



**File Code:** 1950

**Date:** March 14, 2008

Dear Interested Citizen,

In 1994, the Northwest Forest Plan recognized the need for watershed restoration, stating, "Watershed restoration will be an integral part of a program to aid in recovery of fish habitat, riparian habitat, and water quality" (p. B-30). In response, the Mt. Hood National Forest has accomplished numerous watershed restoration projects including culvert replacement for improved fish passage, in-stream projects to create pools, riparian planting, and road decommissioning. The Forest has decommissioned over 400 miles of roads over the past fifteen years. More recently, the Forest completed the 2007 Clackamas Restoration Project, and is planning a forest-wide aquatic restoration project, which proposes to re-open side channels, plant native vegetation, and increase large-wood component in streams and floodplains. Continuing with restoration efforts, the Mt. Hood National Forest is now preparing an environmental assessment (EA) to improve hydrologic function and reduce adverse impacts to aquatic habitat by proposing to decommission unneeded roads in eight high priority sixth-field subwatersheds. We will subsequently upgrade roads necessary to improve hydrologic function where needed to protect aquatic habitat.

**Background:** The Mt. Hood National Forest, working in collaboration with representatives from many local, state, federal, and tribal governments as well as non-governmental organizations, identified priority areas for watershed and aquatic habitat restoration within the Fifteenmile Creek, Hood River, and Sandy River basins. Specifically, between 2004 and 2007, a series of meetings and workshops were held in each basin to develop basin-specific aquatic habitat restoration strategies. The primary goal of each strategy is to address aquatic habitat restoration needs for resident and anadromous fish species, while at the same time addressing needs for streamflow and water quality improvements. It is envisioned that each basin-wide strategy would be used to guide restoration investments over the long term in a manner that will achieve tangible, aggregated restoration benefits at the watershed-scale.

Additionally, in 2003 the Mt. Hood National Forest prepared a *Roads Analysis*, which addressed both the access benefits and ecological impacts of road-associated effects. As highlighted in the *Roads Analysis*, Forest Service budgets have not kept pace with what it costs to maintain all roads so they are functioning properly. With this trend of declining budgets expected to continue, the Forest's backlog of roads needing maintenance continues to impact hydrologic function. In response, the *Roads Analysis* recommends decommissioning road segments having environmental risk factors coupled with low access needs.

**Purpose for the Proposal:** The basin-specific aquatic restoration strategies identify sixth-field subwatersheds that provide the cornerstone for addressing freshwater habitat restoration needs for federally listed and state sensitive resident and anadromous fish species, as well as water quality improvements. Therefore, the purpose of this proposal is to restore hydrologic function in several specific high priority sixth-field subwatersheds as identified in these strategies, which include: Headwaters Fifteenmile Creek, Upper Fifteenmile Creek, Upper Eightmile Creek, Upper Middle Fork Hood River, Linney Creek, Lower Salmon River, Upper Salmon River, and Still Creek (see enclosed map).

Specifically, the need for this proposal is as follows:



- Reduce impacts to water quality, aquatic habitat, and threatened, endangered, and sensitive aquatic species caused by landslides, gullying, seasonal and permanent impassible culvert barriers, and surface erosion associated with unneeded roads.
- Meet objectives outlined in basin-specific aquatic habitat restoration strategies by reducing risks to water quality and riparian function from roads.
- Reduce road maintenance costs by removing unneeded roads.

**Proposed Action:** In order to improve hydrologic function and reduce adverse impacts to aquatic habitat, this project proposes to decommission approximately 80-90 miles of unneeded roads in the following priority sixth-field subwatersheds: Headwaters Fifteenmile Creek, Upper Fifteenmile Creek, Upper Eightmile Creek, Upper Middle Fork Hood River, Linney Creek, Lower Salmon River, Upper Salmon River, and Still Creek (see attached maps).

Road decommissioning would be accomplished by both active (i.e., mechanical) and passive (i.e., inactive) methods. Decommissioned roads would no longer need maintenance of any kind, since the ground occupied by decommissioned roads would return to a more natural, forested landscape. All decommissioned roads identified in this project, including “actively” and “passively” decommissioned roads, would be removed from Mt. Hood National Forest’s transportation system.

