



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Mt. Hood National Forest

Hood River Ranger District
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File Code: 1950

Date: March 10, 2008

Dear Interested Party:

The Hood River Ranger District on the Mt. Hood National Forest has identified you as an individual, agency, or organization that might be interested in commenting on our proposal for a 2,900 acre fuels reduction and restoration project. The proposed action is designed to improve and protect forest health on public lands adjacent to The Dalles Municipal Watershed and is located within the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) identified in the Hood River County, Community Wildfire Protection Plan.

Stand species composition and tree and brush densities in the North Fork Mill Creek area have been altered through a combination of factors including: fire suppression over the past 100 years, climatic conditions favoring rapid vegetative growth, and the accumulation of dead fuels resulting from insects and disease. Consequently, stands in the area are too dense and crowded. Trees not only have to compete for nutrients, water and sunlight but are also more susceptible to insects and disease due to their decreased vigor. Dwarf mistletoe-infected trees, trees infected with root rot and other diseases, insect-killed trees, and down fuel are creating a continuous "ladder" of fuel from the ground to the tree crowns thereby increasing the vulnerability of healthy trees to fire. Much of the National Forest System lands in this area have been mapped as Condition Class 3, indicating these lands have missed multiple natural fire events and now contain unnaturally high fuel situations.

Background

In February 2004, the City of The Dalles requested the Forest Service take action to improve and protect forest health on federally managed public lands within and adjacent to The Dalles Municipal Watershed. Under the authorities of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA), the Hood River and Barlow Ranger Districts convened a collaborative working group to assist with developing recommended actions for the South and North Fork Mill Creek planning areas. Barlow Ranger District currently is implementing the first phase of the recommendations for South Fork Mill Creek with The Dalles Watershed Fuelbreak. That project focuses on reducing fuel loadings and reducing tree density to provide for better protection along the perimeter of, and along roads within, this municipal watershed. The North Fork Mill Creek Restoration Project (Hood River Ranger District) would implement many of the collaborative group recommendations for the North Fork Mill Creek area and would reinforce fuel reduction efforts occurring with The Dalles Watershed Fuel Break.

Collaborative representatives met from November 2004 to March 2006. The community collaborative group was composed of representatives from: federal and state agencies (Forest Service, Oregon Department of Forestry, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Oregon Department of Environmental Quality Oregon Department of Parks and Recreation, US Fish and Wildlife Service), watershed councils and local agencies (Wasco County Soil and Water Conservation District, City of The Dalles), environmental groups (Bark and ONRC/Oregon Wild), private citizens, neighboring landowners, timber industry, mountain bike groups and other recreational enthusiasts such as the Backcountry Horsemen of Oregon, Columbia Gorge Power Sledgers and Columbia Gorge Off-Road Association. The collaborative group recommended developing fuels treatments that would restore forest stand health and allow for fire to play a more natural role as well as implementing a variety of restoration activities to improve the overall forest health in the planning area. The specific restoration recommendations focused on wildlife

habitat, meadows and aspen stands, fish habitat, road density, recreational trails, and grazing management. After receiving the recommendations, District personnel began the interdisciplinary process of developing a detailed fuels reduction and restoration proposal that would meet the objectives for the area and respond to many of the recommendations of the collaborative group.

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of the project is to conduct restoration activities within the North Fork Mill Creek planning area to effectively reduce fuel loadings, improve the health and vigor of forested stands, restore wildlife habitat, improve conditions for aquatic resources, and to integrate the public’s need for access to the area with the needs of aquatic and wildlife resources. Specific management objectives and underlying need of the project are to:

- Reduce risk of loss of healthy large diameter/remnant ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, and western larch trees, and develop stands more resilient to insects, disease and fire;
- Restore stand health to improve resiliency to insects and disease;
- Maintain the health and vigor of established Douglas-fir understories within stands previously partially harvested;
- Decrease the rate of spread of laminated root rot and dwarf mistletoe;
- Restore wildlife habitat, including the unique aspen stands, within the planning area; and,
- Restore wildlife security and aquatic integrity within the planning area while integrating the public’s need for access.

Proposed Action: Vegetation Treatments

The Mill Creek planning area includes the North Fork of Mill Creek watershed and small portions of Mosier and Neal Creek watersheds on National Forest System lands. It is located approximately 5 miles east and southeast of the community of Mt. Hood. The legal land description is T1S-T2S, R10E-R11E, Willamette Meridian. (See attached vicinity map.)

