

Figure 1: Packer Creek TIP Location

Overview/Background Information

The Packer Creek Forest Health (PCFH) Targeted Implementation Plan (TIP) includes all the non-industrial, private forest (NIPF) within the Packer Creek drainage; extending south of Interstate 90 to include the remaining private parcels near Saltese- in Mineral County, MT. The total acreage of private forest land within the TIP boundary is 1,386 acres, with an additional 11,271 acres of federal land associated with the Lolo National Forest (see Figure 2).

The primary forest habitat types identified in the focus area include grand fir and subalpine fir habitat types at elevations below 4,000 feet (where private property tends to be found), transitioning to cooler, moister subalpine fir types as elevation increases. Current stand composition consists of lodgepole pine on drier sites with southern and western aspects, transitioning to mixed species dominated Douglas-fir and western larch, with lower densities of western white pine, grand and

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subalpine fir on moister northern and eastern aspects. Lodgepole pine stands will be managed for proper spacing and increased vigor, and mixed conifers managed to promote seral species such as western white pine, western larch, and Douglas-fir.

Packer Creek and its tributaries flow through the focus area to the St. Regis River confluence at Saltese and support a variety of species including bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout. The Packer Creek Forest Health TIP will work to improve the productivity, health, and vigor of upland timber stands and native understory communities, reducing wildfire hazard and serving to enhance the riparian habitat and surface water quality in the Packer Creek drainage and St. Regis River in the process.

Much of the Packer Creek project area burned during the Great Fire of 1910. The resulting regeneration as well as those trees that survived the fire make up the forest seen today. Packer Creek is characterized by both well managed, properly stocked stands, as well as overstocked, suppressed stands exhibiting signs of poor forest health. During the past century, most of the private lands within the project area have been commercially logged and, in many cases high graded, leaving either open landscapes of scattered unmerchantable trees or thickets of overstocked regeneration in need of thinning and stands composed of mostly shade tolerant species. Overstocked and suppressed stands are suffering from several forest insect and disease issues such as mountain pine beetle, fir-engraver beetle, western spruce budworm, dwarf mistletoe, western gall-rust and root diseases resulting in reduced tree vigor, morality and an accumulation of dead, down fuels. Declining forest health and hazardous fuel accumulation issues are likely to persist until management actions are taken to address stand species composition and stocking levels.

Mineral County is heavily forested, making forest and understory health and wildfire preparedness the most significant resource concerns in the county, and aligning with established Local Working Group priorities for forest health and weed management, as identified on page 38 of the Missoula County and Mineral County Long Range Plan (LRP). The USDA-NRCS Missoula Field Office and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) have been very active in planning and implementation of forest management projects throughout the county for many years. In addition to NRCS and USFS efforts, the Montana Department of Natural Resources (DNRC), Bitter Root Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D), and Mineral Conservation District have also worked with private landowners to improve forest health and reduce hazardous fuels on properties throughout the county, and this proposal directly supports these efforts.

The Packer Creek focus area will complement the USFS Cruzane Mountain vegetative management project between Saltese and Haugan. Hazardous fuels reduction is a key factor in this effort, as lodgepole pine stands that grew following the 1910 wildfires have matured, are in decline and have lost much of their value. The USFS plans on a combination of commercial harvest and precommercial treatments, which will also address habitat concerns for the wildlife that uses the local area. This project also has significant aesthetic and recreational components as well, with Lookout Pass Ski Area, Route of the Hiawatha and Route of the Olympian bike trails, and several groomed snow trail routes within the local area. The project area has been described as challenging, given the steep terrain and lack of local roads, but greatly needed to deal with the hazardous fuels and vegetative conditions and growing recreational demands on this area.

