

CONFEDERATED SALISH AND KOOTENAI TRIBES
FORESTRY DEPARTMENT
MISSION MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS BUFFER ZONE RECLASSIFICATION

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
NOVEMBER, 2005



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Prepared for:

Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes
And
Bureau of Indian Affairs, Flathead Agency
Pablo, MT 59855

COVER SHEET

Proposed Action: Modification of Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes' Forest Management Plan and Amendment of Forest Management Plan Environmental Impact Statement

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Cover photos: Mission Mountains, circa 1916 (left). Mission Mountains circa 2004, photo courtesy of Pat Hurley (right).

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Executive Summary

This document was prepared to analyze the potential effects of a policy change applicable to tribally owned forest lands with the Mission Mountains Wilderness Buffer Zone. Two alternatives are considered: to leave the classification of these lands as “commercially unavailable”, or to change the classification to “restricted management”, which is specifically defined for this particular area within this document.

An interdisciplinary team consisting of a fire specialist, foresters, a wildlife biologist, a fisheries biologist, a hydrologist, a wildland recreation manager, a cultural resource specialist analyzed the issues and wrote the bulk of this document. During the preparation of this analysis the team held two public meetings and also solicited input from the interested tribal public at a quarterly tribal council meeting. Issues brought by the public are included in an appendix to this document, along with team responses.

This document addresses only the policy issue at hand. It does not consider the effects of a future action proposal, as those effects would be examined in detail in another environmental analysis document if the policy were changed. This document does attempt to generally discuss the types of resource concerns that could potentially arise if a specific action proposal were brought forward in the future if the policy is changed.

Upon completion of the analysis, the team recommends Alternative 2, changing the classification to “restricted management”, under the definition created specifically for the wilderness buffer zone in this document.

Chapter 1. Purpose of and Need For the Proposed Action

In 2002, the Tribal Council of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes directed the Tribal Forestry Department to investigate the possibility of conducting hazardous fuel reduction within the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness Buffer Zone (hereafter, “Buffer Zone”), which lies along the west-facing foothills of the Mission Mountains. This request was prompted from the wildfires of 2000, the fuel loading concerns, and associated safety risks to human life and property raised by the Division of Fire.

Analysis of this area in 1990 by the Division of Fire indicated a high risk of wildfire due to fuel accumulation. There are over 175 homes within the Buffer Zone located on Tribal allotments and scattered private lands. Most of these homes are surrounded by a thick stand of timber, resulting in a high risk of loss due to wildfire. Timber harvest has occurred on some privately-owned lands and some tribal allotments in recent years.

The Buffer Zone was officially established in 1987, when the Tribal Council adopted the *Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness Buffer Zone Management Plan* (revised, 1993). The Buffer Zone Plan identifies that timber harvesting is permitting with identified restrictions.

The *Flathead Indian Reservation Forest Management Plan* (FMP) was approved in 2000. Under the FMP, the Buffer Zone was classified as “Unavailable.” The unavailable classification indicates that the area is not available for commercial forest management activities. This decision was based on a poll of Tribal members in 1995, which indicated that Tribal members did not favor timber management activity within the Buffer Zone. Poll results led to a Tribal Council motion to prohibit commercial timber harvest within the Buffer Zone.

In order to address the emerging issues of public and firefighter safety, reduce the risk of large high intensity fires, and restore the forests to a more biologically balanced condition, both merchantable and non-merchantable forest products need to be removed from the Buffer Zone. Therefore, the Tribes propose to change the classification of the Buffer Zone from “Unavailable” to “Restricted”. This particular definition will apply only to the Buffer Zone, and while other areas of the Reservation may carry the same designation, each “Restricted” area has a unique set of restrictions and limitations on a site-specific basis.

This Environmental Assessment (EA) will document the interdisciplinary process used to address the impact of this proposed policy change. The EA will address the rationale to be used when implementing fuel reduction and forest restoration projects that could include the harvesting of timber within the Buffer Zone under the “Restricted” classification.

This EA specifically focuses on the change in forest use classification. Future project-specific environmental analyses will address the specific silvicultural systems, logging methods, and the effects of implementation of any future project.

Tiering Documents

1. The Flathead Indian Reservation Forest Management Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement (CSKT 2000b)
2. The Flathead Indian Reservation Forest Management Plan 2000 (CSKT 2000a)
3. The 1993 Wilderness Buffer Zone Management Plan (CSKT 1993)
4. The Flathead Reservation Comprehensive Resources Plan Vol. I and II (CSKT 1996)
5. The Flathead Indian Reservation Grizzly Bear Management Plan (CSKT and USDI BIA 1981)

Description of the Project Area

The Buffer Zone was created in 1987 to provide a protective “cushion” between the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness and the adjacent valley floor. The purpose of the Buffer Zone is to protect the wilderness from undesirable influences from encroaching civilization..

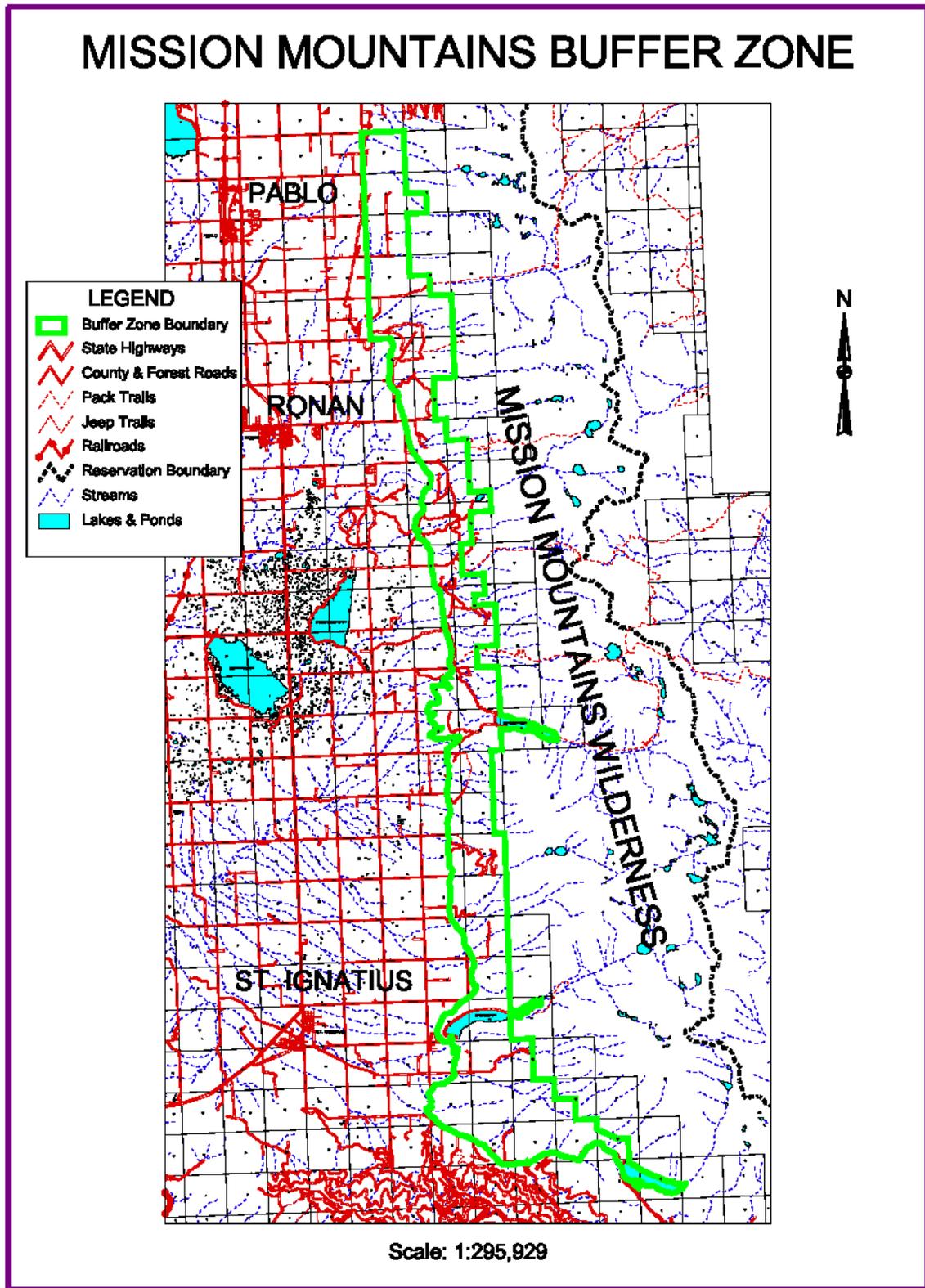
The Buffer Zone encompasses over 22,000 acres in the foothills of the Mission Mountains (Fig. 1) (CSKT 1993). Based on 2003 land status data, the Tribes and individual Tribal members own nearly two-thirds of the area, with most of the remaining acreage held in fee status ownership by individuals, and a small proportion of the Buffer Zone is owned by the State of Montana and by the Federal government (Figure 2).

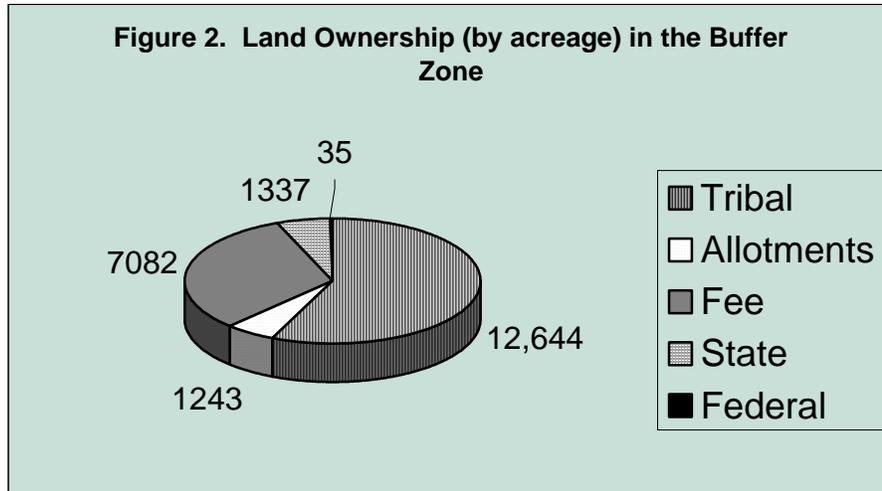
The Buffer Zone is an area of overlapping land uses, including cultural uses, homesites, timber harvest, recreation, and other consumptive and non-consumptive resource uses (CSKT 1993). Concurrent resource uses within the Buffer Zone have dictated an interdisciplinary approach that is formalized within the 1993 Buffer Zone Management Plan. Further, the Buffer Zone Management Plan requires that all activities within the Buffer Zone would be guided by the requirements of the plan and conducted under the auspices of an Administrative Use Oversight Committee specifically tasked with responsibilities for the Buffer Zone.

