



## PROJECT SCOPING

September 2022

# Coyote-Divide Vegetation Project

Belt Creek-White Sulphur Springs Ranger District, of the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest (the Forest), is proposing the **Coyote-Divide Vegetation Project**. The Forest Service is now scoping this project for 30 days and seeking your input.

The project area is approximately 36,500 acres. Roughly 70% of the project area lies in Cascade County and 30% in Meagher County. This project is located on the westside of Highway 89 (a scenic by-way) between the communities of Monarch and Neihart, Montana in the Little Belt Mountains.

This area was identified as a priority planning area for the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest as part of the overall Forest Landscape Prioritization process completed in August 2018. This process refined active management opportunity areas from a 2014 Landscape Assessment for the Little Belt Mountains that identified vegetation departure and fire threats. The purpose and need for action and the proposed treatments consider land status such as acres of Wildland Urban Interface, acres within the Governor's Priority Landscape, Inventoried Roadless Areas, operational feasibility, and access and consistency with the Helena-Lewis and Clark Land Management Plan.

## Purpose and Need

The Forest Service is proposing the Coyote-Divide Vegetation Project to move conditions toward the goals and desired conditions of the Little Belt Mountains Geographic Area in the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (2021) as well as guidance and recommendations of the Cascade County Regional Community Wildland Fire Protection Plan, findings from the Little Belt Mountains Landscape Assessment, direction from the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy, and the Forest Service's 10-year framework for reducing wildfire risk to communities and natural resources in the West (2021) that build on the National Cohesive Strategy.

This purpose and need for action reflects the difference between the current vegetation conditions and the desired vegetation conditions for this landscape. The following purposes and needs have been identified:

### Life Safety

- Improve conditions for public and firefighter safety across the landscape in the event of a wildfire, as every wildland fire requires an appropriate management response based on management direction.

### Forested Resiliency, Diversity, and Restoration

- Develop and maintain forest and rangeland conditions across the landscape.
- Improve the components of forest health to promote resiliency to disturbances including insects, disease, fire, and drought through maintaining existing seral species and increasing or restoring their overall representation across the landscape.

### Maintain and Enhance Ecological Integrity of Terrestrial Vegetation

- Promote natural openings and fire-resistant tree species within open-grown forested stands that can be maintained in a low fire hazard condition.

### Wildland Urban Interface

- Reduce threat of catastrophic wildfire by reducing hazardous fuel loads in the Wildland Urban Interface, prioritizing the Belt Park Road area and the Monarch to Neihart Highway corridor.

## **2021 Helena-Lewis and Clark Land Management Plan**

The 2021 Helena-Lewis and Clark Land Management Plan (forest plan) provides the management direction for all resources on the national forest. The plan was developed following the process and requirements set forth in the 2012 Land Management Planning Rule (36 CFR § 219). The rule requires that forest plans provide for ecological sustainability and contribute to social and economic sustainability, using public input and the best available scientific information to inform plan decisions. The forest plan provides direction for project and activity-level decision making on the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest. The proposed Coyote-Divide project has been designed to be consistent with the 2021 forest plan. All applicable plan components (desired conditions, goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines) and final determinations will be documented in the environmental assessment.

The project is fully within the Little Belt Mountains Geographic Area, one of 10 geographic areas across the forest. Geographic Area management direction in the forest plan reflects community values and local conditions in the area. The Little Belt Mountains Geographic Area is popular for motorized and non-motorized recreational use, has a relatively high scenic integrity, includes Inventoried Roadless Areas, and supports multiple use management for grazing, minerals, and forest products. More information on the forest plan and unique characteristics of the Little Belts Geographic Area can be found on the forest planning webpage at [Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest - Planning \(usda.gov\)](https://www.usda.gov/land-management/forest-planning/helena-lewis-and-clark-national-forest).

## **Proposed Action**

The Coyote-Divide Vegetation Project proposes to treat approximately 8,450 acres (24%) of the approximate 36,500-acre project area using a range of fuels reduction, prescribed fire, tree harvest, and other appropriate silvicultural techniques to meet the outlined purpose and need (see Table 1 for treatment descriptions). Prescribed burns are also planned to complement the vegetative treatments and improve conditions for future fire suppression efforts. In addition to these treatments, aspen stand restoration, whitebark pine release, and maintenance of naturally occurring meadows/parks are planned as part of this project.