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Interstate 90 runs through the middle of Mineral County (including the lower portion of the focus area) and is the major travel corridor through Montana into the Pacific Northwest. In addition, Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) transmission lines bisect the Packer Creek drainage, with a substation located immediately to the west of the focus area. Locally, Tower Road and West Fork Packer Creek Road (single lane gravel roads) serve as the primary access for the area beyond the Interstate, and in the event of a wildfire would serve as the only practical ingress for firefighting activities, and egress for the public to evacuate. Wildfire in this area presents a significant public safety issue, given the unimproved and poorly maintained nature of the local road network, and the critically important infrastructure located in and around the focus area.

The Mineral County Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) was initially developed in 2005 and seeks to restore the resiliency of the County's forests, with ecosystems and developments less vulnerable to severe wildfire. The west end of Mineral County has not seen significant wildfire since the Big Burn of 1910, and over the past century fuel loads and development along the Interstate 90 corridor have presented a significant wildfire hazard, with potential to impact public and private lands, as well as critical infrastructure. The CWPP identifies the lodgepole pine forests near Saltese as being high risk for wildfire- with the Packer Creek drainage cited as a high priority for fuels reduction work, concerns directly addressed through the Packer Creek Forest Health TIP.

Mineral County's 2012 Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plan identifies wildfire as the highest priority hazard in the county, with the potential impact to local communities as being very high, and specifically cites a lack of defensible space around structures in the western end of the county. The Packer Creek Forest Health TIP aligns with, and addresses multiple goals cited in the Mitigation Plan:

- Prioritizing private land fuels reduction in areas where work is being done on adjacent public and private acreages.
- Targeting fuels treatment in and adjacent to priority at-risk communities, areas where access constraints exist, and areas identified as highest risk in wildfire assessments.
- Continue to seek out funding assistance for fuels reduction work on private lands.

The project area has been chosen because of the residents' interest in forest health and in implementing fire safe practices, as well as the ongoing work on adjacent public land which directly aligns with this effort. Initial interest was gauged at a local landowner meeting for the group in the fall of 2020. The focus area was delineated in cooperation with a variety of landowners, partners, and other stakeholders in Mineral County with the objective of complementing on-going or planned forest health partner projects within the Packer Creek Drainage. The overall goals and objectives of the TIP are to improve forest health, resiliency, and wildlife habitat, reduce wildfire hazard, and improve fire preparedness by reducing stand stocking levels and incidences of insect and disease pressures within private forested acres. The Missoula NRCS Field Office along with partners including the DNRC, USFS, Mineral Conservation District and Local Working Group, Mineral County Resource Council, Bitter Root RC&D, and Mineral County Weed District have identified the area as a priority for this effort.

