

Decision Notice & Finding of No Significant Impact

CANYON TIMBER SALE

USDA Forest Service
Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument,
Gifford Pinchot National Forest
Skamania County, Washington
T. 4 N., R. 5 E., T. 5 N., R. 5 E., Willamette Meridian

Decision and Reasons for the Decision

Background

The Gifford Pinchot National Forest prepared an environmental assessment (EA) for the Canyon Timber Sale, located within the Merwin Reservoir and Yale Reservoir fifth-field watersheds. The proposal is to commercially thin approximately 479 acres of timber stands on the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument (outside of the legislated Monument) in Washington State. The purpose of this action is to restore and improve/accelerate timber growth and yield of even-aged, stagnated stands that were artificially regenerated following clear-cut timber harvest in the 1960s and 1970s. It is also to restore late-successional ecosystems in stands in Late-Successional Reserves and in Riparian Reserves, and to manage the stands within the lands designated as Matrix in the Northwest Forest Plan for the continued production and utilization of forest resources, principally timber, water, dispersed recreation, and wildlife. The proposed action would yield approximately 7.6 million board feet of commercial timber for sale.

The EA for this project was completed in October 2007 and identified resource needs and management objectives (EA, pages 3-6) for this project that are intended to move the area closer toward the desired future conditions of the landscape, as identified in the *Gifford Pinchot National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan* (LRMP), as amended, and actions recommended in the *Lower Lewis River Watershed Analysis* (1996) identified as necessary to attain the Aquatic Conservation Strategy objectives.

Decision

Based upon my review of the analysis and alternatives, I have decided to implement the proposed action from the Canyon Timber Sale EA.

The proposed action would commercially thin 479 acres out of a total of 553 acres in twelve timber sale units. The action broken down by land allocation is as follows:

General Forest – The proposed action would thin the trees, to accelerate conifer growth, within timber stands within the General Forest/Matrix allocation totaling approximately 393 acres. A variable density reduction thinning prescription (VDT) would be used to space the trees and accelerate the conifer growth rate. Specifically:

- Stands 2, 6, 11, 12, 14, 16, 17, and 20: Five percent of the upland acreages within these stands would be cut for “gaps”. Gaps would be created openings (1/3 – 1/2 acre each) and well distributed. Temporary road prisms and log landings would count toward this goal. Five percent of the unit acreages would be retained for no-cut, leave areas. Riparian Reserve no-cut buffers and sensitive species buffers would count toward this goal. The exception being unit 12 which would retain approximately 30 acres (riparian and alder patch). The remaining acres would be thinned to an approximate Curtis RD34-47 (125-140 trees per acre).
- Stands 8, 9, and 10: Within Deer and Elk Winter Range, thirty to forty percent of the upland acreage within these stands would be thinned heavily to between an approximate Curtis RD25-34 (85 trees per acre) to provide a future mix of forage and cover that, over time, would maintain a level of deer and elk commensurate with other resource management goal and objectives. The heavy thinned areas would be located away from FR 5300, and distributed in the upland forested areas. Approximately 10 percent of the unit acreage would be retained for no-cut, leave areas. Riparian Reserve no-cut buffers and sensitive species buffers would count toward this goal. The remaining acres would be thinned to between an approximate Curtis RD31-43 (120-125 trees per acre). The primary goal of this entry is to reduce stocking levels to significantly increase growth rates of dominant and co-dominant trees and provide forage.

A component of down logs (120 linear feet/acre) would be created or maintained in all units, and snags (2.6 snags/acre) would be created in Units 2 and 12.

Riparian Reserves - The proposed action would commercially thin approximately 41 acres of timber stands within the riparian reserves. A density reduction thinning prescription would be used to space the trees and accelerate the conifer growth rate. Specifically:

Stands 3, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 17, and 20: The thinning treatment (VDT) would reduce stand density to an approximate Curtis RD34-47 (125-140 trees per acre) on the treated acres within the Riparian Reserves. A 60-foot no-cut buffer would be required from all waterways, with the following exceptions: unit 17 (Fly Creek) which would receive a 210-foot (1 site potential tree height) no-cut buffer; Unit 10 where the wetland would also receive a 210-foot no-cut buffer, and the creek draining the wetland in the southwest part of the unit would receive a 100-foot no-cut buffer. Two (largest diameter) trees per acre would be “daylighted” within the Riparian Reserve treatment areas. All Douglas-fir trees within an 18-foot radius of the leave tree would be removed. The primary goal of this entry is to reduce stocking levels to significantly increase growth rates of dominant and co-dominant trees and interplant shade tolerant species. A component of down logs and snags would also be created or maintained on these acres. Shade tolerant conifers (western red cedar and western hemlock) would be planted on all treated riparian acres (38 acres). Vexar tubing, with 2 sticks, would be placed on the western red cedar seedlings (within one week after planting) to deter animal browsing.

