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TENMILE- SOUTH HELENA PROPOSAL

Scoping Comment
December 11, 2014

Helena Hunters and Anglers Association
&
Montana Wildlife Federation

Comments-northern-helena@fs.fed.us

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Thank you for soliciting comments on the Tenmile-South Helena Proposal, and shaping that proposal to address our concerns.

Helena Hunters and Anglers Association (HHAA) and the Montana Wildlife Federation are submitting the following scoping comments for the proposed Tenmile-South Helena project.

HHAA joined with the Clancy-Unionville Citizen's Task Force, the Wild Divide Chapter of the Montana Wilderness Association, and the Montana Backcountry Hunters and Anglers in forming an ad hoc group to raise awareness of the Tenmile-South Helena proposal to the greater western Montana community. We called ourselves People Who Care about South Helena-Tenmile (PWC).

We held a Citizen's Forum to address concerns and review projects that had occurred within the project area in the past, specifically in the South Helena portion of the area. The Citizen's Forum was held on December 1, 2014 at the Montana WILD facility and was attended by approximately 50 individuals. PWC compiled and distributed to the public, the attached bulleted concerns which we request be made part of the public record.

In addition to the attached points of concern, we request a full analysis, according to the 1986 Forest Plan Standards, with respect to this proposed project and all past projects (see below) within and immediately surrounding said proposed project. Subsequently, please provide a full cumulative effects analysis upon the following:

- big game security, habitat effectiveness, (all wildlife and fisheries standards)
- water quality, water quantity, seasonal run-off projections, impacts to ground water; feasibility analysis to address undesirable water yields or sediment
- soil health, site productivity (particularly after mechanical treatments), stream channel degradation, State of Montana standards for A-1 watersheds, noxious weed spread
- visual impacts; recreational impacts; consequences to ethical hunting environments

Past Decisions and Mitigation for Wildlife

We request that a MAP of the project area with all of the following projects overlain, be developed to show units that have been “treated” in some way, according to decade: 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, 2010s:

- Strawberry Timber Sale (1986)
- Lava Mountain Timber Sale (1993)
- Clancy-Unionville Vegetation Manipulation Project (2003)
- Hazard Tree Reduction Project (2010)
- Chessman-Red Mountain Flume Project (2014)
- Dry Gulch, Tucker Gulch (1970s-80s)
- Categorical Exclusion projects (various)
- All treatments that have occurred over the past 30 years that are not included in the above projects (Tenmile projects are not listed here but need to be displayed)

Decision Notices, Records of Decision, and other decision documents for past projects have not been fully implemented. Proposing activities in the same areas that have had previous projects, without maintaining all the mitigation features, would put the Helena National Forest in violation of its own decisions and thus NEPA and NFMA regulations.

The Helena National Forest must abide by its contracts with the public – which we believe all previous Decision Notices, RODs, other types of decisions constitute contracts with the public that the HNF is obliged to honor. The following are only some of the mitigation provisions in decisions for previous sales. Most of these promised provisions have not been implemented:

- Strawberry Timber Sale (1986)
 - ***EA Concern: “The record of the forest on road closures and enforcement is poor at best.” Response: “Management Requirements and Constraints 1. “To insure that road density and hiding cover changes will not decrease the habitat effectiveness in the analysis area, all newly constructed roads will be closed following fuelwood access. A road management plan will be developed describing method and season of closure. Some existing roads in the analysis area which are contributing to resource damage, will be closed as new access facilities are developed. This will include the old Frohner Mine road, Skihi Peak road, Strawberry Creek road, and the North Fork of Quartz Creek road.”***
 - The road along the Brooklyn Bridge ridge did not extend to Skihi Peak prior to the Strawberry timber sale, but rather turned at the Brooklyn Bridge mine and went north down to Unionville. The road was extended along the Brooklyn Bridge ridge for this sale in 1986.
 - However, the Skihi Peak road and the North Fork of Quartz Creek road were not closed, and as of 12/2014, are not yet closed.
 - ***“The impact of timber harvest on elk security in this alternative will be mitigated by closing new road access and maintaining hiding cover above 60% for the Kady Gulch and Lazyman/Black Mountain/Colorado Mountain Habitat Analysis Units.”***
 - Current hiding cover percentages for the Kady Gulch and Lazyman/Black Mountain/Colorado Mountain Habitat Analysis Units are not approaching 60% as of December, 2014.
- Lava Mountain Timber Sale (1993)
 - ***“... [the decision] does require that we maintain an effective array of roadless country and forested habitat through the linkage zone.”***
 - Describe in detail, conformance with this requirement.

