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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Little Wolf Fire Recovery; Kootenai National Forest, Lincoln County, Montana

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement.

SUMMARY: The Little Wolf Fire burned over 15,000 acres of Kootenai National Forest System lands, Flathead National Forest System lands and Plum Creek Timber Company lands in August of 1994. The Forest intends to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to assess and disclose the environmental effects of opportunities designed to recover economic value of burned timber, reduce fuel accumulations, reforest unstocked lands, rehabilitate existing sediment sources, improve hydrologic conditions in affected watersheds, and protect long-term soil productivity. These objectives would be accomplished through salvage harvest of fire-killed timber; reforestation of severely burned areas; fuels reduction in harvested and unharvested areas; drainage improvement and revegetation of road surface, cuts and fill slopes on existing roads; providing for immediate and long-term recruitment of instream large woody material; and revegetation in riparian areas within the Little Wolf decision area. The Little Wolf decision area is located approximately 35 air miles southeast of Libby, Montana.

The proposal's actions to salvage fire-killed trees, reduce fuels, reforest burned areas, construct temporary roads, restore drainage and vegetation on existing road surface, cuts and fill slopes, restrict road access and implement watershed recovery projects are being considered together because they represent either connected or cumulative actions as defined by the Council on Environmental Quality (40

CFR 1508.25). The EIS will tier to the Kootenai National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan and Final EIS of September 1987, which provides overall guidance for achieving the desired future condition of the area.

DATES: Written comments and suggestions should be received on or before March 27, 1995.

ADDRESSES: The Responsible Official is Robert L. Schrenk, Forest Supervisor, Kootenai National Forest. Written comments and suggestions concerning the scope of the analysis should be sent to Lawrence A. Froberg, District Ranger, Libby Ranger District, 12557 US Highway 37, Libby, Montana, 59923.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Jeff Scussel, Planning Staff, Libby Ranger District. Phone: (406) 293-7773.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: During the night of August 14-15, 1994, a lightning storm started 207 fires on the Kootenai National Forest in northwest Montana. Several fires ranging in size from less than one acre to almost 5000 acres occurred on the Libby Ranger District. The Little Wolf Fire Recovery EIS is being prepared in response to conditions resulting from the 4700 acres of the Little Wolf Fire that is within the Kootenai National Forest. An interdisciplinary team is using an ecosystem based approach to assess the fire affects and identify management opportunities that could be implemented to move the postfire landscapes toward a desired ecological condition.

Burn intensities on National Forest System lands in the Little Wolf Fire were mostly stand replacing. Within the fire perimeter on the Libby Ranger District, approximately 1848 acres burned at high intensity (average 90% to 95% tree mortality), 845 burned at moderate intensity (average 70% to 75% mortality), and 237 acres burned at low intensity (average 30% mortality). The fires burned in the upper end of the Little Wolf Creek drainage.

The Little Wolf decision area contains approximately 4700 acres within the Kootenai National Forest in Lincoln County, Montana. All of the proposed projects are located in the Little Wolf drainage. The legal location of the decision area is as follows: Sections 7, 8, 17 and 18, of Township 29 North, Range 25 West; Sections 1, 2, 3, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14 of Township 29 North, Range 26 West; and Sections 34, 35 and

36 of Township 30 North, Range 26 West; Principle Montana Meridian. The land in and adjacent to the decision area is within federal ownership under the jurisdiction of the Forest Service or Plum Creek Timber Company lands.

Proposed Action: The purposes of the project are to recover valuable timber products from trees burned by wildfires that occurred in 1994 (while maintaining ecological processes); to enhance watershed recovery; and improve big game and grey wolf security habitat as timely as possible and to reduce fuel loading. The Forest Service proposes to harvest approximately 7 million board feet or timber by salvaging fire-killed timber and imminently dead trees on approximately 841 acres of forest land outside riparian protection areas. Only trees that were killed, or are expected to die as a result of the fire, would be harvested. The proposal includes prescribed burning of about 42 acres, excavator piling on 160 acres of harvested areas to reduce natural and activity fuels and an additional 20 acres of grapple piling in unharvested areas to reduce natural fuels. An estimated 685 acres of proposed salvage units would be planted with conifer seedlings to help meet desired conditions for species diversity and 80 acres of annual rye and native shrubs would be planted in riparian areas for watershed restoration. The Forest Service proposal also includes approximately 1.8 miles of temporary road construction, of which 1.2 miles would be constructed using low impact snow road construction and would be completely rehabilitated and recontoured. The remaining .6 miles of temporary road would be ripped and seeded. Drainage improvement activities (such as surface ripping, drainage structure improvement, and seeding) would be implemented on all roads within National Forest System lands, (approximately 7 miles), with the intent of restoring natural drainage and reducing sediment. These roads will be needed for future management access, and would remain a part of the permanent transportation system. Additional road access restrictions in cooperation with Plum Creek Timber Company are proposed to provide adequate security areas for big game and grey wolf. Additional projects to improve watershed recovery, reforestation of severely burned areas not proposed for salvage, fuel reduction