



United States Department of the Interior



BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
Butte Field Office
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Butte, Montana 59701-9701
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In Reply Refer To:
9200 (MTB070)

July 26, 2016

Dear Interested Party:

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Butte Field Office is requesting comments on the Draft Proposed Action for the Marysville Landscape Restoration Environmental Assessment (EA) (EA #: DOI-BLM-MT-B070-2015-0003-EA). This Proposed Action is also available on the BLM ePlanning Website at: <http://1.usa.gov/1t28HMN>

Introduction

The Marysville Planning Area (PA) is located in Lewis & Clark County, Montana, approximately 20 miles northwest of the town of Helena. The Planning Area lies within Townships 11-14 North, Ranges 4-7 West, Principal Meridian Montana (see enclosed Map 1).

Within the Marysville PA there are approximately 155,740 total acres of land, of which approximately 14,170 acres are public lands administered by the BLM. BLM lands within the Marysville PA extend from the Virginia Creek area located on the Stemple Pass Road past the American Gulch area south of Marysville, MT. The elevations on BLM lands within the PA range from approximately 4,500 to 7,300 feet. The physical setting is dominated by forested areas of lodgepole pine and Douglas fir with some grassland and minimal shrubland at lower elevations.

Background

In 2013, an interdisciplinary team (IDT) assessed BLM administered lands in the Marysville PA for the five Standards of Rangeland Health. The Standards assessed were: Upland Health, Riparian Health, Water Quality, Air Quality, and providing for Biodiversity. Additional field visits occurred thru 2015, looking closer at vegetative condition of the BLM administered lands within the Marysville PA

The Marysville Assessment Report describes the condition/function of resources within the assessment area. The purpose of the Standards and Guidelines are to facilitate the achievement and maintenance of healthy, properly functioning ecosystems within the historic and natural range of variability for long-term sustainable use. The Marysville Assessment Report is available to the public and may be reviewed at the Butte Field Office, or on the BLM ePlanning Website at: <http://1.usa.gov/1t28HMN>

The following summarizes the existing vegetation and fuel conditions on BLM administered lands within the Marysville PA as identified in the Marysville Assessment Report:

- **Conifer Encroachment:** Upland, aspen, and riparian vegetation communities in the Marysville PA are trending away from desired reference conditions. Portions of grassland/shrublands and riparian habitats have been colonized or encroached upon by conifers due to the interruption of the natural fire disturbance regime.

- **Declining Forest Health:** Many of the timber stands are experiencing mortality from insects and disease, along with other forest health issues such as high density and loss of stand diversity. Dense stands of Douglas-fir are susceptible to western spruce budworm activity. Trees are stressed by increased competition for limited light and water resources and have declined in vigor. Lodgepole and ponderosa pine stands have been impacted by infestations of the mountain pine beetle.
- **High Concentration of Fuels:** Insect infestation, disease and areas with declining forest health have resulted in blow down, increasing the concentration and abundance of fuel loads across the Marysville PA. Higher fuel loads have increased the hazard associated with wildland fires thus making it harder to provide for public and firefighter safety.
- **Fire Danger to the public:** The town of Marysville is considered to be within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). The Tri-County Fire Working Group identified a 4 mile buffer around the town as being high hazard and at risk of wildland fire based on the finding in the Regional Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) (2005 update 2016).

Purpose and Need

Action is needed in the Marysville PA to address conifer encroachment, declining forest health issues, and fuels hazards associated with wildland fire for public and firefighter safety. Forest, woodland, riparian, and sagebrush/grasslands communities have departed from desired conditions in terms of ecosystem process and function, composition, structure and density, and providing native wildlife habitats. In addition, there is a need to meet goals and objectives outlined in the Approved Butte Resource Management Plan (2009).

The purpose of the action is to:

- Restore and/or maintain density, structure, and species composition of forest, woodland, and riparian habitats within the natural range of variability.
- Improve forest health by reducing the risk of insect-related mortality, increasing the vigor and health of stands, protecting old-growth trees, and increasing the diversity of understory vegetation.
- Restore the distribution and vigor of sagebrush/grassland habitats consistent with their appropriate fire regimes.
- Provide for public and firefighter safety by reducing the hazard associated with wildland fire in the WUI and in other areas where standing dead or down wood creates a high fuel loading hazard.