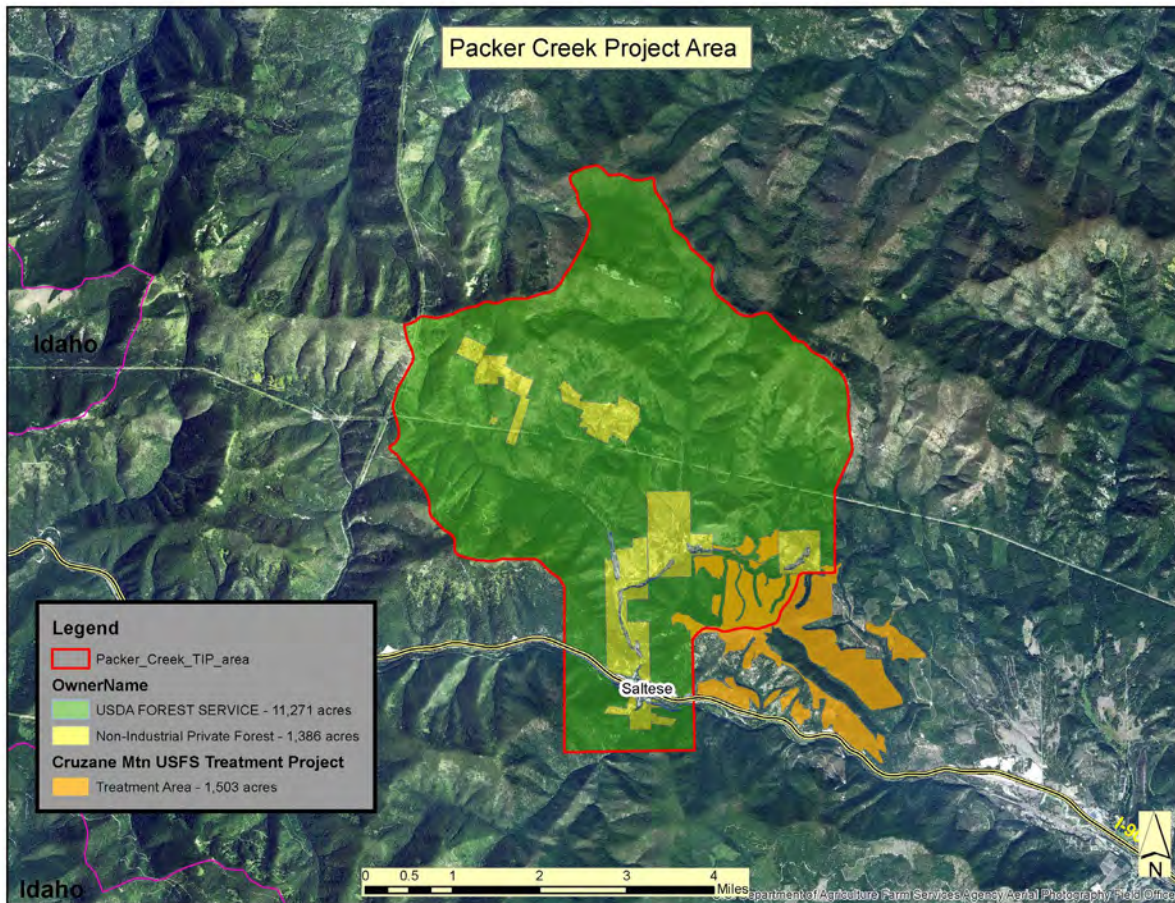


Figure 2: Packer Creek TIP Project Area

Problem Statement

The **primary resource concern** in the Packer Creek focus area is **plant productivity and health**. Secondary resource concerns identified for this proposal include plant structure and composition, plant pest pressure, along with wildfire hazard from biomass accumulation. Forest landowners in western Mineral County are experiencing increased pressure from threats such as insects, disease, wildfires, extreme weather and drought on their land and resources; and accordingly, the Local Working Group has prioritized forest health and weed management resource concerns, per the Missoula County and Mineral County Long Range Plan (see page 38). For plants growing within a forested ecosystem to produce the expected yields and help create preferred timber related products they must be adapted to the site and provided appropriate amounts of nutrients, water, and sunlight, and be resilient to weeds, insects, and disease pressures.

Wildfire and declining health of forestlands are significant concerns throughout Mineral County. Forests within the Packer Creek focus area have historically experienced low frequency, variable to high intensity wildfire, resulting in stands characterized by higher fuel loading and a high diversity of tree species such as lodgepole pine, subalpine fir, grand fir, Engelmann spruce, hemlocks, western larch, ponderosa pine, western white pine, western larch and western redcedar. Stand composition is highly dependent on aspect and elevation with more moisture loving and shade tolerant species on

northern and eastern aspects and more seral and dry tolerant species on southern and western aspects. Decades of fire suppression following the 1910 wildfires has allowed densities of shade tolerant and fire intolerant species as well as fuel loading to greatly increase, resulting in stress through competition for growing space, water, nutrients, and sunlight. The health and vigor of these forests substantially decrease when trees are stressed from overcrowding, grow slower and take longer to mature into a merchantable product- and in the case of lodgepole pine, are reaching the end of their life expectancy- and blowdown is a key factor affecting mortality of young ungulates, as individuals have a higher tendency to become trapped and are subject to increased predation in these areas. Tree stress is further exacerbated by moderate to severe Western spruce budworm and Douglas-fir tussock moth defoliation and Douglas-fir dwarf mistletoe. Poor tree vigor provides opportunity for insects and disease such as Douglas-fir beetle and Mountain pine beetle to establish and spread. This disease and insect caused mortality adds to the fuel load and, coupled with terrain and accessibility issues makes fire suppression more difficult. Where disease and insect pressure are a concern, the intermediate silvicultural treatment scenarios can address root rot disease, or trees affected by pine beetles by reducing competitive stress and creating forest stands that are more resilient to disturbance.

