



Wildfires & Resiliency

Shawn Thomas, Division Administrator

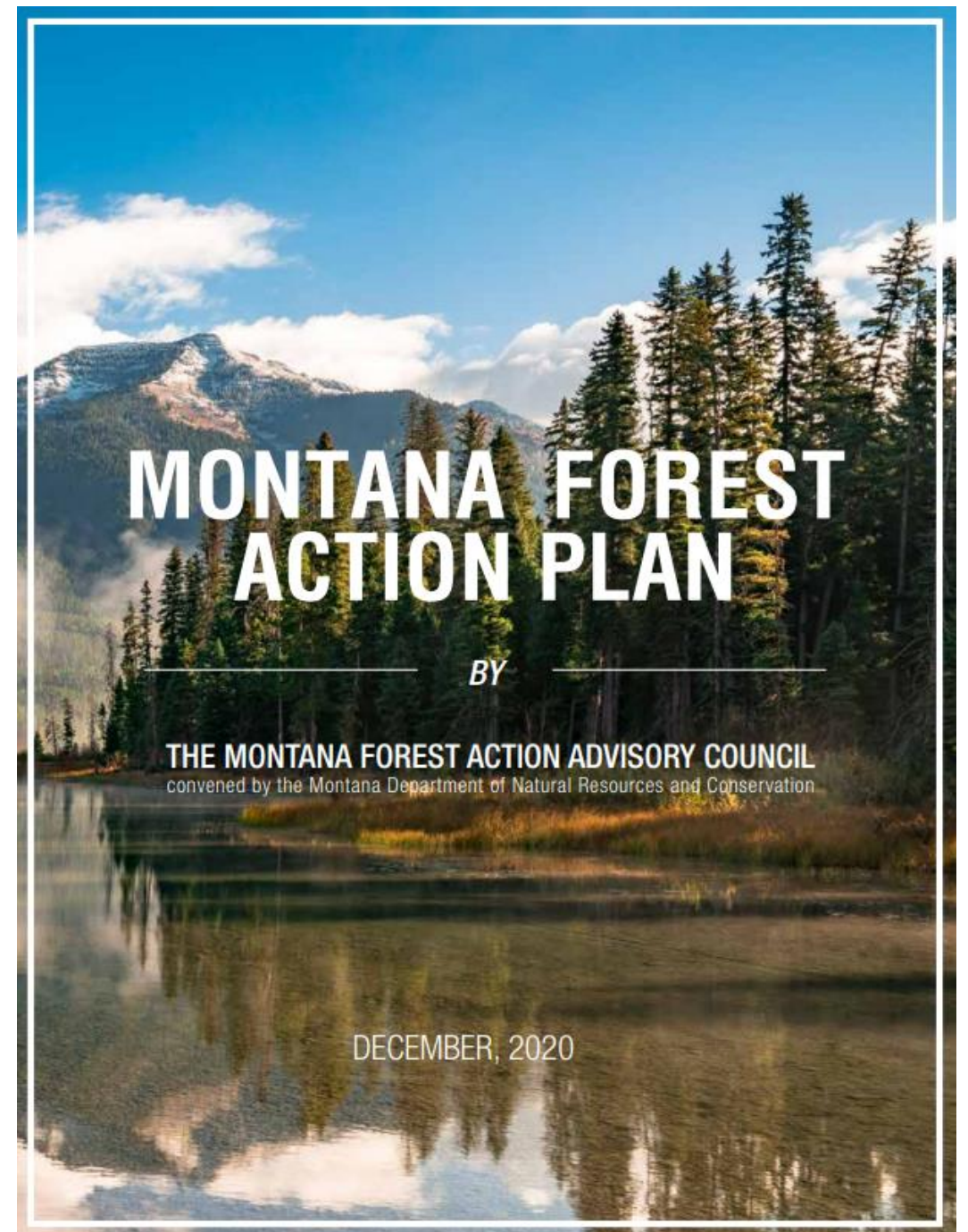
Montana DNRC Forestry and Trust Lands Division

