

## **Decision Memo**

### **Pine Creek Thinning Project**

USDA Forest Service  
Hood Canal Ranger District, Olympic National Forest  
Mason County, Washington  
T23N, R05W, Sections 4 & 5  
T23N, R6W, Sections 34 & 35

#### **BACKGROUND**

The Hood Canal Ranger District has identified opportunities to thin second growth stands to enhance structural diversity and promote the development of old-growth characteristics, while providing habitat benefits to aquatic resources and old-growth dependant species in the Pine and Lebar creek drainages in Mason County. The stands proposed for thinning originated following past logging of old-growth forests, and are approximately 45 year old in the competitive exclusion/biomass accumulation stage of stand development.

The purpose of and need for this project is to:

- Increase structural diversity of forest stands, develop a multi-layered canopy, and enhance growth and coverage of herbaceous plants on the forest floor.
- Achieve the economic objective of generating revenue through sale of the timber to provide funding for needed restoration activity on Forest Service Road 2361000 by converting 0.60 miles of road to trail.

The project area is located in the Pine and Lebar Creek drainages within the Skokomish Watershed in Mason County. The legal location of the project is: T23N, R05W, Sections 4 & 5, T23N, R6W, Sections 34 & 35.

The Northwest Forest Plan-designated land allocations within the project area are Late Successional Reserve (LSR) and Riparian Reserve. The objectives of the Late Successional Reserve Lands are to promote and enhance conditions of late seccessional and old-growth forest ecosystems. Riparian Reserves, overlaying other Northwest Forest Plan land allocations, are intended to protect the health of the riparian and aquatic system.

#### **DECISION**

I have decided to implement the thinning of the proposed 69 acres in the Pine and Lebar Creek drainages as detailed below.

The stand will be thinned using a prescription that results in variable spacing between retained trees and that is feasible for the Forest Service and contractors to implement. 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 heavy thinned and (gap) areas may also provide grazing for deer and elk. The thinning will be designed to minimize disturbance to riparian areas, soils, and retained vegetation.

There will be no new, reconstructed, or temporary roads built under the proposed action. The proposed thinning units will be harvested by two different harvesting methods:

1. Cable yarding, incorporating the use of intermediate supports to maintain log suspension and reduce impacts to forest soils.
2. Cut-to-Length and yarding to existing roads using a forwarder, carrying logs above ground, thereby also reducing the impact to forest soils.

### **Mitigation Measures:**

#### Aquatic

- Incorporate all conditions of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's Hydraulic Project Approval permit.
- Trees felled in no-cut riparian buffers due to yarding operations will be left in stream or riparian area.
- Leave all existing wood in streams, unless designated for removal by a fisheries biologist.
- Any machinery maintenance involving potential contaminants will occur at an approved site or greater than 100 feet from wetlands, water bodies, or stream channels.
- A watershed specialist or fish biologist shall be consulted prior to modifying any of the project design criteria that could impact aquatic resources.
- Locate post-harvest canopy openings at least 100 feet from floodplains and stream valley floors to maintain conifer trees in the stream-influence zone.

#### Botany and Invasive Plants

Mitigation measures in this section are based on Best Management Practices and the standards set forth in the record of decision for the Pacific Northwest Region invasive plant program (USDA 2005). When approved, follow the standards in the Olympic National Forest site-specific invasive plant treatment project (USDA 2006).

- The contractor shall be responsible for preventing and treating the spread of invasive plants in the project area as stated in the noxious weed/exotic plant prevention and control supplemental clause. The contractor shall consult with Forest Service invasive plant specialists to develop and implement a site-specific plan for invasive species prevention and treatment.

- Contractor shall ensure that off-road equipment used outside the limits of the road prism is free of invasive plant material including soil, seeds, vegetative matter, or other debris that could contain or hold seeds.
- Use only gravel, fill, sand, and rock that are judged to be weed-free by district or forest weed specialists.
- Site restoration planning shall include an evaluation of the need to seed a site or use other erosion control measures. When needed, use weed free straw and give priority to seed mixes/plantings with local native species.

### Wildlife

- Project activities creating noise above ambient levels will not occur within the harassment distance of specified equipment from March 1 to August 5.
- Activities producing noise above ambient levels will start no earlier than 2 hours after sunrise and shall cease 2 hours before sunset from April 1 to September 15.
- Danger trees greater than 21” dbh within suitable habitat for the northern spotted owl and marbled murrelet will be reviewed by wildlife biologist prior to being cut.
- Any active raptor nest located during thinning operations will have appropriate conservation measures applied (species specific).
- A wildlife biologist shall be consulted prior to modifying any of the project design criteria that could impact wildlife resources.

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment as under the Forest Service Handbook Title 1909.15 Chapter 30, Section 13.2(12): “harvest of live trees not to exceed 70 acres, requiring no more than 1/2-mile of temporary road construction.” The categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects which may significantly affect the environment, and it does not, individually or cumulatively, have a significant effect (40 CFR 1508.27) on the quality of the human environment.

### **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

This project was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions since October 1, 2005. Scoping letters to the public were mailed on February 24, 2006, and letters soliciting public comment were mailed on January 29, 2007. In addition, the Skokomish Indian Tribe was consulted with on this project and has representation on the Skokomish Watershed Action Team Collaborative Group. Four comments were received regarding this project; all responses indicated that they were in favor of the project.