One of the most important aspects of the wilderness and the Buffer Zone is the aesthetic appearance of the area, and thus is the first issue addressed within the 1993 Buffer Zone Management Plan. From the valley floor at about 3000’ elevation, the Mission Mountains tower into the sky to nearly 10,000’ (9820’ McDonald Peak) in elevation, providing a spectacular viewshed visible from all areas in the Mission Valley. Numerous overlooks and scenic turnouts exist along the highway where passers-by frequently stop and take photographs. Average daily traffic in the area rose from 4440 in 1984 to 6450 in 1994 (U. S. Department of Transportation 1996); therefore the average number of vehicles on Highway 93 in a 24-hour period in 2004 could easily be above 8000 if this trend has continued, and for all of this traffic the Buffer Zone is readily visible.

Another primary consideration for management of the Buffer Zone is the nature of the resources within the adjacent wilderness area. Consideration for protection of cultural resources within and adjacent to the wilderness were a major factor in its creation. The Tribal Historic Preservation Department is concerned for the protection of trails and other important features within the Buffer Zone, the locations for some of which are not presently known (T. Ryan memo dated 4/1/04 to B. Swaney). It would be of vital importance to document and protect any cultural resources that could be harmed by this proposal in accordance with Tribal Ordinance 95, the Cultural Resources Protection Ordinance administered by the Preservation Office.

Figure 1. Location Map of the Buffer Zone





Watersheds, streams, and wetlands within the Buffer Zone are important for a variety of reasons, including providing high quality drinking water, as fisheries and wildlife habitat, as a renewable source of irrigation, and for a healthy ecosystem downstream. Many of these streams and wetland complexes possess the highest water quality on the Flathead Reservation (S. Makepeace email dated 3/31/04 to B. Swaney). The Crow Creek drainage also serves as a source of public water for the city of Ronan (CSKT 1999). In addition, the associated aquatic habitats in the buffer zone are of importance in harboring bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) populations and westslope cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarki*) populations (B. Hansen, pers. commun.). The Tribal Fisheries Program has focused a great deal of management effort on these two species in an effort to restore self-sustaining populations of these native trout on the Reservation.

Fig. 3. Changes in forest composition at low elevations on the Flathead Reservation (CSKT 2000a).



Forested areas of the Buffer Zone are comprised of a variety of species, with Ponderosa Pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) and Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) as the primary species. Other common species on northerly slopes and in moist, shaded areas include western larch (*Larix occidentalis*), western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*), grand fir (*Abies grandis*), Englemann spruce (*Picea engelmannii*), and scattered populations of Pacific yew (*Taxus brevifolia*) and lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*).

Substantial encroachment of Ponderosa pine habitat by Douglas-fir is occurring within the Buffer Zone, primarily as a result of fire suppression (CSKT 2000a, Figure 3). The 2000 FMP identified a number of other trends applicable to forests within the Buffer Zone, including changes in patch size, in species diversity within stands, and increases in tree density within stands.

1.1 Decision to be Made

The Superintendent of the Flathead Agency is the official responsible for making the final decision regarding the project and EA, and will decide whether this project would have a significant impact on the human environment. If the Superintendent decides that the effects would not be significant a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) would be prepared and signed. The Superintendent is also responsible for selecting the appropriate action to be implemented with the signing of the FONSI.

1.2 Scoping Summary and Public Involvement

An initial scoping meeting was held February 18, 2004 on the campus of Salish Kootenai College. Resources and issues represented at this initial meeting included forestry, fire, recreation, fisheries, cultural resources, weed management, wildlife, water resources, and rights-of-way. Team leader Bill Swaney gave a brief summary of the process (Appendix A) and those present discussed various issues related to the proposal.

On September 13, 2004, representatives of the interdisciplinary team presented the proposal to the Kootenai Elders Committee. About 20 people attended this meeting, including elders, Tribal Council representatives, and members of the Kootenai Culture Committee.

On October 6, 2004, team members presented the proposal to the Salish Elders Committee. About 40 people were at this meeting, including elders, members of the Salish Culture Committee, Tribal Council representatives, and tribal staff.

On December 15, 2004 and December 16, 2004, public meetings were held at the St. Ignatius Longhouse and at the Tribal Complex in Pablo. About a dozen people attended these meetings.

On January 7, 2005, members of the interdisciplinary team presented the proposal at the quarterly Tribal Council meeting at the Tribal Complex in Pablo. Approximately 60 people were in attendance. At this meeting, team members outlined the proposal, fielded questions, and provided comment forms for interested members of the public to fill out and return to the team.

During the analysis and preparation of this document, the *Char Koosta*, the *Missoulian*, and the *Valley Journal* all ran stories covering the proposal and advertising the public meetings.

Issues raised by the public and the team's responses are appended to this Environmental Assessment. This appendix also includes the comment form provided and the presentation given at the public meetings in slide format.

1.2.1 Issues Not Given Detailed Study in the Environmental Analysis

During the scoping and analysis of this project, a number of project-specific issues were raised that were theoretical in nature. They related to what could happen if fuel reduction were actually occurring within the Buffer Zone. Because those issues would be studied in detail in a future Environmental Assessment if the classification of the Buffer Zone changed and a specific action

proposal arose as a result, they were not analyzed in detail for this document. Other issues that were not site-specific to the Buffer Zone were also not analyzed in this document.

1.2.2 Issues Relevant to the Decision to be Made

The primary issues considered in this analysis are fire and fuels, visuals, wildlife, watershed, fisheries, recreation, and cultural resources located within the buffer zone. The following is a brief summary of these issues.

Fire and Fuels

Non-lethal Fire Regime types in the Buffer Zone Management Area have excellent potential for fire regime restoration. However, increased fuel loadings within the area are of concern, and are considered unnatural at current levels. Timber harvesting in combination with thinning and prescribed fire is the method of restoring natural ecosystems under direction of the Flathead Agency Forest Management Plan, 2000.

Visuals

The Buffer Zone is a sensitive area from a visual appearance perspective. Much if not all of the Buffer Zone is visible from along Highway 93 and the adjacent communities of Polson, Pablo, Ronan, Charlo, and St. Ignatius. The Forest Management Plan (CSKT 2000) took this into consideration and therefore classified this area as visually sensitive.

Wildlife

Numerous species of wildlife inhabit or travel through the Buffer Zone, most notably grizzly bears (*Ursus arctos*). Most of the Buffer Zone is classified as Grizzly Bear Management Situation I or II (CSKT and USDI BIA 1981) which is managed primarily to provide important spring or fall habitat for these bears. Other wildlife species, wildlife habitat needs, and impacts of disturbance to wildlife are also relevant.

Watershed

Many of the streams crossing the Buffer Zone originate as headwaters streams in the adjacent wilderness area. The Tribes have classified all such streams originating within the wilderness as A-1 waters from their origin until they leave the wilderness. The only higher classification possible under the tribal system is A-closed, which is a designation intended to protect surface waters used as a public water supply. This designation occurs in the Middle Crow Watershed, which flows through the Buffer Zone and Middle Crow serves as a public water supply for the city of Ronan.

Fisheries

Streams and reservoirs within and adjacent to the Buffer Zone support either bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) or westslope cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarki*). The Tribes highly

value these species and expend considerable effort to manage fisheries habitat and associated aquatic resources to increase self-sustaining populations of these two species.

Recreation

Recreation resources consist primarily of the trails and trailheads leading into the wilderness area. The Buffer Zone Management Plan (CSKT 1993) listed 7 developed trailheads, one undeveloped trailhead, and five primitive campgrounds within the Buffer Zone. With respect to management of recreation resources, the Tribes attempt to simultaneously consider the human, Buffer Zone resource, and wilderness needs in the area (CSKT 1993).

Cultural Resources

A number of historic trails and culturally important sites exist within the Buffer Zone, but many areas are in need of detailed survey to determine the location and extent of these important resources. All activities potentially affecting cultural resources are regulated under Tribal Ordinance 95, the Cultural Resource Protection Ordinance (CSKT 1995).

1.3 Permits

Because this document does not propose a site-specific activity and is substantively a policy change issue, no permits are needed for this decision. If management practices changed as a result of this document and specific actions were implemented in the future, those actions could require various permits normally associated with timber harvest activities in other areas. These could include a cultural clearance under Tribal Ordinance 95, a permit for wetland construction activities under Tribal Ordinance 87A, or other required permits depending on the specific action proposed.

Chapter 2. Alternatives, Including the Proposed Action

2.1 Alternative 1: No Action

This is the “no action” alternative. Under this alternative, the area would retain the “unavailable” classification. No commercial timber harvest would be permitted. The consensus of the ID Team is that commercial harvest is defined as the cutting and harvesting of commercial size timber that would be delivered to a mill or processing facility in exchange for revenue or services to the Tribes.

Commercial size timber is dependent upon market conditions. Logs that have a minimum of a 5 1/2” small end diameter and are at least 16’-6” in length are generally considered commercial size logs. Smaller size material is being processed for products such as pulp, chips, hog fuel and specialty products. Historically the revenue generated from the sale of these size products has been marginal to none. As industry has adapted to smaller material the value of smaller material has increased.

Fuel reduction projects that did not include commercial timber harvest could continue to be proposed and implemented.

With the possible exceptions of access to tribal homesites, allotments, State or fee lands, no new road construction would be proposed across trust lands. No road management, improvements or maintenance would be implemented through a timber sale.

2.2 Alternative 2: Change the Classification from Unavailable to Restricted

This alternative is the “proposed action” and would change the classification of the Buffer Zone from “Unavailable” to “Restricted.” Commercial timber harvest would be permitted under this alternative, with the following restrictions:

“Restricted Management” of tribal lands within the Buffer Zone implies that removal of merchantable and non-merchantable material will be guided by the need to protect human life and property, the ecological integrity of the wilderness, fire ecology and ecological restoration principles. Proposed treatment considerations will also include treatments that are designed to enhance or restore cultural, visual and ecological resources. Resource concerns other than timber production will determine treatment decisions.

As an example, any new roads, with the exception of those needed to protect human life and property would be fully obliterated; any even-aged treatments would be for restoring critical big game winter range or to meet cultural, visual, or ecological objectives.

2.3 Alternatives Considered but Dropped From Further Consideration

The team considered an alternative of ecosystem management as prescribed in the Forest Management Plan. This approach would have treated the Buffer Zone the same as all commercial forest land on the Reservation. Because of the sensitive nature of the issues surrounding the Buffer Zone, this approach was deemed not feasible and was not analyzed in any further detail by the team. Another alternative briefly considered was to follow the 1993 Buffer Zone Management Plan. This approach was also deemed not feasible and was not analyzed in further detail.

2.4 Identification of the Preferred Alternative

Alternative Two has been identified as the Preferred Alternative.