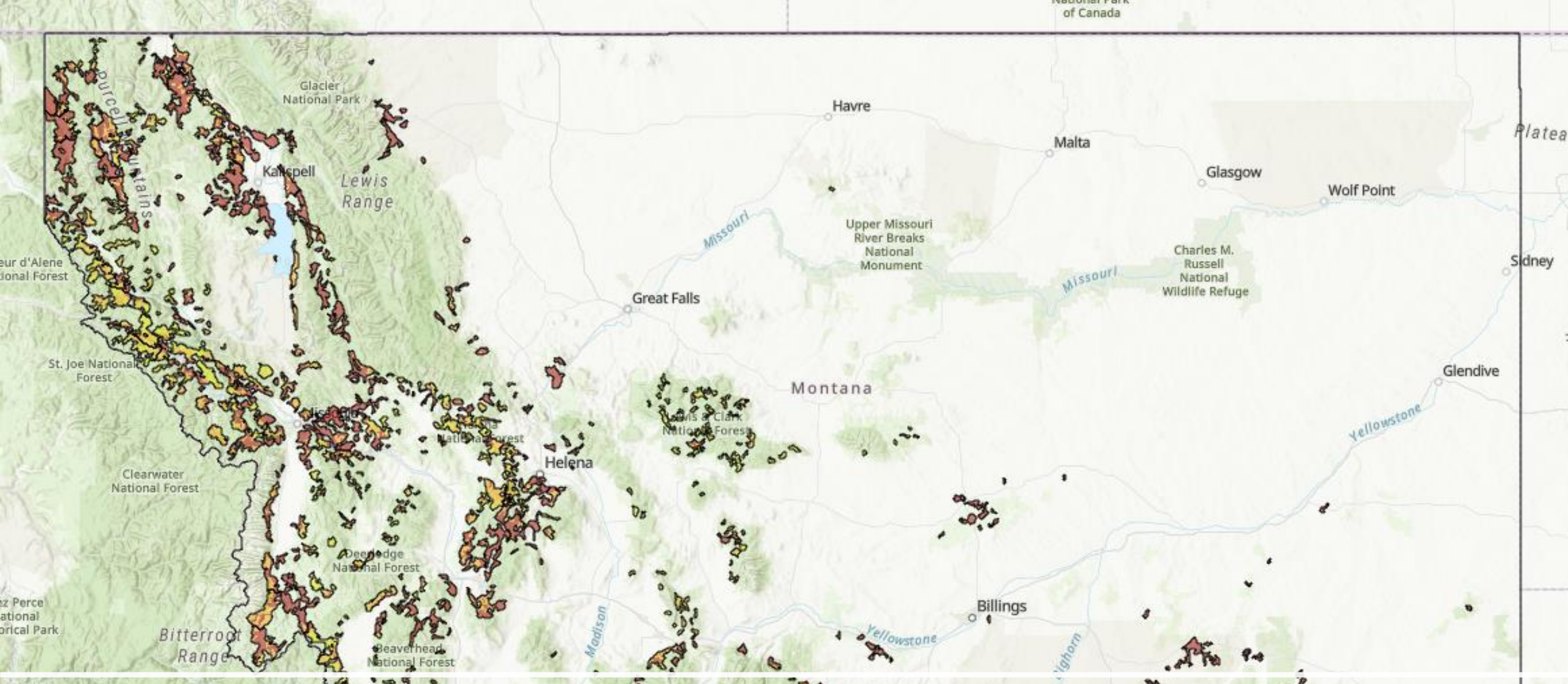
Working together across agencies and ownerships to improve forest health and reduce wildfire risk to communities across Montana.

In 2020, the DNRC convened a group of partners and stakeholders **representing diverse perspectives** in a robust update of the State's Forest Action Plan resulting in:

- 1) A statewide assessment of forest conditions across ownerships,
- 2) Identification of **Priority Areas of Focused Attention** based on wildfire risk and forest health,
- 3) Recommended implementation strategies to decrease wildfire risk to communities and improve forest health, including:
 - ✓ *Increase resilience to wildfire, windthrow, insects and diseases, drought, invasive species.*
 - ✓ *Mitigate and adapt to impacts of climate change.*
 - ✓ *Increase understanding and use of authorities to facilitate cross-boundary work.*
 - ✓ *Reduce wildfire risk to communities, watersheds, and infrastructure.*
 - ✓ *Restore resilient landscapes with prescribed fire.*
 - ✓ *Foster fire-adapted communities.*
 - ✓ *Increase firefighter safety and effectiveness.*

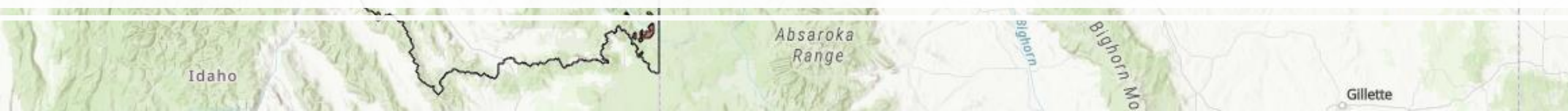
Formation of the Montana Forest Action Council (MFAC) to provide oversight, guidance, and accountability.





