

NEWS RELEASE

USDA Forest Service -- Northern Region



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

FOREST SERVICE ACTS TO EXPEDITE BITTERROOT'S BURNED AREA RECOVERY PROJECT

Missoula, Mont., Nov. 27, 2001--U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth has requested Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment Mark Rey to approve a burned area recovery project for Montana's Bitterroot National Forest to reduce unacceptable risks to natural resources, public safety and private property.

The chief has asked Rey to delay his decision until mid-December in order to provide public notification. If Rey co-signs the record of decision with Bitterroot Forest Supervisor Rodd Richardson, it will not be subject to appeal under the Appeals Reform Act, but would be immediately subject to judicial review. Weather permitting, the burned area recovery project could begin by late December.

Richardson said that because of the magnitude of the project, he wanted to obtain the understanding and support of the chief and USDA prior to announcing the decision.

"The administrative appeals process would only result in further delay of these urgent restoration activities," said Richardson. "I know that several organizations have expressed their intent to challenge this project. Those who disagree with the decision will still have the opportunity to challenge it in court without delay."

"The Bitterroot employees have done an extraordinary job conducting the post-fire assessment, environmental analysis and public involvement for the treatment and rehabilitation project on the Bitterroot," said Bosworth. "It is imperative that we move forward with the project to help restore the land and prevent further environmental degradation." He added that, given the extensive public involvement associated with developing the EIS, the administrative appeals process would not add any value to the decision-making process.

While wildland fires significantly affected western national forests in 2000, the Bitterroot National Forest was one of the hardest hit with more than 300,000 acres burned. Since

then, the Forest has prepared an environmental impact statement evaluating fuel reduction, watershed improvement and tree planting activities to take place over the next several years on portions of the burned area.

The project--the largest post-fire recovery effort of its kind--includes 46,000 acres of hazardous fuels reduction, 46 miles of road decommissioning, and more than 500 miles of road maintenance to eliminate sediment sources and improve fish habitat. It also includes restoration work in 16 miles of streams and reforestation work on over 33,000 acres.

Public comments on the chief's request may be mailed to Forest Service Northern Region, Public and Governmental Relations, P.O. Box 7669, Missoula, MT 59807. (The Forest Service's Washington, D.C. office is experiencing significant delays in mail delivery.) Comments may also be faxed to (202) 205-8517 or e-mailed to emc@fs.fed.us. Questions on the chief's request may be referred to Steve Segovia, assistant director for appeals and litigation, Forest Service, at (202) 205-1066. Comments must be received by Dec. 9.

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