

Decision Memo

East Fork Riparian Tree Culturing Project

USDA Forest Service
Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument, Gifford Pinchot National Forest
Skamania County, Washington

Background

The East Fork Lewis River Fish Habitat Rehabilitation Environmental Assessment and Decision Notice (1999) analyzed and approved the planting of conifers on 147 acres within riparian stands along the East Fork Lewis River. The EA and DN also allowed for limited release activities excluding the creation of one to two acre gaps (analyzed in the EA).

The project purpose and need is to enhance the growth of planted and natural conifers within East Fork Lewis River riparian reserves, while maintaining or improving stand diversity, stream shade. The long-term objective would be to restore the presence of conifers within riparian stands, and accelerate the development of large trees and future down wood. The East Fork Lewis River provides spawning and rearing habitat for summer and winter steelhead (*Onchorynchus mykiss*), listed as threatened in 1998.

Trees were planted in 2000 without significant site preparation and on areas where the site conditions facilitated relatively easy planting. Since 2000 many trees have been severely overtopped by the shrub and tree layer, and in some units there was a significant level of animal browsing. Many seedlings are established on site, but have not been able to sufficiently develop due to shaded conditions (competition for light) and animal damage.

The general prescription for this project includes the release of surviving conifers that were planted in 2000 along the East Fork Lewis River Riparian Reserve. Preparation activities would include the selection of individual conifers and the identification of shrubs and red alder that are overtopping individual trees. On to two red alder trees per acre would be girdled. Selected conifers would be identified and determined as those that would likely respond to release.

Most of the surviving small trees are western red cedar. Western hemlock and grand fir were also planted; a few western hemlock have survived. Naturally regenerated western hemlock and Douglas-fir is also present within the stands, and would be selected for culturing and release. Shrubs to be cut include larger, overtopping species such as vine maple.

The following prescription is recommended to improve the growing conditions for planted and naturally regenerated conifers, and to enhance the potential for success of the investment made in these stands during 2000.

1. Treat four stands analyzed in the original EA, and identified as follows in the 2000 contract. See the East Fork Lewis River Fish Habitat Rehabilitation Environmental Assessment and Decision Notice (1999) for maps and locations of units.
 - √ V-8: 17.5 acres and 2000 trees (114 tpa)
 - √ V9- 6.8 acres and 1075 trees (158 tpa)
 - √ V10- 6.7 acres and 1875 trees (280 tpa)
 - √ V11- 6.4 acres and 2000 trees (312 tpa)
2. Enhance growing conditions for 50 to 100 planted or natural seedlings (or trees) per acre (tpa).
3. Culture around seedlings to assure that adequate light is reaching seedlings to allow for adequate growth and development, and expansion above the shrub layer and into the mid and upper tree canopy.
4. Allow for some level of seedling protection to prevent further damage from deer and elk. This can be done through artificial prevention methods such as Vexar or other barriers and through the use of residual slash from shrubs that are cut.

Decision

I have decided to allow the release of conifers in units that were planted along the East Fork Lewis River in 2005. This decision includes required mitigation, listed below.

Project Design Criteria (also see attached PDC's from the programmatic BA)

1. Maintain a minimum 25 foot "no cut" buffer for shrubs and red alder along the East Fork Lewis River, and a 50 foot no cut buffer for red alder (25 feet for shrubs) on the south side of the East Fork Lewis River. The objective would be to maintain shade conditions.
2. The cutting of conifers or big leaf maple is not allowed.
3. If overstory red alder are treated to increase sunlight for under-planted conifers, kill trees through girdling during the growing season (early June is an effective time).
4. The girdling of red alder would be limited to a SE-south-SW semi-circle designed to limit the removal of the species, which provides habitat complexity and the benefits of nitrogen fixation. Girdling would be limited to individuals that would enhance conifer growth. One to two red alder per acre would be girdled.
5. Maintain 40 to 50% canopy cover. The girdling and eventual killing of red alder should create gaps no larger than 0.25 acre (Programmatic BA/BO).
6. The pulling of shrubs will not be allowed.

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment. The action is covered by the category list in FSH 1919.15, 31.2, subsection 6: “*Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction.*”

This categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects that may significantly affect the environment. This category requires the maintenance of a project file or documentation of the decision in a Decision Memo; however, because listed wildlife and cultural or historic resources exist in some of the proposed locations, I found it necessary to prepare a Decision Memo. I find that there is no potential for significant impact from implementation of this action. In this decision, I considered the girdling of red alder within a riparian reserve in a Tier 1 Key Watershed, the potential to affect critical habitat for federally listed species, and the potential for disturbance to culturally significant sites.

Scoping

The location of units and a description of the proposed activity were circulated to the interdisciplinary team. The proposal to release conifers through the cutting of shrubs and the girdling of red alder, and the associated site/habitat disturbance was considered for specific sites. The proposed action was published in the quarterly schedule of proposed actions for the Gifford Pinchot National Forest (“*Pinchot Projects*”) during 2004/2005.

Findings Required by Other Laws

As required by the National Forest Management Act, this decision is consistent with the *Gifford Pinchot National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan* (1990) as amended by the *Record of Decision for Amendments to Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Planning Documents Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl* (Amendment 11).

The project was designed in conformance with forest plan standards and incorporates appropriate forest plan standards and guidelines for Riparian Reserves (Amendment 11, pages 2-57, 2-62) and the Aquatic Conservation Strategy (Amendment 11, pages 2-1 through 2-3).

I find that this decision is consistent with the Endangered Species Act. There would be no effect to listed species. Essential and critical habitat will be protected. There are no timing restrictions for this action. The project may impact Region 6 Sensitive animal and plant species, but would not likely contribute to a trend towards federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the populations or species. These findings are documented in the Botany and Wildlife Biological Evaluations (September 9, 2005 and August 15, 2005) and the Federal Analysis of Effects and Determination for Fisheries (September 16, 2005). The project is consistent with the July 26, 2004 NOAA Fisheries Programmatic BO (*Endangered Species Act Section 7 Formal Consultation and Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act Essential Fish Habitat Consultation for USDA Forest Service Programmatic Activities, Gifford Pinchot National Forest and the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, Washington*).

I find that this decision is consistent with the National Historic Preservation Act. As mitigated, the proposed action will not result in a significant impact to the cultural and historic resource. I find that this decision is consistent with the Clean Water Act. Implementation of this decision will mean that Aquatic Conservation Strategy objectives will continue to be met.

Implementation Date

This project will be implemented immediately.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is not subject to administrative appeal.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Cynthia Henschell, South Zone Planning Team Leader (phone: (509) 395-3411 or email: chenchell@fs.fed.us), or Karen Thompson, North Zone Planning Team Leader (phone: (360) 497-4078) or email: karenmthompson@fs.fed.us).

Clifford D Ligons

CLIFFORD D LIGONS
Monument Manager

September 16, 2005

Date

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