Montana Forest Action Plan

Priority Areas for Focused Attention



HB 883

The 2023 Montana legislative session introduced HB883 as an amendment to Section 76-13-150, MCA redefining the terms of the fire suppression account:

- DNRC now has the authority and increased resources to improve forest conditions, while more aggressively preparing for wildfire suppression and response.
- Modernized the state's fire suppression fund by providing a One Time Only (OTO) transfer to increase its maximum balance, enhancing the ability to cover costs associated with longer and more severe fire seasons.
- Specifies that the state treasurer shall transfer **\$152 million** from the general fund to the fire suppression account (done in June 2023).



HB 883

Funds in the fire suppression account may only be used for specific purposes:

- ✓ Fire suppression
- ✓ Fuel reduction and mitigation
- ✓ Forest restoration
- ✓ Grants the purchase of fire suppression equipment for county cooperatives
- ✓ Forest management projects on federal land
- ✓ Support for collaborative groups;
- ✓ Road maintenance on federal lands
- ✓ Fire preparedness.

HB883 Allocations

DNRC was authorized to spend, over the biennium, **\$30 million** to reduce wildfire risk and improve forest health and **\$30 million** to increase wildfire preparedness.

- **Fire Protection Bureau** - \$15m/year to increase wildfire preparedness
- **Fire Protection Bureau** - \$3m to decrease wildfire risk to communities
- **Forestry Assistance Bureau** - \$8m for grants to private landowners
- **Forest Management Bureau** - \$5m for State Trust Lands
- **Good Neighbor Authority** – \$12m for work with federal partners
- **Ag and Grazing Bureau** – \$1m for conifer encroachment and prescribed fire on STLs
- **Forestry Trust Lands Division support** - \$1mil

Benefits of increased wildfire preparedness and progress in reducing wildfire risk and improving forest health are already apparent.

Forestry Assistance Bureau

Helping Montana Landowners Manage their Forest



Historically, the DNRC was awarded approximately \$3 Million/year of competitive and non-competitive federal funding* to assist state, private, and tribal landowners implement 3,000-4,000 acres of active, sustainable forest management activities.



About 10 years ago, the state legislature passed a law allocating **state funds to support forest management** activities focused on reducing wildfire risk and improving forest health.



In that time, funding has ranged from approximately \$2 – \$3.5 Million / year, resulting in the completion of an additional 4,000 – 6,000 acres of treatment annually.

* Funding source = US Forest Service; State, Private, & Tribal Forestry

Forestry Assistance Bureau

Recent projects:

- **Southwest Montana Sagebrush Partnership** - Addresses conifer expansion to reduce wildfire risk, improve wildlife habitat, and prepare conditions for prescribed fire in the headwaters of the Missouri River. (3,600 acres)
- **Bozeman Municipal Watershed** - Commercial and non-commercial thinning to reduce the potential for catastrophic wildfire impacts within the city's watershed. (558 acres)
- **Custer County Prescribed Fire** – Supports the applied use of prescribed fire to mitigate wildfire risk and maintain forest conditions which sustain frequent, low-severity wildfire behavior in the event of a fire. (280 acres)
- **Dunn Creek** - A combination of salvage harvest, shaded fuel break along ingress/egress route, and commercial and non-commercial thinning across US Army Corps of Engineer, State, and private lands (500 acres)

* Funding source = US Forest Service; State, Private, & Tribal Forestry Program



Fire Protection Bureau

Increasing Wildfire Preparedness

Estimated Cost for Resources for FY 25 up to August 10- \$2,536,912.

- Hand crews completed prep work on 6 prescribed fire units, including 11,200-feet of line and 10 acres of treatment.
- Aviation suppression resources have responded to emerging fires for the state, as well as County and federal partners.
- Mapped 6 different incidents and detected 12 fires.

T1 Helo N562AJ – 90-day contract through State of Montana

Large Air Tanker T-544 – Here from Alaska for past 24 days

Scooper FB-216

Scooper FB-217 4 single-engine scoopers were

Scooper FB-204 CWN with BLM for 42 days

Scooper FB-246

T2 IA Crew #1 and #2 – 90-day contract through State of Montana

IR Aircraft N578WY – Call When Needed through the State of Montana

Air Attack N-529NR – Here from Minnesota for 34 days



Fire Protection Bureau

Increasing Wildfire Preparedness

Updating Community Wildfire Protection Plans.