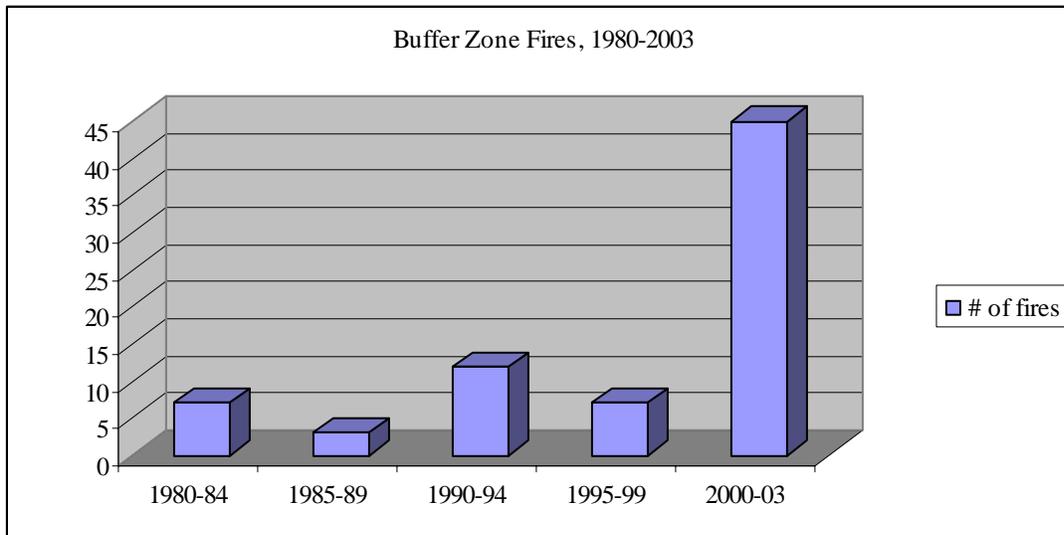
Chapter 3. Existing Conditions

Following is a brief overview of the existing condition of the resources involved. These resources are discussed in more detail in the Forest Management Plan (CSKT 2000a), which is hereby incorporated into this document by reference. The reader is urged to consult this document for additional detail.

3.1 Fire and Fuels

Timber types within the Buffer Zone Management Area have evolved with past fire disturbance events. An active wildfire history has created a diverse fuels matrix in the Missions Landscape, of which the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness and Buffer Zone are a part. According to the 1855-1975 Timber, Tribes and Trust book, the Mission Mountains portion of the Flathead Indian Reservation had several large wildland fires between 1890 and 1976. Several of these large fires were 5-10,000 acre stand replacement wild fires at lower to mid-elevation. Literature notes that several large fires occurred at lower elevations (east of Ronan and Twin Lakes) during the 1910 fire season. Numerous (almost 40 fires for over 400 acres) 10 to 100 acre fires occurred in this area in the 1920-70's. The advent of the modern fire suppression era (since the 1940's) has resulted in successful suppression of most Buffer Zone Area wildland fires. Since 1980, a total of 74 fires have occurred within the management area itself, including 45 fires from the period 2000-03 (Fig. 4). The McDonald Lake Fire burned 35 acres in 1991. A fuels assessment of the Buffer Zone indicates that four significant fire regime types occupy the management area, including a major component of Non-lethal/Encroached types; a major component of partial stand-replacement mixed severity types, and a minor component of long-interval stand-replacement types.

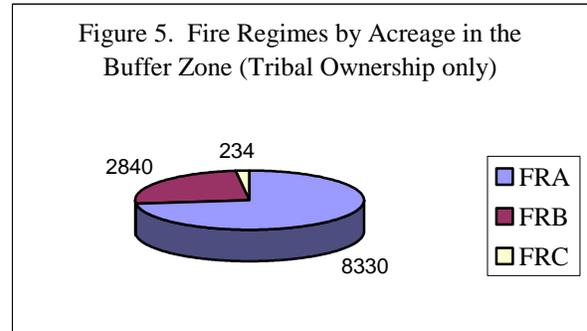
Figure 4. Fires Occurring in the Buffer Zone 1980-2003



A comparison of aerial photos from the 1930's to the Tribes' most recent photography (1998) indicates that this area has changed considerably in the last 70+ years. The lack of fire in the ecosystem has allowed the stands to become denser and encroach on areas that were grasslands in the 1930's. This densification has increased the fire hazard in the area.

Of the 12,644 acres of Tribally owned land within the Buffer Zone, approximately 11,404 are forested and falls into one of three different fire regimes (Figure 5).

Fire Regime (FRC) types -An estimated 234 acres (approximately 2%) of timbered stands scattered across the Buffer Zone and in riparian zones are classified as Stand-replacement Fire Regime (FRC) types. These lower-elevation timber stands are primarily comprised of mature, mixed conifer Douglas-fir, Grand-fir, Western Red Cedar, and Spruce.



Forest health in these timber stands is fair to poor with high levels of dead and dying trees due to mistletoe, insect infestations, and moderate levels of root-rots. Downed and dead woody fuels average an estimated 20-40 tons per acre. Regime aspects are mainly west to northwest with moderate slopes.

Fire history records from 1910 to the present show no significant fire activity within the Buffer Zone Management Area in this type. Environmental conditions in this type are typically cool and moist with moderate wind exposure, so fires within this regime occur infrequently over a return interval of about 150 to 300 years. Down woody fuels build up naturally over time due to declining forest health, blow-down, and tree suppression from closing forest canopies. Under severe fire weather conditions large, catastrophic fire events will occur that could produce severe, stand replacement type wildfires.

The even-age nature of the present vegetative structures in this type indicates that the existing timber stands were created from larger fire event that occurred some time between the 1880's and 1910.

Past timber harvest activity has occurred from timber and permit logging sales that occurred prior to 1975. Some recent harvest has occurred on Tribal allotments and fee tracts within the last several decades (mostly harvested as shelterwood or unevenage harvest units). These harvest units reduce wildfire risk to adjacent tribal lands from the creation of a partial fuels mosaic of mature timber stands.

Partial Stand-Replacement Fire Regime (FRB) - An estimated 2,840 acres (approximately 25%) of lower- and mid-elevation timber stands on south to northwest aspects are classified as Partial Stand-Replacement Fire Regime (FRB) types. Most timber stands within this type have a very dense pine/fir/larch understory. Non-lethal conditions dominated these stands historically,

however the stands are moving toward stand-replacement conditions due to densification of the understory, increased stem counts, and closing tree canopies.

Relatively large areas within this type, up to the early 1970's, were harvested with uneven-age harvest treatments. Fuels are typically dry in this type and wildfires can be expected to occur more frequently than at upper elevations. Large fires in this type historically occur over an interval of 40 to 75 years and are usually of mixed severity with a non-lethal underburn in healthy timber stands on moderate slopes, and severe, stand replacement fires on steeper slopes and where fuel build-ups have occurred.

Past logging activity (i.e. selective harvest) has reduced some crown-fire potential within this type. Wildfires in the un-harvested timber stands on steep slopes could be expected to crown with severe fire intensities. Resistance to control is moderate in this type due to fuels, dense understory structures, and moderately steep slopes.

Non-Lethal Fire Regime (FRA) - Vegetative types within the lower to mid-elevation south to west aspect portions of the management area are classified as short interval-low severity fire types within the Non-Lethal Fire Regime (FRA). There are an estimated 8,330 acres (approximately 73%) of this type within the management area, which are comprised of predominately mature and intermediate Ponderosa Pine and Douglas-fir with dense thickets of Douglas-fir and Ponderosa Pine regeneration. These timber stands have a well-developed needle litter with scattered low shrubs and grasses. Forest health is fair to good except in dense, young stands where mortality from natural thinning (suppression mortality) and *Elytraderma* have caused surface fuel accumulations. Dense thickets of Ponderosa Pine\Douglas-fir regeneration have become established during an extended fire-free period. Former grassland and some pine woodland types are heavily encroached with trees. Overstories are also susceptible to stand-destroying crown fire within these encroached situations.

Air Quality – In 1979, the Flathead Indian Reservation was designated a Class I Airshed as defined under the 1977 Clean Air Act amendments (42 U.S.C. § 7401 *et seq.*). The Class I designation provides the most federal protection to pristine lands by severely limiting the amount of additional human caused air pollution.

Presently, the Flathead Agencies Division of Fire Management cooperates with the State of Montana, and other agencies, to assure that State and Federal air quality standards are met or exceeded, and will meet constraints established by the Idaho/Montana Airshed Group's Memorandum of Understanding. In Montana, the open burning season runs from March 1 through November 30. No prescribed burning is allowed under the Montana Airshed Group's restricted burn season from December 1 through March 1.

Air quality in the Buffer Zone Area can be fair to poor and smoke generated from prescribed fire use could cause a temporary effect on Flathead Reservation air quality in this area. Burning activities on the Flathead Reservation are monitored and scheduled to comply with Idaho/Montana State Airshed Group and Tribal Air Quality regulations and guidelines.

Currently the fire and fuels management goals for the Buffer Zone are to manage forest lands to reduce the risk of major wildfire events within the Buffer Zone and to enhance other resources (CSKT 1993). There are also restrictions and guidelines under the Buffer Zone Management Plan (CSKT 1993) and the 1995 tribal membership straw vote that have been adopted by tribal resolution, which could have an effect on timber harvesting practices and prescribed fire use.

3.2 Visuals

During the analysis process for the Tribal Forest Management Plan (2000), forested stands were evaluated according to how visible they were from designated viewpoints. This resulted in a stand’s Scenic Integrity Level (SIL, CSKT 2000:Appendix L). Areas that were located in sensitive areas were classified Distinct; all other stands were considered Common. Ranks of high, moderate and low resulted from combinations of visibility and slope steepness. Maps of the SILs for each Landscape are located in the Plan (CSKT 2000:196-7 for the Missions Landscape). SILs for the Buffer Zone are listed in Table 1.

To evaluate visual quality, we used methods and terms described in *A Handbook for Scenery Management*, Number 701 Appendix H (U.S. Forest Service 1996). In the Buffer Zone, the following factors drove the analysis: 1) Selection of representative view points for analysis of the Buffer Zone Management Area; 2) Slope steepness; and 3)The character of the landscape and its ability to absorb change.

Table 1. Proportion and management direction for Scenic Integrity Levels (SILs), Buffer Zone Management Area, Flathead Indian Reservation, 2004.