Roads and road segments proposed for *active* decommissioning cross streams and require work, such as slope rehabilitation and culvert removal. Any drainage structures to be removed or treated, such as culverts, bridges, or fords, must be accomplished in such a way that restores natural drainage. This usually involves the excavation of road fill and removal of culverts for drainages and streams, thereby restoring natural contours of stream channels. For road surface drainage and intercepted shallow groundwater (springs and sheet wash), cross drains are excavated, culverts removed and flow from ditches routed to the cross drains. Cross drains are designed to be sufficiently large to capture all of the road related runoff and suitably spaced to limit the storm runoff to small discharges and slow velocities. Additionally, a barrier closure device or feature may be constructed at the beginning of some actively decommissioned roads to deter vehicle access.

Roads and road segments proposed for *passive* decommissioning would be decommissioned by allowing them to return to a natural condition as native vegetation grows. Most of the roads identified for passive decommissioning have not been maintained and natural vegetation has already made them inaccessible by vehicle. Also, most of these roads are on relatively flat terrain where erosion and sedimentation are not a risk. Additionally, a barrier closure device or feature may be constructed at the beginning of some passively decommissioned roads to deter vehicle access.

Approximately 4-5 miles of roads proposed for decommissioning would be converted into recreational trails. Roads converted to trails would be removed from the forest’s transportation system and returned to a hydrologically stable condition.

**Preliminary Issues:** The potential for impacts or consequences as a result of decommissioning roads are important considerations that need to be addressed in the analysis. The following issues were identified during the preliminary effects analysis:

- **Forest Products:** Roads provide access to the Forest for gathering products such as firewood, boughs, beargrass, mushrooms, huckleberries, Christmas trees and landscaping plants. Reducing road density may affect the opportunity for gathering forest products.
- **Recreational Access:** Roads provide access to favorite dispersed recreation sites. Reducing road density may affect this recreational opportunity.

- Hunting Access: Roads provide access to favorite or traditional hunting sites and for many it is important to be able to get as close as possible with their vehicle. Access for disabled hunters may also be reduced. Reducing road density may affect opportunities for hunting.
- Fishing Access: Roads provide access to favorite or traditional fishing sites. For many, such as disabled or physically challenged individuals, it is important to be able to get as close as possible with their vehicle. Reducing road density may affect opportunities for fishing.

Project Design Features: In order to avoid, minimize, and reduce impacts as a result of decommissioning, design features would be an integral part of the Proposed Action. The following design features have thus far been identified by the interdisciplinary team:

- Trailheads that would be inaccessible after road decommissioning would be re-located.
- Disturbance to existing native vegetation in and around project areas would be minimized to the extent necessary to restore the hydrologic function.
- Off-site soil displacement would be minimized by the use of filter materials (such as silt fencing and straw bales).
- Project activities would be maximized during dry conditions when soil moisture and stream baseflow levels are low.

Public Scoping: The Mt. Hood National Forest is now seeking comments from individuals, organizations, local and state governments, and other federal agencies that may be interested in or affected by the proposed action. Comments may pertain to the nature and scope of the environmental, social, and economic issues, and possible alternatives to the proposed action. Your comments will help us assess the proposed action, develop alternatives and prepare an environmental assessment.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project, available for public inspection, and released if requested under the Freedom of Information Act.

The Forest Service would like your scoping comments by **April 21, 2008**. Please send your written comments to: Michelle Lombardo, Mt. Hood National Forest, Aquatic Restoration Team Leader, 16400 Champion Way, Sandy, Oregon 97055; FAX: (503) 668-1413. You may also hand-deliver your comments to the above address during normal business hours from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays. Electronic comments may be submitted to [comments-pacificnorthwest-mthood@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-pacificnorthwest-mthood@fs.fed.us) in a format such as an e-mail message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc). All those who comment will remain on our mailing list and receive future updates on this proposal.

Electronic maps and other information about the project are available on the Internet at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/mthood/projects/>. If you have any questions concerning this proposal please contact Michelle Lombardo at (503) 668-1796 or [mlombardo@fs.fed.us](mailto:mlombardo@fs.fed.us).

Sincerely,

*/s/ Gary L. Larsen*  
GARY L. LARSEN  
Forest Supervisor