Riparian reserve widths are expressed as the height of a site-potential tree which is the average maximum height of the tallest dominate tree at age 200 years for a given site class. The riparian reserve widths for the Canyon planning area are as follows:

- Fish bearing streams – two site potential trees or 420 feet.
- Perennial non-fish bearing – one site potential tree or 210 feet.
- Intermittent streams – one site potential tree or 210 feet.

Late Successional Reserve - The proposed action would commercially thin approximately 45 acres of timber stands within the Late-Successional Reserve. A variable density reduction thinning prescription (VDT) would be used to increase tree vigor and add stand level complexity (patchy understory development, large trees, and decadence) and protect key habitat and legacies features. Specifically:

Stand 3: Ten percent of the upland acreages within this stand would be cut for “gaps”. Gaps would be created openings (1/3 – 1/2 acre each) and well distributed. Temporary road prisms would count toward this goal. Approximately 10 percent of the unit acreage would be retained for no-cut, leave areas. Riparian Reserve no-cut buffers would count toward this goal. The remaining acres would be thinned to an approximate Curtis RD47 (131 trees/acre). The entire unit, except the untreated retention islands, would be under planted, with shade tolerant conifer species.

A component of down logs (120 linear feet/acre) would be created or maintained, and snags (2.6 snags/acre) would be created

All Land Allocations

Slash Treatment – Tops, branches, and other slash generated by the activity would be left in the units and would not be piled, except for machine piling at the designated landing locations, within 50 feet of FR 5300 and 5700, and in isolated areas of heavy slash accumulation. The slash piles would be burned during a time of the year when damage to the soil would be minimized.

Road Decommissioning - Following timber harvest activities Forest Roads 4205522 and 5300607 would be decommissioned. Decommissioning would include removing culverts, pulling back the fill at stream crossings and stream-adjacent road sections to a stable slope, and decompacting the road bed. Prior to timber harvest, culverts would be cleaned, replaced or added at seven locations.

Table 1. Summary of Proposed Action

Unit	Acres	Yarding Method	Normal Thinning (acres)	Heavy Thinning Deer/Elk (acres)	Gaps (acres)	Retention Islands outside RR (acres)	RR Thinning Treatment (acres)	RR no-cut Buffer (acres)
2	17	Ground	15	0	1	1	0	0
3	50	Ground	39	0	5	4	1	1
6	24	Skyline/ Ground	16	0	1	0	3	4
8	36	Sky/ Ground	19	13	0	2	1	1
9	42	Ground	21	17	0	4	0	0
10	62	Ground	23	25	0	0	3	11
11	14	Ground	13	0	0	1	0	0
12	143	Sky Ground	79	0	7	2	27	28
14	52	Sky/ Ground	43	0	3	0	2	4
16	49	Sky/ Ground	43	0	2	1	1	2
17	48	Skyline	38	0	2	0	2	6
20	16	Skyline	12	0	1	1	1	1
Total	553		361	55	22	16	41	58

Table 2. Temporary road construction by unit.

Unit #	Action Alternative Temporary Road Length (ft)
3	3,168
6	800
9	300
10	800
12	4,224
16	1,056
Total	9,348

The following are design features of the proposed action. A complete list of project design criteria and mitigation measures can be found in Appendix A of the EA.

- A density reduction thinning prescription for the uplands would be used to space the trees and accelerate the conifer growth rate. The thinning treatment would reduce stand density to an average of 85 to 140 trees per acre.
- A riparian management zone, 420 feet on each side of perennial fish bearing streams and 210 feet on each side of non-fish-bearing perennial and intermittent streams, would be designated. Density reduction activities would be permitted within portions of the management zone. Cut trees would be directionally felled away from the streams. A 60-foot no-cut buffer would be implemented adjacent to all streams in the units except for the stream in the southwest part of Unit 10 which would receive a 100-foot no-cut buffer, Fly Creek at the base of Unit 17 which would receive a 210-foot no-cut buffer, and the wetland in Unit 10 which would also receive a 210-foot no-cut buffer.
- Remnant legacy features (snags and large down logs) would be preserved whenever possible. In identified areas devoid of these features, snags and coarse woody debris would be created.
- Hardwoods that exist within the units would not be cut, except if there are cases where hardwoods need to be removed in order to reuse an old landing or temporary road.
- Western hemlock, and/or western redcedar would be planted within the thinned riparian areas. Vexar tubing would be installed on the western redcedar to deter animal browsing.
- Temporary roads, including 5300607 would have all culverts removed, and temporary roads and log landings would be sub-soiled and grass seeded as needed following logging operations.
- An invasive weed prevention and treatment plan would be completed for the project.
- Skyline logging would require a slack pulling carriage for lateral yarding.
- All off-road heavy equipment used in the removal of logs would be cleaned to remove soil, seeds, vegetation matter or other debris that could contain noxious weeds.