SIL Type Defined in the Forest Plan (CSKT 2000:Appendix L)	Proportion of Buffer Zone	Management Direction
Common Very High Common High	15 % 8 %	Specifies that management activity may dominate the characteristic landscape, but must also use naturally established form, line, color, and texture. It should appear as a natural occurrence when viewed in the foreground or middle ground (generally less than 3 to 5 miles from the viewpoint).
Common Moderate Common Low	51 % 26 %	Refers to landscapes where the valued character appears “moderately altered.” Deviations begin to dominate the valued landscape character, but they borrow valued attributes such as size, shape, edge effect, pattern of natural openings, and vegetative type changes, from outside the landscape being viewed. Managed areas should be compatible or complimentary to the landscape character

Three viewpoints (Table 3) were evaluated for the Buffer Zone. Although most of the Buffer Zone has a Scenic Integrity Level of Common, concerns for visual resources are high because of the following factors:

- High frequency and number of travel and visitor days;
- High recreational use, scenic overlooks, National Bison Range, Ninepipes and Kicking Horse Reservoirs, and various business locations along the US. 93 Travel Corridor; and
- Proximity of the MA to the US Highway 93 and the towns of St. Ignatius, Ronan and Charlo.

The Buffer Zone has been subject to natural fires, resulting in diverse visual patterns, stand textures, stand sizes, and species composition. Fire records indicate that no recent major fire history exists in the Buffer Zone. However existing stands show fire dependent species that would have needed some disturbance factor like fire or logging to exist. It can be assumed by inference that a mosaic of small, medium, and possibly large stand replacing wildfires existed before the turn of the last century. In contrast, no large fires have occurred in this Buffer Zone in the last 20 years.

With the advent of fire suppression, portions of the Buffer Zone have become densely forested. This condition is most noticeable on steep, north-facing, south-facing and west-facing aspects. At lower elevations on south and west aspects, forest encroachment has taken place where trees have moved into grasslands and meadows.

Today, natural patterns or modifications to the landscape are somewhat evident to the average visitor. Major features include residential development sites; small ranches; agricultural areas reservoirs, canals: and small private timber harvesting areas. Vegetation is characterized by dense forest stands of mixed species intermixed with range and farmlands. The overall scenic integrity level is rated as moderately altered. The variety class is Common and the sensitivity level is 1.

The Buffer Zone provides a popular travel route into the forested regions and trails of the Mission Mountains Wilderness Area. Views of the project area are available from the west and along the developed county road system in the area. The longest duration views are from homes, businesses, rest stops and towns located along the base of the Mission Mountains and in the Lower Flathead Valley. The main north-south transportation corridor bisecting the Reservation—US Highway 93—passes parallel to the full length of the Buffer Zone. This highway provides recreational travel access to Kalispell and Glacier National Park to the north and Missoula to the south. Year-round traffic has increased steadily, with increasing local populations and recreational travelers. The US. 93 travel corridor provides unobstructed views of the entire Buffer Zone and the adjacent wilderness area for those traveling either direction on this heavily traveled highway.

The Cumulative Effects Analysis Area for scenic quality includes visible areas located outside of the Buffer Zone. Generally, this includes the slopes above the buffer Zone—the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness, the Moss Peak Management Area to the north and the Kelly's

Ridge Management Area to the south. Views in the cumulative effects analysis area are discussed with the viewpoints from which they are most readily viewed.

Viewpoint Descriptions

The Buffer Zone is visible from a continuous source of viewpoints along the valley floor. Three representative viewpoints were selected for analysis, based on the number and sensitivity of the viewers, distance and viewing angle to the Buffer Zone.

Table 2. Viewpoint descriptions, Buffer Zone

View point	Location
1	St. Ignatius Rest Area Overlook (US 93 and Bison Range vicinity).
2	Ninepipes Lodge / US 93.
3	Minesinger Road. / US. 93 Intersections.

The project is viewed can be viewed from all three distance zones—foreground, middle ground, and background. The middle and background distance zones are dominant when viewing the Buffer Zone from Highway 93 and from viewable locations to the west of US 93. The foreground zone is dominant when traveling west from US 93 on a large number of Lake County Roads. The most frequently occurring viewing angle would be with the viewer observing from below (viewpoints 2-4). Viewpoint 1 has the viewing angle from above and from the background distance zone.

Viewpoint #1 - St. Ignatius Rest Area and US 93 Intersection)

This viewpoint is located at the overlook rest area on the east shoulder of US 93 approximately three and one half miles southwest of St. Ignatius, Montana. This location is also seven and one half miles west of the southern end of the Buffer Zone. The viewpoint approximates the distance and viewing angle for those living in or traveling south of St. Ignatius. The viewing distance is from the upper background (from three to five miles distant). This is listed as a critical viewpoint because of the duration of time that motorists and local residents see the viewshed. This general area has a direct and unobstructed view from the west when viewing the area.

Viewpoint # 2 (Ninepipes Lodge / US 93)

This viewpoint is located approximately five and one half miles south of Ronan on the east side of US 93. The viewing conditions are different than from viewpoint # 1 in that the Buffer Zone is seen from a lower middle ground viewing angle and distance (three to five miles from the Buffer Zone).

The viewing duration is long for viewers traveling north or south on US 93, or for visitors stopping at local business and attractions or residents homes in the vicinity. The sensitivity of this viewpoint is high. Today’s usage is much higher with new housing and increased traffic.

Viewpoint # 3 (Minesinger Road / US 93)

This viewpoint is located approximately three miles north of Pablo at the Minesinger Road Intersection. The viewing angle and distance is from the lower viewing position with middle ground distance (three to five miles distance) to the north Buffer Zone.

The viewing duration is moderate to long for vehicular traffic traveling US 93 or Lake County Roads in the Vicinity. The sensitivity of this viewpoint is high due to the high density of housing and highway usage is much higher than in the past.

Visual Absorption Capability

Visual Absorption Capability (VAC) is the estimate of a landscape to tolerate or absorb modifications without sacrificing the desired visual character. The VAC is a judgment regarding the ability to achieve or sustain the management direction for a particular site. Key considerations in estimating the VAC of an area include the complexity of the landscape, steepness of slope, vegetative screening, diversity, soil and rock color contrast, and regeneration potential. Additional social factors to be considered include the following: the numbers of people viewing the corridor route; year-round viewing from local traffic; viewing from through traffic; residential development; and recreational use that includes developed campgrounds and views from town sites, subdivisions and the National Bison Range.

The VAC for most of the Buffer Zone is rated as moderate. This means that most of the landscape has a reasonable ability to absorb management actions without creating obvious changes to the viewshed. The VAC would vary by viewpoint, however, based on the following elements:

- Majority of the timbered area forms a continuous canopy without much textural difference except for some private ownership timber management, Current size, shape and visual recovery of past regulated and unregulated harvest units;
- Fragmentation of stands due to house site locations and farm or small ranch clearings;
- Continuous gentle to moderate sloped terrain with shallow sub-ridge development, with common and repetitive features when compared to the more scenic and spectacular topography of the Tribal Wilderness upslope to the east; and
- Duration of time that each viewpoint allows the user to see the scenery.

3.3 Wildlife

Big game in the area includes white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), mule deer (*O. hemionus*), elk (*Cervus elaphus*), black bear (*Ursus americanus*) and occasionally moose (*Alces alces*). White-tailed deer and black bear are the primary species found throughout the year. During severe winter weather, mule deer and elk utilize the southerly exposures for winter range. The proximity of human development within and adjacent to the buffer zone has reduced the value of much of this area for big game.

Carnivores typically found in the area are bobcat (*Felis rufus*), mountain lion (*F. concolor*), coyote (*Canis latrans*), and occasionally red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) in the forest/grassland interface. These carnivores are referred to as ‘habitat generalists,’ which means they are not associated with any particular forest structure characteristics. The primary habitat requirement for these animals is an adequate prey base and freedom from human harassment. Human development within and adjacent to the buffer zone has also reduced the value of this area for carnivores.

Forest Raptors in the area include sharp-shinned hawk (*Accipiter striatus*), red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*), great horned owl (*Bubo virginianus*), western screech owl (*Otus kennicotti*), northern pygmy-owl (*Glaucidium gnoma*), barred owl (*Strix varia*), and the northern saw-whet owl (*Aegolius acadicus*). During the winter, the area serves as a roosting site for rough-legged hawks (*Buteo lagopus*). Some sensitive species may utilize the area, including flammulated owl (*Otus flammeolus*), great gray owl (*Strix nebulosa*), and northern goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*).

Game birds found in the area are primarily ruffed grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*). These birds are primarily found in riparian areas, which are relatively abundant throughout the buffer zone. Wild turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*) are also found in this area.

Montana’s Partners in Flight chapter has identified 108 species of birds in Montana as priority for management (Casey 2000), and 42 of these species are known or are likely to occur within the Buffer Zone (B. Gullett email to G. Barce July 28, 2005).

Forest bats likely to occur in the buffer zone: Big brown bat (*Eptesicus fuscus*), little brown myotis (*Myotis lucifugus*), long-eared myotis (*Myotis evotis*), long-legged myotis (*Myotis volans*), Townsend's big-eared bat (*Corynorhinus townsendii*), and Yuma myotis (*Myotis yumanensis*). Tree-roosting bats: silver-haired bat (*Lasiurus noctivagans*) and hoary bat (*Lasiurus cinereus*).

Amphibians found in the buffer zone: long-toed salamander (*Ambystoma macrodactylum*), Rocky Mountain tailed frog (*Ascaphus montanus*), boreal toad (*Bufo boreas*), Pacific treefrog (*Pseudacris regilla*), and spotted frog (*Rana luteiventris*).

Reptiles of the buffer zone: painted turtle (*Chrysemys picta*), northern alligator lizard (*Elgaria coerulea*), rubber boa (*Charina bottae*), yellow-bellied racer (*Coluber constrictor*), gophersnake (*Pituophis catenifer*), common garter snake (*Thamnophis elegans*), western garter snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*).

Additional groups of species such as songbirds, waterfowl, and small mammals (e.g. bats, pine martins, snowshoe hares), are also found within the Buffer Zone.

Threatened and endangered species found in this area are generally limited to grizzly bears (*Ursus arctos*). These bears typically utilize the lower slopes of the Missions during the spring and fall. The lack of fire and human occupancy of the buffer zone and adjacent environs have caused some bear/human encounters in this area. The area is generally classified as Situation I grizzly bear habitat in the Flathead Indian Reservation Grizzly Bear Management Plan (CSKT and USDI BIA 1981).

Gray wolves (*Canis lupus*) have not been documented in this area. No known denning or rendezvous sites exist within the area. The nearest known wolf population is in the Ninemile Valley, approximately 24 air miles southwest of the Buffer Zone.

This area is generally below the elevational limits of lynx (*Felis lynx*). No reports of lynx inhabiting this area have been received.

Bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) may frequent the area, although no known nest sites exist within the Buffer Zone. The nearest nest site is Mission Creek, west of the Buffer Zone. Two other sites are located adjacent to the Jocko River, west of the southern boundary of the area, and near Kicking Horse Reservoir, west of the center of the Buffer Zone.

