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GOV. STEVE BULLOCK WORKS HARD FOR ALL MONTANANS

BULLOCK U.S. SENATE 2020

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Logging projects near Bozeman set to continue despite fire

By Helena Dore Chronicle Staff Writer Sep 20, 2020



Crews have marked trees along the Kirk Hill trail that will be saved when work begins on the Bozeman Municipal Watershed Project, which is a mix of thinning prescribed burning on 4,700 acres between the Bozeman Creek and Hyalite Creek drainages. The trees in question are on Forest Service property which a small portion of Kirk Hill trail runs through.

Rachel Leathe/Chronicle

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The Forest Service plans to move forward with two logging projects near Bozeman this fall despite the Bridger Foothills fire.

Corey Lewellen, Bozeman district ranger for the Forest Service, said the fire has not changed the timeline for work on the North Bridgers Forest Health Project and the Bozeman Municipal Watershed Project.

"(The Bridger Foothills fire) confirms that we live in fire-driven ecosystems," he said. "We're going to continue to be living with fire on the landscape. We need to be prepared for that."

BUT SHOWED UP AT THE GROUNDBREAKING TO GET HIS PICTURE TAKEN

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The Forest Service is still waiting for the North Bridgers project purchaser to submit a plan for operations, Lewellen said. Sun Mountain Lumber was hired to do the logging.

The North Bridgers project targets trees impacted by beetle kill on approximately 2,300 acres in the Bridgers and Bangtails. Areas along Fairy Lake Road, Battle Ridge, Grassy Mountain and Brackett Creek face clear cuts and thinning.

Until the project purchaser submits a plan, Lewellen anticipates local crews will continue doing some work by hand that doesn't require mechanical equipment and isn't tied to a logging contract. That work will likely occur this fall and winter, he said.

Forest Service staff have already improved South Brackett Creek Road and sprayed for noxious weeds. They've also removed conifers around Fairy Lake to help restore aspens, Lewellen said.

Hand treatments on the Bozeman Municipal Watershed Project will likely occur this fall, but prescribed burns won't occur until next spring, Lewellen said.

That project is aimed at reducing fuels through burns and thinning on approximately 4,700 acres between the Hyalite and Bozeman Creek drainages. The two drainages supply 80% of the city of Bozeman's water.

Officials worry a wildfire in the area could contaminate Bozeman's water and threaten private property in the wildland urban interface. Lewellen said the project will improve firefighter safety in the event of a wildfire.

The hand work involves thinning smaller-diameter tree stands. Officials are still considering contract options for the project, and mechanical treatments on older stands likely won't occur until next spring.

Environmental groups have sued the Forest Service over both projects.

Alliance for the Wild Rockies and the Native Ecosystems Council both challenged the watershed project in 2012, claiming it threatened critical lynx habitat. A judge put the project on hold for seven years. The injunction was lifted this April.

The same two groups in June 2019 filed a lawsuit against the Forest Service over the North Bridgers project. They claimed the agency didn't sufficiently consider the project's environmental impacts before approving it. In June, a federal judge ruled in favor of the Forest Service.

Cottonwood Environmental Law Center sued the Forest Service later this summer to block the both projects. The firm accused the Forest Service of approving both plans under a 1987 forest plan that doesn't address climate change.

John Meyer, Cottonwood's attorney, recently amended the lawsuit to challenge a third logging project near Hebgen Lake. He said he intends to ask a judge for an injunction on the projects.

The Custer Gallatin National Forest is in the process of updating its forest plan. The final plan will likely go into effect next spring.

Lewellen said working through litigation is just part of what goes into managing the forest.

"It's a valid legal process for those concerned over the process to engage," he said. "We'll just keep working through the litigation process. It's ultimately the judge's decision."

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2	-	Denny Hamlin
3	-	Brad Keselowski
4	↑2	Martin Truex Jr
5	↓1	Joey Logano

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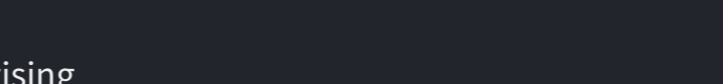
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