



*Figure 1 View of the Community of York*

# York Area Plant Health and Wildfire Resiliency

Targeted Implementation Plan

**Helena Field Office**  
Lewis and Clark County Montana

**Author: Andrew C. Kretschmer**  
District Conservationist: Rebecka Ayre

## **Project Summary:**

**Program:** Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

**Land Uses Eligible:** Forest, Range

**Resource Concern Category:** Plants

**Primary Resource Concern:** “Plant Structure and Composition”

**Secondary Resource Concerns:** “Wildfire Hazard from Biomass Accumulation” and “Plant Pest Pressure”

**Project Description:** The goal of this targeted implementation plan (TIP) is to provide a framework for partnership between private landowners in the York area, the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest, and the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS). This TIP was created due to the recent initiation of the United States Forest Service (USFS) Middleman Project (see partners contribution section below for more detail) which aims to apply vegetative management practices including prescribed burning to the public lands surrounding the private property in the York community. The objective of this TIP is to provide landowners with assistance in managing their range and forest vegetation synergistically with the management occurring on adjacent USFS holdings.

## **Expected Timeline and Cost:**

<b>Fiscal Year</b>	<b>Acres Contracted</b>	<b>Obligation Requested*</b>
2024	459	\$504,900
2025	459	\$504,900
2026	459	\$504,900
Three Year Total	1,377	\$1,514,700

*\*Yearly obligation amount based on estimated number of contract acres per year with a per acre cost of \$1,100.*

**Geographic Focus Area:** The TIP boundary is shown in figure 2 and was selected because of landowner interest in NRCS forestry practices and input from partners indicating it as a priority area for treatment in which they wish to pursue a collaborative approach to management.

**Estimated Number of Acres:** The full TIP boundary encompasses approximately 6,889 acres of privately owned land of which the Helena Field Office aims to treat 20% (1,377 acres).

Twenty percent was selected as the goal with these considerations in mind:

- The TIP boundary only captures the private inholdings in a landscape dominated by USFS and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) property. This means the actual

proportion of the landscape that will be treated between this TIP and the Middleman Project is closer to 60%.

- Availability of alternative funding sources through partners.
- The presence of acres previously treated with identical practices through other programs such as Joint Chiefs. However, it's important to recognize the continuing development of properties in the area has resulted in new landowners who did not have the opportunity to participate in those programs.

#### **Past Joint Chiefs Project Overlap with Focus Area**

The Capital 360 Joint Chiefs project occurred during fiscal years 2018, 2019, and 2020. The Capital 360 project captured a large target area that encompassed much of the area around the city of Helena including the acres proposed in this Targeted Implementation Plan. The Capital 360 project also shared many of the same resource concerns and practice treatments proposed in this Targeted Implementation Plan. This overlap is intended to build upon the work previously completed by expanding the treatments to new acres.