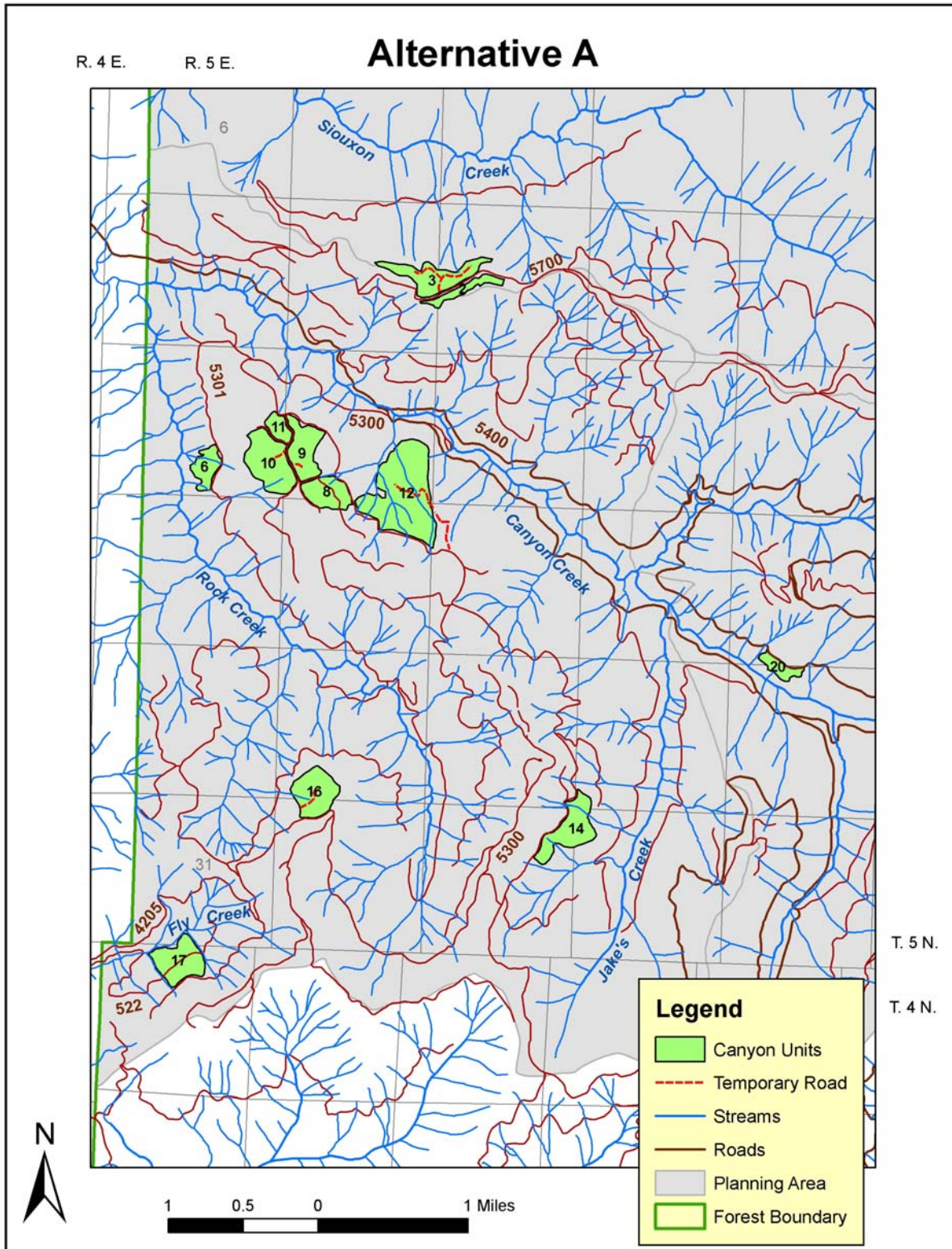


Figure 1. Alternative A – Proposed Action.

