

The Rising Cougar Project Questions and Answers

As a result of some of the comments and questions we have received on the Rising Cougar Project, we have developed this question and answer sheet to clarify some information and provide more details. Many of these questions, as well as questions about the potential effects of the project on a variety of resources, will be addressed in the Environmental Impact Statement.

What is the Rising Cougar Project?

The Rising Cougar Project is a fairly large and complex forest management project that stretches between East Hope and the Montana border. We have 4 primary objectives:

- 1) Decrease fuel loadings on NF lands along the interface between public and private lands to reduce the threat of an uncontrollable wildfire to life and property.
- 2) Restore big game winter range conditions and promote wildlife habitat diversity.
- 3) Reestablish the structural diversity of forest stands and decrease the proportions of DF and GF to create favorable conditions for trees like PP, WP and larch.
- 4) In the southern portion of the project area where there are lots of roads, manage motorized access and road densities to benefit watersheds and grizzly bear habitat recovery goals.

What led the Forest Service to choose this area for a project?

There are several factors, most of which relate to the forest conditions out there that we feel are important to change. One has to do with the amount of hazardous forest fuels next to private lands, one has to do with a decrease in the quality of elk and deer winter range and other wildlife habitat, and one has to do with the composition, structure, and pattern of our forest stands. We believe that all these things are “out of whack” largely due to active fire suppression over the years.

What has fire suppression done?

Most of the forests in north Idaho historically have been shaped and influenced by natural fires. As many people have been hearing, the success our society has had with suppressing fires since the early 20th century has led to changed forest conditions that are outside of what we call the “historic range of variability.” This means that historically, fires caused a variety of forest conditions out there, depending on how often they burned and what the site conditions were like where the fire burned—was it dry, moist, wet? So today, in the Rising Cougar project area as well as many other forest areas, we’re seeing more trees per acre on many sites, and species that used to be kept at lower proportions by fire. These are mostly Douglas-fir and grand fir trees which have grown in and are now competing with trees like ponderosa pine on the drier sites, and larch on the more moist sites.

Why is the growth of Douglas-fir and grand fir a problem?

It isn’t if you have the historic fire patterns to keep them at more natural levels. The Douglas-fir and grand fir in this area are species that grow easily in the shade of other trees, but when they are young, they don’t survive fires very well. They also tend to succumb to insects and diseases before they can get very old—most live only to about 100 or 130 years. Conversely, trees like ponderosa pine and larch are what we call fire-adapted species. They tend to survive fires of low to moderate intensities, but they need a lot of sunlight to thrive.

So in a nutshell, what has happened to many of the forests in north Idaho, is that they have lost the element of fire, allowing Douglas-fir and grand fir to increase in proportions way beyond what many areas used to support. This has resulted in higher levels of insect and disease, higher numbers of trees dying, and excessive fuels from the trees that are dying as well as from the forest floor materials that have not been cleaned by fire. It has also led to a decrease in the proportion of the trees that need more sunlight to survive, trees like ponderosa pine and larch, which are longer lived species that provide some valuable habitat components for wildlife, like large long-lasting snags for nesting.

Where does the big game winter range issue fit in to all this?

The lower slopes of the project area, especially the slopes that face the lake, provide prime winter range for deer and elk because you get a warm, moist air influence from the lake. This helps temper the snow accumulations in winter, and the south-facing slopes tend to melt off earlier in spring, expanding wintering areas for the animals. These south-facing slopes are where the best deer and elk food tends to be, in the form of brush fields. So, again, with the lack of fires and the increase in trees and shade, we are seeing a decline in good quality browse for the deer and elk. Fire helps prune the shrubs so that they produce more succulent growth and without it, we are seeing some very tall and woody shrubs where they exist, and areas of the forest where there are little to no shrubs because the forests are so dense. Add to that all the increasing private land development that has occurred in the last 10 to 20 years in the Hope and Clark Fork areas and the need to provide better winter range on the National Forest land becomes even more important.

How about your objectives that speak to managing road access and road densities to benefit watersheds and grizzly bear habitat?

The southern portion of the project area located around Antelope and Sugarloaf Mountains is a mix of National Forest and private lands. There are a lot of National Forest roads, and a lot of roads on the private lands. From a watershed standpoint, the more roads you have, the more you break up the natural hydrologic flow of a hillside by diverting water onto compacted surfaces. You also have a greater chance of diverting sediment into streams if any part of a road system fails during rains or times of high runoff. So anytime you remove a road or do things to minimize erosion or improve the hydrologic flow, you can help prevent these problems.