The Hood River Ranger District proposes to treat approximately 2,900 acres. The purpose of all the activities is to reduce hazardous fuels (removal of surface fuels, removal of ladder fuels, and opening of the canopy) and improve forest health conditions (removing root rot pockets, removing diseased trees, thinning overstocked stands). The mechanical fuels reduction treatment methods would consist of tree thinning from below (including the sale of vegetative material), machine piling, hand thinning, pruning by hand, machine mastication, and manual brush removal. Underburning (prescribed fire) would be used in combination with mechanical treatments or with limited non-mechanized (pruning, hand falling) treatments (684 acres) to restore stand health and to create conditions whereby fire could function in a more natural role. The proposed treatments for the planning area are shown in the table below.

Treatment	Acres
Restoration Thin	2131
Sapling Thin	26
Aspen Cottonwood Enhancement	45
Underburn	684
Total Acres	2885

All proposed treatment areas are shown on the proposed action map, and include riparian buffers and buffers around known Northern Spotted Owl nesting sites. Some stands may undergo future prescribed underburning after mechanical thinning. The vegetation treatments would follow the stand treatment parameters in the following table. The overarching goal of the parameters is to facilitate restoring stands to their historical species composition while providing for retention of healthy large trees and wildlife habitat needs.

North Fork Mill Creek Restoration Project Stand Treatment Parameters

Preface: The overarching objective of the treatments in the North Fork Mill Creek Planning area is to reduce fuels and restore stands to their historical species composition while also providing for wildlife habitat needs. By doing so, we would be moving treated areas toward the appropriate condition class based on the fire regime classification and therefore be addressing fuels reduction needs in the treated areas. Promoting a diversity of tree species would allow the forest to more readily adapt to climate change. Stand treatments would also reduce the vulnerability of the area to uncharacteristic fires that put large amounts of carbon into the atmosphere. Other treatments would occur in the area (i.e. sapling thinning, underburning, pruning, etc.). Cutting of trees identified as hazards along open roads is required to provide for public safety and therefore is one area where the identified size parameters for cutting trees would not apply. Hazard tree removal, to the extent possible, would try to be consistent with the guidelines outlined below.

Stand condition	Douglas-fir	White fir	Ponderosa pine, larch, western white pine, western red cedar, etc
<p>Stands with root-rot pockets (where target understory or target residual stand is not root rot susceptible species) - openings created through tree removal generally should be around 1 acre in size; however, larger openings may occur if they are naturally appearing in shape (amoeba shaped). The objective is to leave the best of what's left in the largest size class available and to avoid leaving openings that are larger than 2 acres in size. Other treatments such as pre-commercial thinning, pruning, underburning, etc would still occur. Snag and on-site woody debris would be left on-site, however may be adjusted to meet fuel loading concerns.</p>	<p>30" and greater size class - retain unless compelling reason present to girdle. For example, tree presents a fuels risk (i.e. ladder fuel) to adjacent desirable species (ponderosa pine, western white pine, larch, and other healthy fire-resistant species) and measures such as pruning of ladder fuel would not adequately address the risk.</p>	<p>30" and greater size class - retain unless within/adjacent to root rot pocket or if a fuels risk to adjacent desirable species, then remove.</p>	<p>Retain all unless stocking density or mistletoe hazard rating (normally when more than 1/3 of the tree crown is infected with mistletoe) compromises long-term health of residual stand. In that case only remove the smaller trees, but still retain variable density characteristics of the stand. Girdle larger mistletoe infected trees and retain on site unless retention results in excessive fuels loading (refer to dimension parameters identified under Douglas-fir). Plant openings with these resistant species</p>
	<p>24-29" size class- retain unless compelling reason to girdle (see above). If of such quantity as to result in excessive fuel loading, remove those in the lower end of the diameter class. Generally, the emphasis would be to use the removed trees in this size class for restoration* projects. Retain if in clumps that are healthy and not susceptible to infection due to proximity to root rot pockets</p>	<p>24-29" size class - remove those that are infected and those that are at the edges of infection centers unless there is insufficient # of Douglas-fir on site to meet snag and/or on-site woody debris requirements</p>	
	<p>Less than 24" size class - remove those that are clearly infected or at the edge of infection centers. Retain healthy clumps, if available and not overstocked. Thin overstocked clumps with emphasis to leave the best in the largest size class available.</p>	<p>less than 24" size class - remove unless retention of healthy white fir is necessary to meet other resource objectives</p>	

