

Officials are resuming efforts to plan an approximately 16,500-acre timber project that would take place south of West Yellowstone, just outside the western border of Yellowstone National Park.

The Custer Gallatin National Forest announced in October it had revised its draft environmental assessment for the South Plateau Landscape Area Treatment Project, and a 30-day comment period is open until Nov. 5. The website where a form exists for commenting can be found at:
<https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public//CommentInput?Project=57353>.

If it's approved, crews would conduct an estimated 5,551 acres of scattered clear-cuts, 6,593 acres of commercial thinning, 2,514 acres of noncommercial thinning and 1,804 acres of additional fuels treatments in the project area.

Lodgepole pine stands dominate the area that would be logged, and the Forest Service wrote that over 26,000 of those acres are highly susceptible to mountain pine beetle due to "the homogenous size, age and tree spacing."

Mariah Leuschen-Lonergan, a spokesperson for the Custer Gallatin National Forest, said a maximum of 57 miles of temporary roads would be built, and they would all be decommissioned after the work wraps up.

On top of the logging, the Forest Service is calling for changes in access designations along all or part of nine national forest system roads. That includes a proposal to decommission a 2.6-mile section of the South Fork Madison Road. The move is aimed at improving water quality.

The South Plateau project would extend across 40,000 acres spanning south from U.S. Highway 20, north and east from the Montana-Idaho border and west from Yellowstone National Park. The work would occur over a 15-year period.

Hebgen Lake District Ranger Jason Brey said in a video posted on the Custer Gallatin National Forest's Facebook page that since 2010, staff on the district have worked to improve forest health, reduce fuel loading and enhance wildlife habitat within the Hebgen Basin.

"What we're trying to achieve for fuels reduction — both for protection of infrastructure in the town of West Yellowstone and for forest health conditions — complements the need of the town to maintain that recreation-based economy," he said.

Officials wrote that the South Plateau project will aid in reducing the risks associated with insect and disease outbreaks in trees, and they believe reducing fuels will make wildfire suppression efforts more effective and safe. The project will also bolster the timber products industry.

Mike Garrity, executive director of Alliance for the Wild Rockies, said the act of adding clear-cuts and logging roads will threaten grizzly bears and Canada lynx — a species that relies on the hiding cover provided by dense trees.

"Grizzly bears are still threatened under the Endangered Species Act, and they are doing the best they can to drive their numbers down instead of protecting their habitat," Garrity said. "And this is on the border of Yellowstone National Park."

Alliance for the Wild Rockies was one of several conservation groups that objected to the previous environmental assessment for the South Plateau project. That assessment was released for comments back in the summer of 2020, and an objection period ran in the spring of 2021.

The coalition of groups wrote that the timber project would destroy habitat and violate the National Environmental Policy Act because it lacked site-specific details. Shortly afterward, the Forest Service withdrew

its proposal.

Leuschen-Lonergan said the pause was due to the ongoing revision of the Custer Gallatin National Forest land management plan, which was signed early on this year. Officials wanted to make sure the project's components aligned with the plan's direction, she said.

The new assessment calls for the retention of snags, live trees and pockets of old growth forest. It's also designed to regenerate aspen and protect whitebark pine, which are declining across much of the West, Leuschen-Lonergan said.

The Custer Gallatin National Forest plans to follow the National Environmental Policy Act scoping process anew, beginning with the 30-day comment period. Garrity said he won't know whether his group will litigate over the project until the Forest Service reaches a final decision.

"What they're proposing — we're totally against it. We think it's illegal, but they are plowing ahead to bulldoze more logging roads and clear more **grizzly bear** and lynx habitat on the border of Yellowstone," he said.

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