

TO: Task Force Members August 9, 2002

FROM: Chris Tootell, ID Team Coordinator
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RE: MONTANA DNRC FIRE SALVAGE, NEPA CASE STUDIES

In response to Federal Register /Vol. 67, No. 131 (Tuesday, July 9, 2002), I'm submitting the follow documents as case studies of NEPA-like processes as accomplished by the Montana DNRC Division of State Lands.

Enclosed are three documents based on salvage from two fires: The Valley Fire Complex in Ravalli County Montana, late summer of 2000 and the Moose Fire in Flathead County, summer of 2001. Both huge fires burned through mixed land ownerships, some that is consolidated state trust ownerships. The Sula State Forest had 12,000 acres burned in Ravalli County and Coal Creek State Forest lost nearly 7,000 acres in Flathead County.

Environmental Assessment of these projects follows Montana MEPA law and process. This law passed the Montana Legislature a few years after NEPA in 1969. It closely resembles the NEPA. Two other state laws compel state land managers to proceed judiciously following events such as these fires. The State School Trust Enabling Act (1889) requires state trust lands to be managed to maximize perpetual financial benefit to state educational institutions (Section 77-1-202 MCA). The other law mandates the salvage of dead or dying timber and that to the extent practical salvage is to occur before wood product value is lost due to decay (77-5-207 MCA).

What follows briefly describes the setting, project and MEPA processes for these salvage operations and concludes with some things we might learn.

Moose Fire Salvage and Reforestation Project

The fire burned 70,000 acres starting August 14th till approximately September 18th, 2001. Montana DNRC began the MEPA project by issuing a public comment notice of the salvage operation on September 10, 2001. The notice opened a 20-day comment period ending October 1, 2001. On October 4, 2001 a public tour was conducted, gathering further comment. The project was split between the accessible areas requiring no road construction and previously inaccessible areas. The roaded area (phase I) was accessed with an EA and concluded with a FONSI. The draft EA was published for comment November 3rd. The Decision Notice was issued November 16th. Final project approval is the prerogative of the Land Board (Governor and elected cabinet officials). Approval for phase I was granted November 19th. The 6.5 mmbf harvest was completed this spring.

Phase II preferred alternative chose helicopter logging in unroaded areas. This will harvest approximately 8.9 mmbf on 960 acres. The ROD was signed June 3, 2002 and approved by the Land Board at their June meeting. The sale is currently advertised.

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A few observations. 1) When DNRC made the decision to go forward with this project they pulled staff from well beyond the responsible management unit, so the planning and assessment was accomplished within a compressed timeline. The Department Director provided financial backing to pay the overtime necessary. 2) Project management was organized like a fire using the ICS model (see project direction appendix of the EA). 3) The public was involved from the outset. 4) The management decisions were highly professional minimizing criticism. 5) An executive summary, intentionally written as a layman's document, promoted understanding with the public as characterized by this comment from a local environmentalist: *"In reading the summary and phase II draft EIS for the Moose Fire, I noticed how well they were written. It is possible to read a sentence just once and understand what is intended. The clarity of the documents and the straight forward answers to difficult questions are unusual in government documents."* (John Frederick, President, North Fork Preservation Association)(page 36 of FEIS). This comment is particularly poignant coming from an opponent of the preferred alternative.

Sula State Forest Salvage

The project was covered by a single EA, but divided into two phases; a stand-replacement fire salvage and a mixed-severity fire salvage. The fire started in late July 2000 and wasn't declared controlled till October. The Sula State Forest burned in early August. On September 1st a 20-day public comment notice was published for the Sula Salvage sale. A public field trip occurred October 3rd and a public meeting conducted November 14th. The tour and meeting serve to clarify the project and collect further public comments. The Decision Notice was published in late November and the Land Board approved the project in early December. Phase I salvage operations were completed the summer of 2001. Phase II is on going. Upon completion approximately 25 mmbf will have been salvaged. No new road construction was necessary.

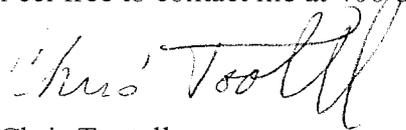
Both Sula and Moose projects incorporated public comments into projects. Another source of ideas came from the BAER plans. The follow-up press and public comments have been good because; 1) project timeliness, 2) the high quality of the land stewardship, and 3) the continues PR done to keep the publics informed. **The land is better because these projects happened.**

As a former DNRC employee I had considerable knowledge of these projects, but was not directly involved with their planning or execution. For further information contact Allen Wolf, MEPA coordinator on the Moose Project (406-751-2257) or Bob Sandman, Stillwater State Forest Unit Manager (406-881-2371), and for the Sula Project, John Hayes, Southwest Land Office, Lands MEPA Coordinator and Silviculturist (406-542-4262) or Tony Liane, Southwest Land Office Area Manager (406-542-4261).

What we can learn

- 1) keep it simple (Your recent draft EA template looks great)
- 2) involve, not just inform, the public
- 3) be clear, understandable in verbal and written communication
- 4) good science applied with a steward's heart minimizes opposition
- 5) commit whatever personnel and financial resources are necessary to do the project in a timely fashion

Feel free to contact me at 406-329-3459 or 559-359-2757.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chris Tootell". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Chris Tootell

Cc: Julia Riber