- \$800,000 to be awarded to counties for at least 9 CWPP updates during the two-year period.
- Combined with Western States WUI, Community Wildfire Defense Grant, and Forest Action Plan funding, will allow the state to have updated OR begun updates on **23 county CWPPs** since January 2023.
- \$170,000 to partially fund a Community Wildfire Resilience Specialist at the state Fire Protection Bureau office to assist counties with CWPP updates.*

Funding two (2) Community Preparedness and Wildfire Prevention Specialist positions.

- \$300,000 in personnel & operations funds for the two positions.
- Cover a total of 12 counties, which had never had any dedicated capacity to community resiliency or wildfire information.

Supporting newly-formed Prescribed Fire Council

- Will increase pace and scale of prescribed fire on private lands across the state of Montana.



Good Neighbor Authority

- GNA continues to expand and find solutions to increase the pace and scale of management on federally (USFS and BLM) managed lands.
- NEPA is often cited as a bottle neck. As a solution, over 20,000-acres of NEPA analysis are under private contract.
- Exploring opportunities to bolster federal legal defense of timber projects.
- Building a robust portfolio of forest management and restoration work:
 - Landline surveys
 - Culverts
 - AOPs
 - Roadwork



Butte Municipal Watershed

Mountain pine beetle outbreaks 15 years ago resulted in standing dead, jack-strawed timber, and high fuel loading that can lead to high severity fire, loss of soil stability, and run-off. A single storm event following a high severity fire could introduce large amounts of soil and woody debris from fire-affected areas of the watershed, delivering sediment loads to the reservoirs and in having to take the water treatment plant offline.

Completed GNA Projects:

- ✓ *Contract to survey 40 corners in planned project area (2023)*
- ✓ *7-acres of non-commercial fuels reduction (2023)*
- ✓ *Engineering and designing of 1.5 miles of road to access project (2024)*

Active GNA Projects:

- ✓ *Road reconstruction for primary access and haul road*
- ✓ *300-acres of non-commercial slashing and hand-piling near reservoirs.*

Planned Projects:

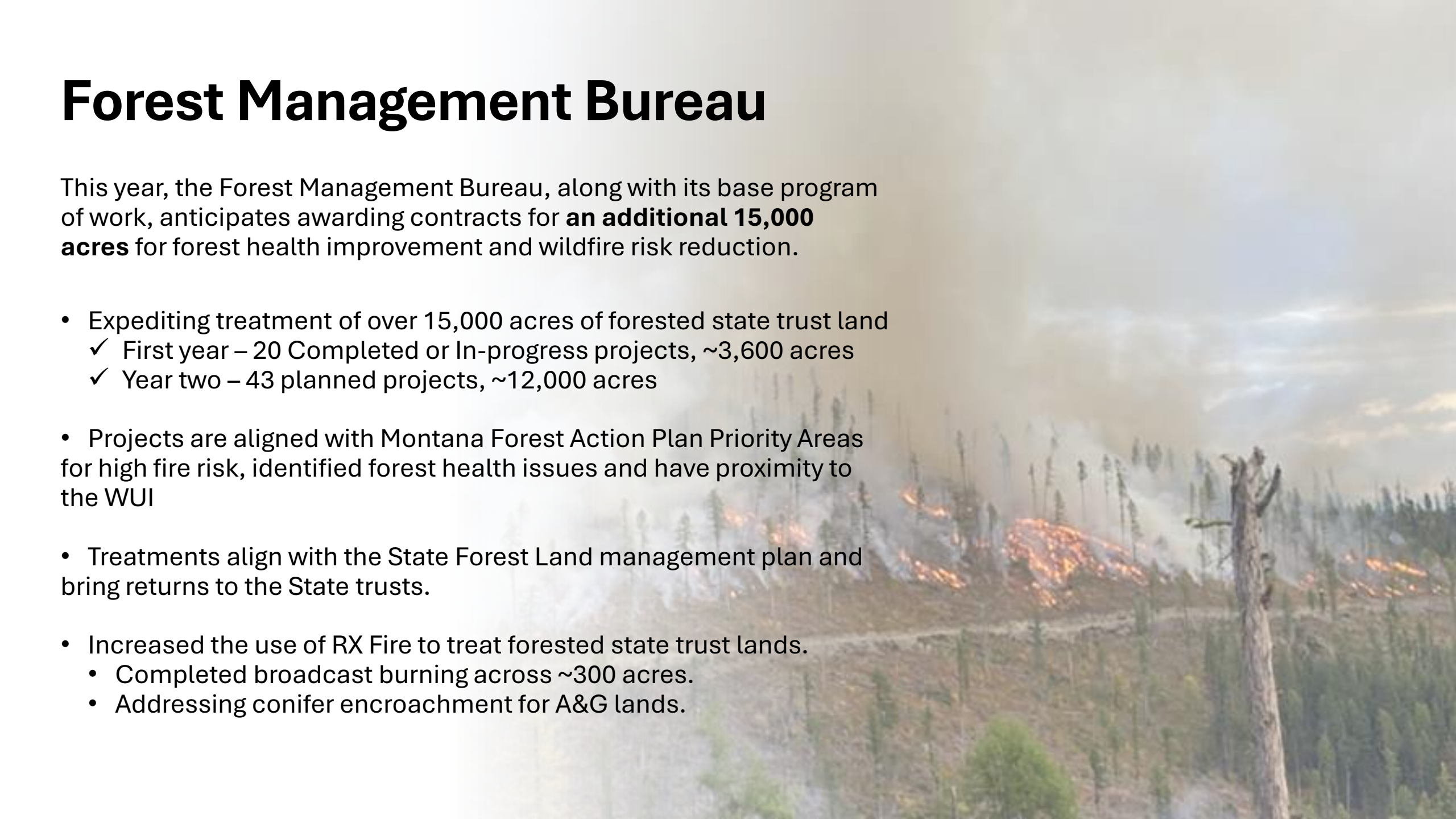
- ✓ *Basin Creek Mechanical Fuel Reduction (out for bid fall 2024) – 1,557 acres of timber removal and mechanical slash treatment that will yield 2.5 MMBF of sawlogs and 32,700 tons (1,250 log truck loads) of firewood and other forest products.*