- Clancy-Unionville Vegetation Manipulation Project (2003)
 - ***“Decommission the Brooklyn Bridge Road”***
 - It was not decommissioned as per the previous Strawberry decision to maintain habitat security, nor does it appear to be scheduled for decommissioning as per the CU decision of 2003 since it is proposed to be used in the Tenmile-South Helena project to access another 27-30 timber sale units. This is a breach of contract to implement mitigation and a violation of NEPA and NFMA.
 - The Tenmile-South Helena project must stay off the Brooklyn Bridge ridge. It has been clearly articulated that standards are failing to be met for habitat effectiveness and big game security, and were on the brink of collapse for the CU project, so it is not acceptable to re-enter this area yet again.

- Hazard Tree Reduction Project (2010)
 - Suspended compliance with big game security standard 4a for this project involving 200-300’ wide cutting along 490 miles of road
 - This irresponsible action assured that most future projects would no longer comply with big game security standards.

- Chessman-Red Mountain Flume Project (2014)
 - ***“This site-specific amendment would exempt the Project from Forest Plan Standard 3 for hiding cover on summer range (Forest Plan p. II/17) for the Quartz Creek herd unit only.”***
 - ***The site-specific amendment would exempt the Project from Forest Plan Standard 4(a) [big game security] (Forest Plan p. II/17-18) for both the Black Mountain-Brooklyn Bridge and Quartz Creek herd units.***
 - Exemptions like these lead to inability of the HNF to comply with long-standing, scientifically based standards. When the HNF subsequently comes along and states that standards need to be amended because they can no longer be met, we know we are at a critical juncture in forest management. Amendment of the standards is not an acceptable solution to the crisis.

If these projects were said to have limited impacts at the time of the project upon water quality, fisheries, big game security, habitat effectiveness, adequate habitat for various species, then why are new “non-specific” standards now being proposed? There is a Catch-22 here.

Big Game Standards

Existing wildlife standards are supported by extensive peer-reviewed literature, so why are they being abandoned?

The proposed Tenmile-South Helena project would occur under the 1986 Forest Plan Standard for big game security that defines cover as “90 percent of an elk being unobservable at 200 feet.” This is the standard that should be used for this project.

To substantiate the proposed amendments to eliminate the need for fall security cover, habitat effectiveness hiding cover, and undisturbed winter ranges for big game on public lands, please demonstrate, using sound scientific support, that vegetative COVER is no longer important for big game,

and that winter ranges can endure disturbance in winter without negative impacts to big game. We have serious doubts that science will support the proposed HNF actions.

Address all big game ungulates including elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose with respect to these big game standards. By virtue of body size and habitat needs, both species of deer need additional consideration.

Dead and down trees do provide a level of security and hiding cover and should be retained where big game standards need to be met.

The proposal says timber harvesting will be allowed in security areas during the hunting season. The proposal says activities will be allowed on big game winter range during the winter. Such action would ensure serious wildlife impacts and flies in the face of established protocol to maintain wildlife habitats.

How will summer habitat effectiveness be ensured when the minimum of at least 35% cover would be dropped? How has past cutting so much of the landscape been in compliance with this standard? How will proposed cutting help big game summer range?

How will big game security be ensured when NO cover will be required in the proposed amendment?

If wildlife standards are verging on collapse, then take measures to restore habitats to meet existing standards.

What are the current security, habitat effectiveness, and winter range levels for affected elk herd units?

Other Wildlife

How will this project conform to threatened and endangered species recovery plans? Lynx in particular.

