

Decision Memo

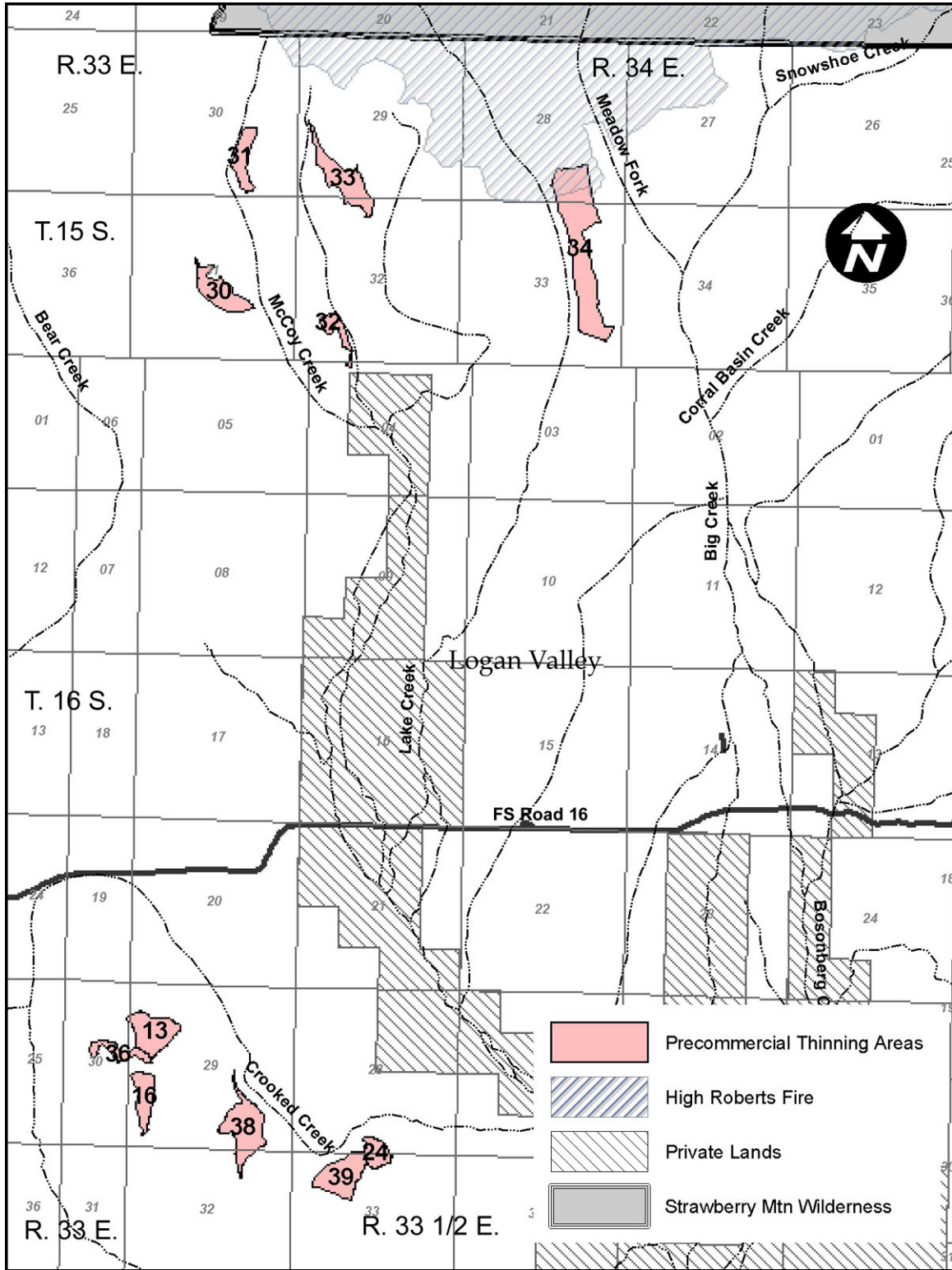
Merit Precommercial Thinning Project

**USDA Forest Service
Malheur National Forest
Prairie City Ranger District
Grant County, Oregon**

Information Contact: Ken Kincaid
Prairie City Ranger District, Silviculturist
(541) 820-3800

Responsible Official: Brooks Smith
District Ranger
Prairie City District
(541) 820-3800

Merit Precommercial Thinning Project - Location: various sections within T.15S., R. 34 1/2E., T.16S., R.33 1/2 E., Willamette Meridian, Grant County, Oregon; approximately 16 air miles south of Prairie City, Oregon.



Decision

Project Description

It is my decision to precommercially thin approximately 370 acres of National Forest System lands in the Logan Valley area (see map on previous page). The thinning will consist of cutting a portion of the small trees less than 8 inches dbh to reduce stand densities. Following the cutting with chainsaws, the down residual and created fuels will be reduced through machine piling or hand piling and burning.