Rationale for the Decision

This action meets the objectives of restoring and accelerating timber growth and yield of even-aged, stagnated stands that were artificially regenerated and restores late-successional ecosystems in stands in Late-Successional Reserves and in Riparian Reserves. The action yields approximately 7.6 million board feet of commercial timber for sale, which meets the objective of managing the stands within the lands designated as Matrix in the Northwest Forest Plan for the continued production and utilization of forest resources, principally timber, water, dispersed recreation, and wildlife.

The selected alternative reflects comments received during scoping that encourage the use of variable density thinning. While wood production is a primary goal of Matrix lands, other values such as water, fish, dispersed recreation, and wildlife (LRMP, amendment 11, pages 6-25) are also important. The purpose of silvicultural treatments in Late-Successional Reserves (Unit 3) is to benefit the creation and maintenance of late-successional forest characteristics. Variable density thinning can be used to increase tree vigor and long term volume growth, as well as maintaining and improving habitat values by increasing stand heterogeneity.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered the No Action alternative.

Alternative B

Alternative B is the No Action alternative. This alternative was analyzed in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act, (CFR 1502.14 (d)) and provided a baseline to evaluate the proposed action. As part of this alternative, none of the proposed activities would occur, including: thinning treatments, riparian planting, construction of temporary roads, slash treatments, or road decommissioning activities.

I did not select this alternative because the opportunity to restore and accelerate timber growth and yield in even-aged, dense stands, and to restore late-successional ecosystems in stands in Late-Successional Reserves and in Riparian Reserves, and for the continued production and utilization of forest resources within the Matrix allocation would be forgone at this time. Matrix stand growth and the development of late-successional characteristics in Riparian Reserve stands proposed for thinning would take place over a longer period of time and at an unpredictable degree and rate of change. This would not meet project objectives for improving stand structure distribution and accelerating late-successional conditions in Riparian Reserves. The opportunity to include the decommissioning of Forest Road 4205-522 as part of the timber sale with the benefits of reconnecting aquatic habitat and reducing sedimentation in Fly Creek would also be forgone.

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study

An alternative was proposed through scoping that would require the stands be thinned without construction or reconstruction of any temporary roads. After considering the proposed placement of temporary roads, and the Project Design Criteria and Best Management Practices that would be part of the Proposed Action, the interdisciplinary team concluded that the potential effects of a second action alternative that eliminated temporary roads would be nearly

indistinguishable from the Proposed Action. In addition, if temporary roads were not built, alternative yarding systems, such as helicopter yarding would be required that would be economically infeasible. The proposed units that require temporary roads would have been dropped from the Alternative, thus not meeting the Purpose and Need to thin these stands.

Public Involvement

The proposal was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions beginning in October 2006. A description of the proposal was sent to a mailing list of 49 individuals, organizations, and agencies for comment during scoping which was initiated on November 15, 2006. The scoping letters for this project were also sent to the Cowlitz Indian office and the Yakama Indian Nation. During the initial scoping period, the Forest Service received three comment letters in response to the proposed action (EA, page 7). Using these comments the interdisciplinary team developed the final proposed action and a list of issues that would be addressed in this analysis. Copies of scoping notices and comment letters are in the analysis file.

Using the comments from the public, the interdisciplinary team identified several issues regarding the effects of the proposed action. Two significant issues were identified:

- Issue 1—Connectivity within the riparian reserves of Canyon Creek (EA, page 8).
- Issue 2 – Road delivering sediment and increasing the road network (EA, page 8).
- Issue 3—Optimal thermal cover in deer and elk winter range, and elk and deer forage production (EA, page 9).

