

Record of Decision

Gotchen Risk Reduction and Restoration Project USDA Forest Service Mount Adams District, Gifford Pinchot National Forest Skamania and Yakima Counties, Washington

Sec. 1-3, 10-16, 21-28, 33-36, T.7N, R.10E and
Sec. 6-9, 16-21, 28-33, T.7N, R.11E, W.M.

Introduction

The Gotchen Planning Area (or “Gotchen area”) is a 19,700-acre portion of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest on the east slopes of the Cascade Range, within the White Salmon Watershed, south of Mt. Adams and east of the White Salmon River.

The landscape is dominated by dense, multi-layered stands of grand fir and Douglas-fir, with a few remnant old-growth ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir and concentrations of down wood material. Fire has been removed from the Gotchen area for decades through policies of fire exclusion, disrupting historic fire cycles. Prior to fire exclusion, frequent (10 - 70 years) low intensity burns effectively cleaned out accumulations of low vegetation and fallen branches and limbs. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, high levels of defoliation and mortality of grand fir and Douglas-fir were caused by a spruce budworm outbreak increasing fuel loading far above historic levels. At this time, the Gotchen area is identified as having a moderate to high fire hazard.

The Gotchen Planning Area adjoins private and state lands to the south and the Yakama Indian Reservation to the east. Early in the planning stages, both representatives of the Yakama Indian Nation and the largest private landowner identified a potential significant risk of economic and resource loss from fire originating within the Gotchen area and moving into adjacent non-federal lands.

The Gotchen Planning Area includes late-successional forest and also provides a link between late-successional forest within and outside of the National Forest boundary. Widespread defoliation and resulting tree mortality have contributed to the decline of suitable habitat for the northern spotted owl and other species dependant on late-successional forests.

I have determined that this action is needed because of the current risk of losing late-successional function from the large-scale ecological disturbances (ongoing defoliation caused by insect and disease activity), and/or the threat of losing habitat from large, stand-replacing fires.

The environmental impact statement (EIS) documents the analysis of four alternatives to meet this need. Three action alternatives were designed to address the significant issues:

- Efficacy of risk reduction activities to reduce the threat of stand-replacing fire,
- Impacts to northern spotted owl habitat and designated critical habitat,
- Public road access and dispersed recreation,

- Impacts to riparian areas

Each of the action alternatives covers approximately the same number of acres within the Gotchen Planning Area (approximately 11%). Every acre proposed for vegetation modification or ground-disturbing actions is subject to surveys for cultural resources, survey and manage species, and species protected under the Endangered Species Act. Early in the process it was necessary to determine which areas were thought to be the highest candidates for proposed treatment as defined by the project's purpose and need so the required surveys could be completed. All of the alternatives are within the surveyed areas, however, all three alternatives have a different treatment intensity level, which produce different effects and outcomes.

Implementation of any of the treatment alternatives would reduce the risk of large-scale habitat loss and the potential spread of large stand-replacing wildfires. However, none of the treatment alternatives will significantly change the overall susceptibility of the Gotchen landscape to future outbreaks of the western spruce budworm. It is the first step toward meeting that overriding objective.

Decision

Based upon my review of all the alternatives, I have decided to implement Alternative C (also referred to in this notice as the Selected Alternative), including the road closures and decommissioning actions, and required mitigation measures. Implementation of Alternative C will reduce fire risk and improve late-successional function and resiliency by *directly* treating fuels and reducing understory density in high-risk areas. A complete description of Alternative C, including required mitigation measures, is included in Appendix 1 of this Record of Decision.

This decision will reduce the fuel loading and understory density in a large, contiguous block within the Late Successional Reserve (LSR) that contains a large component of grand fir. Alternative C thins the understory, within the majority of treatment units, removes snags in excess of the optimum number determined to be necessary to preserve habitat for cavity nesting species, and treats residual fuels by piling and burning, followed by underburning and reforestation within several units. In addition, a combination of Shaded Fuelbreaks and Fuelbreaks will be created, within the LSR, to tie together existing natural features (Aiken Lava Bed) and into areas with lower fire hazard.