How will wildlife movement corridors and genetic linkage zones be ensured when this segment of the Continental Divide provides the most direct route between the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem and the Yellowstone Ecosystem, but the last remaining Inventoried Roadless Areas in this fragile zone would be roaded, cut, and burned?

How are wildlife movement corridors and genetic linkage zones ensured/enhanced through this project when 39 square miles of forest will be either logged or burned and 40 miles of roads constructed?

How are the Forest Plan standards for Management Indicator Species such as pileated wood peckers, goshawks, marten, and cutthroat trout being met? Will the project improve habitat for them? How much more decline can their habitats suffer before a forest plan amendment is also pursued for them? Have they already reached that tipping point? Visually display where these habitats exist and if they meet the standards, and how much of a buffer is left.

Given the high likelihood of increased sedimentation, how will fisheries habitats be maintained or improved through this project?

Recreation

How will the lack of vegetative cover impact big game hunting? The act of hunting requires stealth, which requires vegetative cover. Without cover the HNF is encouraging long shots across open expanses. Ethical

hunting opportunities would be diminished and the sport itself compromised.

How will this project encourage poor behavior such as taking long shots across clear cuts, shooting from roads, and creating firing lines as has been demonstrated recently when wildlife do not have cover?

http://helenair.com/news/opinion/letters/disgusted-by-white-gulch-elk-massacre/article_4deb581d-bccc-5a7b-b1b2-9447a8c64fe8.html

Water

The Purpose of this project states, “*Maintaining a consistent quality and quantity of water*”:

- Where is the recognition that current water quality is substandard?
- How will water quality be improved by implementing this project?
- Why hasn't the HNF done more to meet water quality objectives?
- How does creating thousands of acres of cutting units improve water quality?
- How will removal of forest cover and construction of 40 miles of new road affect sedimentation?
- What will happen to the moisture content of the landscape and water tables, when thousands of acres of trees are removed, and how will that affect long-term water sustainability in the watershed?

About 50% of this project does not occur within the municipal water supply so how does cutting and burning this area comply with the project's Purpose to address the municipal watershed?

The Lake Helena Watershed Plan was developed and EPA Region 8 (Denver) approved an official water quality restoration plan in 2006. It took years to develop the plan. It has not yet been implemented.

A Federal court order said the state needed restoration plans in the form of TMDLs, completed. This was not simply a paper exercise. The plan established a framework for addressing sediments, metals and other impairments in the streams draining the South Helena area.

The Montana Water Quality Act has a 5 year evaluation deadline of 2011. This deadline was to have provided a reality check. Has that happened? To our knowledge it has not.

The county has been given money to do the water quality work, while the Forest Service and the city forge ahead with a massive project that is likely to add to water quality degradation.

The Tenmile and Prickly Pear watersheds do not meet water quality standards now. A court order stands requiring that they be fixed. Please demonstrate how this huge landscape project will address these impairments.

Since the EPA is required to address water quality concerns on public lands, we wonder what the EPA's views are on this? Will this project rectify water quality concerns?

If this project were designed to rectify water quality concerns, it seems to us that it would be requiring:

- Decommissioning roads rather than construction of miles of new roads throughout the watershed
- Let harvested areas regenerate, rather than proposing hundreds of new cutting units and massive burns over 26,000 acres of the Helena watershed
- Scrupulous attention to Best Management Practices

Silviculture and Fire

It appears that the cart is driving the horse for this project, in order to assuage fire concerns, but without a responsible analysis of the circumstances and impacts to other resources created through efforts to “reduce” fire. Most effort should be put into the 100 yards surrounding private residences and the Wildland Urban Interface rather than across the vast landscape. Such treatment would have the most benefit to private property, be the most cost effective, and have the least impact to wildlife habitats and streams.

All measures to implement WUI within 100 yards of private residences should be implemented. Why are buffers for South Helena (100 yards) different that the WUI buffers for the Tenmile Portion (200 yards)?

