United States Department of Agriculture | Forest Service | Olympic National Forest | Hood Canal Ranger District
P.O. Box 280
Quilcene, WA 98376

File Code: 1950
Date: September 18, 2006

Dear Interested Party,

The Hood Canal Ranger District is proposing two projects to provide habitat benefits to aquatic resources and Roosevelt elk. The first project is to thin 69 acres of second growth forest for elk habitat enhancement and to provide revenue for road decommissioning and other road related activities. A secondary objective of the commercial thinning is to provide a demonstration and trial of using thinning prescriptions to promote the development of structural complexity in the forest. The second project proposed is to decommission or reduce the road Maintenance Level on 8.5 miles of road for aquatic and elk habitat enhancement. These actions would occur in the McDonald Creek drainage within the McDonald Creek Watershed, in Clallam County. The legal location of the projects are: T29N, R03W, Sections 19, 30 and T29N, R04W, Sections 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 28, 32, 33.

These projects are under the Stewardship Contracting Authority, Public Law 108-7, which allows the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management the authority to enter into stewardship contracts with the public to achieve land management goals for national forests and public lands that meet local and rural community needs. The Stewardship Authority must be consistent with forest plans and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) decisions. A Collaborative Stewardship group has been formed for these proposed actions, that includes representatives from local tribes, state agencies, conservation organizations, and citizens. The proposed actions were developed in coordination with the Dungeness Collaborative Group, with final decision made by Dean Yoshina, District Ranger, Olympic National Forest.

Forest Service personnel are preparing to conduct environmental review for the proposed projects. It is expected that these projects will fall within a category of actions listed in the Forest Service Handbook (FSH) that are excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), and has no extraordinary circumstances that would preclude use of the categorical exclusions. (FSH 1909.15, Chapter 31). The categorical exclusion proposed for the commerical thin project is: "Harvest of live trees not to exceed 70 acres, requiring no more than 1/2-mile of temporary road construction" (FSH 1909.15, Chapter 30, Section 31.2(12)). The categorical exclusion proposed for the road decommissioning or reduction in road maintenance is: "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" (FSH 1909.15, Chapter 30, Section 31.2(6)).

YOUR INVOLVEMENT

The purpose of this letter is to invite your participation in the NEPA analysis during the scoping and 30-day public notice and comment period. Comments in support or in opposition are welcome. In particular, if you have information you feel the Forest Service may not be

aware of, or feel you have issues (points of dispute, debate, or disagreement) regarding potential effects of these proposed actions, please send those issues in writing to the project leader (Susan Piper, Olympic National Forest, 1835 Black Lake Blvd. SW, Suite A, Olympia, WA 98512), or e-mail: comments-pacificnorthwest-olympic-hoodcanal@fs.fed.us.

Comments concerning these actions will be accepted for 30 calendar days following publication of a notice in the Peninsula Daily News, Port Angeles, WA. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period for these proposals. Those who provide timely comments will be eligible to appeal the thinning project decision pursuant to 36 CFR part 215 regulations.

All comments received will become part of the public record and copies of comments, including names and home addresses of respondents, may be released for public inspection. Requests by individual respondents to have their home addresses withheld from the public record will be honored to the extent allowable by law. Such requests to withhold names and/or addresses must be stated prominently at the beginning of the comments. Anonymous comments will not be considered. Submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, will be made available for public inspection in their entirety.

This comment period is being provided pursuant to the September 16, 2005, order issued by the U. S. District Court for the Eastern District of California in Case No. CIV F-03-6386JKS.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

The purpose of these actions is to:

- Achieve the ecological objective of providing a demonstration and trail of using commercial thinning as a tool to promote the development of structural complexity in the forest stand faster than it might otherwise develop. This structural complexity includes: horizontal and vertical variation in the forms and spatial arrangement of live and dead plant matter, a range of tree sizes, some large trees with large and complex crowns, a diverse and balanced composition of over-story tree species, a diverse understory light environment that promotes a range of small-scale vegetation patch types and promotes growth and coverage of herbaceous plants on the forest floor; and skips to maintain small diameter snag recruitment, protect sensitive legacy or other features, and provide refugia for species impacted by thinning. The thinning will provide improved habitat for elk, and other species.

- Achieve the economic objective of generating revenue through sale of the timber to provide funding for needed restoration activity on roads and elk habitat. Selected roads or road segments have been determined to present risks to aquatic resources and/or elk. These roads or road segments will be decommissioned and/or closed to motorized vehicles and/or have their Maintenance Level reduced to non-motorized use. Forest

Service Roads currently under consideration for this action include: 2870056, 2875070, 2877040, 2877090, 2870053, 2870054, 2870058, and 2870059.

The Northwest Forest Plan-designated land allocations within the project area are Adaptive Management Area (AMA) and Riparian Reserve. Adaptive Management Areas are landscape units designated to encourage the development and testing of technical and social approaches to achieving desired ecological, economic, and other social objectives. Riparian Reserves, overlaying other Northwest Forest Plan land allocations, are intended to protect the health of the riparian and aquatic system.

Thinning treatments are currently being used on the Olympic National Forest for the ecological objective of promoting development of selected forest features and processes that are integral to stand complexity, and that are generally in short supply on the landscape due to past logging practices. Examples of such features and processes to develop stand diversity include: understory development, vertical canopy stratification, development of horizontal patchiness, and growth of large trees with large and complex crowns.