As far as grizzly bear habitat benefits go, this area, including the private land, is all within the Cabinet-Yaak Grizzly Bear Recovery area. Although we don't manage grizzly bear populations (that's the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), we are required under the Endangered Species Act to manage habitat and activities that will contribute toward recovery of Threatened or Endangered species. A big part of managing habitat for grizzlies comes down to providing secure habitat areas where the chance of bears and people encountering each other is minimized. What a part of the management emphasis has come down to is reducing road densities and motorized access within these grizzly bear management units to provide more "secure" habitat.

This is a difficult issue in this project because we know there are a lot of people in the local area that want motorized recreation and are very opposed to closing roads. So when we began looking at what our road management opportunities are in that area, we looked at how we could avoid closing roads on National Forest land that are currently open to motorized vehicles, and instead focused on roads that are already gated, or roads that are on National Forest lands but are not part of what we call our transportation system.

What exactly are you proposing to do out there?

Since we were just talking about the roads, let's address that first. We've identified less than 3 miles of old roads on National Forest lands that we may use to accomplish some of the project, then we'd decommission them (remove most of the road prism from the landscape). We're also proposing to put just under 6 miles of roads, which are currently gated to prevent motorized use, into storage—which means we deconstruct the portions of a road that might pose an erosion risk, but keep it in our system for potential future use. These measures would help us achieve our road density reduction goals without having much impact on current motorized road use. To accomplish some of the logging, we're only proposing about a half-mile of temporary road construction.

For the forest management issues, we are currently looking at about 5,600 acres of forest we could potentially treat using logging, prescribed burning, and planting in some areas. We say "potentially treat" because we tend to put forth a maximum level of proposed treatment and that level is usually scaled back as we get comments from the public or discover new information. A majority of the area will be logged using helicopters, because a large portion of the project is located within two Inventoried Roadless Areas. Where we have existing road systems outside of the roadless areas, skyline or tractor systems can be used as well as helicopter.

What will the forests look like after logging and burning?

Many of the areas we are proposing to treat will be very open, but will have clumps, patches, and scattered trees in them, similar to how the forests would look if natural fires had occurred there regularly. Some forest stands will be thinned where we want to retain some of the healthy tree species but they won't be as open. Much of the lake-facing slopes in the areas between East Hope and Lightning Creek are the areas where we are trying to promote the more open winter range brush fields. In our project proposal, we have some photos showing examples of what the very open stands would look like. We work hard to make them look as natural as possible from a distance, and feel we've been pretty successful with the work we did on the Kirbys project, which accomplished similar objectives on the slopes between Pack River flats and East Hope.

What information supports that there is a risk of wildfire in this area?

Aside from the field data we have gathered over time, other Federal, State and local governments have identified a need to address the fire risk in this area. The National Fire Plan of 2001 identified the communities of Hope, East Hope and Clark Fork as "communities at risk" from wildfire. The Idaho Department of Lands identified this area as a top priority for fire risk reduction efforts on private lands, and recognized the need for National Forest efforts as well. In addition, Bonner County has developed a fire mitigation plan for this area.

Will the Rising Cougar Project prevent a wildfire from burning private lands?

No. We have always recognized that we can't prevent a wildfire from burning private lands. But by removing forest fuels that carry a ground fire into a crown fire, we believe our efforts will make a wildfire on National Forest lands easier to suppress and attack more safely. Jack Cohen, a fire researcher who has tested what contributes to the loss of houses during wildfires, has said that home ignitions depend on the home materials, the design, and the types of things that are flammable closest to the house. In other words, much of what protects a home is up to the private landowner. Unfortunately, we have no control over what people do on their private lands, even those right next to National Forest. However, staff at the Idaho Department of Lands

have been working with many private landowners to create defensible space around their homes and properties.

But the prevailing winds in the area are from the southwest. If the National Forest lands are above the private lands, won't the fire burn up and away from them?