The proposed actions were developed in coordination with the Skokomish Watershed Action Team Collaborative Group, which includes representatives from local tribes, state agencies, conservation organizations, and citizens.

## **FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS**

As required by the National Forest Management Act, this decision is consistent with the Olympic National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (1990) as amended by the 1994 Record of Decision for Amendments to Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Planning Documents within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl, and its amendments, as well as its attached Standards and Guidelines.

Threatened and Endangered Species Currently there are three species of fish listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act within the Skokomish watershed- Chinook salmon, summer chum salmon, and bull trout. The planning area directly affects steelhead and bull trout spawning and rearing habitat. The watershed also provides habitat for northern spotted owls, marbled murrelets, and bald eagles which are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

The proposed action was assessed and found to be consistent with the 2003 – 2008 *Programmatic Biological Assessment for Selected Forest Management Activities, Olympic National Forest*, which addressed potential effects of projects on federally listed threatened and endangered species. It was determined that this proposed project “May Affect, but is Not Likely to Adversely Affect” northern spotted owl and marbled murrelet, Puget Sound steelhead trout, bull trout and designated critical habitat for northern spotted owl and marbled murrelet. This proposed project would have “No Effect” on Puget Sound Chinook salmon, Hood Canal summer chum salmon, and bald eagle species.

Survey and Manage Species. Survey and Manage species were assessed for this project as it related to the October 2006 court modification to the January 2006 injunction of the 2004 Record of Decision to Remove or Modify the Survey and Manage Mitigation Measures Standards and Guidelines in Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Planning Documents within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl. The court modification exempts thinning in stands younger than 80 years old from survey and regulatory requirements under the 2001 Record of Decision. For those exempted activities, the 2004 Record of Decision applies.

Surveys were not required for this project due to the age of vegetation proposed to be thinned, and species were evaluated as sensitive species where designated under the 2004 Record of Decision. A review of the most recent database for occurrences of Survey and Manage species, however, indicated that there were no known sites of Survey and Manage species in the project area. The project is determined to have “No Impacts” to Hoko vertigo (snail), , and “May Impact”, Malone’s jumping slug, Evening fieldslug, blue-gray tailedropper slug, and Puget Oregonian snail, but is not likely to contribute to a trend towards federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species.

Sensitive Species. Potential effects of the proposed project on Regional Forester’s Sensitive plant and animal species were evaluated. The commercial thinning unit was reviewed for likelihood of habitat of sensitive fish and wildlife species. It was determined that this project “May Impact” individual Puget Sound/St. Georgia Chum Salmon, Puget Sound Coastal Cutthroat Trout, Van Dyke's Salamander, warty jumping slug, Burrington’s jumping slug, and Puget Oregonian snail, but is not likely to contribute to a trend towards federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species.

Surveys for sensitive plants were conducted to determine if there were any special status plant, fungi and lichen species documented in the project area. Existing field records in addition to field surveys determined that there were no new occurrences. Therefore, there are no anticipated adverse effects to any of the listed sensitive amphibians, birds, mammals or plants.

Invasive Plants. Noxious weeds and other invasive plants may pose a serious threat to the health of National Forests. Executive Order 13112, Invasive Species (Feb. 1999), provides direction that “Federal agencies shall: (1) prevent the introduction of invasive species; (2) detect and respond rapidly to and control populations of such species in a cost-effective and environmentally sound manner; (3) monitor invasive species populations accurately and reliably; (4) provide for restoration of native species and habitat conditions in ecosystems that have been invaded.”

Four species of invasive plants were found in the project area and include Canada thistle, bull thistle, St. John’s wort, and tansy ragwort. All were located on roads that pass through or border the proposed units: Overall, infestations were small, sparse, and scattered along the roads.

Cultural Resources. A cultural resource effects determination was prepared and submitted to the Washington State Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation (OAHP) on July 27, 2006 and April 17, 2007. Field surveys were conducted for the thinning area. No cultural resources were identified, and therefore, it was determined that there would be no impacts to cultural resources.

### **Aquatic Conservation Strategy Consistency Finding and Rationale**

I have reviewed the relevant analysis for this project that pertains to the Aquatic Conservation Strategy Objectives (NWFP ROD 1994), and I find that this decision meets these objectives. I have reviewed the analysis of the existing condition and desired future condition or range of natural variability of important physical and biological components as documented in the related watershed analysis and specialist input. I am confident with my finding that this decision will meet the Aquatic Conservation Strategy Objectives.

### **IMPLEMENTATION DATE**

This project may be implemented immediately after publication of the decision in the applicable newspaper of record [36 CFR 215.9 (c)(1)].

### **ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES**

This decision is not subject to administrative appeal as no substantive comments expressing concerns or only supportive comments were received during the comment period provided on the proposed action [36 CFR 215.12 (e)(1)].

**CONTACT PERSON**

For further information concerning this project or decision, contact Bruce Huntley, Timber Sale Contracting Officer, Olympic National Forest, 1835 Black Lake Blvd. SW, Suite A, Olympia, WA 98512, ph: 360-956-2287.

/s/ \_\_\_\_\_

6/30/07

Dean Yoshina  
Hood Canal District Ranger

Date

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