With the exception of Unit M, Unit X, and Unit BB (within the LSR), the diameter limit for harvest of green trees is limited to a maximum of 10" dbh. Green tree harvest within Units M and X is limited to a maximum of 20" dbh and within Unit BB is limited to a maximum of 6" dbh.

The models used for analysis of effects associated with the action alternatives are only considered to be reasonably certain if the treatments are implemented and reoccur as scheduled. Therefore, my decision includes the repeated underburning and maintenance of Fuelbreaks and Shaded Fuelbreaks on a schedule to be validated by monitoring.

Alternative C also treats approximately 57 acres of riparian habitat. Thinning of overly dense riparian areas will improve the health of the remaining trees and accelerate their growth by reducing competition from other trees. The riparian silvicultural prescriptions excludes treatment with 25 feet of any stream.

This alternative will result in a total commercial timber harvest of approximately 9,056 ccf (4,710 mbf) from 519 acres of Matrix allocation and 112 acres from the Gotchen Late-Successional Reserve.

A total of 4.3 miles of temporary roads will be established (3.9 miles of temporary road reconstruction in the Matrix). In addition, 18.4 miles of existing roads will be closed by gates or other devices and 6.4 miles of road will be decommissioned.

Mitigation and Monitoring

The decision includes all of the mitigation measures as described in pages 44 - 51 of the FEIS, and all post-harvest activities associated with Alternative C, as described in Appendix 1 of this Record of Decision and Appendix E (“Alternative C”) of the FEIS. My decision also includes activities and projects that use funds collected under the Knutson-Vandenberg (KV) Act, as listed in the description of Alternative C. I am confident that the mitigation measures we have developed will adequately prevent potential adverse effects of the project actions because the selected mitigation measures are practices that we have used successfully in the past; they are State-recognized best management practices for protecting water quality; or they are based on current research.

It is also important that we monitor the project to ensure that we achieved our objectives, and that we accomplished all the treatments, mitigation, and post-treatment activities described in this decision. Monitoring is also necessary to determine the need for and to schedule recurring treatments that will be needed to maintain the desired conditions. Therefore, we will develop and implement a monitoring plan that addresses the monitoring questions included in Appendix 2 of this Record of Decision.

The decision further amends the Gifford Pinchot Late-Successional Reserve Analysis (LSRA, 1997). The Regional Ecosystem Office reviewed the Preferred Alternative (Alternative C) and the proposed amendment to the LSRA (ROD, C-11). Comments and requested clarification were documented in a letter (Regional Ecosystem Office Memorandum, October 9, 2003) and resulted in clarification that the post-project snag and down wood retention levels are sufficient to meet late-successional species needs in the project area. The supporting documentation and analysis were incorporated into the FEIS.

Changes between DEIS and FEIS

In response to comments received, additional consideration was given to excluding cattle from portions of the meadow in the vicinity of the Gotchen Creek Guard Station. The change to the action alternatives between the DEIS and the FEIS is to include construction of a cattle enclosure around the perimeter of the Gotchen meadow, approximately 11 acres, to exclude cattle. The

exclosure will allow for the natural regeneration of aspen to occur and remove the direct impacts that grazing cattle have to mardon skippers and their habitat. The exclosure will be designed to not distract or reduce the historic character of the area. This modification was considered as mitigation for ongoing grazing permitted under a separate NEPA decision and is a part of the Selected Alternative.

Rationale for the Decision

I have determined that Alternative C addresses the Purpose and Need and moves the environment towards the Desired Future Condition as defined in the *Gifford Pinchot 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).

I believe that the *Gotchen Risk Reduction and Restoration Final Environmental Impact Statement* (FEIS) provided sufficient information for me to make a reasoned choice between alternatives.

Alternative C addresses the need to reduce the risk of losing late-successional habitat from stand-replacing fires by *directly* treating fuels and reducing understory density on more acres than the other action alternatives. In addition, this alternative is the best alternative for meeting the silvicultural objectives of density reduction and reintroducing early seral species to the Gotchen area.

