must include the following:

- Name and address;
- Title of the proposed action;
- Specific comments on the proposed action, along with supporting reasons that the Responsible Official should consider in reaching a decision; and
- Signature or other verification of identity upon request.

Written comments should be mailed or hand-delivered to: White Sulphur Springs Ranger District, PO Box A, White Sulphur Springs, MT 59645; telephone (406) 547-3361; or FAX (406) 547-6023. The White Sulphur Springs Ranger District office hours are 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM, Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays. Electronic comments must be to comments-northern-lewisclark@fs.fed.us. The subject line must contain the name of the project for which you are submitting comments. For electronically mailed comments, the sender should normally receive an automated electronic acknowledgement from the agency as confirmation of receipt. If the sender does not receive an automated acknowledgement of the receipt of comments, it is the sender’s responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other means.

For specific project information please contact Stan VanSickle, Engineering Technician at the Lewis & Clark National Forest Supervisor’s Office, 1101 15th St. N., Great Falls, Mt, 59401, (406) 791-7743; or by email at svansickle@fs.fed.us.

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