



TOM BAUER, MISSOULIAN

Mike Bader, an analyst for the Flathead-Lolo-Bitterroot Citizens Task Force, stands next to larch trees marked in blue to be logged in the Little McCormick Creek drainage of the Ninemile Valley last week. Logging projects and a proposed gold mine have some residents of the valley worried about turning back the clock on extensive restoration work done to fix damage from decades of previous clear cutting and mining.

Quiet Ninemile braces for forest controversy

Residents worried projects could turn back clock on valley

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NINEMILE — Don't be lulled by the calm air of isolation wafting down this mountain valley: Practically every major land-use issue in western Montana is reaching the boiling point here.

Logging projects, grizzly bear survival, gold mining, trout fishing, road access and wild-fire potential have all showed up like unwanted summer visitors in the forests 20 miles northwest of Missoula. Around picnic tables and lawyer's desks, stakeholders are drawing battle lines to define the future of a place many think has just recovered from a century of abuse.

An extensive coalition of local and national groups have spent nearly \$5 million on stream restoration and mine clean-up work in the Ninemile Valley over the past decade. This summer, the Lolo National Forest plans thousands of acres of logging and burning in the mountains above those streams in what's called the Soldier-Butler Project. A new gold-mining operation has



Betty Thisted, a decades-long resident of the Ninemile, said she wants to know why the Lolo National Forest is giving the OK to clearcuts and a mine after so much restoration work has been done to clean up previous damage to the valley.

started exploratory digging on two claims there. Grizzly bears have started using the area linking three major recovery zones for the first time in more than a century. A group of environmentalists plans to sue the Forest Service, claiming improper analysis of the logging and gold projects. And several Ninemile landowners have been angered by the changes they claim will uproot their long-standing ef-

forts to protect the area.

"Every piece of land we own is under conservation easement except our homestead," said Betty Thisted, whose family has lived in the Ninemile for decades. "Now they're going to damage the creeks they just restored? The final decision now has clearcuts. Why are they taking out so much marketable timber when the timber business is so low?"

In a 60-day notice of intent

to sue, Patty Ames of the Flathead-Lolo-Bitterroot Citizens Task Force warned the Forest Service that combining a gold mine and a timber cut should have been analyzed for impact on grizzly bears.

"These cumulative effects were not analyzed or disclosed in the EA (environmental assessment) or project files as required by law," Ames wrote Lolo Forest Supervisor Carolyn Upton on July 21. "This information was not provided or included as part of the Endangered Species Act Section 7 consultation process."

Gold mine owner and Missoula resident Nathan Johnson described his project as a hobby effort aimed at recovering gold nuggets popular for jewelry making — not an industrial-scale operation. He and a partner have two 20-acre claims in the Little McCormick Creek and Kennedy Creek drainages of the Ninemile.

"They're assuming it's some big hillbilly mine up there with AK-47s and gigantic tailings ponds and silt in the streams," Johnson said. "These operations are away from the streams, on benches, with no chance of silting the streams unless there's a giant landslide."

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"I understand people do not like mining, especially up in the Ninemile because of what they did in the '40s, where they left gigantic dredge piles and wouldn't level them. My technique is more modern. We dig a trench eight feet deep, and then backfill the trench. It's not laying around all year like a quarry."

The Forest Service considered Johnson's project small enough to give it a categorical exclusion from more extensive environmental analysis. That raised concerns at Missoula County, where Community Planning Services Officer Chet Crowser warned "to add new mining activity to an area with such notable ongoing mining reclamation/restoration effort is a huge step in the wrong direction."

A ridgeline known as the Ninemile Divide north of Interstate 90 blocks the view of the Ninemile Valley. On the other side, Ninemile Creek waters a lush bottomland sprinkled with big meadows and ranches, the Forest Service's historic Ninemile Remount Depot, and side roads leading to secluded smaller creek drainages dotted with cabins. Farther north, the Reservation Divide of moun-

tain ridges marks the end of the watershed and the start of the Flathead Indian Reservation.

Step back further in both time and space, and the Ninemile becomes even more interesting. In the mid-20th century, loggers cut around 100 million board-feet of wood a year from its mountainsides, leaving clearcut scars still visible today. Before that, placer miners dredged its waters for gold, turning parts of Ninemile Creek straight as an irrigation ditch and leaving heaps of tailings to pollute other drainages.

Wildlife use the area as a crossroads connecting the Mission Mountains and Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex to the east, the Cabinet-Yaak mountains to the northwest and the Bitterroot Mountains to the south — three of the biggest forest ecosystems left in the continental United States. All three contain designated grizzly bear recovery areas under the Endangered Species Act. Their recovery plan identified an 808-square-mile demographic connectivity area centered on the Ninemile as a grizzly travel corridor.

Elk herds cross back and forth. Threatened bull trout spawn in some streams, especially those recently renovated at a cost of nearly a

million dollars a mile.

Since 2008, a combination of habitat mitigation money from the Bonneville Power Administration, abandoned mine programs, Trout Unlimited, the Clark Fork Coalition, National Wildlife Federation and Missoula County Commission has geo-engineered much of Ninemile Creek.

This summer, the Forest Service released a final decision on its Soldier-Butler Project in the Ninemile. It calls for logging 17.5 million board-feet of timber, burning and thinning 10,000 acres, and building 16 miles of new permanent or temporary roads. In her decision announcement, Lolo National Forest Supervisor Upton said the project was needed to decrease high-intensity wildfire potential, maintain road access for firefighters and the public, enhance forest health and manage for variety across the landscape.

Upton noted she took particular consideration of public comments regarding grizzly bear and big game activity. Part of that involved changes to the plan's roadwork, including changes to previous promises to decommission roads from the Frenchtown Face project of 2007. The plan states it will have no effect on old-growth timber, lynx foraging habitat and that "effects to grizzly bear

denning habitat and food habituation will be dis-countable to non-existent."

On the positive side, replaced culverts should improve fish water quality, make the remaining tree stands healthier and more fire-resistant, and improve wildlife habitat by the decommissioning or storing of more than 100 miles of

old road.

Citizen Task Force analyst Mike Bader said he couldn't trust the Forest Service's claims, as it used earlier promises of road removal to win approval for the Frenchtown Face project that are now getting rescinded in Soldier-Butler. But the bigger issue, Bader argued, is the lack of con-

cern for letting an already heavily logged and mined landscape finally serve the wildlife that still call it home.

"This is not just any piece of Forest Service land, even though they're pretending it is," Bader said. "With all this logging and mining, they're turning the clock back 70 to 100 years."



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