In reading the Gotchen Risk Reduction and Restoration FEIS, I found no documentation that actions associated with this project would result in soil erosion or damage to water quality. The findings of no impact to water quality is based on implementing Best Management Practices and on the professional judgment of the specialists on the interdisciplinary team who have first hand knowledge and experience with road construction on this type of terrain and soils.

All practical means to avoid or minimize environmental harm from the decision have been adopted.

I received several comments both during and after the close of the formal 45-day comment period concerning the harvest prescription for Unit A under Alternative C. Commentors requested the prescription be changed from Light Forest Retention (LFR) to Medium or Heavy Forest Retention. It is my decision to retain the LFR prescription for Unit A. This unit is located in the Matrix allocation and contains predominately grand fir trees, with lesser amounts of Douglas-fir and a few ponderosa pine trees. Historic forest conditions were a much different forest structure and species composition at the turn of the century (1900). Historic forest conditions in the Matrix consisted predominately of large diameter ponderosa pine (25 - 40 trees per acre) with little or no grand fir component due to a frequent fire return interval. The desired future condition for these stands is to increase the early seral species component (ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, and western larch). Past logging activities (partial harvests) have removed the bigger trees (ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir) from these stands. However, it has been the fire exclusion activity from fire suppression efforts that have mainly influenced the composition and structure of these stands. Silviculturally, we are very limited on our options to manage these stands.

Thinning these stands is not a valid silvicultural option nor is it backed by sound science. In order to successfully increase and return these stands to historic conditions with early seral species, a regeneration cut, followed by reforesting the sites, are needed to meet the desired future condition. Thinning these stands would not return them to historic composition of early seral species and therefore would not meet the desired future condition. A Light Forest Retention prescription will leave a scattered retention islands and individual residual overstory of 10 – 20% canopy closure, plus a snag and large coarse wood debris component. The residual trees will be from the largest diameter class and preferably be ponderosa pine or Douglas-fir.

Public Involvement

The Gotchen Risk Reduction and Restoration Project first appeared in the Winter 2000/2001 edition of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (*Pinchot Projects*). A Notice of Intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (NOI) was published in the *Federal Register* on November 6, 2001, (Vol. 66, No. 215). A scoping letter providing information on the purpose and need, and the proposed action was sent to a list of 78 individuals, organizations, agencies, tribes and congressional offices that might have an interest in the Gotchen Risk Reduction and Restoration Project on February 19, 2002. A total of eight letters were received in response to scoping. Field trips and briefings were held with interest groups and individuals to discuss public issues.

Chapter 1 of the FEIS details the following issues that I determined to be significant for the analysis of the Gotchen Risk Reduction and Restoration Project:

- Efficacy of risk reduction activities to reduce the threat of a stand-replacing fire,
- Impacts to northern spotted owl habitat and designated critical habitat,
- Public road access and dispersed recreation,
- Impacts to riparian areas.

These issues were used to develop the alternatives, as described on pages 16 – 18 of the FEIS.

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) was mailed to everyone who commented during scoping, plus others who might have an interest in the Gotchen Risk Reduction and Restoration Project on July 16, 2003. The 45-day comment period ended on September 8, 2003. A total of 14 comment letters were received during that time. Responses to the comments are addressed in Appendix J of the Gotchen Risk Reduction and Restoration Project FEIS. Copies of the comment letters are available in the project record located at the Mount Adams District office.

Alternatives Considered but Not Selected

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered three other alternatives, which are discussed below. Alternative C was the environmentally preferred alternative. A more detailed comparison of these alternatives can be found in the FEIS on page 52.

Alternative A - No Action

Under the No Action alternative, current management plans would continue to guide management of the project area. The No Action Alternative assumes that none of the proposed activities would occur.

My decision not to select Alternative A is based on the analysis that this alternative would continue to allow fire to spread unimpeded across the landscape. A wildfire under a high to severe fire weather condition would most likely produce an intense, high mortality-type fire; thus placing at risk the amount and functionality of the late successional habitat within the Gotchen LSR.