Proposed Action

This initial Proposed Action was developed by the BLM to meet the purpose and need for action. Vegetation treatments would occur within the Marysville PA to improve the vegetation and fuel conditions (see enclosed Maps 2 and 3).

Conifer Encroachment

To address conditions where grassland/shrublands, aspen stands, and riparian habitats have been colonized or encroached upon by conifers, the Butte Field Office proposes the following in the Marysville PA:

- **Scouler willow stand (up to 34 acres):** In the willow area, remove pole- and sapling-sized conifer trees using mechanized equipment. Scarify the surface to promote new growth of willows. Install temporary fencing around the willow area to eliminate grazing for up to 4 years.

- Riparian Habitat (up to 20 acres): In the Sawmill Gulch aspen stand, cut conifers by hand to eliminate competition and promote new growth. Use the cut conifers as a barrier to livestock and wildlife to prevent browsing. Incorporate woody debris into Sawmill Gulch to create small dams to raise the water level and enhance riparian deciduous vegetation, including a sizeable aspen stand.
- Seeps and springs (up to 10 acres): Near seeps and springs, cut conifers by hand to eliminate competition and promote new growth. Use the cut conifers as a barrier to livestock and wildlife to prevent browsing.
- Sagebrush Habitat (up to 680 acres): In scattered live sagebrush areas and conifer stands with dead woody sagebrush in the understory, use hand thinning of the conifer colonization followed by a prescribed fire treatment to remove the residual fuel loading. The thinning treatments would focus on enhancing the vigor, compositional distribution and the structural component of sagebrush.
- Upland aspen stands (up to 250 acres): In upland aspen stands, use hand thinning, mechanized cutting, prescribed burning, fencing, and scarifying the surface to remove encroaching conifers and promote sprouting of aspen.

Forest Health

To address declining forest health, mortality, stand density, and loss of diversity conditions in forested habitats, the Butte Field Office proposes the following in the Marysville PA:

- Forested Stands (up to 3700 acres): Thin conifers from dense savannah habitat, forests, and mixed conifer stands using commercial harvest and non-commercial thinning. Use prescribed fire after thinning to reduce residual slash and promote increased nutrient cycling.

Fuels and Fire Danger

To address the high concentration of fuels and fire danger, the Butte Field Office proposes the following in the Marysville PA WUI:

- Mixed Conifer Stands (up to 390 acres): Use commercial timber harvest, biomass removal, thinning, pruning, and chipping/mastication and/or lop and scatter with materials left on site to minimize the adverse effects of wildland fire. Reduce the basal area in the 8-inch and greater diameter breast height (DBH) trees and thin with a spacing of 20 to 40 feet for trees with less than 8-inch DBH. Prescribed burning could be used to reduce residual slash on site. Fuels treatments would focus on creating target densities that result in a low fire hazard, as described in “A Strategic Assessment of Fire Hazard in Montana” (Fielder, 2001)
- Lodgepole Pine Stands (up to 75 acres): Use a salvage treatment to reduce fuel loading to decrease the hazard associated with wildland fire.

Associated Actions

- To access timber and fuel treatment areas, construct up to 20 miles of temporary roads. All temporary roads would be rehabilitated after use to prevent habitat degradation, erosion, motorized access, and weed spread.
- To access treatment areas, improve the conditions of existing roads and ATV trails to minimum specification for utilization and returned to pre-project specification upon completion of the project. Allow travel for administrative purposes on seasonally restricted or closed roads during treatment periods when necessary.
- Follow up treatment for blown down may occur in all units if determined to be needed.

Commenting

The BLM would appreciate your review and comments on the Marysville Landscape Restoration EA Proposed Action. Comments may be used to alter the Proposed Action and/or create new alternatives to be analyzed prior to issuing an EA. If you would like to comment, please make your comments as specific as possible, including any suggestions regarding resource issues, or changes to the Proposed Action.

Please provide your comments to the Butte Field Office at 106 N. Parkmont, Butte, MT 59701 or e-mail ctuss@blm.gov. Comments will be accepted until September 15, 2016. To be considered, all comments must contain the name and address of the submitter. Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment -- including your personal identifying information -- may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

If you have questions regarding this project, please contact Charles Tuss at the Butte Field Office at 406-533-7634.