Stand condition	Douglas-fir	White fir	Ponderosa pine, larch, western white pine, western red cedar, etc
<p>Stands where the objective is to restore historical species composition and where target understory is comprised of species such as Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, western larch, western white pine, western red cedar, etc. Most of these stands had previous entry and resulted in a residual stand that was a seed tree, shelterwood, partial cut (usually selective species removal), or plantation (old clearcuts). These are stands where commercial thinning is prescribed or where there is a need to start over in terms of the understory component (current component has limited ability to achieve long-term growth and health objectives). Other treatments such as sapling thinning, pruning, underburning (where appropriate) would still occur. The emphasis is to leave the best of what is available in the largest size class. Snag and on-site woody debris would be left on-site, however may be adjusted to meet fuel loading concerns.</p>	<p>30" and greater size class - retain. If tree is infected with mistletoe and it compromises viability of understory then girdle.</p>	<p>30" and greater size class- retain unless presence compromises establishment of target understory, then girdle and leave on-site.</p>	<p>Retain all unless stocking density or mistletoe hazard rating (normally when more than 1/3 of the tree crown is infected with mistletoe) compromises long-term health of residual stand. In that case, only remove the smaller trees, but still retain variable density characteristics of the stand. Girdle larger mistletoed trees and retain on site unless retention results in excessive fuels loading (refer to dimension parameters identified under Douglas-fir). Plant openings with these resistant species</p>
	<p>24-29" size class - girdle all that are infected with dwarf mistletoe <u>and if</u> left on-site would compromise health and viability of understory. If of such quantity so as to result in excessive fuel loading, remove those in the lower end of the diameter class. Generally, the emphasis would be to use the removed trees in this size class for restoration* projects.</p>	<p>24-29" size class remove unless: 1) retention of healthy white fir is needed to meet other resource objectives; or 2) if there is insufficient # of other species on-site to meet snag and/or woody debris requirements.</p>	
	<p>Less than 24" size class- remove those that are infected with mistletoe and <u>if</u> left on site would compromise health and viability of understory. Thin where the stand is overstocked with emphasis to leave the best of what's left in the largest size class.</p>	<p>less than 24" size class - remove unless retention of healthy white fir is necessary to meet other resource objectives</p>	

Restoration* generally includes those projects that would result in a benefit to resources on-the-ground such as stream and aquatic restoration, trail restoration, road decommissioning, and site productivity restoration.

The proposed action includes snowplowing to allow for hauling under winter conditions, if necessary and if approved by the District Ranger. Vegetation treatment over most of the area would involve the use of available roads and skid trails existing from past activities. A few temporary roads may be constructed for removal of vegetation in some stands, but these roads would be decommissioned at the end of the project.

Proposed Action: Other Activities

In addition to the proposed vegetation treatments, the proposed action for this project area includes restoration and projects that would affect public access (road closures, road decommissioning, culvert replacement, and trail construction). The road proposal includes implementing seasonal closures on 7.64 miles of road, year-round closures on 7.78 miles of road, and obliterating 8.78 miles of road. The culvert proposal includes replacing 12 culverts on and off-Forest on roads that are under Forest Service jurisdiction. The following two tables (Road Proposal and Culvert Replacement Proposal) display which roads are proposed for specific road treatment activities. These road treatment proposals will serve to improve wildlife habitat, reduce the risk of spread of noxious weeds, improve water quality, and reduce the costs of road maintenance in the area. Lastly, the proposed action includes designating and improving the non-motorized trail system within the planning area, as shown in the proposed action map. Approximately 6.0 miles of horse/hiking trails and approximately 7.5 miles of horse/hiking/biking trails are being proposed for improvement and/or construction. The motorized trail recommendations proposed by the collaborative group are being analyzed as the Gibson Prairie OHV Area included in the Proposed Action in the Mt Hood National Forest, Off-Highway Vehicle Travel Management Plan Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process, currently ongoing.

Road Proposal						
Road #	Miles Closed		Road #	Miles Closed	Road #	Miles Closed
Seasonal Closures			Year-Round Closures		Obliteration	
1711	2.83		1710640	1.29	1711650	1.46
1711630	2.67		1700660	2.26	Unnamed spur rod to 1710	0.49
1720193	2.14		1700662	2.97	1710643	0.3
Sub-total	7.64		1700665	0.13	1710644	0.87
			1700740	0.40	1710630	0.48
			1711620	0.73	1710631	0.27
			Sub-total	7.78	1710632	0.09
					1710690	0.27
					1710620	0.25
					1711640	0.22
					1711620 from the 1711623 junction	0.57
					N10911	1.7
					1711624	0.61
					1700013	0.7
					1700663	0.3
					1700664	0.2
					Sub-total	8.78