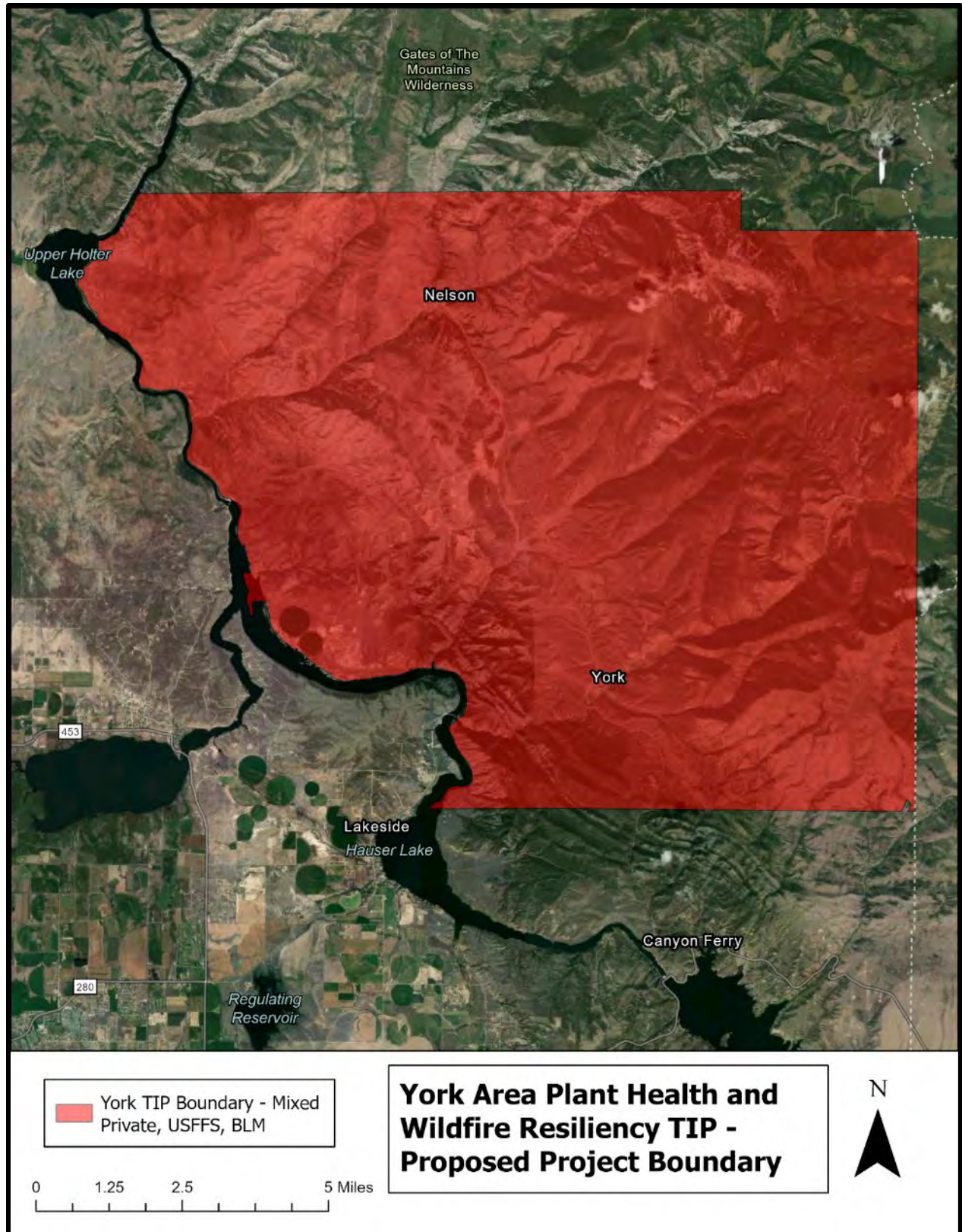


Figure 2 TIP Project Boundary Map.



## **Resource Concerns:**

The primary resource concern to be addressed by this TIP is “Plant Structure and Composition”. The secondary resource concerns are “Wildfire from Biomass Accumulation” and “Plant Pest Pressure”.

If not managed, forest and rangeland plant composition, structure, and biomass accumulation will continue to degrade. Simultaneously residential development in the area around York has resulted in expansion of the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) into areas that once supported few homes and people. The WUI is the area in which humans and their development meet or intermix with wildland fuels. This residential growth borders the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest and poses several challenges for the community and landscape, these include:

- Risk of high severity wildfire
- Land management limitations such as lack of knowledge and resources
- Increased spread of weeds
- Increase of high value infrastructure
- All these challenges are compounded by the remote location with limited and difficult access

**Lewis and Clark County Long Range Plan:** A **long-range plan** identifying priority resource concerns for Lewis & Clark County was developed by field office staff and the Lewis & Clark Conservation District through a series of local work group meetings. During the planning process a list of nine natural resource issues and desired outcomes were developed. Among these, “Forestry Concerns, Invasive Plants, and Urbanization” (page 20 & 21 of the long-range plan) are the most pertinent to this proposed TIP.

**Montana State Forest Action Plan:** The resource concerns addressed through this TIP align with the **2020 State of Montana Forest Action Plan** (MFAP), an all lands, all hands plan for addressing forest health and wildfire risk issues across the state of Montana. Of the seven priority concerns detailed in the MFAP, this project addresses six. These include “forest health, wildfire risk, working forests and communities, biodiversity and habitat conservation, human and community health, and sustainable cross-boundary work in Montana”.

## **Goals and Objectives:**

The objective of this project is to assist private landowners in actively managing their lands to increase plant health and landscape resiliency while promoting collaborative, cross boundary management with adjacent public lands. To accomplish this, NRCS aims to:

- Improve plant community health by manipulating species composition and structure.
- Reduce the risks of high severity wildfire by reducing plant stocking densities and fuel loads through tree thinning.

- Increase resistance to pests by improving plant vigor and resiliency through manipulation of plant structure and species composition.
- Increase implementation of active management on the landscape through education and financial assistance.
- Limit the spread of invasive species through use of integrated weed management.



*Figure 3 Photo showing a stand on USFS property adjacent to the proposed TIP boundary that has been treated to improve plant structure and composition while increasing resiliency to wildfire.*



*Figure 4 Photo showing an untreated stand within the proposed TIP boundary.*

## **Alternatives:**

**Alternative #1 (Not Selected)** Enact a targeted implementation plan with a reduced practice list consisting of just the Fuel Break and Brush Management practices and limiting focus to areas with residential development. This would help landowners to create defensible management areas in locations where wildfire hazard poses a direct threat to residents. However, this alternative would do little to address the plant structure and composition or plant pest pressure concerns at a landscape scale.