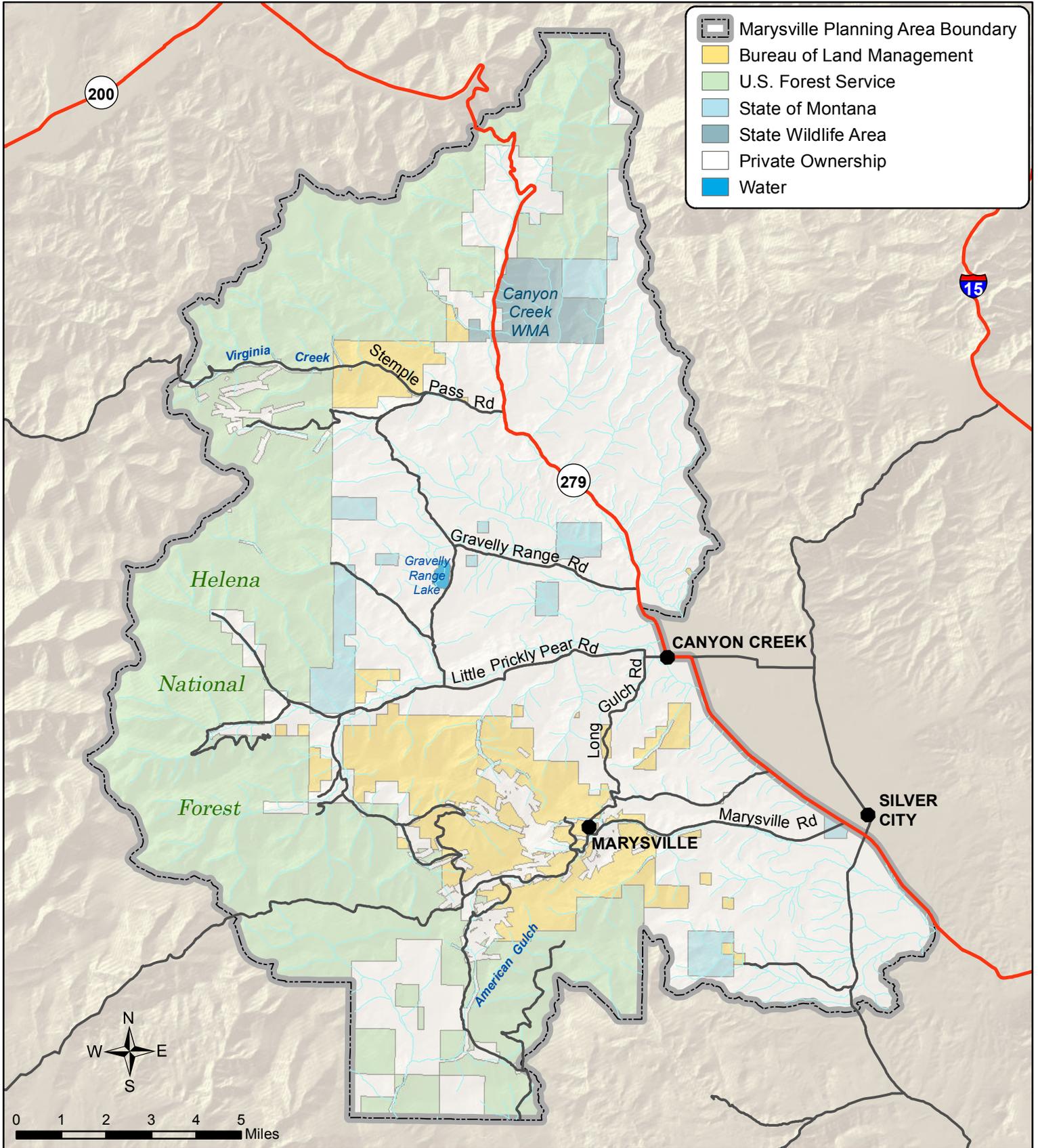
Sincerely,

//SIGNED//
Scott Haight
Field Manager

Enclosures



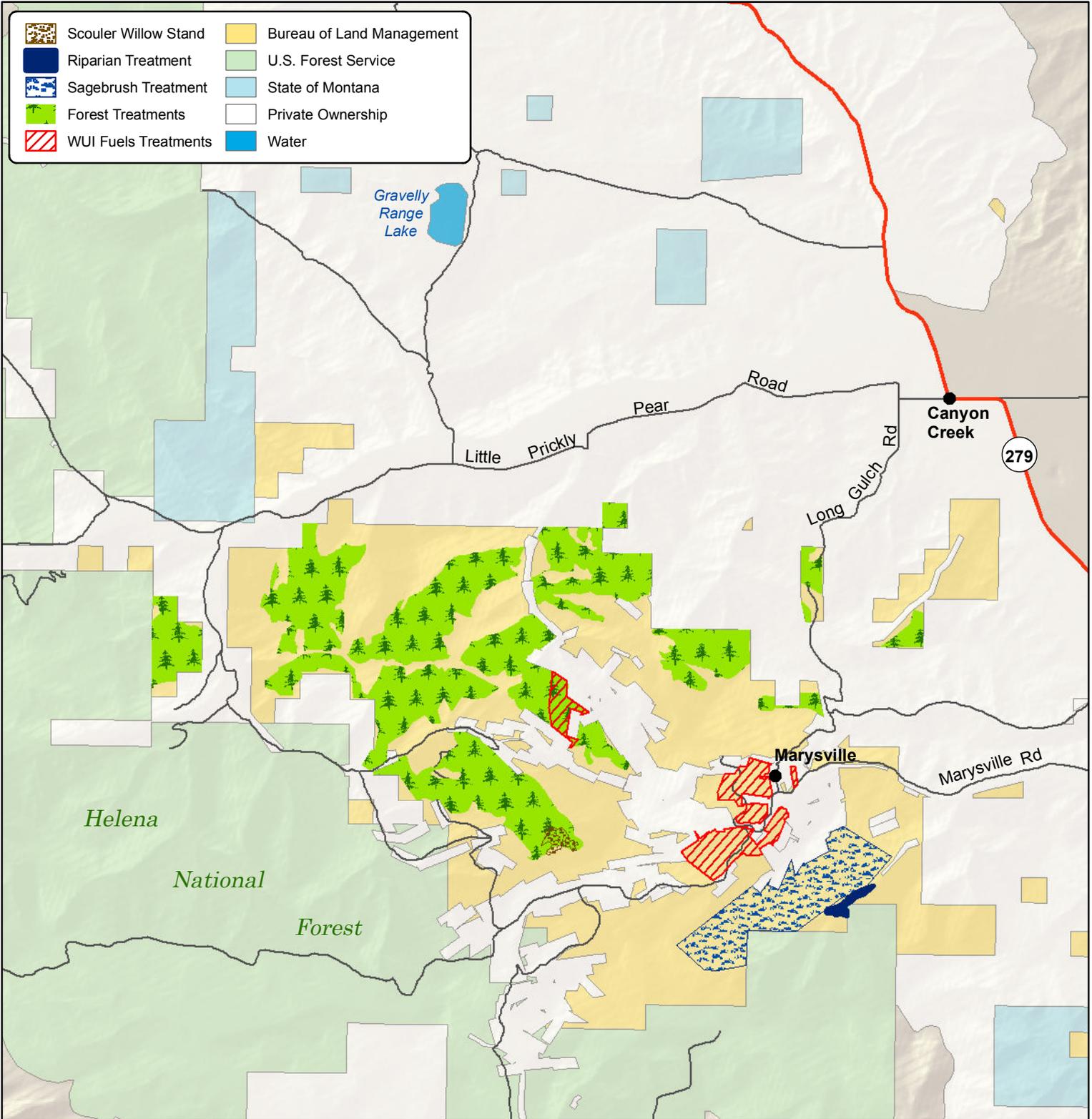
Map 1 Marysville Planning Area





Map 2

Marysville Landscape Restoration Environmental Assessment Proposed Action - South





Marysville
Planning
Area

Map 3 Marysville Landscape Restoration Environmental Assessment Proposed Action - North