These issues were addressed through the design features of the proposed action. Specifically, by: enhancing late-seral components of riparian areas through the thinning prescription, while protecting the sediment filtering and shade providing function of non-disturbed stream adjacent riparian areas by setting stream adjacent no-cut buffers; decommissioning existing roads and obliterating temporary roads; and, variably density thinning to accelerate the development of optimal thermal cover and provide forage for deer and elk (EA, pages 8, 9)

A legal notice announcing the availability of the Canyon Timber Sale EA for review and comment was published in the *Columbian* newspaper (newspaper of record) on October 8, 2007. The 30-day comment period ended on November 7, 2007. Three individuals and organizations submitted written comments within the comment period (EA, page 7). Copies of these letters are in the Canyon Timber Sale analysis file. Substantive comments received are summarized along with Forest Service responses in Appendix C of the EA.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant affect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

1. Adverse and beneficial impacts have been assessed and found to be not significant. The analysis considered not only the direct and indirect effects of the projects but also their contribution to cumulative effects (EA, Soils, pages 25-31; Hydrology, pages 36-55; Fisheries, pages 62-66; Silviculture, pages 70-74; Botany, pages 81-92; Wildlife, pages 102-115; Scenery, page 116; Heritage, page 116; Economics, pages 116-118; Other Environmental Consequences, pages 118-120). Adverse effects from the proposed action have been reduced or eliminated through project design and mitigation measures (EA, page 13 and Appendix A). My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action. Past, present and foreseeable future actions have been included in the analysis. No significant cumulative or secondary effects were identified.
2. I find there will be no significant affects to public health and safety. No public health and safety issues were raised during scoping. Log haul will be permitted only Monday through Friday, except holidays to limit the potential for road use conflicts with recreational visitors (Appendix A, page 7).
3. I find there will be no significant affects on unique characteristics or ecologically critical areas, including historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, rangelands, wetlands, or Wild and Scenic Rivers. There are no heritage resource sites located within the Canyon Timber Sale planning area (EA, page 116). There are no park lands, farmlands, or rangelands within the planning area. There will be no impact to wetlands due to the implementation of project design criteria and mitigation measures (EA, pages 120 and Appendix A). A Wild River corridor along Siouxon Creek runs through the northern part of the planning area (EA, pages 6, 115, and 116). This creek has been identified as eligible for Wild and Scenic River designation. None of the proposed harvest units is near the Wild and Scenic River corridor. The closest units are Units 2 and 3, which are about 0.5 mile from the corridor along Siouxon Creek and would not be visible from the corridor (EA, page 116).
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. There is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the project. The comments to the EA indicate that this project is not considered to be controversial (Analysis File, Comments to the EA).
5. Through implementation of similar vegetation management in the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument, the Forest Service has considerable local experience with the types of activities to be implemented. Thus, I have determined that the effects analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk (EA, pages 16-120).
6. I find that this action is one of several similar actions undertaken on National Forest System lands and is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, or represent a decision in principle. The decision implements the Gifford Pinchot Forest Plan, as amended (EA, 3-6).

7. I find that the cumulative impacts are not significant. Cumulative impacts are addressed by issue in Chapter 3 of the EA (EA, Soils, pages 29, 30; Hydrology, pages 42, 46-48, 50, 51; Fisheries, pages 65, 66; Silviculture, pages 70-74; Botany, page 91, 92; Wildlife, pages 102-107, 109-111, 113-115; Scenery, page 116).
8. I find that the action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, because there are no heritage resource sites located within the Canyon Timber Sale planning area (EA, page 116).
9. I find the action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species act of 1973. The effects determination for northern spotted owl is *May Affect and and Not Likely to Adversely Affect*. The effects of this project are covered under the Programmatic Biological Assessment for Forest Management for the Gifford Pinchot National Forest (August 2001), and additional consultation with USFWS is not required. Canyon Creek is not a bull trout watershed, so consultation on potential effects to this species is not required. The effects determination for Lower Columbia River steelhead, Lower Columbia River Chinook, and designated critical habitat is *No Effect*, so consultation with the National Marine Fisheries Service is not required (EA, page 121).
10. I find that the action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA (EA, pages 121). The action is consistent with the *Gifford Pinchot National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan* as amended.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

As required by the National Forest Management Act, this decision is tiered to 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* (1994), and *Amendments to the Survey & Manage, Protection Buffer, and other Mitigation Measures Standards and Guidelines* (2001), I find that the only irreversible or irretrievable commitment of resources will be use of rock for road surfacing and the small loss of soil productivity (about 2.3%) (EA, page 119, 120). All landings and temporary roads will be subsoiled and reseeded upon completion of the project.

This decision is based on the following additional factors to assure consistency with the National Forest Management Act of 1976:

This action is best suited to the goals in the LRMP. The applicable goals with respect to the LRMP and the *Lower Lewis River Watershed Analysis* are stated in the EA on page 3 and 4. This decision is responsive to those goals and is best suited to meet those goals.

Lands can be adequately restocked within five years after final harvest when trees are cut to achieve timber production. No final harvest is included within the proposal (see Table 1, above).