The project proposes to use a combination of newly constructed temporary road and temporary use over existing road or trail templates. All constructed temporary roads would be decommissioned and stabilized after project completion. Existing system roads would be utilized for project access or specified haul routes. These routes would be reconditioned or reconstructed where needed and would meet Best Management Practices applicable for forest management activities in Montana. No new permanent roads would be added to the forest transportation system (see Table 2 for road treatments).

Active management treatments would be used to address current vegetation conditions and meet stand objectives. The proposed treatments would follow agency and forest plan guidance for old-growth stands. Treatments would create a variety of patch sizes to help achieve desired conditions and in some cases, would create openings larger than 40 acres in size. The Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest Plan provides an exception to allow openings up to 75 acres. Units using this exception would be located primarily east of Belt Park. These larger openings mimic natural patch sizes, and the Forest would seek Regional Forester approval to exceed the maximum opening size limit. Using this exception also requires that the Forest provides the public a review period of 60 days specific to plans to exceed the maximum opening size of 40 acres. The environmental analysis will disclose the rationale and expected effects of applying even-aged regeneration harvest prescriptions to these areas. These prescriptions would include varying amounts of live tree retention in clumps and patches to buffer openings.

The proposal includes implementation elements of the 2007 Travel Management Plan such as physical closure of decommissioned roads and motorized trail relocation using sustainable design to reduce impacts to water quality and fisheries. The trail relocation would remove portions of an existing trail from the riparian management zone. Class of use would remain for all-terrain vehicles measuring less than 50 inches. For safety and management purposes, a change in the current gate location on Forest System Road 834 may slightly reduce total open road mileage.

Project design features are incorporated in the proposal to protect natural and historic resources and ensure compliance with forest plan standards.

The project area includes small portions of two Inventoried Roadless Areas. Please refer to Map 2 for Inventoried Roadless Area information. The project would treat approximately 880 acres in the Pilgrim Creek Inventoried Roadless Area and approximately 70 acres in Calf Creek. Preliminary project review suggests that this project would meet one or more exceptions under the 2001 Inventoried Roadless Area Rule for allowing vegetation treatment, tree cutting, or prescribed fire use within Inventoried Roadless Areas in the project area.

Table 1 is the summary of proposed treatment activities, and Table 2 contains proposed road use and treatments for the transportation system. Please refer to the Proposed Action Map 1.

*Table 1: Summary of Proposed Treatment Types for the Coyote-Divide Vegetation Project*

<b>Vegetation Treatment Type</b>	<b>Approximate (Acres)</b>
Aspen Restoration	243

<b>Vegetation Treatment Type</b>	<b>Approximate (Acres)</b>
Dry/Mixed Forest Improvement	675
Lodgepole Regeneration Harvest	2,221
Fuel Reduction	1,415
Improve Stand Health and Vigor	1,078
Meadow Restoration	565
Reduce Wildfire Hazard (Includes approximately 460 acres of broadcast burn not combined with other treatments)	2,007
Whitebark Pine Restoration	245
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8,449</b>

*Table 2: Summary of Transportation Route Treatment Types*

<b>Road Treatment Type/Use Category</b>	<b>Approximate (Miles)</b>
Construction of Temporary Road	22
Reconditioning of System Road	17
Reconstruction of System Road	16
Reconstruction of Road over Existing Template (Temporary Road)	5
Proposed Haul Route across Private Roads (Non-Forest Service Land)	4
Motorized Trail to be Relocated	<1

## **Treatment Descriptions**

Aspen Restoration: The objective of aspen restoration is to reduce competition, stimulate suckering, and improve the overall clone quality. The primary treatment would be hand-felling of small diameter conifer within and immediately around aspen stems or clones followed by prescribed burning (pile, jackpot, or broadcast). Stand clearcutting with leave trees may be prescribed in areas dominated by mature conifer.

Dry/Mixed Forest Improvement: The objective of this treatment is to improve forest and range conditions through the removal of small diameter, non-commercial conifer. Stand density would be reduced, growth would be concentrated in residual trees, and grasslands and shrublands would be restored. Trees would be slashed or felled by hand or mechanical means, and prescribed burning may occur.