Mineral County is on the eastern range of the western white pine, a prized timber species and historically a major component of millions of acres of forest in the Inland Northwest. White pine blister rust, an introduced fungus, had risen to epidemic levels in Mineral County by the 1940s, resulting in mass mortality and a significant species shift in forest stands. Western white pine is more resistant to root disease than the Douglas-fir, true firs and hemlock species that have overtaken growing sites since the introduction of blister rust and its loss has resulted in an overall reduction in forest productivity in stands where it was once common. Efforts to save the species include the development of rust resistant strains of white pine as well silvicultural practices such as pruning the lower branches of young western white pine trees.

Shifting species composition and a buildup of hazardous fuels has contributed to Mineral County seeing more frequent high intensity, high severity wildfire than in the past. With wildfires also comes the concern of people living within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), their knowledge of wildfire and how they can prepare for a wildfire on their property. It is important for people living in a WUI to know how they can manage their forest to decrease the likelihood of their homes and structures being damaged or destroyed in a wildfire. There are over 20 different private homes or cabins (with additional outbuildings) identified within the Packer Creek Drainage, and this awareness is both important for the community members and firefighters who can better manage fires around structures if the proper precautions have been taken.

The prevalence of noxious weeds within forest stands can limit the growth of desirable understory plants, negatively affecting key wildlife species. Supporting practices such as Herbaceous Weed Treatment can be implemented to treat existing populations of noxious weeds and reduce their spread to unaffected areas. Mineral County is located on the western edge of Montana, along the Interstate 90 travel corridor, and is often one of the first parts of the state to see new invasive species making active monitoring and control critically important. Within the Packer Creek drainage, noxious weed species such as spotted knapweed, Canada thistle, and houndstongue are commonly observed along roadways, trails, and old landings where soil and vegetative disturbance has occurred.

Goals and Objectives

- 1) Improve forest health, increasing stand resilience to insects and diseases.
 - a. The Missoula NRCS Field Office along with the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) will collaborate to develop Forest Management Plans (FMP) with silvicultural prescriptions for each participant with consideration for long-term forest health and resiliency.
 - b. Work with partners, primarily DNRC, to identify insect and disease outbreaks in the project area that may have damaging effects on forest health and cause an increase in hazardous fuels.
 - c. Complete at least 700 acres of treatment over five years leveraging the assistance of multiple partners.

- 2) Reduce hazardous fuels to minimize wildfire impacts and decrease the likelihood of stand replacing fire events.
 - a. This objective will go hand in hand with the above objective as many NRCS practices can be used to increase forest resiliency to both wildfire and insects and disease. The Missoula Field Office will use NRCS practices to achieve this goal along with help from DNRC in creating FMP's that emphasize forest wildfire resilience.
 - b. Improve wildfire resiliency through decreased fuel loads and stand density.
 - c. Reduce the probability for catastrophic wildfire within the local area, serving to decrease uncontrolled carbon emissions and potential for climate change to occur as a result.
 - d. Progress will be measured by overall acres treated.

- 3) Increase wildfire preparedness through education and outreach activities.
 - a. Partner with DNRC to facilitate forester visits, management plan development, and fire risk assessments on homes and properties for program participants.
 - b. Actively work with the DNRC and Bitter Root RC&D to conduct fuels mitigation assessments and assist landowners with creating defensible spaces by implementing fuel breaks around homes and structures.
 - c. Promote and participate in MSU Extension Forest Stewardship Program workshops on an annual basis.
 - d. Progress will be measured by communicating with partners on how many community members they have conducted outreach to and have signed up for their programs.
 - e. The desired outcome is to increase awareness of fire safe practices while also increasing the number of community members who implement these practices on their property.