We would hope so. But winds are never predictable. Even if every land owner were to clear all around their properties and homes, we can't guarantee that the winds will always blow the direction we want them to, or that the fire wouldn't burn downhill (like at night when cooler air creates "downslope winds"). A fire on the steep slopes would be conducive to "rollers"--burning debris that can roll downhill starting a fire on private lands. Embers and firebrands can float a mile or more from a large wildfire. The proximity of private lands in the area makes it impossible for us to allow a fire to burn; it's not even an option we would consider. Since we can't predict when and where a fire will occur, our approach is to take measures to improve our ability to suppress fires when they start. If we can be more effective at putting a fire out more quickly and safely, we can substantially reduce potential impacts to the local communities. Over the long term, using prescribed fire on a periodic basis, we can continue to reduce the threat to the communities as well as provide benefits to wildlife and forest health.

Isn't it against regulations to cut trees in an inventoried roadless area?

Our most recent direction for managing roadless areas is from the Roadless Area Conservation Rule, signed by President Clinton in 2001. In general, that rule placed certain restrictions on road construction, reconstruction, and timber harvesting in inventoried roadless areas. However, the rule made exceptions for the use of timber harvest and other fuel management techniques to "help maintain ecosystem composition and structure within its historic range of variability at the landscape scale" especially where doing so would help reduce the risk of "uncharacteristic wildfire effects."

Are you building any roads in the inventoried roadless areas?

No. We are not proposing to build any roads in the inventoried roadless areas.

Are you proposing anything in the Scotchman Peaks proposed wilderness area?

No. We are not proposing any activities in the proposed wilderness area.

Will you be cutting big trees to pay for helicopter logging?

Our criteria for which trees will be cut and which will be left have to do with the multiple objectives of the project, not the economics of logging. Logging is just one of many tools we are using to accomplish our objectives. Although helicopter logging is expensive, our experience with the Kirbys project showed us that this method is a viable option.

As stated in our proposal, the trees that would be selected for cutting are those contributing to fire risk, those competing with healthy trees we wish to retain, those dying or at high risk of insect and disease attacks, and excess Douglas-fir and grand fir that have grown in over the last 80 to 100 years with the absence of fire. Not all Douglas-fir and grand fir will be removed. No cutting will occur in designated old growth stands, and we are emphasizing that large old trees throughout the project area be retained. Finally, not all dead and dying trees will be removed so we can achieve wildlife habitat guidelines for snag retention.

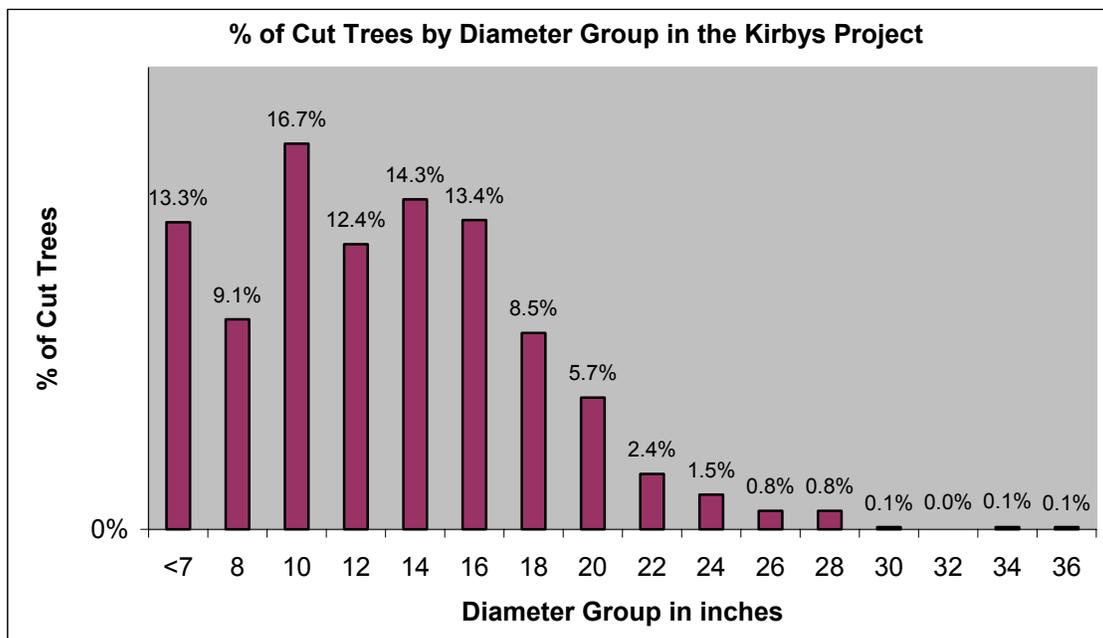
Doesn't the Roadless Conservation Rule say you can only cut small diameter trees?