**Alternative #2 (Selected):** Execute this targeted implementation with a focus on the full landscape using the full list of proposed practices including: Forest Management Plan, Forest Management Practice Design, Fuel Break, Forest Stand Improvement, Tree & Shrub Pruning, Woody Residue Treatment, Brush Management, and Herbaceous Weed Treatment. This alternative would enable the community to take the management actions outlined in this proposal and achieve the goals and objectives of the project.

**Alternative #3 (No Action):** No action will result in a failure to address continued degradation of plant structure and composition along with increased susceptibility to pests and wildfire. Resource concerns will continue to be addressed by individuals in a piecemeal approach providing some improvement over existing conditions but will do little to address the issues at a landscape scale.



## **Implementation:**

### **Eligible Practices:**

<b>Practice Code</b>	<b>Practice Description</b>	<b>Payment Schedule Per Acre*</b>
CPA 106	Forest Management Plan	\$1,197.00 - \$8,164.80
DIA 165	Forest Management Practice Design	\$315.00 - \$1,738.80
383	Fuel Break	\$858.02 - \$1,492.61
666	Forest Stand Improvement	\$350.76 - \$696.92
660	Tree & Shrub Pruning	\$235.05 - \$378.94
384	Woody Residue Treatment	\$110.38 - \$634.56
314	Brush Management	\$39.23 - \$704.04
315	Herbaceous Weed Treatment	\$33.12 - \$201.11

*\*Payment schedule is based on FY2023 payment schedule and is subject to change.*

### **Timeline & Cost:**

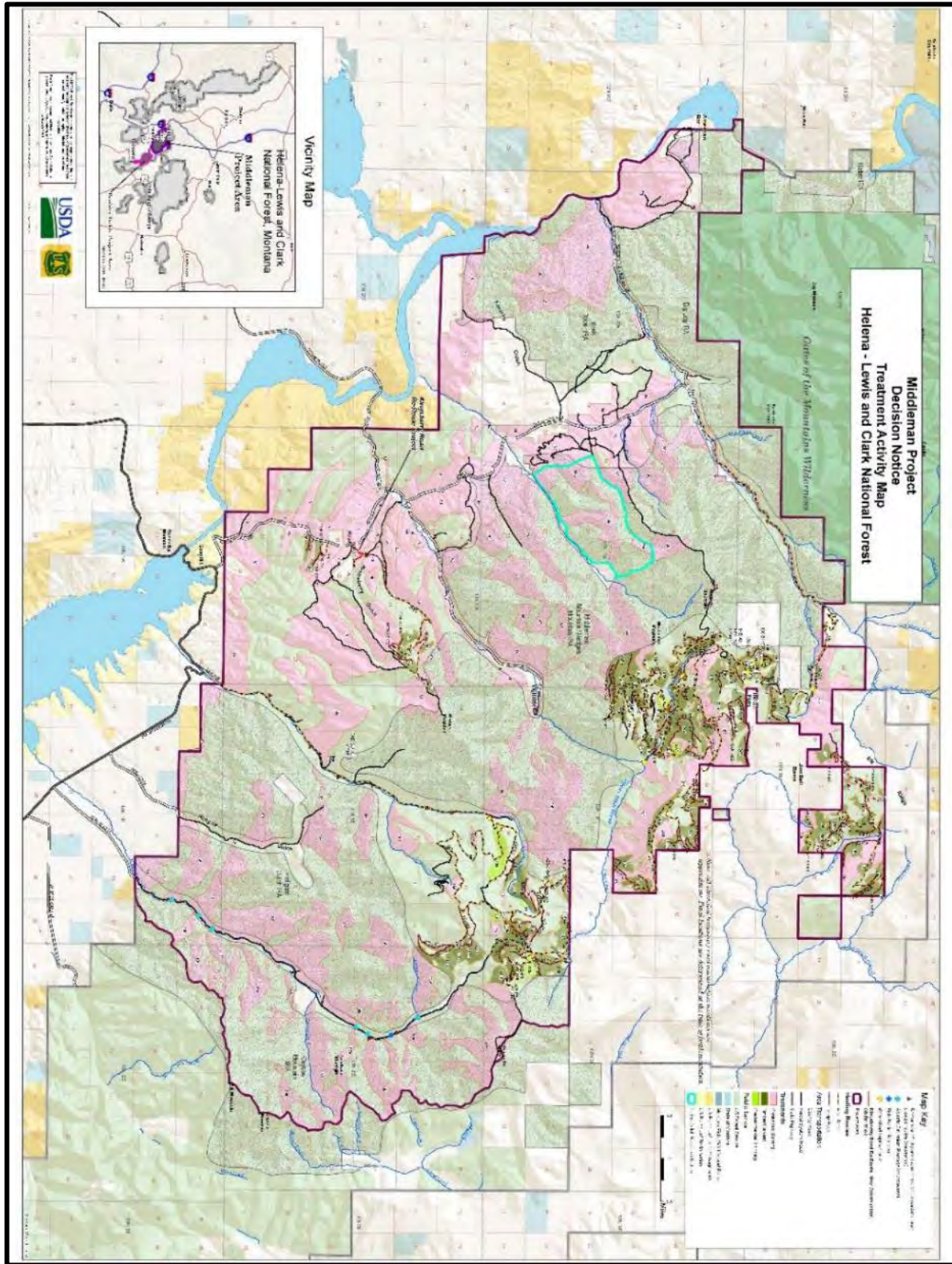
<b>Fiscal Year</b>	<b>Acres Contracted</b>	<b>Obligation Requested*</b>
2024	459	\$504,900
2025	459	\$504,900
2026	459	\$504,900
Three Year Total	1,377	\$1,514,700

