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Hello:

The staff of the Flathead National Forest is pleased to announce the release of its draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) for the draft revised Land and Resource Management Plan (draft forest plan) for your review and input. In addition to the effects of the draft forest plan, the DEIS includes the environmental consequences of the draft forest plan amendments to incorporate habitat management direction for grizzly bears for the Helena, Lewis and Clark, Lolo, and Kootenai National Forests. These documents reflect extensive public participation over the past 3 years through collaborative working group meetings and other public input. We greatly appreciate the commitment of interested participants who have provided important contributions toward the development of the draft forest plan and amendments. The documents also reflect a truly interdisciplinary team approach in the consideration of the input received, as well as, of the directives associated with the 2012 planning rule.

Purpose of the draft forest plan and amendment

The purpose of the draft forest plan is to provide for long-term direction to guide the management of the Flathead National Forest. The draft forest plan describes the Forest's distinctive roles and contributions within the broader landscape and details forest-wide, management area, and geographic area desired conditions, objectives, standards, and guidelines. The draft forest plan identifies suitable uses of National Forest System lands and estimates of the planned timber sale quantity for the Forest. The draft forest plan identifies priority watersheds for restoration, and includes areas being recommended for wilderness designation and eligible wild and scenic rivers. The purpose of the forest plan amendments, along with the revised forest plan for the Flathead National Forest, is incorporating habitat-related direction from the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy to ensure adequate regulatory mechanisms are in place across these national forests in support of the de-listing of the grizzly bear.

Highlights of the draft forest plan, amendments, and associated DEIS include:

- In response to one of the fastest growing population centers in Montana, the Forest is proposing a range of focused recreation areas (from approximately 30,000 acres up to 61,000 acres) that are either near communities or are areas that can provide additional developed and dispersed recreation opportunities to meet increased demands for recreation opportunities.
- The role of timber harvest in meeting ecosystem management and social and economic objectives has changed since the Forest's 1986 forest plan was developed. The draft forest plan presents new plan components for lands suitable for timber production and for lands where timber harvest is appropriate for purposes other than timber production (e.g., removal of hazard trees in campgrounds). These plan components are intended to facilitate an active vegetation management program of work to meet ecosystem, social, and economic objectives. The alternatives reflect a range of timber suitability (13 to 22% of the NFS lands on the Forest) and a range of timber products projected to be available annually (approximately 22-29 MMBF).
- Plan direction for maintaining and improving key ecosystem characteristics and their integrity, especially in light of changing climates. Since the Flathead National Forest does currently contain such a high degree of ecosystem diversity, the plan is focused on maintaining ecosystem diversity and its resiliency to large scale disturbances so as to continue to provide quality habitat for its assemblages of medium to large carnivores and hundreds of species of native mammals, birds, fish, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates. The plan provides direction that will maintain the persistence or contribute to the recovery of native species within the plan area (including 7 threatened and endangered and candidate species, and 32 species of conservation concern). The draft plan also



provides conservation direction for grizzly bear habitat within the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem that is expected to be sufficient regulatory mechanism for US Fish and Wildlife Service to petition for delisting.

- Four alternatives that propose a range of recommended additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System (from 0 to 507,000 additional acres).
- The draft plan reflects the strategies proposed in the Northern Region Adaptation Partnership which include adaptation strategies to address climate change. The use of this strategy, as well as, the use of the best available science in developing the plan components and assessing effects is a key cornerstone to the plan revision effort. Numerous discussions and meeting with agency research partners, and other private, local, state, and federal partners have contributed to the development of this plan.
- The Flathead National Forest has not identified a preferred alternative or alternatives at this point but plans to identify a preferred alternative in the final environmental impact statement after reviewing and considering the public comments on this draft environmental impact statement.

How to comment:

The notice of availability of the DEIS is expected to be published in the Federal Register on Friday June 3, 2016, which will initiate a 120-day comment period on the draft forest plan, amendments, and the DEIS. Only those individuals and entities who have submitted substantive formal comments during the opportunities provided for public comment, will be eligible to file an objection. More information about how to comment, the objection process, as well as relevant documents and maps can be found on the Forest's plan revision webpage www.fs.usda.gov/goto/flathead/fpr. Comments can be submitted electronically at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=46286>. Comments can also be sent by mail to Flathead National Forest, Attn: Plan Revision, 650 Wolfpack Way, Kalispell, MT 59901. To view submitted comments, visit our public reading room at <https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public/ReadingRoom?project=46286>.

Open house schedule

The Forest Service is hosting two open house sessions, during which the planning team will be available to answer any questions you may have. There will not be a formal presentation. Please stop by at any time during the open house.

- Monday, June 20, 2016, 2:00–6:00 p.m., Flathead National Forest Supervisors Office, 650 Wolfpack Way, Kalispell MT 59901
- Wednesday, June 22, 2016, 2:00–6:00 p.m., Hilton Garden Inn Missoula, 3720 N. Reserve St., Missoula, MT 59804

Also, please don't hesitate to call with questions or comments. And again, thank you for your continued interest in the management of your public lands.

Sincerely,



Chip Weber
Forest Supervisor

cc: Joe Krueger

