



File Code: 1950

Date: October 17, 2008

Dear National Forest User,

The purpose of this letter is to inform you of our initiation of analysis on the proposed *Dan Thin Commercial Timber Sale*, on the Darrington Ranger District of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. The Forest proposes to commercially thin approximately 600 acres and pre-commercially thin approximately 80 acres all within the Matrix land allocation. The project area is located on the Darrington Ranger District of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. The proposed thinning area is located east of Darrington, in the Dan Creek drainage of the Sauk River, in T.32N., R.10E., Sections 16, 20, 21, 27, and 28. This area is accessible by Roads 24 and 2420. (See enclosed map.)

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED PROJECT

Purpose of the Project: The purpose of this proposed timber sale is to implement the objectives of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie Land Management Plan, as amended by the April 14, 1994 *Record of Decision for Amendments to the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Planning Documents Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl*. Under the Forest Plan as amended, portions of the proposed Dan harvest area are within designations of Matrix and Riparian Reserve land allocations. The Sauk River is designated as a Key Watershed. The Forest Plan, as amended, includes Standards and Guidelines for all of these land allocations. Matrix lands are those not included in the other categories of designated areas; most scheduled timber harvest activities are conducted within Matrix lands. In this project, the entire project area is identified as Matrix with the overlying Riparian Reserve. One purpose of this proposed thinning is to contribute to the long-term timber production objectives of the Forest on Matrix lands. There are also silvicultural treatments within Riparian Reserves to develop desired riparian vegetation characteristics, where those characteristic are currently lacking.

Purpose and Need: The purpose and need of the proposal is to:

1. Manage forest stocking to maintain or promote increased growth rate in dense stands, promote horizontal and vertical diversity, and retain diversity, health, and vigor of the residual stands.
2. Manage Riparian Reserves for desired vegetation characteristics needed to attain Aquatic Conservation Strategy objectives (Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, 1994, ROD p. C-32).
3. Provide economically viable, commercial wood fiber products consistent with the 1990 Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie Forest Plan, as amended in 1994 by the Northwest Forest Plan.
4. Treat road maintenance needs in the project area consistent with regional and forest direction.



The existing condition of forest stands within the Dan analysis area (as described from field examination, review of stand exams, and silvicultural analysis of stocking levels and tree size) indicates the stands are appropriate for commercial and non-commercial thinning harvest at this time.

Proposed Action: The Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest (MBS) is proposing to harvest timber through a commercial thinning timber sale located within the Darrington Ranger District. The proposed action would harvest approximately 4 to 6 million board feet (mmbf) of volume from approximately 600 acres within the Dan project analysis area. All timber would be harvested using ground-based or cable logging systems. Retention of residual large trees and minor tree species including species such as cherry and yew will promote stand diversity. Some areas of Riparian Reserves will be thinned to meet Aquatic Conservation Strategy objectives.

The proposed action would include connected actions associated with timber harvest: maintenance of existing Roads 24, 2420, and potentially road 2410 for up to 12 miles of permanent road reconstruction. There would be utilization of approximately 1.1 miles of existing roadbed and the construction of approximately 0.4 mile of new temporary road, which will be closed following sale activities. The proposed action also would include landings necessary for ground-based, cable logging systems; the scattering of landing slash, and pile burning to reduce slash at landings and designated burning sites. The proposed action map is attached.

Decision Framework: The Forest Supervisor will answer two questions based on the environmental analysis:

1. Whether the proposed action will proceed as proposed, as modified, or not at all? If it proceeds:
2. What mitigation measures and monitoring requirements will the Forest Service apply?

Alternative Development –Decisions to be Made: An interdisciplinary team of specialists from the U.S. Forest Service has been formed to conduct an environmental analysis of this proposed timber sale. Environmental analysis will continue for the next several months.

The decision to be made also includes what road maintenance or treatment needs will be done in the project area, consistent with regional and forest direction.

The interdisciplinary team is in the process of developing a range of alternatives for consideration. The “no action” alternative will be considered along with several action alternatives. The range of action alternatives will relate to the identified issues and mitigation requirements.

Proposed Action Items:

- Commercially thin approximately 4 to 6 million board feet (MMBF) of timber from the proposed areas, depending on selected alternative and areas to be treated.
- Retain a residual stand canopy closure to meet hydrologic considerations in the Dan Cr. drainage.
- Utilize: ground-based and cable logging systems.

