

FLATHEAD NATIONAL FOREST RELEASES ITS NEW FOREST PLAN

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Portions of the Bunker Creek drainage, shown here, would be recommended for wilderness under the plan.

The Flathead National Forest quietly released the final environmental impact statement for its new Forest Plan during the holiday season.

The document, which is more than 2,000 pages long with appendices and glossaries, is designed to be the guiding document for the Forest for the next 15-plus years. In addition, a separate document dictates habitat management for grizzly bears on the Helena-Lewis and Clark, Kootenai and Lolo National Forests.

The last Forest plan was originally written in 1986. It's taken more than five years to craft the new plan.

The preferred alternative — which is the one that is ultimately implemented — includes 190,403 acres of recommended wilderness. On the flip side, the forest estimates that the annual commercial timber harvest will be about 27.3 million board feet annually, which is roughly 3,140 acres per year. The timber harvest could increase if the Forest is fully funded.

In addition, the Forest would set about 4,900 acres annually in prescribed burns,

It's also estimated that the plan will support about 1,582 jobs annually, with an estimated income of just under \$55 million.

The plan also looks to expand recreational opportunities on the Forest, with about 107,656 acres that would have snowmobile and snowbike routes, an additional 50,000 acres of motorized use on trails and about 150,000 acres of "primitive use" such as mountain bikes.

The Forest currently has about 1.072 million acres of designated wilderness. The recommended wilderness areas include acreage in the Spotted Bear River drainage, adjacent to the Great Bear and Bob Marshall Wilderness; in the upper North Fork along Red Meadow, Whale and Trail Creeks; lands adjacent to the Great Bear Wilderness near Morrison Creek; lands along the Swan Front and in Bunker Creek and the Jewel Basin Hiking area.

The plan also adds about 5,000 acres to the experimental forest system.

Forest Supervisor Chip Weber was pleased with the plan's final outcome.

"We tried to represent all the interests at the table," he said, adding that the plan was designed for the "greatest good for the greatest number of people."

One notable change in the plan from the 1986 document is road closures. Under Amendment 19 of the old plan, the Forest was obligated to reclaim more than 500 miles of Forest Service roads for grizzly bear security and to protect bull trout habitat.

In the new plan, the Forest will reclaim only about 30 to 60 miles, the plan estimates.

That facet immediately drew the ire of the Swan View Coalition, an environmental group that has fought the Forest Service for decades over road closures.

"The Forest Service has abandoned overwhelming public comment and science supporting the Flathead's current integrated road management plan and similar plans on the other Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem Forests," Swan View Coalition Chairman Keith Hammer said. "The current Forest Plan Amendment 19 restores habitat for bull trout and grizzly bears by removing damaging roads and their culverts ... The Forests are terminating the very programs they claim have helped increase the grizzly bear population and are necessary to conserve bull trout. The revised plan is an irresponsible rollback in essential protections and reflects the political haste to remove Endangered Species Act protections from the grizzly bear."

But Weber noted the plan follows the guidance of the draft grizzly bear conservation strategy for the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem, which says, in short, that the Forest's open road densities established in 2011 are adequate for bear recovery.

Ecologically, most state and federal biologists note that grizzlies in the NCDE are a recovered species, with more than 1,000 bears living in the region.

But Hammer claims that in order to ensure grizzly bear and bull trout recovery, numerous studies have shown that roads need to be "decommissioned" which includes tearing out culverts and putting in "tank traps" which are deep pits that stop vehicle traffic from using the road.

The Forest Service has decommissioned about 700 miles of roads under Amendment 19 over the years, but would have more to go if it had retained the amendment.

Amendment 19 has helped restore some watersheds. For example, the Big Creek watershed up the North Fork used to be considered "impaired" by the state Department of Environmental Quality due to road runoff and other past land practices, but road closures over the years have eased runoff and improved the water quality in the drainage and the stream has since been taken off the impaired list.

Hammer also had issues with the Forest Service's tactics of releasing huge documents during the holidays.

Often called a "document dump" the Forest posted the final EIS just before Thanksgiving. In addition, the final record of decision, a document that describes how the Flathead Forest will comply with the instructions of the regional forester, who made recommendations on the plan back in August. The record of decision was posted as being available on Dec. 27, but with the partial federal government shutdown, no one is working at the Flathead National Forest offices and the document isn't yet available online.

According to Forest Service officials, they were ready to release the plan and make announcements, but because of the shutdown, were directed not to from the regional office.

The final environmental impact statement and other documents are the Flathead National Forest website at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detailfull/flathead/landmanagement/planning/?cid=stelprdb5422786&width=full> (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/detailfull/flathead/landmanagement/planning/?cid=stelprdb5422786&width=full>)

The record of decision should be released within a few days of the government shutdown ending, Weber said.