Forest Management Bureau

This year, the Forest Management Bureau, along with its base program of work, anticipates awarding contracts for **an additional 15,000 acres** for forest health improvement and wildfire risk reduction.

- Expediting treatment of over 15,000 acres of forested state trust land
 - ✓ First year – 20 Completed or In-progress projects, ~3,600 acres
 - ✓ Year two – 43 planned projects, ~12,000 acres
- Projects are aligned with Montana Forest Action Plan Priority Areas for high fire risk, identified forest health issues and have proximity to the WUI
- Treatments align with the State Forest Land management plan and bring returns to the State trusts.
- Increased the use of RX Fire to treat forested state trust lands.
 - Completed broadcast burning across ~300 acres.
 - Addressing conifer encroachment for A&G lands.



Foothill Road PCT and Restoration Harvest



68-acres of management (commercial, precommercial, tree planting). The objective of silvicultural treatments is to improve overall stand health and vigor by removing diseased trees. Regeneration of western white pine and larch will move these stands to the desired future condition. Project will improve resilience to wildfire by removing diseased overstory trees, managing ladder fuels, and performing high standard slash clean up.

- Based on declining forest health and wildfire risk to neighboring communities, this area has been **identified as a priority in both the Forest Action Plan** and the recently updated Flathead County Community Wildfire Protection Plan.
- Over the past several years, private landowners adjacent and to the west of the project area have been completing fuels reduction through an expended WUI grant delivered that was recently complemented with additional funding through HB883.
- GNA is assisting with NEPA survey work nearby on the Flathead National Forest.

South Moccasins

\$300,000 of HB883 Ag and Grazing funds were allocated to the South Moccasins Project, an area near Lewistown that burned in the South Moccasin Fire of fall 2021 resulting in the loss of five structures and numerous head of cattle.

- 397-acres of classified grazing ground restoration to address conifer encroachment and remove dead standing trees with intent of preventing future fire hazards and ensuring safe movement of livestock.
- Treatments will focus on historic pasture lands with slopes less than 40% currently facing encroachment of Ponderosa Pine. Trees greater than 21” DBH will be retained for wildlife habitat. 10% of the area or 40-acres will be preserved for black-capped woodpecker.
- Lessee is an active partner and will benefit from treatments by getting cattle back into production and \$400,000 of additional HB883 funds have been allocated to add connectivity to similar management on adjacent private lands.

Challenges identified

- ✓ Doing more with more takes planning, coordination, and time.
- ✓ Increasing capacity, recruiting, hiring, and retention.
- ✓ Procurement and other internal processes can slow projects.
- ✓ Specialists time is valuable, necessary, and in demand; need to increase capacity in this area.
- ✓ GIS team is working to rebuild to share more easily across programs, so foresters and managers are better able to identify, plan, track, and communicate cross-boundary, cross-program projects.
- ✓ Communication
- ✓ Mill closures
- ✓ Contractor and workforce shortages in some areas of the state



Wildfires & Resiliency

Montana DNRC Forestry and Trust Lands Division

Working together across agencies and ownerships to improve forest health and reduce wildfire risk to communities across Montana.