- 4) Address existing populations of noxious weeds.
 - a. Partner with Mineral County Weed District to coordinate education, outreach, and training regarding noxious weed related issues that exist in the Packer Creek drainage and west end of Mineral County.
 - b. To help prevent the spread of noxious weeds both on the project site and on adjoining parcels. Identified noxious weeds will be controlled through the application of herbicides where applicable.
 - c. Progress will be evaluated on a per acre treated basis and relying on the landowners to conduct follow-up herbicide applications where necessary to continue to reduce noxious weed presence.

- 5) Collaborate with partners to increase landowner education regarding general forest health, noxious weed control, and improving wildlife habitat.
 - a. Partner with the DNRC to provide outreach to potential clients and develop forest management plans.
 - b. Partner with the USFS Lolo National Forest, Superior Ranger District to coordinate efforts on private and public lands.
 - c. Work with Mineral Conservation District to conduct outreach to potential clients and promote education.
 - d. Partner with the Mineral Weed District to collaborate on education and weed management activities within the Packer Creek Drainage.
 - e. Partner with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation to improve habitat condition that will further support a multitude of wildlife species within the drainage.

Alternatives

Alternative 1: No action will result in forest health continuing to deteriorate. Forest health will continue to decline in the short and long term due to overstocking, insects, and disease-leading to declining wildlife habitat, and subpar timber stands. Forest fuels will likely continue to increase which will increase the susceptibility to high intensity, high severity fire events.

Alternative 2: (Preferred) Implement a set of vegetative treatment practices to effectively address the stated resource concerns. Use NRCS financial and technical assistance along with partner assistance to address resources concerns. NRCS cost-share practices will include Forest Stand Improvement (666), Woody Residue Treatment (384), Fuel Break (383), Tree and Shrub Pruning (660), and Herbaceous Weed Treatment (315). Landowners will gain knowledge of the site potential of their forest, its role in the landscape, and have a management direction to sustain benefits into the future. Short-term and long-term benefits of forestry improvements will reduce the risk of catastrophic fire, improve forest health and productivity, and improve wildlife habitats.

Alternatives will be analyzed in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). All practices chosen for implementation will meet NEPA requirements. Special consideration will be given for practices affecting T/E species, such as Canada Lynx and Bull Trout, to meet all federal regulations and NRCS policy requirements. Any cultural resources present will be identified and avoided during the planning and implementation of practices involving any federal action.

Proposed Solutions and Actions

To address these substantial and complex resource challenges we propose employing a comprehensive approach that effectively engages private landowners, leverages partnerships, and incorporates a suite of available NRCS forestry practices to achieve desirable results. We will utilize grassroots outreach through interested landowners and partners within the community to maximize visibility of the project and reach prospective applicants. Specific actions will depend on the silvicultural treatment recommended by technical experts and outlined in site-specific forest management plans. The implementation of NRCS conservation practices will complement the

benefits of the Forest Service's Cruzane Mountain Project (see Figure 2). The Packer Creek TIP proposal has already gained significant support within the Saltese community and this strong local interest will be an integral part of the continued growth of this project.

