



# Guide to Forest Aesthetics in Montana

## Information for Family Forest Owners

Actively managing forests to insure their health and value often involves road building and commercial logging, both of which can dramatically impact a forest's visual appearance. Forest aesthetics are visual resource management practices that have been developed to address negative reactions to forest appearance.

Forest managers and private landowners who want to maintain aesthetically pleasing forest landscapes should consider the following four questions:

### **What are visually sensitive landscapes?**

Just as riparian forest management practices are confined to riparian forest zones, visual resource management practices should be applied only on visually sensitive forest landscapes. When determining whether a parcel is in a visually sensitive landscape consider the following factors:

*Distance between the viewer and the harvest area*—in the *foreground*, details such as stumps and slash dominate the view, in the *middleground* as distance increases color differences are most noticeable, and finally in the *background* at long distances harvest size and shape are most notable.

*Viewer position*—a harvest can be screened from view if a viewer is below or even with the harvest. On the other hand, a viewer above a harvest is offered a clear look at the harvest.

*Topography*—in general, the steeper the slope the more visually sensitive the landscape.

*Duration*—the length of time a viewer is exposed to a site.

*Ephemeral characteristics*—temporary characteristics caused by weather or climatic conditions. For example, harvests on southwestern hillsides are well-lit by the sun, where as harvests on northern slopes tend to be shaded and less visible.

*Stand Structure*—any tree removal in even-age closed canopy stands will be apparent.

### **What harvest practices do people approve of, and which ones do they dislike?**

Research has shown that the major concerns of the viewing public are:

*Tree retention*—the more standing trees after a harvest, the less the visual impact

*Residual material*—tree remnants such as tree stumps, snags, limbs, and brush are a major visual concern. Removing residual material, however, may conflict with wildlife objectives, or hamper nutrient cycling.

*Color contrasts*—forests are generally green, where as harvested areas are likely to be brown or black. The contrasting colors resulting from the harvest are disliked.

*Shape and location of harvest unit*—Square or rectangular harvest units create a greater visual impact than those with more rounded edges.

Practices that the public likes include:

*Buffers*—a buffer is a strip of trees or other vegetation that screens a harvest area from view. If buffers are used they should be wide enough to effectively screen the harvest area. Thin, wispy buffers gives people the notion that something is being hidden from them.

*Information signs*—most people view signs that convey when trees were harvested, planted, thinned, etc. Well placed signs are useful in letting people know that a forest is being tended under a sound stewardship program.

## Why don't people like certain harvest practices?

Despite the common notion that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, there is a high level of agreement among diverse populations regarding what makes a landscape attractive, or unattractive. Research has shown that when people do not like what they see on a landscape, it is because some element of the landscape doesn't "fit". Not fitting can be explained in terms of line, form, color, and texture; four elements that can be used to describe a landscape.

*Lines*—an element of the landscape that may include the horizon and tree trunks.

*Forms*—three-dimensional configuration of lines on the landscape, e.g. hills and mountains

*Colors*—a feature that applies to all elements of the landscape. Up close colors are easily distinguishable. At a distance, colors become shades of light and dark.

*Texture*—the relative smoothness of a landscape, e.g. craggy rocks versus relatively smooth forest canopy.

In an undisturbed, or natural landscape all of the elements work together to create a scene that we expect. A timber harvest often affects some of the visual elements and thereby creates a scene that doesn't "fit" with our expectations for a natural, forest landscape.

## What can be done to mitigate the visual impacts of harvest practices?

Knowing what people like and dislike about harvest practices is helpful in any effort to minimize negative visual perceptions of timber harvesting.

### *Plan for the Viewshed*

Planning the entire viewshed (the landscape seen from a particular area or along a transportation corridor) is essential. Rather than planning each harvest unit on a case-by-case basis, it is more efficient in the long-term to assess the needs of an entire viewshed and plan for all the harvest units that will occur in the area over time. Planning in this manner will minimize conflicts later in the process.

### *Evaluating the Need for Buffers*

Part of the preliminary viewshed assessment is the task of evaluating the need or opportunities for buffers. By leaving visually impenetrable stands of vegetation in strategic locations, visually sensitive areas can often be separated from more utilitarian landscapes where routine harvesting takes place. Buffers should not be considered set-asides or reserves. In most cases they can be thinned to create openings, varied densities of tree stands, understory regrowth and opportunities for deeper views into the buffer (but not through the buffer to the harvest area).

*Harvesting practices in foreground situations (less than 1/2 mile between viewer and harvest area) should concentrate on:*

- Replanting with a variety of species
- Retaining trees in groups
- Do not pile brush
- Keep trees with substantial crowns
- Increasing planting density
- Avoid high stumps

*Harvesting practices in background situations (greater than 4 miles between viewer and harvest area) should concentrate on:*

- Minimal number of yarding corridors
- Reduced size of units
- Feathered edges
- Harvest lines diagonal to ridge lines
- Trees retained in groups
- Selective cutting
- Curved and undulating edges
- Curved and undulating ridges
- Few midslope roads

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