Fuel Reduction in Private Land Buffers / Reduce Wildfire Hazard: The objective of this category is to reduce fuels and wildfire hazard within the forest and adjacent to private land. Potential treatment methods include rearrangement of fuels, thinning, fuel break construction, commercial harvest, and prescribed burning using hand and mechanical means. Treatment method and intensity would vary based on vegetation conditions, geographic location, wildfire hazard, and values-at-risk.

Improve Stand Health and Vigor: The objective of this category is to improve stand growth and overall condition through stand density reduction or removal of poor quality, low-vigor trees. Potential treatment methods include pre-commercial thinning, commercial thinning, and improvement cutting. Commercial harvest would be conducted with ground-based or skyline yarding methods. Prescribed burning may occur in some units based on post-harvest stand conditions or management objectives.

Lodgepole Pine Regeneration: The objective of this treatment category is to create a new age class of lodgepole pine. Treatment methods would include stand clearcut with leave trees and patch clearcut with leave trees with potential post-harvest prescribed burning. Lodgepole pine is the primary species to be removed. Other conifer species may be retained to meet management objectives other than regeneration.

Meadow Restoration: The objective of meadow restoration is to remove conifer species from grasslands and shrublands (meadows or parks) and along the forest/meadow ecotone to re-establish herbaceous vegetation and shrub growth and extent. Conifer removal would eliminate seed sources that facilitate conifer establishment within historic grasslands and shrublands. Potential treatment methods include conifer cutting or mastication with prescribed burning (pile, jackpot, or broadcast). Conifer cutting may be completed by hand or mechanical means.

Whitebark Pine Restoration: The objective of whitebark pine restoration is to reduce stand density and competition around whitebark pine to improve whitebark pine's growth and vigor. Potential treatment methods could be pre-commercial thinning, improvement cutting, and stand clearcutting with leave trees. Stand conditions and whitebark pine density would determine treatment method and intensity.

The Coyote-Divide environmental analysis will include effects to identified resources such as threatened, endangered or sensitive species, water quality, roadless area conservation, old growth forest, carbon/climate, scenery, and heritage. Preliminary findings will be available for public comment, and the project is subject to the pre-decisional review process (objections) under regulation at 36 CFR 218.

## **How to Comment**

The Forest Service is now scoping this project for 30 days and would like your feedback on this proposed action in the Little Belt Mountains. Comments will be accepted beginning on

September 28, 2022. Members of the public and interested parties will also have the opportunity to review the project assessment and development throughout the planning process. Your input at this time will help the Forest Service identify key issues, project design features, and values or constraints that should be considered. Comments specific to the proposed action and those that identify a cause-effect relationship are most helpful.

Comments on this project proposal are welcomed and encouraged. Please submit your written comments in one of the following ways:

By electronic means (preferred) Please use the “**Comment on Project**” link found under Get Connected on the on the project webpage at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=59803>.

- By mail, C/O Helen Smith, Belt Creek White Sulphur Springs District Ranger; 204 W. Folsom, P.O. Box A; White Sulphur Springs, Montana 59645.
- By facsimile to (406) 547-6023.
- By hand to the White Sulphur Springs Ranger District Office or the Belt Creek Ranger Station between the hours of 8:00 am to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays.

Comments received in response to this scoping notice, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for the project, available for public inspection, and released if requested under the Freedom of Information Act.

## Open House

There will be an informational “Open House” meeting for this project on **Thursday, October 6, 2022 from 4:00-6:00 p.m.** at the **Monarch Volunteer Fire Department Hall**, 7 Montana Avenue, Monarch, MT. Forest staff will be on hand to your answer questions or discuss the project in more detail. If you cannot attend but would like to be involved with the project, please see the “How to Comment” section above. If you have additional questions, or would like to be removed from this mailing list, please contact John Casselli, Project Team Leader, at (406) 791-7723 or via email with return receipt to [john.casselli@usda.gov](mailto:john.casselli@usda.gov). Project information is posted to the Helena-Lewis and Clark projects webpage along with updates as they become available at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=59803>.

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For compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), the Forest has determined the Coyote-Divide project meets all qualifying criteria for use of the National Programmatic Agreement among the US Department of Agriculture Forest Service, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Offices for Phasing Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act for Large-Scale Multi-Year Undertakings (NPA, 2021). The Forest Service is currently coordinating with identified consulting parties and intends to commence with the identification and evaluation of historic properties. NHPA consultation will occur throughout the NEPA analysis process and will be completed prior to project implementation.

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