3.4 Watershed

The Mission Mountains Buffer Zone is a region along the foothills of the Mission Range that includes segments of numerous perennial streams, forested wetlands, and three onstream irrigation reservoirs. Due to the geography of the Buffer Zone, the area does not generally include entire watershed areas. Stream segments in the Buffer Zone often lie within the transition between downstream irrigation-impacted stream reaches and very steep, generally bedrock dominated stream reaches in the Mission Wilderness Area. As such, stream segments in the Buffer Zone may contain very diverse and interconnected stream and floodplain environments, and may represent the least impacted alluvial stream segments in their respective watersheds. In some instances, perennial streams persist in the wilderness and buffer zones, but are completely eliminated below the Pablo Feeder Canal west of the Buffer Zone..

All stream segments in the Buffer Zone except Middle Crow Creek are designated with an A-1 water quality classification. This classification recognizes the high water quality condition of these streams, and is intended to be supportive of all designated waterbody uses. The Middle Crow Creek watershed contains a stream reach that is located in the Buffer Zone. This watershed is the primary water supply for the Community of Ronan and is designated with the A-Closed waterbody classification. This classification is intended to be very protective of all uses, including use as a water supply.

The three irrigation reservoir facilities located in the Buffer Zone – McDonald, Mission, and St. Mary’s Reservoirs, are located directly on stream systems. These reservoirs are generally operated to fill during and immediately after spring runoff, and to be drawn down to minimum pool elevations by fall.

There are numerous patches of forested wetland located throughout the Buffer Zone. The hydrology of these wetland systems generally falls into one of two categories. Forested wetlands are located within active floodplain areas. These features occur as island patches between active channel braids, as areas that are seasonally flooded, and as areas that are supported by shallow groundwater moving through the floodplain.

Forested wetland areas occur with the Buffer Zone that are associated with groundwater discharge zones. Groundwater discharge occurs within the buffer zone because of the slope break between the steep Mission Mountains and the valley floor. Groundwater is derived from mountain recharge sources and forms large diffuse areas of seasonally saturated soils, as well as discharge zones that initiate as diffuse areas, but concentrate into small stream channel networks as the volume of groundwater discharge increases.

3.5 Fisheries

The streams within the Buffer Zone support a wide range of fisheries. All streams within this area are typified by high gradients, large substrates, a high degree of shading, substantial amounts of woody debris, and generally clean and cold water. All streams are also intersected by the Pablo Feeder Canal, which acts as an upstream barrier, truncating the range of the fish populations occurring in the Buffer Zone. As a result the functionality of these streams and the life history of these populations is greatly changed from the historic condition. These streams no longer serve as headwater spawning and rearing areas for larger populations occurring downstream. Instead these populations must function in greatly reduced stream distances and are therefore much less secure than they were historically. These headwater streams also have lower productivity than valley streams because of their smaller size, colder temperatures, and lower nutrient levels. As a result the density of fish in these streams is typically low and the upper limit of growth potential is about 300 mm in length.

Three reservoirs are present in the Buffer Zone and all support bull trout. The inflow streams to these reservoirs are critical to these populations, although they occur outside the Buffer Zone and within the Tribal Wilderness. Post Creek, below McDonald Reservoir, is the only stream within the Buffer Zone that supports bull trout. Two streams, North Crow and Ashley Creek, support pure strain westslope cutthroat trout. The remaining streams within the Buffer Zone have all been invaded by non-native brook and rainbow trout, where they either compete with native cutthroat trout or have completely eliminated them.

The condition of the watersheds within the Buffer Zone is generally good, due in part to the fact that the origins of all these streams is in the Tribal Wilderness where landscape change has not occurred. Road densities within the Buffer Zone range from very low to levels negatively affecting watershed condition. Residential development also influences the lower reaches of these watersheds.

3.6 Recreation

Activities – The Buffer Zone offers the visitor a variety of recreational opportunities. Major summer activities include fishing, camping, hiking, swimming, boating, sight-seeing, picnicking, berry picking and horseback riding. During the fall and winter, recreation activities include big game and bird hunting, fishing, snowmobiling and cross-country skiing. One Tribally permitted commercial guide/outfitter provides horseback trail rides within the Buffer Zone.

Visitor Use – As a whole, the Buffer Zone receives light, dispersed recreation use that may reach moderate levels on reservoir waters at lakeshore campgrounds or near trailheads. Only during

the summer season and on weekends or holidays is recreation use likely to reach high levels at those sites in the Buffer Zone. Factors contributing to the level of use are the aesthetic quality and high visibility of the area, its location relative to population centers, Highway 93, wilderness, and the quality of fishing.

Trails – The current trail system in the Mission Mountains is a combination of old historical Tribal trails and Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) trails constructed in the 1930's. Some trails only access the reservation-side of the Missions while others provide a thru route to the eastside of the Missions, Swan Valley and areas to the east. A 1941 CCC project map for the Flathead Indian Reservation lists approximately 32 trails in the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness & Wilderness Buffer Zone areas. Currently, there are 9 maintained backcountry trails in the Buffer Zone, of these, 4 traverse Buffer Zone land and the other 5 are located at the wilderness boundary. The maintained trails have been added to the Tribes GIS database. The remaining trails are documented from historical maps but have yet to be added to the GIS database through Global Positioning System (GPS) technology.

Campgrounds/Recreation Sites – There are five primitive campgrounds within the Buffer Zone. The primitive designation refers to the presence of amenities such as campsites, fire rings, picnic tables, shelters, parking areas, stock loading ramps, boat launch, information signs, restroom facilities, etc. Primitive sites do not have plumbed restroom facilities, electricity, or a potable water system (usually). The campgrounds provide amenities for larger groups to participate in recreational activities in the Buffer Zone and adjacent Tribal Wilderness. The Swartz Lake area and trail, accessible by a short ¼-mile hike, provides a natural outdoor setting and is a highly used site throughout the year for area educational and outdoor groups. . Impromptu recreation sites, established through years of recreational and cultural use, can be found scattered throughout the area along streams, ponds, lakes, reservoirs, trails, roads, canals, and homes.

Roads – The Buffer Zone is presently accessed by county, private and Tribal roads. County and private roads within or adjacent to the Buffer Zone are currently maintained by either the county or by private owners. Canal roads are maintained occasionally by FAID but they are not considered to be public access routes. The Tribal Roads program and the Wildland Recreation Program maintain some Tribal roads and bridges. Generally, reservation-wide, Tribal forest roads and bridges are maintained/repared when timber sales are scheduled for an area. These timber sales generate revenue used to offset expenses of doing the roadwork. The Tribes prohibition of commercial logging within the Buffer Zone has resulted in Tribal forest roads and bridges receiving minimal maintenance. Several sub-standard roads exist within the Buffer Zone and these roads are kept open by the occasional hunter, wood cutter or Christmas tree cutter. These un-drivable roads limit vehicular traffic and aid law enforcement officials patrolling for illegal activities by concentrating visitor use.

The Buffer Zone is included in the 2000 Flathead Indian Reservation Forest Management Plan (FMP). The general guidelines of this plan are a combination of high standard main haul roads and low standard spur roads, with an average road spacing of approximately 1,000 feet. Road closures are allowed for specific multiple-use management purposes. Road density is to be reduced in the Buffer Zone by following the interim guidelines for grizzly bear recovery. The Buffer Zone Plan's Tribal forest roads management objectives are to restrict road access and

otherwise mitigate impacts from existing roads that may adversely affect the Tribal Wilderness and other natural resources.

Recreation Management - Currently, there is not an overall, outdoor recreation management plan for the Flathead Indian Reservation or for the Buffer Zone. Buffer Zone campground and recreation area user capacities have not been formulated, nor management direction for future recreation needs requirements. Management decisions for the Buffer Zone prior to the implementation of the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness Management Plan (1982) were reactionary to user requests and immediate resource needs. The Buffer Zone, beyond the scope of the campgrounds, trailheads, reservoirs and major access roads, is generally unregulated, primarily due to the diverse landownership. This diversity presents a potential for recreationist, landowner and resource conflict throughout the Buffer Zone. There is no new campground or similar facility development in the Buffer Zone with the exception of the development of the KaKaShe trailhead and Buffer Zone trails not previously maintained by the Wildland Recreation Program. Remaining maintenance and development will continue at existing facilities.

Overall Management - Wilderness Buffer Zone Plan policies state that current lands within the Buffer Zone or recently acquired lands that are better suited as wilderness may be reclassified and incorporated into the wilderness land base. The Wildland Recreation Program will re-inventory lands within the Buffer Zone and adjacent to the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness on an annual basis. Lands that possess wilderness characteristics will be considered by the Buffer Zone Administrative Use Oversight (AUO) Committee to determine what type of classification would best suit the land. The AUO will present reclassification recommendations to the Tribal Council for approval. The FMP identifies one such tract of Tribal land suitable to be added to the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness, the 160-acre parcel known as the *Courville Creek Addition* (SW1/4, Sec. 3, T21N, R19W). The FMP also prohibits logging in the entire 160-acre section surrounding the *Swartz Lake Roadless Area*.

3.7 Cultural Resources

The location and extent of cultural resources played a critical role in the initial creation of the Tribal Wilderness in 1982. The Mission Mountains provided a place to gather medicinal and food plants, and food in the form of wildlife and fish. Tribal Elders spoke at length of the Missions as a place to seek spiritual guidance and solitude as well. The Tribal Wilderness and the Buffer Zone are still utilized today for these same cultural purposes. Therefore, the cultural resource values in the Mission Mountains have both historical and contemporary importance to the CSKT and its members.

Cultural resources are of vital importance to the Tribes and Tribal Members, providing a link to the past and also a source of spiritual renewal in the present and into the future. Accordingly, the CSKT implemented a Cultural Resource Preservation Ordinance (Tribal Ordinance 95, CSKT 1995) and created a Cultural Resource Preservation Office (“Preservation Office”) to administer and oversee the protection of these important resources.

The Preservation Office has primary authority and responsibility for authorization of all activities that could potentially affect cultural resources on the Flathead Reservation. Any activity that involves disturbance of the ground is subject to permitting regulations under Tribal Ordinance

94. These activities have always included logging and timber removal as being subject to regulation by the Preservation Office.

The Preservation Office is responsible for safeguarding cultural resources, which implies that the locations of these are typically not specifically disclosed to the public. Instead, the information provided is general in nature to protect the sensitivity of these sites and the resources therein.

The Buffer Zone has not been formally inventoried for identification and documentation with eligibility determination for cultural resource sites, as required under the National Historic Preservation Act or Tribal Ordinance 95. This process would need to be conducted prior to any activity. The Preservation Office would need to identify Salish and Kootenai place names associated with the area, along with documentation of oral history and analysis of historic photographs.

The area is significant to the historical and current uses of the Pend' Oreille, Salish and Kootenai people. The historic trail system represents the land use and subsistence practices of our ancestors. These trails hold the footprints of our people as they traveled to familiar hunting camps in the Swan Valley or what is now the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Historic trails represent the early reservation era, when our Indian men worked for wages under the Civilian Conservation Corps. They tell us about the trap lines of these early years as the trails thread together trapping cabins across the Mission Mountain front. These trails need to be inventoried with Global Positioning Systems and recorded onto Geographic Information Systems maps.