Alternative B – Proposed Action

Alternative B was identified in scoping and in the DEIS as the Proposed Action. This alternative was designed to address the purpose and need for the action and each of the objectives to some degree (FEIS, pages 30 - 31). The Shaded Fuelbreak prescription is the centerpiece of this alternative. Risk reduction treatments would be implemented across 1,684 acres, including 1,139 acres within the LSR (FEIS, page 52).

My decision not to select Alternative B is based on the analysis of two of the significant issues. Compared to the selected alternative, Alternative B would degrade more (386 acres) suitable habitat for the northern spotted owl to non-suitable habitat (FEIS, pages 52). Alternative B relies on a system of fuelbreaks along existing roads and prescribed fire to modify the vegetation to slow or change fire behavior and spread of wildfire, whereas the selected alternative directly treats more acres of heavy fuels.

The Shaded Fuelbreak prescription includes the removal of live trees up to 20" dbh and would reduce the canopy closure to approximately 40 - 50% over approximately 475 acres. This would degrade suitable habitat for the northern spotted owl to non-suitable habitat.

Alternative D

Alternative D emphasizes the treatment of ground and ladder fuels to minimize the spread of fire. Fuelbreaks are also part of the fire strategy to compartmentalize the landscape. This alternative is similar to Alternative B, except green tree cutting and removal is restricted to 10" dbh and less within most of the LSR units. The alternative treats 1,645 acres, 1,100 in the LSR.

My decision not to select Alternative D is based on the analysis that although suitable habitat within the LSR is better preserved, the fuelbreak effectiveness is less under this alternative than in alternative C. As a result of the green tree diameter cut limit, Alternative D has a decreased level of thinning and surface fuel reduction within the firebreaks. These factors give a crown fire more potential to spread through these areas, than with alternative C. This treatment, combined with limited acreages of treated fuels, continues to place the Gotchen late successional habitat at risk.

Findings Required by Law, Regulation, and Agency Policy

I have determined that my decision is consistent with relevant laws, regulations, and agency policy. The following summarizes findings required by major environmental laws.

National Forest Management Act, 1976

The FEIS sets forth the Forest Plan direction and the goals for each of the Management Areas within the Gotchen Planning Area (FEIS, pages 6 - 9). Based on review of the EIS and analysis file, I have determined that the Selected Alternative is consistent with the goals and objectives of the *Gifford Pinchot National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan* (LRMP, 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* (NFP, 1994).

My decision, including required mitigation, is consistent with Standards and Guidelines established in the LRMP, as amended.

Alternative C is consistent with direction in the Northwest Forest Plan (NFP) and the Standards and Guidelines established in the NFP. The FEIS (pages 251 – 283) details how this project addresses each of the Aquatic Conservation Strategy Objectives. Based on review of this information and the recommended management actions in the Upper White Salmon Watershed Analysis, I have determined that the Selected Alternative is consistent with the Aquatic Conservation Strategy.

The Gotchen Risk Reduction and Restoration Project EIS and silvicultural treatments within the Gotchen Late-Successional Reserve were reviewed by the Regional Ecosystem Office. (Regional Ecosystem Office Memorandum, October 9, 2003). This decision amends the Gifford Pinchot National Forest Late Successional Reserve Analysis through incorporation of the Selected Alternative.

The FEIS complies with the Mediated Agreement and the 1988 *Record of Decision for Managing Competing and Unwanted Vegetation FEIS* (USDA-FS 1988). The Gotchen projects that fall within the scope of the FEIS are: 1) Vegetation management for site preparation; 2) Fire management activities; and 3) Noxious weed control. Provisions of the FEIS do not apply to thinning and aspen restoration. The objective of the Mediated Agreement is to manage competing and unwanted vegetation under the preferred “Prevention” and “No Action” strategies. The Gotchen Risk Reduction and Restoration Project FEIS will utilize Prevention, Early Treatment, and Correction Strategies to manage the competing and unwanted vegetation.