Culvert Replacement Proposal		
Creek	Culvert	Location
North Fork Mill Creek	1700-660	on-Forest
	1700-663	on-Forest
Alder Creek	1721	on-Forest, in The Dalles Municipal Watershed
West Fork Neal Creek	1700	on-Forest
	1710-710	on-Forest
	1700-641	on-Forest
	1700	~0.5 mile downstream of Forest boundary
	1700-630	~0.5 mile downstream of Forest boundary
	1700	~1.5 mile downstream of Forest boundary
Tributary to West Fork Neal Creek	1700	~1.25 mile downstream of Forest boundary
	1700-730	~1.0 mile downstream of Forest boundary
Neal Creek	1710	~1.25 mile downstream of Forest boundary

Mt. Hood Land and Resource Management Plan

Standards and guidelines in the Mt. Hood Forest Plan were not written to specifically address hazardous fuels reduction. When the Mt. Hood Forest Plan was written (1990), it emphasized traditional timber sales, and did not specifically address fuels reduction projects. The following standards would not be fully met with this project.

- Down Wood Material (FW-219): An average total of at least 6 logs per acre in decomposition classes 1, 2 and 3 should be retained in all project activity areas.
- Snags (FW-215): Where new timber harvest units occur, wildlife trees (i.e. snags and green reserve trees) should be maintained in sufficient quantity and quality to support over time at least 60 percent of the maximum biological potential of primary cavity nesting species.

Based on a preliminary effects analysis conducted by the interdisciplinary team, exceptions to these standards would be needed to meet the purpose and need of effective fuel reduction within the planning area. These standards are in the “should” category (Forest Plan, page Four-45) and therefore exceptions are acceptable if 1) they are identified during interdisciplinary project planning environmental analyses and 2) are documented in environmental analysis documents.

Healthy Forest Restoration Act

The District is analyzing the proposed fuels reduction project in an Environmental Assessment (EA) under the authorities of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA). HFRA was adopted by Congress to improve the capacity of agencies to implement hazardous fuels reduction projects that are aimed at protecting communities and watersheds from wildfire. To view the text of the HFRA, you can visit the following link: <http://fsweb.wo.fs.fed.us/hfra/references/hfra.pdf>. Also, detailed information on the implementation of HFRA projects can be found on the following website: <http://www.fs.fed.us/projects/hfi/field-guide/>. The project, as proposed, fits within the parameters of an HFRA project, since it is within the Wildland-Urban Interface in the Hood River County Community Wildfire Protection Plan and the treatments are proposed within Fire Regime Condition Classes 2 and 3. The Community Wildfire Protection Plan can be found at: <http://www.co.hood-river.or.us/documents/CWPP.pdf>.

There are special requirements and exemptions in an EA prepared under the HFRA, such as analyzing a limited number of alternatives and a special administrative review called an objection process, rather than the traditional administrative appeals process. The requirements of the objection process are explained below.

Opportunity for Public Comment

Public participation is an important part of this analysis. The District is seeking information, comments, and assistance from Federal, State and local agencies, tribes, and other individuals or organizations that may be interested in or affected by the proposed action. We are interested in hearing your comments on these or any other issues you may have on this project. Your issues will be important to us as we develop any alternatives to the proposal, analyze the effects of the alternatives, and select a final course of action.

In addition, written comments must be received during this comment period to be eligible to file an objection during the pre-decisional, administrative review process (36 CFR 218). Comments must be specific and relate to the proposed action. They must be postmarked or received no later 30 days following the publication of the legal notice in *The Oregonian*. Please send comments to Jennie O'Connor, 6780 Highway 35; Mt. Hood/Parkdale, OR 97041. She can also be reached at (541) 352-6002 x634; or via email at: jmoconnor@fs.fed.us. Electronic comments should be submitted to comments-pacificnorthwest-mthood-hoodriver@fs.fed.us in a format such as an e-mail message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc).

There will be a public meeting on March 26, 2008 at the Hood River Ranger Station from 6:00-7:30 pm to discuss this proposal, provide maps and answer questions. It will also be a time for us to hear any concerns you may have for this proposal or its effects. Please contact us if you would like to attend, or need directions to the office.

Timeline:

After comments are received during this comment period and are incorporated into the analysis, an EA is expected to be completed in May 2008.

We look forward to your participation in this project.

Sincerely,

DAINA L. BAMBE
District Ranger

Enclosures