The Flathead Indian Irrigation System marks another significant change for the area. Streams were diverted into irrigation ditches and canals, which altered the natural flows to the valley bottom, in turn causing a change in tribal use and access to this water.

The Buffer Zone sustains locations of generational cultural use by families still practicing their traditional beliefs. Cultural traditions are an ongoing custom for the people. Each tribe carries a custom that has been handed down to them for generations. Some of these are the ceremonial beliefs and call for usage of the various areas of these mountains. Traditional stewardship, the conservation and wise use of our cultural and natural resources, is the guiding principle for managing our Tribal trust assets.

Chapter 4. Effects of Implementation of Alternatives

This section discusses the effects of implementation of each of the two alternatives considered. Again, because this proposal does not include a specific action proposal other than a policy change, this discussion is general in nature. This section is organized according to the issues identified in Chapter 3 and considers the possible effects of taking no action versus the preferred alternative.

4.1 Effects on Fire and Fuels

4.1.1 Alternative 1: No Action

Fire Regimes B and C

Fuel loadings within these two fire regimes produce difficult smoke dispersal conditions that will impact air quality within and adjacent to the Buffer Zone MA and east of the communities of Ronan and St. Ignatius. Smoke dispersal and transport, with community air quality impacts, will be a primary concern for wildland fire suppression planning in the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness and Buffer Zone Fire Regimes B & C

These two fire regime types (stand replacement and mixed severity) are found primarily in the northern and southern portions of the Buffer Zone Management Area. Without fuels treatments, timber stands within these fire regime types will continue to accumulate biomass with a further closure of tree-canopy conditions. Ladder fuels will continue to increase at lower fuel layers that will also add to overall crown fire risk conditions over time. Basic ecological conditions will trend toward a continued development of denser, horizontally layered tree conditions with an overall decline in over-all forest health.

Wildland fires that will occur in these stands will still be easily detected due to the geographical location of the Buffer Zone. Fires will continue to have a high resistance to control because of limited access and expected delays in the response times of firefighting resources.

Limited fuels management and hazard fuel reduction activities would still occur, focusing on allotted tracts with the greatest wildland fire risk to property and structures within the MA. Most fuels treatments would involve removal of mature trees utilizing uneven-age methods, thinning of understory ladder fuels, mechanical piling, and burning of piles. Prescribed underburn treatments would be very limited due to a lack of roads and natural fuel barriers for project control lines.

Impacts/Concerns

Wildland fire risk, with potential natural resource loss, will increase to high and very high levels over the long-term due to changing fuels conditions, average tree canopy closure, and moderately steep slopes. No action in these fire regime types will promote large fire events with a high resistance to control.

Fire suppression road access, for handcrews and large equipment, will be very limited within the Management Area. Existing road and bridge access should be improved and maintained to promote quicker response times for fire suppression resources.

Local topography produces difficult smoke dispersal conditions that will impact air quality within and adjacent to the Buffer Zone MA and east of the communities of Ronan and St. Ignatius. Smoke dispersal and transport, with community air quality impacts, will be a primary concern for wildland fire suppression planning in the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness and Buffer Zone Management Areas. Biomass utilization options would be limited due to poor road access.

Fire Regime A

This fire regime type (non-lethal) is found primarily in the central and lower elevation, west portions of the Buffer Zone Management Area. Without fuels treatments, timber stands within these fire regime types will continue to accumulate biomass with a further closure of tree-canopy conditions. Ladder fuels, from Douglas-fir and Mountain Juniper encroachment, will also continue to increase at lower fuel layers that will also add to overall crown fire risk conditions over time. Basic ecological conditions will trend toward a continued development of denser, horizontally layered tree conditions, and encroachment of Douglas-fir and Mountain Juniper onto historical Ponderosa Pine areas with an overall decline in forest health.

Wildland fires that will occur in these stands will still be easily detected due to the geographical location of the Buffer Zone. Fires will continue to have a high resistance to control because of limited access and expected delays in the response times of firefighting resources.

Limited fuels management and hazard fuel reduction activities would still occur, focusing on allotted and tribal trust tracts closest to home-site developments with the greatest wildland fire risk to property and structures within the Management Area. Most fuels treatments would involve limited removal of mature Douglas-fir utilizing uneven-age methods, thinning of understory ladder fuels, mechanical piling, and burning of piles. Prescribed underburn treatments will be possible within this fire regime type, but would be limited due to a lack of roads and natural fuel barriers for project control lines.

Impacts/Concerns

Wildland fire risk, with potential natural resource loss, will increase to high levels over the long-term due to existing and changing fuels conditions, average tree canopy closure, encroachment, and moderately steep slopes. No action in these fire regime types will promote large fire events with a high resistance to control.

Fire suppression road access, for handcrews and large equipment, will be very limited. Existing road and bridge access should be improved and maintained to promote quicker response times for fire suppression resources.

Local topography within this fire regime would limit biomass utilization options due to poor road access.

4.1.2 Alternative 2: Change the Classification to Restricted

Fire Regime C

This fire regime type would benefit from activities that create larger scale disturbances over the landscape. However prescribed underburning or prescribed natural fires are not feasible in this type due to the expected resistance to control, expected fire behavior, and the relationship of the fire regime, checker-board private land ownerships, and the proximity to the up-slope Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness. Harvest activities that provide a widespread fuel mosaic of plant succession, tree ages, and reduced forest fuel loadings would provide the best opportunities for protection from large, catastrophic wildfire events.

Fire protection and hazard reduction opportunities would improve through timber harvest activities. Even-age treatments, with aggressive slash disposal, would alter homogenous ground fuels and closed tree canopy conditions. Breaking up the tree crown continuity would reduce crown fire potential. Fire intensities and severity could be reduced in areas of most recent disturbance and provide fuel breaks or control zones to assist in fire suppression activities.

Impacts/Concerns

Wildfire risk and potential natural resource loss is presently moderate/high due to existing natural fuels, average tree canopy closure and moderately steep slopes. Resistance to control is high due to fuel types and limited road access. No action in this type will promote large fire events in the future.

Road management within this type should consider the strategic values of the existing and proposed logging roads. Fire suppression access, for handcrews and large equipment, should be promoted in high hazard areas. In areas with existing roads, adequate logging road turn-outs and turn-arounds will be required to support wildfire suppression, as well as prescribed fire activities. Permanent road closures would increase critical suppression response times.

Local topography produces difficult smoke dispersal conditions that could impact air quality for within and adjacent to the Buffer Zone and east of the community of Ronan, MT. All prescribed burn activities must be conducted with strict adherence to Tribal and Idaho/Montana Airshed Group rules, regulations and guidelines. Broadcast burns should be conducted only during the spring season. Test fires will be required for all projects. If the smoke dispersal is not acceptable, then the project will be shut down for the day. Dozer piles should be ignited during late fall under snowy and windy weather conditions. Options for biomass utilization (chipping of woody material) should be aggressively pursued.

Most timber harvest units should receive prescribed broadcast burn treatments for soil protection, energy recycling, nutrient recycling and plant succession site requirements. Dozer and/or excavator slash treatments must adequately reduce hazardous fine-fuel loadings and provide proper soil scarification for plant succession.

Fire Regime B

Stands within this fire regime type, which have received past selective harvest treatments, would benefit from understory burning and various harvest treatments with aggressive slash disposal/scarification. Selective harvesting would provide low crown fire potential levels. Even-age harvest treatments would alter homogenous fuel conditions, providing a fuels mosaic for protection from the spread and intensity of large fire events which would be consistent with the historical effects of wildfire in this landscape.

Impacts/Concerns

Fuels management, road access, and wildfire suppression impacts and concerns are similar to the Stand-Replacement Fire Regime mentioned above.

Larger fires could easily occur under 90th percentile, droughty fire weather conditions and/or wind events.

Broadcast burns should be conducted only during the spring burn season. Dozer piles should be ignited during late fall under snowy and windy weather conditions. Underburn activities should be scheduled for late April and May under warm, unstable weather conditions. Daily projects should start in early afternoon and be completed by early evening hours to utilize optimum smoke dispersal conditions. Test fires will be required for all projects. If the smoke dispersal is not acceptable, then the project will be shut down for the day. Burn prescription fuel moistures should provide for clean burning with rapid extinguishment of fuels and minimal residual fire.

Fire Regime A

Fire protection and hazard reduction opportunities exist through proposed timber sale activities and hazard fuel reduction projects that will restore historical grassland, mature pine, and park-like structures. Uneven-age treatments, with aggressive slash disposal, will reduce overall fire intensities and local crown fire potential. Hazard reduction and silvicultural understory burning should be considered in most Non-lethal stands within the management area. Grassland maintenance and park-like restoration underburns should be conducted wherever possible to reduce wildfire hazards and to restore historical non-lethal structures. Two or three stage underburn treatments may be required in stands that produce logging slash and/or have deep needle litter components.

Impacts/Concerns

Fuels management, road access, and wildfire suppression impacts and concerns are similar to the Partial Stand-Replacement Fire Regime mentioned above. Hazard ratings and wildfire risk would increase with permanent road closures and the creation of large, untreated areas of logging slash. Aggressive slash disposal and good road access are critical to the maintenance of low hazard conditions in these stands. A no action alternative would produce closed canopy timber stands that would increase crown fire potential.

Timing and season of prescribed fire activities will determine the smoke impacts on the local area. Broadcast burns must be conducted only during the spring burn seasons. Dozer piles should be ignited during late fall under snowy and windy weather conditions.

Underburn activities should be scheduled for late April and May under warm, unstable weather conditions. Projects should start in early afternoon and be completed by late afternoon to utilize optimum smoke dispersal conditions. Test fires will be required for all projects. If the smoke dispersal is not acceptable, then the project will be shut down for the day. Burn prescription fuel moistures should provide for clean burning with rapid extinguishment of fuels and minimal residual fire.

4.2 Effects on Visuals

4.2.1 Alternative 1: No Action

Taking no action would mean visual timber resources would remain unchanged at present. Encroachment of timber onto meadows would continue. Continuous carpets of dense forest canopies would continue to dominate the lower slopes of the Missions (BUFFER ZONE), broken predominantly by the rectangular mosaic of private home sites and small ranches.

Impacts and concerns

The public would see no change in the BUFFER ZONE as a consequence of a No Action decision. Visual diversity would remain low, but unnoticed by the average viewer. The overall scenic integrity level would remain Moderately Altered (MA).

4.2.2 Alternative 2: Change the Classification to Restricted

The change of classification from unavailable to restricted would have no effect on the visual resources from the representative viewpoints. The change in classification would imply that future action proposals would ask for harvest or thinning actions that would meet fire and other natural resource objectives.