Suitability for Timber Production and Vegetation Manipulation

This project complies with the consistency standards of 36 CFR 219.10(f). No timber will be harvested from lands not suited for timber production as defined in 36 CFR 219.14. The ability to restock after tree harvest is generally not a concern and ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, and western larch are expected to be restocked within 5 years after harvest, as needed to meet desired stocking levels.

All manipulation of vegetation will comply with the requirements of 36 CFR 219.27 (b). The decision to implement Alternative C was based on a variety of reasons as discussed earlier in this decision. Economics was one of the many factors I considered. I reviewed the economic analysis (FEIS page 295 and project file) to assess the trade-offs between alternatives. I recognize that Alternative C has higher implementation costs but it addresses other important project goals and issues.

Alternative C avoids impairment of site productivity. This determination is supported by the disclosures in the FEIS (pages 241 - 251) and the application of BMPs to prevent the loss of soil as displayed in the FEIS, page 48.

Alternative C provides the desired effect on water quality and quantity, wildlife and fish habitat, regeneration of desired tree species, forage production, recreation uses, aesthetic values, and other resource yields. The Standards and Guidelines contained in the Forest Plan are designed to provide the desired effects of management practices on the other resources values. The Selected Action is consistent with applicable Standards and Guidelines.

I find that my decision to approve the road actions under Alternative C, including temporary road construction activities is adequately informed by the Gifford Pinchot National Forest Roads Analysis (2002) and is consistent with current USDA Forest Service transportation system policies. Considering road closure and decommissioning actions, the decision results in a decrease to the road system in the project area.

National Environmental Policy Act

My decision is consistent with the National Environmental Policy Act (1969). The Gotchen Risk Reduction and Restoration Project FEIS was completed under the guidelines outlined in 40 CFR Part 1500, and the USDA Forest Service NEPA Policy and Procedures in Forest Service Manual 1950 and Forest Service Handbook 1909.15. I believe that the range of alternatives is adequate and that sufficient information was included in the FEIS for me to make a reasoned and informed decision.

Clean Water Act

This project is consistent with the Clean Water Act (1982). Mitigation measures for this project will meet the requirements outlined in *General Water Quality Best Management Practices* (PNW Region Nov. 1988). This report was used as a source of management direction for establishing recommendations for this project in relation to water quality issues.

National Historic Preservation Act, 1966

My decision is consistent with the National Historic Preservation Act. A cultural resource inventory has been completed for the Gotchen Planning Area. All field surveys, certified by the Archaeologist, were completed and a heritage resource report has been completed and forwarded to the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) in accordance with 36 CFR 800.5 (B). The SHPO has reviewed the finding of *no effect* to heritage resources and has concurred with this finding (State of Washington, Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, November 18, 2003).

The Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended and Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) of 2000:

My decision is consistent with the Endangered Species Act (December 1973). The Wildlife Biologist determined that the project *may affect, and is not likely to adversely affect* gray wolf,

Canada lynx, and grizzly bear (FEIS, page 178), and would have *no affect* to bald eagles (FEIS, page 180). The project *may affect, and is likely to adversely affect* northern spotted owls and spotted owl critical habitat (FEIS, page 163, USFS Memorandum, January 13, 2004). In accordance with section 7(a)(2) of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*) the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has issued a Biological Opinion (Western Washington Fish and Wildlife Office ref. 1-3-03-F-1967, November 19, 2003). The FWS concurred with the Forest Service determination for gray wolf, grizzly bear, and bald eagle. The FWS further concluded that as proposed, the action is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the Canada lynx or the northern spotted owl, or result in the destruction or adverse modification of designated northern spotted owl critical habitat. Terms and Conditions of the Biological Opinion have been incorporated into this decision as required mitigation measures (Appendix 1 of this Record of Decision). This project is not likely to adversely affect, or has no effect to other Federally listed species or Federal Species of Concern. *Sisyrinchium sarmentosum* is a FWS Species of Concern and is a Regional Forester's Sensitive plant species. Alternative C was determined to have a *beneficial impact* on this species (FEIS, page 217).