What are the ecosystem costs of landscape “treatments” as compared to private land fire buffers with respect to ecosystem services such as sustained water run-off, diverse and more hydric forests, intact fish and wildlife habitats, and maintaining undisturbed soils that have minimal weed presence?

How would the proposal alter old growth forest characteristics such as soil moisture, dead and down woody material, understory diversity? How would that affect ecosystem services?

What is the status of old growth forests in the project area, and are the standards to maintain at least 5% of each third order drainage them being met? Are adequate quantities of mature trees are being recruited and retained in order to create future old growth forests?

The plan calls for removal of 12” dbh or less trees. 12” dbh is a good sized tree on its way to becoming mature. The dead/downed trees subsequent to beetle kill have already thinned forest crowns over much of the forest. Why remove green, healthy trees just because they are a foot in diameter or less, when they are the recruits for mature and old growth forests?

If “low surface fuels is described as “generally <15 tons/acre,” then why are levels of <5 and <10 tons/acre being required for other areas? Ground litter and downfall help build soils in this otherwise thin, fragile granitic area.

Proposed Action Descriptions repeatedly use the term “undesirable trees” but the term doesn’t indicate what constitutes “undesirable trees”. Who gets to define “undesirable”? For wildlife, there are few if any, “undesirable trees.”

How big is a “Clearcut Harvest with Leave Trees?” What is a “Improvement Harvest?” No definition exists in the Proposed Action Descriptions.

Scoping comment submitted by Helena Hunters and Anglers Association member Steve McEvoy excellently summarizes HHAA’s concerns relative to forest succession and health, fire risks, treatment impact concerns, harvesting costs born by citizens yet camouflaging natural resource impacts (costs), watershed issues, and some wildlife concerns. In particular, he notes,

“The plan fails to mention the proportion or estimated board footage of live timber needing to be cut to finance the removal of unmarketable (dead) trees without value. The plan should just as importantly include how much timber will be harvested. Cutting live timber under the auspice of removing beetle kill, lessening risk to the watershed, and eliminating undefined “wildlife hazards” is misleading, deceptive and counterproductive. Especially after the beetle epidemic, live remaining timber stands, regardless of species, have increased value to ecosystems as habitat, and shouldn’t be sold as logs to finance the project.”

Please pay special attention to Mr. McEvoy's entire comments.

Weeds

Prescribed Burning: How is the Helena National Forest going to avoid spread of noxious weeds? Especially when you only allow treatment for a few years, and yet weed seeds are known to last for years and years? Inadequate weed treatment has occurred to date. The Brooklyn Bridge ridge now is covered with toadflax that was completely absent 10 years ago. Knapweed is getting a hold throughout this area, but that has only occurred in the last few years. Obviously more targeted control is required, not more land disturbance.

Aerial spraying may or may not kill weeds, but would be deadly to all manner of native forbs that comprise native habitats. How would planned aerial spraying of herbicides retain native forb species (such as balsam root, orchids, buffalo berry, sagebrush, aspen, etc)? We support targeted ground spraying done twice per year for decades to come if this project proceeds in any fashion.

Herbicides are known to leach into ground water. A complete evaluation of such leaching and a thorough literature review is critical in analyzing potential impacts to ground water, streams and the Helena water supply

Roadless Areas

Do not enter the Inventoried Roadless Areas. Congress passed a bill that included a portion of these areas as Wilderness that was unfortunately, subsequently pocket-vetted by President Regan. Their Wilderness character must be maintained.

The Lazyman and Jericho Mountain Roadless Areas are weed-free, relatively intact, moist ecosystems providing critical wildlife habitats, that will only be harmed with mechanical manipulation.

Avoid reducing the size of these already small Roadless Areas by either entering their centers, carving off their edges, or penetrating them with high standard roads. See above bullet points.

Roads

The Clancy-Unionville Travel Plan is done and should be enforced, but the Divide Travel Plan must still be resolved. This project jumps the gun on stating which roads will be open for use in the Divide area and violates provisions of the CU Travel Plan.