- Use the existing road system for primary access; develop new temporary roads (estimated to be approximately 0.4 mile) only as needed, to be closed following thinning activities. There is the potential for up to 12 miles of existing road reconstruction with 1.1 mile of existing roadbed to be used temporarily. Road work will include improved drainage and road surface, with replacement of deteriorating culverts and surface rock.
- Identify existing roads (or portions thereof) for storage or decommissioning after completion of harvest activities.
- Conduct road work consisting of brushing, maintenance or replacement of culverts, and grading the road surface.
- Treat noxious weeds to eliminate existing and prevent new populations.
- Conduct Riparian Reserve thinning where identified to restore stand conditions (Riparian Reserves with landslide prone ground would not be entered).
- Dispose of slash by scattering back into the residual stand. Residual logging slash at landings and along the road would be piled and burned.
- Separate firewood size material from slash and made available to the public through firewood permits.

PRELIMINARY ISSUES

The ID Team has identified the following preliminary issues for the environmental analysis to address.

Issue 1: Economic Viability

The Decline Thin Project may turn out to be not economical for a purchaser to harvest.

There is a concern that the proposed timber harvest would result in a deficit timber sale. "Deficit sales" are defined as sales where the "average indicated advertised rate" is less than the "average base rate." As a result, depending on actual market conditions at the time of sale, the sale may not receive viable bids, and the sale may not be sold. The market value for timber fluctuates seasonally and yearly. Financial analysis of the proposed project will provide an estimate of timber sale viability. The financial analysis will estimate bid rate of the timber sale based on log values, logging costs, and contractual requirements. An estimated bid rate that is less than the minimum advertised rate for a timber sale would indicate a deficit sale (using today's costs and values). In a changing market, price scenarios vary, and small changes in wood product values may turn a deficit sale into a positive one, or vice versa.

Units of Measure

- Volume of timber sold (mmbf)
- Estimated PNV
- Estimated benefit: cost ratio
- Expected bid rate

Issue 2: Watershed Processes—Peak Flows and Sediment Yield

Thinning and road building activities may affect soil erosion and water quality and quantity in the project area and downstream.

The Proposed Action includes thinning harvest operations (600 acres), haul road reconstruction of existing roads (up to approximately 12 miles), and new temporary road construction (0.4 mile).

Particularly in areas susceptible to rain-on-snow events, the above activities can influence the timing and quantity of flows, soil erosion, and the rate and quantity of sedimentation to aquatic habitats.

Reconstruction of roads and associated drainage features, especially those that currently pose a risk to aquatic resources, can also help restore natural drainage patterns and benefit aquatic and riparian conditions. Decommissioning of roads with continuing hydrologic risk can have long-term benefits to watershed conditions.

Units of Measure

- Length of haul road reconstruction (miles of road upgraded)
- Length of temporary road construction
- Percentage of soil disturbance
- Percentage of vegetation disturbance
- Percent changes in sediment
- Miles of high-risk road decommissioned or put into storage

FIELD TRIP OPPORUTNITY

A field trip to the project area is scheduled for Friday, November 14th from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. The trip will start from the Darrington Ranger District office and travel on paved road and gravel Road 24 approximately 6 miles up Dan Creek drainage. Please RSVP with Phyllis Reed if you would like to participate in the field trip. If you have questions, contact Phyllis Reed, at the Darrington District Office at 1405 Emens Street, Darrington, WA 98241. Responses can be e-mailed to plreed@fs.fed.us, or you may contact Phyllis between 7:30 am and 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday, at (360) 436-1155 ext.216.

REQUEST FOR COMMENTS

We are asking for your comments on the issues and the scope of the analysis related to the proposed action described above. Your input will be considered in the analysis and may be used to modify alternatives, identify mitigation measures, or analyze environmental consequences of implementation. The Environmental Assessment is projected to be available for public comment in the early spring of 2009. A decision is expected in the summer of 2009. The Deciding Officer for this project will be the Forest Supervisor.

In order to ensure your comments and concerns are considered in the analysis process, please respond by November 20th, 2008. Written comments should be sent to the project leader, Phyllis Reed, at the Darrington District Office at 1405 Emens Street, Darrington, WA 98241. Comments may also be faxed to (360) 436-1309, or e-mailed to plreed@fs.fed.us. If you have any questions on this project, please contact Phyllis between 7:30 am and 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday, at (360) 436-1155 ext.216.

Comments received in response to this letter, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the Project Record and available for public review.

Your concerns and comments on our proposed actions are important to us. I would welcome a meeting if you should so desire. Please feel free to contact me at any time.

Sincerely,

PETER R. FORBES
District Ranger

Enclosures