Selected Practices will include:

Forest Stand Improvement (666) - can be used for several silvicultural treatments including pre-commercial thinning, sanitation harvests for stands with substantial insects and disease infestation, and others. This work will be completed in accordance with NRCS approved management plans written by qualified natural resource managers. **(Primary Practice)**

Woody Residue Treatment (384) - can be used to reduce or eliminate slash generated during thinning. Options will include piling and burning, chipping, shredding, and removal for utilization. This work will be contracted in conjunction with Forest Stand Improvement. **(Supporting Practice)**

Fuel Break (383) - can be used to intensively thin overstory, prune, manage understory vegetation, and treat slash to reduce ladder fuels around a structure/home. This practice can also be applied along property boundaries, roadways, or other key locations to reduce fuel continuity. **(Supporting Practice)**

Tree and Shrub Pruning (660) - can be used to prune the lower branches in western white pine to reduce the spread of white pine blister rust. Pruning benefits white pine by removing infected branches and removing lower canopy needles- which reduces potential infection sites; and can also modify the lower canopy environment to inhibit blister rust spores. **(Supporting Practice)**

Herbaceous Weed Treatment (315) - can be used to treat noxious weed infestations that occur on forested land. Treatments can include chemical or biological treatments, with a focus on preventing spread to unaffected acreages. This will be done through NRCS funding and technical assistance. **(Supporting Practice)**

A combination of these practices can be used throughout the project area according to the goals and objectives of each participant and their forest management plan. Overall benefits from implementation of these practices will include a more healthy and productive forest that aligns with the participant's forest management plan. Participants can also benefit by working with partner organizations to: meet management goals; work to increase knowledge and awareness through activities such as participation in the MSU Extension Forest Stewardship Program; and create defensible spaces around homes by using funding and technical assistance through collaborative efforts with Bitter Root RC&D.

Partnerships

The Packer Creek Forest Health Proposal consists of the following partners:

- Mineral Conservation District and Local Working Group

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- Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation (DNRC)
- Mineral County Resource Council (MCRC)
- Mineral County Weed District
- US Forest Service, Superior Ranger District (USFS)
- Bitter Root Resource Conservation & Development (RC&D)
- Montana Tree Farm

In September 2020 and January 2021, two landowner meetings were held near Saltese, MT to discuss the Packer Creek TIP proposal. In attendance were representatives from NRCS, DNRC, and several landowners who reside in the Packer Creek Drainage. The meetings were held to generate interest and support for forest management activities aimed at addressing forest health issues existing on privately held parcels within the Packer Creek Drainage and initiate a working collaboration between landowners and partner agencies/organizations. A total of 7 EQIP applications for the Packer Creek Forest Health TIP Proposal have been submitted thus far for project work, along with inquiries from additional landowners and commitments from partner groups willing to assist with ongoing outreach and educational activities.

Mineral Conservation District has a long history working with the NRCS to promote conservation and restoration projects. The District is an excellent asset for technical information and client referrals/networking with other government agencies and NGOs- and has agreed to assist with outreach and education for this project.

Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation Service Forester and NRCS field office staff have built a strong working relationship to meet the needs of forest landowners in both Mineral and Missoula Counties. The DNRC Service Forester has been an integral part in effectively conducting outreach, forest management plan development, technical information exchange, and will continue to do so throughout the course of the Packer Creek Forest Health TIP.

Mineral County Resource Council is comprised of a diverse group individuals and organizations that represent land-based interests throughout the county- including recreational groups, timber industry, wildlife groups, small business owners, private landowners, and governmental organizations. These local stakeholders are effectively collaborating on forest management activities with key interests relating to forest health, recreation access, timber management, and economic benefits and to create vigorous and involved communities throughout Mineral County.

Mineral County Weed District has provided coordination, education, outreach, and training to address the needs of the public in Mineral County. The weed district staff has effectively provided local landowners with integrated weed management, vegetation mapping, research, and hands-on training to assist with reducing the spread of noxious weeds. The weed district will continue to coordinate with NRCS to further assist landowners within the Packer Creek TIP boundary, with an emphasis on education in the identification and eradication of new invasive species and preventing the further spread of established noxious weeds.