- 1864 – Bear Gulch leading to the Continental Divide, currently is closed yearlong to motorized vehicles – and none of the alternatives allow it to be opened. This is a steep slope within the wildlife movement/genetic linkage corridor that should be allowed to continue its process of natural closure.
- T9N, R6W, Sec 24, 25, 36 along the Continental Divide is designated a non-motorized trail and should stay that way
- 578 – is closed to motorized use yearlong as per past and present Travel Plan (Clancy-Unionville). However the proposed project erroneously shows 578 being open from the west edge of Section 31 to the center of Section 36 – It is NOT. Then, the project proposal shows closed route 578 being used as a haul road all the way to the head of Blackhall Meadows, and

from there a NEW road would be built from the head of Blackhall Meadows to Chessman Reservoir. This is entirely out of compliance with the CU travel plan and past mitigation decisions for wildlife.

- Above Scott Reservoir in Sec 20, 1876-C1 is currently closed to wheeled vehicles yearlong, but the proposal map shows it open as a haul road, with a NEW road to be built off if it.
- A route is shown as a haul route to Sec. 26 into Little Buffalo Cr. This route is not part of the CU Travel Plan.
- A route up Whiteman Gulch through Sections 34 and into 27 is shown as a haul route but is not part of the CU Travel Plan.
- The Brooklyn Bridge road was to have been decommissioned as per TWO previous decisions, but is now slated for haul route use.

Forty miles of new roads constructed into remaining forested areas to remove timber would be disastrous for wildlife. These remaining forested areas are essential wildlife habitat. These new roads would further fragment an already tattered landscape. There is no room for new roads.

All of the above closures were executed to mitigate impacts from past activities. How will past mitigation obligations be upheld?

Scheduling

A massive project of this nature must disclose the timeframe and chronological steps that would be taken for implementation and required mitigation. Where is that information?

Enforcement

If contracts are broken and enforcement is disconnected from management so that promises to implement and enforce decisions never occur, how can the USFS expect the public to remain engaged? Or is this a strategy to exhaust and discourage the citizenry?

Thank you for thoroughly addressing these comments/concerns. Please retain Helena Hunters and Anglers Association on your mailing list: 219 Vawter Street, Helena, MT 59601 and/or joznpoz@bresnan.net. Please retain the Montana Wildlife Federation on your mailing list: Nick Gevock, Conservation Director, Montana Wildlife Federation, P.O. Box 1175 5530 N. Montana Ave., Helena MT 59624 and ngevock@mtwf.org

Sincerely,



Stan Frasier, President

C: Julie DalSoglio, EPA Director

Attachment: Issues of Concern by People Who Care (PWC)

TENMILE-SOUTH HELENA PROPOSED TIMBER SALE & BURNING PROJECT
Issues of Concern by People Who Care (PWC)

The following are items we request that you address:

- A project of this magnitude places an enormous burden on citizens to evaluate.
- Why does the Helena National Forest (HNF) propose work in the Inventoried Roadless Areas? Congress considered these areas worthy of Wilderness protections and passed a bill that included them (subsequently pocket-vetoed by Pres. Reagan).
- We strongly recommend that the HNF spend available funds implementing private land fire buffers. This type of treatment is most effective and least impactful to the forest and landscape.
- Please provide maps that display *all* activities that have occurred within the Tenmile and west Prickly Pear drainages. It is critical that the cumulative effects of these prior activities as well as foreseeable projects need to be evaluated carefully regarding the impact upon Forest Plan Wildlife, Water Quality and Old Growth Standards.
- Why has HNF failed to implement provisions from past projects per their Records of Decision or Decision Notices?
- Please explain how wildlife standards have been met in the past and why these standards were suspended for the Hazardous Tree Removal Project which impacted all subsequent projects (including this one) and Forest Plan standards.
- Existing HNF wildlife standards are supported by extensive peer-reviewed literature. Why is HNF proposing to abandon these standards?
- Present the science upon which proposed new standards for big game are based. Please cite the scientific studies that support the HNF premise that big game do not need vegetative cover.
- How will the lack of vegetative cover impact big game hunting? The act of hunting requires stealth, which requires vegetative cover. Without cover the HNF is encouraging long shots across open expanses. Ethical hunting opportunities would be diminished and the sport itself compromised.
- How will this project encourage poor behavior such as taking long shots across clear cuts, shooting from roads, and creating firing lines as has been demonstrated recently when wildlife do not have cover? http://helenair.com/news/opinion/letters/disgusted-by-white-gulch-elk-massacre/article_4deb581d-bccc-5a7b-b1b2-9447a8c64fe8.html
- The proposal states that timber harvesting will be allowed in security areas during the hunting season. How is hunting while timber harvesting is in progress supported by science, especially in security areas?
- The proposal states activities will be allowed on big game winter range during the winter. This proposal is contrary to the purposes of even recognizing winter range.
- How will wildlife winter range meet the needs of wildlife in the future if the present standard of minimum 25% thermal cover is reduced?
- How will summer habitat effectiveness be ensured when the HNF proposed to reduce the minimum of at least 35% cover? How has past cutting activity been in compliance with the current standard? How will proposed cutting help big game summer range?
- How will big game security be ensured when the HNF proposes that NO cover will be required, per the proposed amendment to the HNF Plan?
- If wildlife standards are verging on collapse, then what measures does the HNF plan to take to restore habitats to meet existing standards?

- How are the Forest Plan standards for Management Indicator Species such as pileated wood peckers, goshawks, marten, and cutthroat trout going to be met? Will the project improve habitat for them? Can their habitats suffer further and still meet the HNF Plan? Has the habitat for these indicator species already reached that tipping point? Please provide a visual display that shows where these habitats exist and if they meet the standards. How much of a buffer is left?
- How will wildlife movement corridors and genetic linkage zones be ensured? The Continental Divide provides the most direct route between the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem and the Yellowstone Ecosystem. However, the proposal indicates that the last remaining Inventoried Roadless Areas in this fragile zone would be roaded, cut, and burned.
- The Purpose of this project states, *“Maintaining a consistent quality and quantity of water”*:
 - Does the HNF recognize that current water quality is substandard?
 - How will water quality be improved by implementing this project?
 - Why hasn’t the HNF done more to meet water quality objectives?
 - How does creating thousands of acres of cutting units improve water quality?
 - How will removal of forest cover and construction of 40 miles of new road affect sedimentation?
 - What will happen to the moisture content of the landscape and water tables, when thousands of acres of trees are removed? How will that affect long-term water sustainability and fire behavior in the watershed?
- About 50% of this project does not occur within the municipal water supply. How does cutting and burning this area comply with the project’s Purpose to address the municipal watershed?
- What is the status of old growth forests in the project area? Are the standards to maintain old growth area being met by the proposed project?
- How does the proposal alter old growth forest characteristics such as soil moisture, dead and down woody material, understory diversity?
- Please analyze the efficiency and effectiveness of implementing private lands buffers against fire as an alternative to landscape treatments.
- Please describe cost-effectiveness of implementing such buffers as compared to costs of cutting/burning vast areas of the landscape, as proposed.
- What are the ecosystem costs of landscape “treatments” as compared to private land fire buffers with respect to ecosystem services such as sustained water run-off, diverse and more hydric forests, intact fish and wildlife habitats, and maintaining undisturbed soils that have minimal weed presence?
- How will heavy machinery that is schedule to be active on nearly all of the burning and cutting units affect soil compaction, run off, and the spread of weeds?
- How will planned aerial spraying of herbicides help to retain native forb species that in many cases define habitats (such as balsam root, orchids, buffalo berry, sagebrush, aspen, etc)?
- How will native fisheries and habitats be improved through this project?
- How will the HNF Plan visual quality objectives be affected by this and past projects? Extensive clear-cuts (regeneration harvests) as have occurred along the Park Lake Road, at Chessman Reservoir, at the head of Go Devil and Whiteman Gulch, along Minnehaha Creek, and other areas within the project area are no longer aesthetically pleasing.

Thank you for thoroughly addressing these concerns.