The focus of the ecological objective arises due to a general lack of structural complexity on the forested landscape today. A large portion of modern stands originated following widespread logging of structurally complex old-growth. The resulting young stands are generally in the structurally simple developmental stage known as "competitive exclusion". In both natural and managed stands, this is a normal stage of development, generally characterized by a dense, single story of canopy formed predominately by one or two tree species, and little understory development. This structurally simple stage provides a specific and narrow range of habitats and hence is generally low in biodiversity. With the passage of much time, both natural and managed stands in the competitive exclusion stage will develop to stages with increasing complexity supporting different, wider ranges of habitats. However, there is concern that biodiversity at the landscape scale will suffer for a long time due to the large portion of the forest that is in the structurally simple competitive exclusion stage. A current goal of management has been to implement treatments designed to increase structural diversity, and hence biodiversity, on the landscape.

The project's provision of a demonstration and trial of using different approaches in thinning prescriptions for ecological objectives meets the intended use of AMA's.

The overall objectives of road decommissioning are to reduce the potential for road-related sedimentation to important aquatic habitat, and to provide more secure habitat for elk. These activities are intended to improve watershed conditions and meet the Northwest Forest Plan Riparian Reserves standards and guidelines.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

Although the primary purpose of the thinning is to provide funding for the restoration work on roads, a forest stand has been chosen for this that would be suitable for the ecological objective also. The stand within the proposed project unit (Refer to map) originated following past logging of old-growth forest, is approximately 65 years old in the Adaptive Management Area,

and is currently in the competitive exclusion/biomass accumulation stage of stand development.

The stand will be thinned using a prescription that results in variable spacing between retained trees and that is feasible for the FS and contractors. The spacing between the retained trees will also vary within the stand. There will be some patches that are not thinned (skips), some that are heavily thinned and relatively open (gaps), and the matrix where a few different thinning intensities may be implemented. Skips, gaps and matrix areas will be located with consideration for pre-existing conditions. The species and sizes of cut and retained trees will be determined to meet the ecological objective. In moist areas, alder may be encouraged to grow for its positive effects on biodiversity, nitrogen input, and tree growth. In the Riparian Reserves, the goal will be to produce the size and quantity of large woody debris sufficient to sustain physical complexity and stability of the riparian reserves and associated streams. The project will evaluate the tradeoffs of including both ecological and economic objectives. For example, the size and number of heavy thinning areas may be done in a way that benefits both the ecological and economic objectives. The heavy thin areas may also provide grazing areas for elk. The thinning will be designed to minimize undesired disturbance to riparian areas, soils, and retained vegetation. Monitoring plots will be established and measured for determined variables (for example the types and amounts of understory vegetation) prior to thinning, then re-measured immediately after thinning, and at intervals over time. Monitoring will be conducted by the Dungeness Collaborative Group.

There will be no new, reconstructed, or temporary roads built under the proposed action. The proposed thinning unit will be cable yarded, incorporating the use of intermediate supports to maintain log suspension and reduce impacts to forest soils.

For the road restoration activity project funded by the thinning, road decommissioning will be conducted to protect or restore both aquatic and terrestrial habitats. Treatments will be developed for each road segment with the main objective to reduce road- related erosion, mass wasting and associated sediment delivery into aquatic systems. These treatments typically include removal of unstable landings and side-cast material, installation of cross ditches in the road bed, removal of culverts, in-sloping and out-sloping of the road bed, and construction of a road entrance barrier. Treatment could also include the subsoiling of the surface and seeding or planting of native forage for elk.

Where the chosen road work is to reduce the Maintenance Level to non-motorized use rather than decomission, Maintenance Level 1 roads will be kept on the National Forest System, but will be closed to motorized vehicles. Treatments will be developed for each road segment with the main objective of reducing motorized use to important habitat areas for elk and to reduce road-related erosion. These treatments typically include removal of some culverts, scarification of road surface, seeding or planting of native forage species, and construction of a barrier to prohibit motorized vehicle access. Closure device is usually either earth berm or a gate.

DECISION TO BE MADE

The responsible official (District Ranger) will decide for the two proposed actions what level of thinning is appropriate in the project area, which roads to decommission, and what management requirements and mitigation measures are included in the project.

If you have any questions regarding the process or the proposed action, please feel free to contact Susan Piper (360) 956-2435 or myself at (360) 765-2201.

Sincerely,

/s/ Dean Yoshina
DEAN YOSHINA
District Ranger

cc: Susan Piper

Dungeness Collaborative Stewardship Restoration Project
Hood Canal Ranger District, Olympic National Forest

Table 1. Road Information, Current Management and Proposed Recommendation.

Forest Service Road Number	Affected Length	Road Segment	Current Road Management	1996 Access and Travel Management Recommendation	Proposed Recommendation
2870053	1.5	0.0 to 1.5	ML-2	ML-2	ML-1 or Decommission
2870054	0.7	0.0 to 0.7	ML-2	ML-2	ML-1 or Decommission
2870056	0.3	0.0 to 0.3	ML-2	Decommission	Decommission
2870058	0.5	0.0 to 0.5	ML-2	ML-2	ML-1 or Decommission
2870059	0.5	0.0 to 0.5	ML-2	ML-2	ML-1 or Decommission
2875070	2.0	0.0 to 2.0	ML-1 and ML-2	Decommission	Decommission
2877040	1.3	0.0 to 1.3	ML-2	Decommission	Decommission
2877090	1.0	0.0 to 1.0	ML-2	Decommission	Decommission

ML-1: Maintenance Level 1, road closed to vehicular traffic
ML-2: Maintenance Level 2, high clearance vehicles and generally have low or infrequent use