United States Forest Service- Superior Ranger District strongly supports this proposal and according to the District Ranger, it will not only benefit homeowners and landowners but will also provide for firefighter and public safety into the future. The Superior Ranger District is working to address forest health and community protection on Forest Service acreage in and around the focus

area through implementation of the Cruzane Mountain Project, which borders private property on the southern portion of the Packer Creek Drainage (see Figure 2). Over the next several years, the Cruzane Mountain Project will include timber harvest, thinning, and prescribed burns- and will directly complement the work implemented through the Packer Creek TIP proposal.

Bitter Root RC&D has worked in conjunction with the Missoula NRCS Field Office to assist small acreage landowners with funding thinning and fuels mitigation work through funding sources such as the Western States WUI and Montana Forest Action Plan grants. The Bitter Root RC&D forester has expressed support in assisting with inventory and forest management plan development on small acreage sites.

Montana Tree Farm and the Missoula NRCS Field Office have developed a strong working relationship to coordinate forest stewardship efforts within Mineral and Missoula Counties. Montana Tree Farm has expressed a strong interest in collaborating with NRCS to provide landowners within the Packer Creek TIP focus area with outreach, stewardship education, and assistance with creating forest stewardship plans.

Implementation

Management is key to maintaining plant productivity and health, which has been identified as the primary resource concern for this proposal. Forest management activities can assist landowners in adapting their forests to multiple threats including drought, invasive species, disease, and wildfires by improving the productivity and health of selected leave trees as well as the native understory vegetation. These management practices can provide an improved environment for maximizing a site's growth potential which can result in larger healthier trees and more valuable timber. In addition, thinning allows for the continued growth of the healthiest preferred species within a forested stand while removing the suppressed, diseased, genetically inferior, and low vigor trees that can reduce the overall health of a stand. Maintaining proper stand density is essential for mitigating disease and insect susceptibility within a forested stand and minimizing catastrophic fire risk.

This TIP in conjunction with recently completed and on-going forest management activities within the focus area have the potential to collectively and positively impact forest health on a broad scale. Utilizing an integrated approach to forest management activities on a landscape level has the potential to spur additional partner participation, contributions, and landowner interest both with or without Farm Bill program assistance. Ultimately, this collaborate approach to conservation could lead to results that far exceed the projected outcomes outlined in this document.

This TIP will be implemented over five years. Partners have been consulted and the level of interest from potential program participants has been very strong. The Missoula Field Office will continue to work with partners and landowners to increase interest in the project. By completing preliminary outreach and effectively working with our partners, the Missoula Field Office has already developed a dynamic list of potential participants. Field Office staff will be responsible for accepting applications, conducting fieldwork to gather necessary information, writing silvicultural prescriptions, developing and administering contracts, and certifying completed practices for payment.

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Table 1. Anticipated NRCS Deliverables

<i>Activities</i>	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	Total
<i>Forest Stand Improvement (CPS-666)</i>	100 ac	120 ac	120 ac	120 ac	100 ac	560 ac
<i>Woody Residue Treatment (CPS-384)</i>	100 ac	120 ac	120 ac	120 ac	100 ac	560 ac
<i>Fuel Break (CPS-383)</i>	6 ac	10 ac	10 ac	10 ac	6 ac	42 ac
<i>Tree and Shrub Pruning (CPS-660)</i>	20 ac	30 ac	30 ac	30 ac	20 ac	100 ac
<i>Herbaceous Weed Treatment (CPS-315)</i>	20 ac	30 ac	30 ac	30 ac	20 ac	100 ac

Table 2. Practice Cost Rate Estimates Used for Projections

Practice	Estimated Payment Rate/Acre
<i>Forest Stand Improvement - CPS 666</i>	<i>\$660.00</i>
<i>Woody Residue Treatment - CPS 384</i>	<i>\$483.00</i>
<i>Fuel Break - CPS 383</i>	<i>\$1,368.00</i>
<i>Tree and Shrub Pruning - CPS 660</i>	<i>\$268.00</i>
<i>Herbaceous Weed Treatment - CPS 315</i>	<i>\$110.00</i>

Budget projections for the listed practices are extrapolated from the NRCS-Montana FY2021 EQIP cost list (BFR/HU rates). Actual costs may vary from year to year based on changes to the cost list and individual practices selected. Future budget projections have been conservatively estimated using anticipated producer interest, average property size, and landowner outreach activities conducted to date.