Impacts and concerns

The public would see no change in the BUFFER ZONE as a consequence of a **Change the Classification to Restricted** decision. Future actions would have to meet or exceed those mitigations included in the Tribal Forest Management Plan. Each proposed action would be evaluated for specific potential impacts to the visual resource in its own NEPA decision document. However, anticipated forest thinning and partial overstory harvest proposals would not be expected to have impacts to the visual resource from representative viewpoints.

No cumulative impact would be expected to the visual resource from selection of Alternative B, or from future specific action proposals.

4.3 Effects on Wildlife

4.3.1 Alternative 1: No Action

There would be both positive and negative effects from this alternative. A large stand-replacing fire might displace or be fatal to all species unable to escape. A stand-replacing fire would also modify or remove desirable habitat.

Big game found in the buffer zone will find differing conditions as succession continues. This will create more cover, with less forage available for big game animals. The lack of forage will make the area less attractive to big game.

Eventually, this area will burn, which will create an abundance of forage. Depending on the intensity and extent of the fire, cover may be lacking for 10 or more years following the fire.

Carnivores will also experience the effect of natural succession. The larger carnivores with big game as their primary prey will experience fewer prey animals due to the lack of forage. The smaller carnivores whose primary prey are small mammals will most likely find an abundance of prey in the thicker timber stands.

A major wildfire in this area would favor the larger carnivores, and most likely displace the smaller predators.

Forest raptors will continue to experience forest densification due to succession. Those species that prefer a closed canopy forest will continue to utilize the area.

Following the fire, forest raptors that prefer the more open terrain will benefit, while the closed canopy species will move to other areas to which they are adapted.

Game birds will continue to utilize their preferred habitat, which will be changing over time due to succession.

A wildfire would displace these birds for a period of time, most likely just a few years, until the area has revegetated.

Threatened and Endangered Species

Grizzly bears are the only threatened and endangered species found in the area, and have been identified as a species of concern in the scoping for this project. The grizzly bear will most likely continue to utilize the area in the spring and fall, as they have for decades. However, they too will experience the changes brought about by natural succession. Less forage available for these animals and an increasing human population will make the area less attractive for the grizzly. In the fall, grizzlies range into the valley to raid fruit trees and agricultural crops. No natural foods in this area would be more attractive to these bears, so this trend would most likely continue.

A major wildfire in this area would create an attractive area for foraging on the forbs, grasses, and shrubs that revegetate a burn. The recent burns would most likely be used more in the spring than the fall, since the ripening fruit of the orchards and the agricultural crops are a major attractant.

4.3.2 Alternative 2: Change the Classification to Restricted

Big game animals would find more available forage if the status of this area was changed and timber removal was done. This difference would be more pronounced if the timber removal were followed with a broadcast burning program. Again, any of these future actions would be analyzed in detail in a separate environmental analysis.

This decision will alter wildlife habitat and would also have both positive and negative impacts on wildlife species. Wildlife goals and objectives, and the effects of timber management can be found in the *2000 Flathead Indian Reservation Forest Management Plan*, pp.102-115.

4.4 Effects on Watershed

4.4.1 Alternative 1: No Action

The no action alternative would generally maintain the existing conditions within watershed areas, stream corridors, and wetlands. With the existing condition, chronic sediment inputs to streams from unmaintained roads and stream crossings will continue. Potential wildfire events that may occur within the Buffer Zone are not anticipated to lead to long-term negative impacts to water resources because of the limited area of the Buffer Zone within each watershed, the generally lower slope lengths in the Buffer Zone, and the generally very stable geologic and soil substrates in the Buffer Zone.

Watershed-scale wildfire events would potentially have a greater influence on water resources, particularly the rate and magnitude of water yield. However, most of the runoff producing precipitation within the Mission Mountains occurs in high elevation zones where forests are either absent, or interspersed within alpine land types.

4.4.2 Alternative 2: Change the Classification to Restricted

Strictly interpreted, the change in designation proposed under this alternative would have no influence on the conditions of water resources because the alternative is administrative in nature. Potential influences to water resources would occur with specific action proposals that would be analyzed in detail in a future environmental analysis if the policy were changed.

The primary potential impact anticipated with specific proposals includes increases in road density and the number of stream crossings. Increasing road density and stream crossings have the potential to increase fine sediment import to water resources, and disrupt the flow of water, sediment, and particulate nutrients above and below road infrastructure.

4.5 Effects on Fisheries

4.5.1 Alternative 1: No Action

There are both positive and negative effects possible from the “no action” alternative.

One negative effect is the elevated potential relative to the action alternative for catastrophic fire to occur. The intensity and area of a possible catastrophic fire may be greater than what occurred historically because in some areas the density of trees and loading of fuels exceeds what occurred historically. Another negative effect is a reduction in opportunity to conduct restoration activities. Timber sales generate revenue and require coordination between resource disciplines that facilitate mitigation and restoration activities. Such restoration activities include removal of problem roads and stream crossings, and revegetating disturbed areas. Positive effects of this alternative are primarily intangible, and in the form of avoided impacts. For example, even the most well designed timber sales have the potential to cause impacts, either as an unavoidable result of land disturbance, or the possible failure of the contractor to conduct the sale as intended. Examples of avoided impacts are changes in rates of sedimentation or runoff caused by road construction, skid trails, and scarification.

4.5.2 Alternative 2: Change the Classification to Restricted

There are both positive and negative effects possible from the “action” alternative.

The negative effects include the range of possible unintended impacts that come from conducting a timber sale that in practice may not meet the standards intended in the planning stages. Additional negative effects may come in the form of elevated sediment delivery or altered hydrographs resulting from new roads and skid trails, even if they are recontoured after the sale. Positive effects are possible if timber sales are conducted in a manner to bring the forest into a structural condition more closely resembling the historic condition by altering the presently overstocked stands. Additional positive effects are possible if legacy impacts of existing roads are addressed by removing and recontouring those road prisms. All of these issues would be considered in detail in a separate environmental analysis if the policy were changed.

4.6 Effects on Recreation

4.6.1 Alternative 1: No Action

Recreational opportunities will remain constant without considerable change to the natural environment. Expectations of engaging in recreational activities in a natural setting will continue to attract visitors to the Buffer Zone area. Big game habitat will continue to be impacted by closed forest canopies with decreasing opportunities for hunters. Hazardous fuels reductions will continue to be allowed at recreation sites to reduce fire danger. Hazardous trees, shrubs and downfall will be removed along trail corridors. Tribal road accessibility will continue to allow visitors to recreation sites provided periodical maintenance occurs. Limited open roads provide the Tribes opportunities to concentrate visitor movement through the Buffer Zone, reduce illegal

activities such as off-road vehicle use and motorized/mechanical uses in the Tribal Wilderness area, poaching, reduce noxious weeds expansion associated with vehicle, stock and pedestrian traffic, and assist in law enforcement and patrolling. Planning and implementation of the protected status of the Buffer Zone roadless and wilderness addition areas as stated in the FMP objectives will continue.

Wildfire can affect the Buffer Zone in a variety of ways. The wildfire itself can impact the recreation resources by:

- damage or destruction of recreation site facilities
- short-term and long-term impacts to visitor enjoyment and expectations
- creation of change to the visual landscape of the Mission Mountains
- degradation of water quality and fisheries
- increased vegetation diversity
- increased big game habitat and forage that would improve hunting opportunities
- immediate loss of some desired plants
- increased production for other desired plants
- removal of vegetation on overgrown/closed roads
- creation of an environment for the expansion of noxious weeds through the Buffer Zone and to the Tribal Wilderness.

Additional impacts can occur from fire suppression activities including damages to trails, clearings for helispots, opening roads, construction of new roads, and tree removal along firelines. Post wildfire impacts include salvage logging, construction of roads and skid trails, and damage to trails. Open hillsides, ridges and drainages can become easily accessible by off-road vehicles.

4.6.2 Alternative 2: Change the Classification to Restricted

The change of policy to allow restricted commercial timber harvest activities through hazardous fuels reduction in the Buffer Zone, along with prescribed fire, can reduce the threat of catastrophic fire in the Buffer Zone and affect the recreation resources in a variety of ways. The following is a discussion of some possible future changes, with the understanding that the area would be analyzed in detail in a future document if the policy were changed and a specific action were proposed.

Recreational opportunities will remain constant despite the immediate change to the natural environment. Visitor enjoyment and expectations will be impacted in the short-term and long-term from harvest activities. Expectations of engaging in recreational activities in a natural setting will likely reduce visitor use in the Buffer Zone area during and immediately following harvest activities. The Mission Mountains' appeal to many of the visitors can be the visual aesthetics from a distance and while in the midst. Restoring and maintaining the Buffer Zone area as an old growth ponderosa pine "park-like" setting will likely increase visitor expectations and enjoyment over time. On steep slopes like those found in the Mission Mountains, opening up stand canopies, exposing mountainsides, and opening and constructing roads can create an undesired visual landscape. High priority should be placed on scenic integrity. Overall

vegetation diversity can be improved from its current condition. Increased big game habitat and forage can improve hunting opportunities. There may be some immediate loss of desired plants while production areas for other desired plants could be improved.

Hazardous fuels reductions and vegetation management will continue at recreation sites to reduce fire danger and help prevent damage or destruction of recreation site facilities from catastrophic wildfire. Hazardous trees, shrubs and downfall will be removed along trail corridors.

Timber harvest activities can impact roads and trails of the Buffer Zone. The potential to damage historical, cultural and recreational trails in the area exists unless efforts are made to map and buffer trails from harvest activities. Improvements to access roads for hauling purposes may increase vehicular use by visitors depending on road management policies. Main access roads will likely receive upgrades to BMP standards. Currently, limited open roads provide the Tribes opportunities to concentrate visitor movement through the Buffer Zone, reduce illegal activities such as off-road vehicle use and motorized/mechanical uses in the Tribal Wilderness area, reduce poaching, reduce noxious weeds expansion associated with vehicle, stock and pedestrian traffic, and assist in law enforcement and patrolling. Timber harvest will result in open hillsides, ridges and drainages that will become easily accessible by off-road vehicles.

Despite all efforts wildfire will not and cannot be prevented in the Buffer Zone. Wildfire can result in the removal of vegetation on these overgrown/closed roads thus making them accessible to vehicular traffic. Effects from fire suppression activities will continue to produce potential for damages to trails, clearings for helispots, opening roads, construction of new roads, and tree removal along firelines. Post wildfire impacts include salvage logging, construction of roads and skid trails, potential damage to trails, and open hillsides, ridges and drainages that will become easily accessible by off-road vehicles.

Planning and implementation of the protected status of the Buffer Zone roadless and wilderness addition areas as stated in the FMP objectives will continue.