*\*Yearly obligation amount based on estimated number of contract acres per year with a per acre cost of \$1,100.*

## **Partnerships:**

**United States Forest Service (USFS):** The Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest is currently undertaking the “[Middleman Project](#)”, shown in figure 5 (or at this [link](#) for a high-resolution version with zoom functionality). The project focuses on prescribed burning but also incorporates forest thinning and harvest. Because the project surrounds this TIP the work completed through NRCS will tie into the work completed by USFS creating a landscape scale, cross boundary, management effect. Additionally, the Helena NRCS Field Office is working to promote communication between USFS and private landowners to enable USFS to incorporate private property that divides public holdings in prescribed burns when applicable. Finally, planning meetings have identified the potential for “participation agreements” between USFS and landowners who border USFS holdings. These agreements can be utilized to provide financial assistance when a private landowner is applying forest treatment to their property and is open to expanding that work across the boundary into adjacent USFS property.





*Figure 5 Map showing the planned treatments within the USFS Middleman Project. The map size when nested within this document makes it difficult to read but the pertinent information are the planned prescribed burn units shown in pink and the thinning units shown in lime green and dark olive drab. For a zoomable version follow the hyperlink above or visit the webpage at “[usfs-public.app.box.com/v/PinyonPublic/file/935279927159](https://usfs-public.app.box.com/v/PinyonPublic/file/935279927159)”*

**Tri-County Firesafe Working Group (Tri-Co):** Tri-Co hosts a Community Assistance Program funded through the Bureau of Land Management. Most landowners within this TIP are eligible and the program provides technical and financial assistance for landowners undertaking wildfire preparedness treatments. Discussions between Tri-Co and NRCS have identified this resource as a good fit for small acreage landowners in the project area as an alternative funding source while larger landowners will be encouraged to pursue NRCS programs.

**Lewis and Clark Conservation District:** The Lewis & Clark Conservation District has agreed to assist the field office with project planning and development. The primary form of assistance is help coordinating and hosting outreach and community engagement events.

**Montana Department of Natural Resources Conservation:** DNRC has entered a contract with MT NRCS to assist with the development of forest management plans as a required component of forestry EQIP contracts. The contract also provides for assistance with outreach for NRCS programs such as targeted mailings and outreach events.

**Lewis and Clark County Weed District:** The Weed District provides landowners with technical assistance in the form of: help developing noxious weed management plans, specific herbicide recommendations (something the NRCS cannot provide), and an herbicide cost share program. Weed district assistance works synergistically with the forest management activities in this project and helps reduce NRCS workload.

## **Outcomes:**

1. Improved plant structure and composition resulting in improved pest resiliency, plant health and vigor, and wildfire resiliency. Measured as the number of acres treated to NRCS practice specification(s) for Fuel Break, Woody Residue Treatment, Forest Stand Improvement, Brush Management, and/or Herbaceous Weed Treatment.
2. Increased fire resiliency of the community. Measured as the number of properties that have Fuel Break implemented on forest land.
3. Increased resiliency of landscape to forest pests. Measured as the number of acres treated with Forest Stand Improvement or Fuel Break.
4. Increase in public awareness and knowledge of identified resource concerns and management alternatives. Measured as the number of engagements with individuals through contract development, technical assistance, and outreach events.
5. Project success, measured as treatment of at least 20% of eligible acres (1,337 acres) with NRCS Fuel Break, Forest Stand Improvement, Brush Management, and Herbaceous Weed Treatment practices or contracts with 20% of landowners (74 landowners) in project boundary.
6. Documentation of before and after photographs of practice implementation.

**Application Ranking:**

1. Will the project address wildfire impact by applying fuel break, forest stand improvement, or brush management practices within 500 feet of infrastructure such as buildings, stockwater developments, or roads?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
2. How many of the identified priority resource concerns (Plant Structure and Composition, Wildfire Hazard from Biomass Accumulation, and Plant Pest Pressure) will be addressed?
  - a. Three
  - b. Two
  - c. One