Table 3. NRCS Budget Projections

<i>CONTRIBUTIONS</i>	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	TOTAL
<i>NRCS EQIP FA</i>	\$130,068	\$162,180	\$162,180	\$162,180	\$130,068	\$746,676

Table 4. Projected NRCS/Partner TA Contributions

<i>CONTRIBUTIONS (HRS)</i>	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	TOTAL
<i>Outreach</i>	20	24	24	24	20	112
<i>Plan Development</i>	40	60	60	60	40	260
<i>Contracting</i>	40	60	60	60	40	260
<i>Implementation/Certifications</i>	30	40	40	40	30	180
<i>Forest Management Plan Development</i>	60	80	80	80	60	360

Totals

190	264	264	264	190	1172
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Screening and Ranking

A screening tool and ranking questions will be used to prioritize projects based upon conservation benefit and the feasibility of completion in the scheduled timeframe to ensure programmatic objectives are met.

Ranking Questions:

1. Has the applicant implemented management practices such as Forest Stand Improvement (666) or Tree and Shrub Pruning (660) within the last 3 years to enhance the productivity and health of the native forest overstory on the property prior to applying for NRCS financial assistance?
2. Are the planned acres of Forest Stand Improvement (666) located adjacent to properties on which previously completed forest management activities have taken place within the last 5 years (private, industrial, state, or federal lands all apply)?
3. Does the application include Fuel Break (383) around structures or along the main points of ingress/egress within the focus area?
4. Does the application include Herbaceous Weed Treatment (315) to promote the health and productivity of native understory vegetation?

Prioritization:

- Appropriate Montana NRCS Bulletins will be referenced for prioritizing the applications received for this TIP.

Progress Evaluation and Monitoring

NRCS will analyze the TIP interest level and monitor implementation of active contracts annually, to plan and direct workloads of staff. A stand level forest inventory will be completed before contract obligation to document stand conditions and to develop a silvicultural prescription. The silvicultural prescription will be used to determine practices to include in the contract and for practice certification. The inventory will include documentation of the existing species composition and stand density as well as disease and forest-health attributes. Pre-treatment and post-treatment photos and inventory data will be used to determine and visually show stand improvements, and each treatment area will have at least one georeferenced photo point. Each active contract will be overseen by NRCS field office staff, and all contract items will be certified with an on-site field visit, and documented with photos, inventory data, and maps. After contract completion, the landowner will be responsible for monitoring and documenting stand conditions during Tree Farm/Forest Stewardship forest management plan updates. NRCS field staff will assist with plan updates if requested.

Additional Benefits

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In addition to the resource benefits discussed throughout this proposal, the Packer Creek Forest Health TIP will also serve to benefit the American public far beyond the local area. Effective forest management will help to maintain the integrity of critical public infrastructure located in the area—namely Interstate 90 and the Bonneville Power lines and substation. If either of these key features were compromised during the course of a wildfire event, significant and widespread disruption to public transportation and electrical network could occur, with the potential for far reaching and long-term economic impacts. The area also holds significant recreational value for outdoor enthusiasts, and is used year round for activities such as camping and snowmobiling, with the nationally renowned Route of the Hiawatha bicycle trail and Lookout Pass Ski Area located in the immediate vicinity as well, and impacts to these areas would also be felt across the nation. Additionally, by reducing the potential for catastrophic wildfire within the treatment areas, the potential for uncontrolled carbon emissions will also be reduced, and in turn, working to help mitigate the associated effects of climate change. The taxpayer dollars applied to this project will reach much further than the Packer Creek Drainage, and will work in conjunction with the Forest Service Cruzane Mountain project to serve as a very visible, collaborative and effort to address similar resource concerns across public and private lands.



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