Shade tolerant conifers (western red cedar and western hemlock) would be planted on all treated riparian acres (38 acres) and the entire unit located within LSR, except the untreated retention islands, would be under planted, with shade tolerant conifer species.

This decision is not based on the greatest dollar return or the greatest output of timber (although these factors shall be considered). This decision was based on a variety of reasons. It was not primarily chosen for its expected economic benefit (EA, pages 116-118). Economics was only one of the many factors considered.

Potential effects on residual trees and adjacent stands have been considered. The effects on residual trees and adjacent stands were considered in development of the LRMP. The decision, including adherence to applicable LRMP Standards and Guidelines and the Project Design Criteria, is designed to provide the desired effects of management practices on the resource values. This decision is consistent with the LRMP and provides the desired effect on residual trees and adjacent stands.

This action was selected to avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and to ensure conservation of soil and water resources. This decision avoids impairment of site productivity. The nature of the decision and use of Best Management Practices, Project Design Criteria, and the Mitigation Measures will protect soil and water resources.

This action was selected to provide the desired effects on water quality and quantity, wildlife and fish habitat, regeneration of desired tree species, forage production, recreation users, aesthetic values, and other resource yields. The decision, including adherence to applicable LRMP Standards and Guidelines, Best Management Practices, Project Design Criteria, and the Mitigation Measures is designed to provide the desired effects of management practices on the resource values. This decision is consistent with the LRMP and provides the desired effect on the above resources.

This action is practical in terms of transportation and harvesting requirements and total costs of preparation, logging, and administration. The project area has adequate access, no new permanent roads are necessary to implement this decision. The treatment in this decision is appropriate to accomplish project objectives, and is economically practical. The benefit-to-cost ratio is positive, considering the cost of harvest operations, design criteria, and mitigation. The return is sufficient to cover the cost of contract preparation and sale administration.

I find that this action is consistent with the *Record of Decision for the Final Environmental Impact Statement for Managing Competing and Unwanted Vegetation* (USDA, 1988b) as amended by the *Amendment to the 1988 Record of Decision for the Final Environmental Impact Statement for Managing Competing and Unwanted Vegetation* (USDA, 1992), further supplemented by the Mediated Agreement. Specific mitigation is included by this decision to prevent or control the spread of noxious weeds within the project area and along roads.

I find that this action is consistent with the Sustainable Fisheries Act of 1996 (Public Law 104-267) (which amended the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act).

Because Essential Fish Habitat will not be adversely affected for any of these species, no consultation is necessary.

I find that all applicable state and federal requirements associated with the Clean Water Act (CWA) will be met through planning, application, and monitoring of Best Management Practices in conformance with the CWA and Federal guidance and management direction.

I find that this action does not violate other Federal, State, or local laws designed for the protection of the environment.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to administrative review (appeal) pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215. The written appeal must be filed (regular mail, fax, email, hand-delivery, or express delivery) with the Appeal Deciding Officer at:

Gifford Pinchot National Forest
Claire Lavendel, Appeal Deciding Officer,
10600 N.E. 51st Circle, Vancouver, WA 98682

FAX (360) 891-5045

email: appeals-pacificnorthwest-giffordpinchot@fs.fed.us.

The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered appeals are: 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays. Electronic appeals must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), Word (.doc), or portable document format (.pdf). In cases where no identifiable name is attached to an electronic message, a verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature is one way to provide verification. E-mails submitted to email addresses other than the one listed above, or in formats other than those listed or containing viruses, will be rejected. It is the responsibility of the appellant to confirm receipt of appeals submitted by electronic mail.

Appeals, including attachments, must be filed within 45 days from the publication date of this notice in the *Columbian*, the newspaper of record. Attachments received after the 45 day appeal period will not be considered. The publication date in the *Columbian* is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Implementation Date

If no appeals are filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of the decision may occur on, but not before, 5 business days from the close of the appeal filing period. When appeals are filed, implementation may occur on, but not before, the 15th business day following the date of the last appeal disposition.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Erin Black, South Zone Team Planner, during normal office hours (weekdays, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) at the Mount Adams Ranger District office (Address: Hwy 141, Trout Lake, WA 98650; Phone: voice (509) 395-3411; Fax: (509) 395-3424; e-mail: ekblack@fs.fed.us).

/s/ Tom Mulder

January 9, 2008

TOM MULDER

Date

Monument Manager

Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument

January 10, 2008

Date Published in *The Columbian*

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