



File Code: 1950

Date: June 5, 2012

Dear Interested Party,

I am providing you with notice and the opportunity to comment on the Flathead National Forest Forest-wide Larch Cone Collection Project pursuant to provisions at 36 CFR 215.5 and 215.6.

The purpose of the Flathead National Forest Forest-wide Larch Cone Collection Project is to promote the health of forest stands by establishing trees in under-stocked areas and increasing the occurrence of western larch (*Larix occidentalis*) across the landscape. Western larch is an important component of resilient forests because it is a long-lived species with high levels of insect and disease resistance. Because it is the region's most shade-intolerant species, western larch needs relatively large openings to regenerate successfully making it a good candidate for planting in wildfire areas.

The initial proposed action has been refined based upon comments received on the project as well as input from the interdisciplinary team of resource specialists tasked with developing and analyzing the effects of the proposal.

The project proposes to collect western larch cones in order to acquire seed vital to anticipated reforestation needs on the Flathead National Forest. This proposed action reflects the need for collecting viable larch seed and is based on the current seed inventory, which is well below levels needed to maintain planting programs for harvested lands and forests impacted by wildfire activity. To meet our projected seed needs, we need to collect 47 bushels of western larch cones from across the forest during the next 10 years. We would need to collect cones from between 50 to 150 trees over the 10-year period.

Western larch cone crops do not occur on a regular basis in western Montana, creating the need for a multi-year planning process to capture the desired amount of larch seed when a sufficient cone crop does materialize. It is likely that a cone harvest would not occur in some years due to the naturally sporadic cycles associated with larch cone production.

Although this project proposes the felling of up to 150 trees, the forest would consider using non-lethal methods that are feasible, cost effective and when our safety requirements can be met. Specifically, the use of a boom truck to pick larch cones would be considered. Therefore, I am directing that as we evaluate our cone crops annually, we take a hard look at possible areas where a boom truck could be used to collect cones. This method is somewhat constrained because it requires a road that can accommodate a low-boy and



boom truck, with larch trees that meet our tree collection requirements (dominate/codominant, displaying vigorous growth with healthy crown and relatively insect and disease free) that are within reach of the road, a minimum of 200 feet apart and within approximately 100 feet elevation of each other within the specific elevation bands.

Our current cone collection contract expires at the end of this year (2012). I have proposed to include in our next cone collection contract, beginning in 2013, a line item for the use of a boom truck to collect western larch cones. If there is a good cone crop this year (2012), and we find that the conditions are met where we have trees meeting our requirements along roads that can accommodate a low-boy/boom truck, we would explore methods of renting or contracting a boom truck to collect cones.

When felling trees is necessary, the trees to be collected from would not exceed 28 inches DBH or 200 years in age. While past experience has shown the best cone production occurs on the larger larch trees (i.e. greater than 22" DBH) smaller trees in collection areas would be used if they meet requirements and have a good crop of cones.

Each seed lot collected must have a minimum of 20 trees separated by a minimum of 200 feet in distance. Requiring a minimum of 200 feet between trees means a maximum of 1 tree per acre within a given area could be selected.

After cones are collected, felled trees would remain on site and be available for firewood utilization as per the terms of a firewood permit.

Where possible, cone collection that involves tree felling would be focused in existing timber sale areas where trees are already planned for harvest. However, cone collection could occur in other areas on the Flathead National Forest where adequate crops are identified. **In all cases, a maximum of 1 tree per acre in a given area could be selected.** The following hierarchy would be adhered to for the felling of trees to collect western larch cones:

1. Current, ongoing timber sales would be utilized first for cone collection operations if viable cone crops are present within these areas and timing of seed maturation can be coordinated with purchaser harvest activities.
2. Previously identified and inactive western larch seed production areas (SPAs) would be assessed for cone production. Seed production areas are stands that support phenotypically superior trees meeting certain established criteria. There are three western larch SPAs that were previously identified on the Flathead National Forest that have been decommissioned. If adequate cone crops are identified within these decommissioned SPAs, trees in these stands would be prime candidates for cone collection as they have been previously identified as being superior specimens.
3. Previously harvested stands which have western larch seed trees on site would be considered for cone collection activities. Shelterwood, seed tree, and commercial thin harvest areas would be the primary focus. If regeneration harvest areas are selected, these stands must be certified as being stocked, according to silvicultural

prescriptions prepared for those stands, before being considered for cone collection operations. If cone-producing trees are felled in these areas, minimum snag retention guidelines will be followed. For example, if the original prescription specified that 10 - 15 trees/acre would be left and there were currently 15 trees per acre, we could remove a maximum of one tree per acre so that 14 trees per/acre would remain. We would not fell trees if that would reduce the trees per acre below the minimum specified in the prescription (10 trees per acre in this example).