4.7 Effects on Cultural Resources

4.7.1 Alternative 1: No Action

The effect of leaving the policy as “Unavailable” for commercial timber removal would have no effect on cultural resources present in the Buffer Zone. A cultural resource survey would still need to be conducted, but would not be an immediate concern. It is possible in the future, that as a result of leaving the policy as is, a fire could result that would have some effect on cultural resources. For example, a wildfire in the Clear Creek area of the Reservation in 2000 was severe enough to burn entire stands of trees, litter and duff and exposed some cultural resources that were not previously visible to the casual eye. This exposure resulted in the increased possibility of vandalism, theft or destruction of these resources.

4.7.2 Alternative 2: Change the Classification to Restricted

The effect of changing the policy to “Restricted” would not affect cultural resources in the Buffer Zone. If an action were to occur in the future that involved ground disturbance, the same protective mechanisms that are employed in other areas would be implemented. Those mechanisms involve the application for and approval of a permit from the Preservation Office, and stipulations that if cultural artifacts were to be discovered during a project, the project would immediately cease until representatives of the Preservation Office could be present to assess the situation and take appropriate action. In some cases, a permit would not be issued due to the nature or extent of cultural resources present. In other cases, protective buffers would be established around sites containing cultural resources but the specific locations would not be divulged, again to protect the integrity of the sites. Again, these issues would be analyzed in specific detail in a separate document if an action arose in the future as a result of the policy change.

The specific effects to cultural resources could not be determined, however, until a survey was conducted and all sites were documented and evaluated for eligibility. This would be a critical immediate requirement under this alternative.

Chapter 5. Agencies and Persons Consulted

Kootenai Elders Committee

Salish Elders Committee

Kootenai Culture Committee

Salish/Pend Oreille Culture Committee

Tribal Council of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes

Natural Resources Department of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes

Forestry Department of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes

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APPENDIX

PUBLIC COMMENTS, QUESTIONS AND INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM RESPONSE

Questions

1. Where does the funding for Wildland Urban Interface/Hazard Fuel Reduction (WUI/HFR) project come from?

Present WUI/HFR funding is received on an annual project by project request basis from the Bureau of Indian Affairs under the U.S. Congress National Fire Plan. The CS&KT-Division of Fire receives project funding to conduct fuels management planning, project implementation, and monitoring activities associated with hazard fuel reduction projects with primary objectives of restoring fire resistant forest conditions to many areas within the Flathead Indian Reservation. The Division of Fire competes for annual funding from BIA appropriations. The National Fire Plan has funded many local WUI/HFR fuel projects since 2001. This funding source should be relatively solid for the next several years.

2. What is the Mission Mountain Buffer Zone (MMBZ)?

The Buffer Zone is a transitional area that serves to protect the Tribal Wilderness from human influence. As discussed in the document, it is primarily located in the foothills of the Mission Mountains between the main “feeder canal” and the Wilderness Boundary.

3. What is the Lands Department homesite policy in regards to MMBZ, if any?

In recent years the Lands Department has discouraged the location of homesites within the Buffer Zone.

4. What is the fire management policy for fighting forest fire within the MMBZ?

The present fire management policy is to aggressively suppress all wildland fires (full suppression appropriate management response) within the Mission Mountain Buffer Zone management area. This response is the same response that is required for all Flathead Indian Reservation wildlands, especially wildland/urban interface areas.

5. What is the Tribes’ liability concerning fire suppression within the MMBZ?

Fire suppression liability is unclear at this point. The existing condition is that the forestry and fire organizations are aware of increasing fire hazards, risks associated with potential for large fire occurrence, and continuing forest health issues in the MMBZ. These issues are presently being discussed with the tribal public, elders groups, other CS&KT resource departments, and the Tribal Council. We are presently addressing these issues with fire management planning and actions that require early fire detection and an aggressive fire suppression response to wildland fires that may occur in the MMBZ and the Mission Mountain Tribal Wilderness. Fire suppression in these areas is problematic with declining forest health, continued fuel hazard buildups, and densification of forest timber stands that presently support conditions for large, severe wildland fires in the future. Large wildland fires in this area will have a high resistance to control due to very limited access for fire suppression equipment, extended walk delays for

fire resources, dense timber stands, and relatively steep slopes along the common boundary with the MMTW.

Tough decisions need to be made in regards to allowing the present high risk fire conditions to continue, or to consider land management actions that could possibly mitigate future wildland fire impacts. Presently, land managers cannot consider a full range of alternatives in making these decisions.

6. WUI/HFR is already allowable under current policy. Why is this policy change needed?

Present WUI/HFR options are limited to tree thinning and slash disposal actions associated with sapling and pole sized trees. These limited treatments are not effective because they only treat one portion of the fuel hazard condition, do not remove appropriate levels of biomass, and do not allow full prescribed fire use options.

Fully effective treatments require restoration of sustainable ecological conditions that would reduce encroachment by Douglas-fir, would reduce accumulating biomass from diseased trees, would provide separation of tree crowns in the forest canopy to reduce crown-fire potential, and would provide conditions for future maintenance under-burn activities. Fully effective treatments would best meet Tribal forest restoration goals and objectives under the Flathead Indian Reservation Forest Management Plan.

To best protect the MMBZ from wildland fire damages; tribal land managers need to consider actions that will allow use of prescribed fire to reduce fuel accumulations, change species compositions, and manage vegetative structure and density for healthier forest conditions.

7. Has wildlife populations changed because of the exclusion of fire within the MMBZ?

Wildlife species that prefer areas with at least some openings and edges have declined in number in the Buffer Zone. These are primarily wildlife like deer and elk. Other species that prefer densely forested areas such as some small mammals and certain bird species may have increased in number in the Buffer Zone.

8. Why is the MMBZ already on the ten-year harvest plan?

The personnel needed to administer an activity such as this are scheduled far in advance of any actual activity, primarily for planning and logistical purposes. A preliminary (and theoretical) attempt was made by Tribal Forestry to outline a schedule of harvest activities over the longer term that anticipated the need to administer activities within the Buffer Zone. Inclusion of the Buffer Zone in the 10-year harvest plan in no way commits the Tribes to any particular plan of action, nor would it change the way trees were removed from the area if the policy was changed. Further, it would have no effect on the primary purpose and need for tree removal, that being fuel reduction and protection of human life, property, and structures, and the Tribes' desire to restore the Buffer Zone to a previous ecological condition.

9. Whose interest is being served by this policy change?

The Tribes feel that their responsibility as a government is to best serve the needs of all who live on the Flathead Reservation.

10. Why are we looking changing policy in the MMBZ now?

The request was originated by local land owners who brought the issue to the Tribal Council. Hazardous fuels and potential for large catastrophic fires are strong areas of concern due to demonstrated resource losses from recent fire seasons and the Tribal Council adoption of a forest and fire ecology based Forest Management Plan. New perspectives on the benefits of forest restoration and the seriousness of existing fuel accumulations and forest health issues should be considered in a public discussion of possible policy changes to address the consequences of previous decisions.

11. What fire suppression tactics were used on the 2003 Mollman fire?

The 2003 Mollman Fire occurred in a very difficult location in the Mission Mountain Tribal Wilderness. This remote lightning caused fire spread over about 350 acres in very steep terrain. Concerns for firefighter safety resulted in an appropriate management response that confined/contained the fire spread using a combination of direct and indirect fireline construction (with helicopter water bucket support) on only a portion of the fire perimeter. Natural (rock) barriers and monitoring of fire behavior directed our limited fire suppression tactics on a daily basis. The fire burned for several weeks and was eventually extinguished by cooler temperatures and rainfall in late September.

12. Is the concern for Wildland/Urban interface a concern only in the MMBZ or elsewhere?

Wildland fire hazards and risks are a concern in all western states, the Northern Rockies Area, the State of Montana, and on the Flathead Indian Reservation. About 100,000 (both tribal trust and private ownership) acres has been identified as wildland/urban interface areas within the exterior boundary of the Flathead Indian Reservation. About 30,000 tribal trust acres (including the MMBZ) have a moderate to high hazard rating. Many of these areas are of concern to tribal land managers. Tribal hazard reduction activities are presently being conducted in the in the Schley, Arlee, Hot Springs, Elmo, Jette, Hellroaring, and Kicking Horse WUI areas.

13. What percentage of homes in the MMBZ are tribally owned?

Approximately 175 structures are located in the Buffer Zone, but this proposal does not consider how many are houses or how many of those houses are owned by Tribal Members. That information would be available from the Tribal Lands Department. Regardless of ownership, the Tribes have an interest in protecting resources present in and adjacent to the Tribal Wilderness Area and the Buffer Zone, and those resources include both human and natural resources.

14. Can WUI/HFR project objectives be met now with the current forest stand conditions?

Effective WUI/HFR objectives cannot be presently met in regards to current forest stand conditions in the MMBZ. Timber stands have become so dense, and fuels have accumulated to such high levels, that prescribed fire use and biomass removal options are presently very limited. Use of prescribed fire only would result in severe fires that would be risky to control. Allowing naturally occurring wildland fires to burn for resource benefit is not a safe option due to the proximity of homes and communities and the associated health impacts from smoke.

Effective prescribed fire treatments require tree thinning and mechanical piling to create appropriate conditions for future maintenance underburn. Extraction of commercial sized timber is warranted to reduce accumulating biomass from diseased trees, to separate dense tree canopies, and to favor ponderosa pine restoration benefits.

15. Is “Commercial Harvest” of trees allowable now if harvest objectives are not commercial?

The feeling of the Interdisciplinary Team is that if trees are removed from the area and taken to a mill and money is paid to the Tribes for those trees, that activity is considered commercial logging and is prohibited under current policy, regardless of the reason the trees were removed.

16. Can the MMBZ Management Plan be the guidance document for the “Restricted” management activities within the MMBZ?

The management plan for the Buffer Zone can and will be used the primary guidance document for any future activity in the Buffer Zone, regardless of whether this policy is changed or not.

17. How many board feet will be harvested if this policy change goes through?

This proposal does not consider concepts like board feet, nor is it likely that future action proposals would use board feet as any type of determining factor. This proposal and any future proposals would consider concepts of fuel loading, ladder fuels, and tree crown spacing rather than volume of timber removed.

18. Does the opinion of the Tribal membership matter? Will this be put to a referendum vote so that all Tribal members can decide whether to allow the policy change?

The primary purpose of a document prepared under the National Environmental Policy Act is to gather public input as an essential part of the process. It is for this reason that three public meetings were held prior to the finalization of this draft, and that additional opportunity will be made available to the Tribal (and non-Tribal) public to comment on the completed draft. As to the referendum vote, that would be a decision of the Tribal Council and is beyond the scope of this proposal.

Comments

- A. The MMBZ is a special area with the responsibility of protecting the Mission Mountains Wilderness.
- B. The question to allow or not allow timber harvest in the MMBZ should be answered by the people.
- C. MMBZ needs to be treated in a way to enhance the Wilderness. No clearcuts, no new roads.
- D. This policy change will open the door to the same old undesirable logging.
- E. People should not be living in the MMBZ. Fire suppression has affected the forest. Fires should be allowed to burn.