The rule says that vegetation management would focus on removing *generally* small diameter trees. Although the rule does not specify what is small diameter, it does say:

"...determinations of what constitutes generally small diameter timber will consider how the cutting or removal of various size classes of trees would affect the potential for future development of the stand, and the characteristics and interrelationships of plant and animal communities associated with the site and the overall landscape...as well as how such cutting or removal of various size classes of standing or down timber would mimic the role and legacies of natural disturbance regimes in providing the habitat patches, connectivity, and structural diversity critical to maintaining biological diversity."

The bottom line is that in doing so, the rule says we must "be consistent with maintaining or improving one or more of the roadless area characteristics" defined by the rule. We feel strongly about maintaining the roadless area characteristics, which is why we are using helicopter logging to remove the trees.

During the Kirbys Project, we tallied every tree that was marked to be cut¹. This included trees that were not merchantable, with diameters of 7 inches or less. The graph below shows that out of all the trees removed, most were less than 16 inches in diameter.



How will the project affect recreation in the roadless areas?

Because the roadless areas are bordered by private lands along the bottom slopes, recreation access is limited to a few trails, most of which are along the top of the ridge, well above where our proposed activities would occur. The slopes are steep and rocky, and users tend to be hunters and hikers. There are only two maintained National Forest trails that would pass through proposed treatment areas, one that is only accessible to the public from the top of the ridge near Beetop Mountain, and the trail to Goat Mountain. Besides hunters, and local residents, we are not aware of very much recreational use on the slopes where proposed activities would occur.

¹ It's important to note that Forest Service personnel are responsible for marking cut and leave trees, as well as monitoring logging contractors to ensure they do not take trees that should be left.

What kinds of effects will logging have on the watersheds, fish habitat, and soils?

In the roadless areas, we are proposing to use helicopter logging for a variety of reasons, not just because we don't want to build roads there. From a soils standpoint, helicopter and skyline logging methods have little impact on soil erosion and compaction since the logs are lifted off the ground. To maintain soil productivity, tops and limbs are left on the ground to allow essential nutrients to leach back into the soil before and after burning. Unlike a wildfire that could volatilize soils when burning in hot and dry weather conditions, prescribed burning occurs when soil moistures are much higher to avoid damage.

The watersheds in the project area have evolved over centuries with fluctuations in precipitation and water flow, which causes natural erosion and sediment in stream channels. At times when the forests were more open than they are today, there were probably higher water flows since there were fewer trees to absorb the precipitation. We believe that creating openings in the forest canopy using helicopter logging would not adversely affect water and fish habitat.

Our research shows that when natural events such as flooding occurs, impacts to watersheds and fish habitat tend to occur where there are roads with stream crossings that could fail. Stream crossing failures on roads are sources of excess sediment that would not occur naturally. Where we do have roads in the project area, we are evaluating them for failure potential and are proposing to remove portions of roads and their crossings that are no longer needed or will not be used for a long time.

What about the effects of logging on grizzly bears?

Since the project is located in the Cabinet-Yaak Grizzly Bear Recovery area, our activities must conform to guidelines established to aid in grizzly bear recovery and the project must gain approval by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service before proceeding. The Kirbys project was also within this recovery area. One of the ways we minimized disturbance to grizzly bears for that project was by requiring some of the logging to occur in winter when bears are hibernating. We believe that in the long run, the project would benefit grizzly bears by producing better foraging habitat conditions and more secure areas by reducing overall road densities.

How does the passage of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act influence this project?

At the time of this writing, we don't have any information as a result of the Act that tells us to proceed differently than we already are. It won't change the basic purpose and reason for the project, which we have been developing since the mid-1990s. If anything, the project will likely already meet some of the definitions in the Act having to do with "communities at risk" and wildland urban interface areas. As we receive more specific direction related to implementing the Act, we will provide that information in future updates.

When will the project start on the ground?

With the complexity of this project, it will likely be at least two years before we get through producing the environmental impact statement, a decision, contract preparation, and field work. At this point in time we estimate that if all goes as planned, logging might begin in 2006.