4. Non-harvested stands which meet the requirement for seed collection.

Design Features

- Felling of trees for larch cone collection would not occur within streamside management zones (SMZs) and/or riparian habitat conservation areas (RHCAs).
- Fuel would not be stored within SMZs and/or RHCAs.
- Larch cone collection would not occur within Inventoried Roadless Areas, designated wilderness, or Research Natural Areas. In addition, cone collection can not occur in the Condon Creek Botanical Area.
- Trees with evidence of wildlife use (i.e. nests and cavities) would not be felled for cone collection.
- Cone collection could occur within ½ mile of an existing road.
- To protect grizzly habitat and meet grizzly management goals and objectives, the Cone Collection Contract must include the following:
 - The Food Storage Special Order for the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) and the Tally Lake/Island Unit Food Storage Order.
 - Contractors must be informed of possible risks when they are operating in grizzly bear country.
 - If there is any potential for human/grizzly bear conflicts in the cone collecting area (based on sightings, food sources, or aggressive behavior by bears), the contractor must move to a different area to collect cones until the potential for conflict subsides.
- When outside a previous harvest area or harvest area, the following applies: Maintain a density of snags to at least the following levels in areas greater than 200 feet from open roads. Provide 5 live replacement trees (>12" dbh) for each large-diameter snag (>20" dbh). If existing snag densities are below the following densities, substitute live trees where possible, and document why conditions cannot be met:
 - Dry PVG¹: 2 snags average per acre 12 to 20 inches dbh and 1 snag average per acre > 20 inches dbh
 - Moist PVG: 6 snags average per acre 12 to 20 inches dbh and 2 snags average per acre > 20 inches dbh
 - Cold PVG: 6 snags average per acre 12 to 20 inches dbh and 1 snag average per acre > 20 inches dbh

¹ PVG = potential vegetative group

- Trees would not be felled onto known populations of threatened, endangered or sensitive (TES) plant species. Coordinate with forest botanist prior to any tree felling to determine if the cone collection sites contains any TES plant species.
- No collection would occur in old growth stands. Trees selected for cone collection would not be older than 200 years. Each tree would be aged using an increment borer to determine if the tree is 200 years old or less.
- Culturally modified trees would not be felled for cone collection.

Reason for Categorical Exclusion

Pursuant to Forest Service NEPA regulations 36 CFR 220 Section 220.6 proposed actions may be categorically excluded from further analysis and documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment, if there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action and if the proposed action:

- Is within one of the categories in the Department of Agriculture (USDA) NEPA policies and procedures in 7 CFR Part 1b.3 or
- Is within a category listed in sec, 220.6 (d) and (e).

The category we propose to use is 36 CFR 220.6(e)(6):

“Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road constriction. Examples include, but are not limited to: (i) Girdling trees to create snags; (ii) Thinning or brush control to improve or to reduce fire hazard including the opening of an existing road to a dense stand of timber; (iii) Prescribed burning to control understory hardwoods in stands of southern pine; and (iv) Prescribed burning to reduce natural fuel build-up and improve planting vigor.”

The mere presence of one or more of the identified resource conditions does not preclude use of a categorical exclusion. It is the degree of the potential effect of a proposed action on the resource conditions that determines whether extraordinary circumstances exist.

An interdisciplinary team consisting of resource specialists reviewed the proposed larch cone collection project. Their review (analysis) indicated that no extraordinary circumstances are present and the proposed action would not have significant effects on the environment.

The wildlife biologist completed a biological assessment analyzing the effects to threatened and endangered species and determined the proposed action would “*not likely to adversely affect*” grizzly bears, and the Canada lynx. The biologist has determined that the potential impact of the project on sensitive wildlife species is “*no impact*”.

The forest aquatics program manager has determined that implementation of the project would have “*no effect*” on bull trout and a “*no impact*” on westslope cutthroat trout.

The forest botanist has determined that this action would have “no effect” on water howellia (*Howellia aquatilis*) and Spalding’s Catchfly (*Silene spaldingii*), their habitat or

potential habitat for these species. The proposed project “*may affect individuals, but is not likely to result in a trend toward federal listing or loss of viability*” for potentially occurring Regional Forester’s sensitive plant species.

How to Comment and Timeframe

Written, facsimile, hand delivered, oral, and electronic comments will be accepted for 30 calendar days following publication of the legal notice in the Daily Interlake which is expected on June 7, 2012. 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. In submitting comments, please provide:

- Your name, address, telephone number, and organization represented, if any;
- Title of document on which the comment is being submitted;
- Specific facts along with supporting reasons that you believe should be considered; and your signature.

Only those who submit timely and substantive comments will retain appeal eligibility. 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.

Written comments can be submitted to: Marsha Moore, Flathead National Forest Supervisor’s Office, 650 Wolfpack Way, Kalispell, MT 59901 or fax at (406) 758-5367. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are weekdays, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., excluding holidays. Oral comments must be provided at the responsible official’s office during normal business hours via telephone at (406) 758-5251 or in person.

Electronic comments must be submitted in MS Word, Word Perfect, PDF, or Rich Text Format (RTF) to comments-northern-flathead@fs.fed.us. The subject line should contain the name of the project for which you are submitting comments. An automated response will confirm your electronic comment has been received. If the sender does not receive an automated electronic acknowledgement of receipt of comments, it is the sender’s responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other methods.

If you need additional information regarding this proposal, please contact project leader Marsha Moore at (406) 758-5325.

Sincerely,

/s/ Chip Weber

CHIP WEBER
Forest Supervisor