

Decision Memo

Precommercial Thinning FY05 through FY09

Mt. Hood National Forest Clackamas River and Zigzag Ranger Districts

The purpose of this proposal is to conduct a multi-year program of stand improvement treatments within young plantations that are overcrowded. This proposal would achieve the following multiple objectives:

- Maintain and enhance species diversity, encourage undergrowth vegetation and wildlife forage;
- Maintain and improve growth of conifer species;
- Restore riparian reserves and late-successional reserves (LSRs) by accelerating the development of mature and late-successional stand conditions.

This action is needed, because the plantations have high stocking densities of 500 to 5000 trees per acre. If no action is taken, this overstocked condition would result in stands with reduced vigor, increased mortality, reduced diversity and increased wind damage susceptibility. If no action is taken within riparian reserves or LSRs, the stands may never achieve the desired future condition of late-successional habitat.

The project is located with the Clackamas River and Zigzag Ranger Districts.

Proposed Action

The proposed action is to precommercially thin approximately 15,000 acres of 10 to 25 year old conifer plantations with hand power tools in the next five years. Trees to be cut are generally smaller than 4 inches in diameter and less than 20 feet in height. Other connected treatments such as slash piling may occur along high-use roads and limb pruning of selected white pine trees may also occur to prevent blister rust infections. These treatments would also use only hand power tools. No off road equipment would be used. This proposal is not considered a ground disturbing activity.

The project would occur within C and B land allocations in matrix, riparian reserves and late-successional reserves identified in the Mt. Hood Forest Plan as amended.

Thinning will generally retain the larger trees, except where small trees are needed for diversity. Diversity will be introduced in several ways:

- Leave tree spacing will vary from 250 to 300 trees per acre in the matrix and 200 to 250 trees per acre with riparian reserves and LSRs.
- Leave trees will include minor species, such as red cedar, western hemlock, noble fir and western white pine.
- All large hardwood trees would be retained and protected.
- All remnant mature or old-growth trees would be retained and protected.
- Large old-growth stumps would not be disturbed.
- All cut trees would be left on site to minimize ground disturbance.
- Slash piling would be done only by hand to prevent disturbance to duff and litter.
- All existing down logs would be retained and key concentrations of large woody debris in the older decay classes would be protected.
- No thinning would occur within 20 feet of any perennial stream, wet area, pond, rock outcrop or other special habitat identified within the wildlife or botany biological evaluations.

Best Management Practices (BMPs) and Design Criteria

1. **Wildlife Seasonal Restrictions** - The biological assessments and biological evaluations contain seasonal restrictions for northern spotted owls, peregrine falcons, and bald eagles.
2. **Invasive plants** – No off-road equipment would be allowed on the project site. Service contracts would include provisions to minimize the introduction and spread of invasive plants. Invasive plants are any plant species not native to a particular ecosystem that are likely to cause economic or environmental harm, or harm to human health. These provisions contain specific requirements for the cleaning of off-road equipment. *This implements Executive Order 13112 dated February 3, 1999.*

Project File – Other details of the project can be found in the project file. The file includes biological evaluations.

Public Scoping

This project was discussed at a public meeting on 11/29/04 attended by local environmental groups, county officials and interested citizens. Public opinion was firmly supportive of this project and recommended that this type of project be included in stewardship contracts. The Hood-Willamette Resource Advisory Committee recommended that this type of project be funded.

Reasons for Categorical Exclusion

I find the proposed action can be categorically excluded from documentation in an EA or EIS because it fits category 31.2-6, described in Forest Service Handbook 1909.15-2004-3, July 6, 2004. This category is for “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.”

I find the proposed action can be categorically excluded because there were no extraordinary circumstances identified by the interdisciplinary team of resource scientists that analyzed this proposal. The project does not involve the use of herbicides or the construction of roads.

- The following resources were considered: threatened, endangered or proposed species or their critical habitat or sensitive species; flood plains, wetlands or municipal watersheds; Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas or national recreation areas; inventoried roadless areas; research natural areas; American Indian religious or cultural sites; archaeological sites or historic properties or areas. I find that the degree of potential effect to these resources does not warrant further analysis or documentation in an EA or EIS.
- Biological Evaluations were prepared for sensitive, threatened or endangered wildlife, fish and botanical species.

Consultation with U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is not needed for the **northern spotted owl** for habitat modification, and is required for disturbance. Programmatic biological assessments cover effects caused by disturbance. Consultation is ongoing.

- The proposal is not in nesting/roosting/foraging habitat or in dispersal habitat. The effects determination for habitat modification would be No Effect and the effects determination for disturbance would be Not Likely to Adversely Affect within LSRs and Likely to Adversely Affect outside of LSRs for the portions of the project that are implemented during the critical breeding season and are adjacent to suitable habitat.
- I have considered the new information that has been recently published about northern spotted owls.

The proposal will have no effect on threatened or endangered **anadromous fish** or Essential Fish Habitat established under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. Consultation is not required.

There will be no impacts to **sensitive** species that would cause a trend to federal listing or loss of viability for any proposed or sensitive species.

The project would have no adverse effects on flood plains, wetlands or municipal watersheds; Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas or national recreation areas; inventoried roadless areas; research natural areas; American Indian religious or cultural sites; archaeological sites or historic properties or areas.

Findings of Consistency

I have determined that the proposed action is consistent with the Standards and Guidelines of the Mt. Hood National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan as amended by the Northwest Forest Plan (Forest Plan).

- **Aquatic Conservation Strategy** - I have considered the relevant information from the watershed analyses. I have also considered the existing condition of riparian reserves, including the important physical and biological components of the fifth-field watersheds and the effects to riparian resources. I find that this project is consistent with the recommendations of the watershed analyses, is consistent with riparian reserve standards and guidelines, and will contribute to maintaining or restoring the fifth-field watersheds over the long term.
- It is consistent with **late-successional reserve** objectives. A portion of the project is within LSRs. The LSR Assessment was completed in 1998. Thinning of stands less 80 years of age is desired to open up the canopy, increasing diversity of plants and animals and hastening the transition to a forest with mature characteristics. The Regional Ecosystem Office indicated in its July 24, 1998 memo that projects such as the proposed action that are consistent with the LSR Assessment would need no further review.
- It is consistent with standards for threatened, endangered and sensitive species; management indicator species, noxious weeds, hydrology, water quality, air quality, heritage resources, scenery and timber management.
- It is consistent with the National Forest Management Act regulations for vegetative management.

Decision and Rationale

It is my decision to proceed with this project because it will enhance and restore within stand biological diversity and result in increased health and growth.

Appeal Rights

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to Forest Service regulations at 36 CFR 215.4.

Implementation

Implementation of this decision may occur immediately.

Contact Person

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/s/ Colleen Pelles Madrid

3/17/05

COLLEEN MADRID
Zigzag District Ranger

Date

/s/ Andrei Rykoff

3/18/05

ANDREI RYKOFF
Clackamas River District Ranger

Date