Because there are no anadromous fish species present in the Upper White Salmon River (FEIS, page 134), there will be no adverse effects to Essential Fish Habitat for Chinook salmon (listed under the Magnuson-Stevens Act) and as a result consultation was not required.

This project will impact individual mardon skipper butterflies and their habitat, but the selected alternative is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the species (FEIS, page 185). The mardon skipper is a candidate for Federal listing and a Washington State endangered species.

Surveys have been completed for Protection Buffer and Survey and Manage wildlife and plant species. No Survey and Manage amphibian or mollusk protection buffer species were found in the project area (FEIS, page 184). Two Survey and Manage plant species are found within the Gotchen Planning Area: *Schistostega pennata* (Bryophyte) and *Botrychium montanum* (mycorrhizal fungus). Neither species will be adversely affected by actions associated with Alternative C (FEIS, pages 218 and 221).

Executive Order 11990, Protection of Wetlands

Pursuant to Executive Order 11990, there will be no loss of wetlands from any of the actions associated with my decision. A system of Riparian Reserves provides protection for wetlands (FEIS, page 7).

Executive Order 11988, Floodplain Management

Pursuant to Executive Order 11988, actions associated with Alternative C are not located on floodplains and the direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of the actions associated with my decision would not result in conditions that would affect floodplains.

Executive Order 12898, Environmental Justice

Environmental Justice means that, to the greatest extent practicable and permitted by law, all populations are provided the opportunity to comment before decisions are made, and are not excluded from government programs and activities affecting human health or the environment. An extraordinary effort has been made to include a wide range of interested and affected people into the development of the Gotchen Risk reduction and Restoration Project (see discussion under Public Participation in this document).

There would be no discernable adverse impacts to human health or environmental effects from the Selected Alternative to low-income populations, minority populations, or Indian tribes (FEIS, pages 293 – 295).

Identification of the Environmentally Preferred Alternative

The CEQ regulations (40 CFR 1500-1508) require that the ROD identify the alternative(s) that could be considered environmentally preferable. The environmentally preferred alternative is defined by CEQ as: (1) the alternative that causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment, and (2) the alternative that best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources. Based on a comparison of the environmental consequences of all action alternatives considered in detail in Chapter 4, Alternative C would result in the least environmental impact on National Forest System lands and thus has been selected as the environmentally preferred alternative. I considered both the long-term effect of reducing the threat of a large, stand replacing fires as well as the short-term, direct effects of the degradation of habitat for the northern spotted owl and acres of ground-disturbing activity. Compared to the other action alternatives, Alternative D affects fewer acres of LSR and riparian areas and fewer acres of suitable owl habitat. However, Alternative C treats more acres of fuels and goes the farthest to reduce the threat of widespread late-successional habitat loss from fire.

Implementation

Implementation Date

If an appeal is filed, the USDA Forest Service will not implement the Gotchen Risk Reduction and Restoration Project until fifteen business days after final resolution of the appeal by the Appeal Deciding Officer.

If the project is not appealed, the USDA Forest Service will implement the Gotchen Risk Reduction and Restoration Project five business days after the close of the forty-five day appeal period, which starts on the date the notice of this decision appears in the newspaper of record (*The Columbian*, Vancouver, Washington).

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to appeal in accordance with 36 CFR 215.11. Individuals or organizations that submitted substantive comment during the 45-day comment period may appeal this decision. A notice of appeal must be in writing and clearly state that it is a Notice of Appeal being filed in pursuant to 36 CFR 215 and must include content for an appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.14. A written appeal must be postmarked and submitted to the Appeals Deciding

Officer at the following address within 45 days of the date that the legal public notice of this decision appears in *The Columbian* newspaper.

Appeals may be submitted by email to: appeals-pacificnorthwest-giffordpinchot@fs.fed.us, or by mail to:

Forest Supervisor, Gifford Pinchot National Forest
Attn: Appeal Deciding Officer
10600 N.E. 51st Circle
Vancouver, WA 98682

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact:

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NANCY RYKE
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