Unit #	Acres	*Fuels Treatment
13	34	FMP
16	20	FMP
24	15	FMP
30	29	FHP
31	21	FHP
32	12	FHP
33	38	FMP
34	106	FMP
36	14	FMP
38	45	FHP
39	36	FHP
Total	370	

***Fuels Treatments**

FMP – Machine Piling/Grapple Piling

FHP – Hand piling

Warm dry stands exhibiting multi-stratum characteristics with a high density of understory trees are proposed for this precommercial thinning treatment. The majority of these stands have seen past harvests of the larger overstory trees without subsequent thinning of the smaller diameter understories leaving them over dense and dominated by suppressed grand fir. A portion of precommercial area #34 is within a lightly burned portion of the High Roberts fire that remains overstocked with small trees.

The primary objective for the precommercial thinning treatment is to promote the development of the understory by increasing growth rates and restoring ecologically appropriate and resilient species compositions. The treatment has 2 components – precommercial thinning and fuels treatment.

The precommercial thinning component will focus on the removal of trees creating fuel ladders into remaining remnant large diameter trees, promoting diameter growth rates and retention of ecologically appropriate and resilient species. Ponderosa pine, western larch, and Douglas-fir will be favored for retention. Emphasis will be placed on retention of desired trees at their natural/variable spacing resulting in a diverse arrangement/density of the understory.

Fuels associated with the precommercial thinning activities would be treated with a combination of hand-piling or grapple piling.

Hand-piling and subsequent burning of piles will be utilized in areas with slopes exceeding 35% or where soils are sensitive to displacement and/or compaction. In these areas fuels will be piled by hand away from residual trees and subsequently burned.

Grapple piling will be utilized on slopes less than 35% and soils with low risk to displacement and compaction. With this method a low ground pressure tracked machine equipped with an articulated arm and grapple will pile slash away from residual trees utilizing existing skidtrails and/or walking on existing slash to minimize ground impacts.

Resultant stand structures will remain as multi-stratum; however, understory densities will be reduced resulting in a more open understory condition.

Specific activities include:

- No precommercial thinning will occur with Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCAs).

Category of Action

This action falls within the categories established by the Forest Service that normally do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment. Specifically this project falls into category #6 of chapter 30 – Categorical Exclusion from Documentation, Section 31 – Categories of Actions Excluded from Documentation (40 CFR 1508.4), sub-section 31.2 – Categories or Actions for Which a Project or Case File and Decision Memo Are Required, Forest Service handbook 1909.15 – Environmental Policy and Procedures Handbook. This category includes timber stand activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction.

Extraordinary Circumstances

Based on the site specific environmental analysis documented in this Decision Memo and Project File, I have determined that no Extraordinary Circumstances have been found to exist with the potential to have a significant effect on the environment. The effects associated with the precommercial thinning on the identified extraordinary circumstance categories, Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, Chapter 30, Section 30.3 (2), are as follows:

Extraordinary Circumstance	Are They Present?	Are There Significant Effects?
<p>Federally listed threatened and endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species.</p>	<p>NO, Malheur mottled sculpin, redband trout, Columbia spotted frog, and bull trout are not present in the thinning units; these species are located in the Lake Creek subwatershed.</p> <p>NO, The gray wolf and Canada Lynx are not present; no activities are within suitable or potential lynx habitat.</p> <p>SUSPECTED – Potential habitat for western sage grouse, upland sandpiper, gray flycatcher, tricolored blackbird, bobolink, and pygmy rabbit.</p> <p>YES, Suitable habitat is present for wolverine.</p> <p>NO, TES plants are present.</p>	<p>There is NO EFFECT on bull trout and NO IMPACT on redband trout, Malheur mottled sculpin and the Columbia spotted frog since no activities occur within RHCAs or wet areas.</p> <p>The determination of effects for the gray wolf and Canada Lynx and their habitat is NO EFFECT.</p> <p>The determination of effects for the California Wolverine is NO IMPACT.</p> <p>The determination of effects for the sage grouse, gray flycatcher, and pygmy rabbit is MAY IMPACT INDIVIDUALS or HABITAT. This determination was based on the original 2002 proposed action that included prescribed burning in sagebrush shrublands. Only the burning affected the habitat for these three wildlife species. No shrubland burning is included in this thinning project</p> <p>The determination of effects for upland sandpiper, tricolored blackbird, and bobolink and their habitat is NO IMPACT.</p> <p>There are NO IMPACTS on TES plants.</p>
<p>Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds.</p>	<p>NO</p>	<p>NO</p>
<p>Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation areas.</p>	<p>NO</p>	<p>NO</p>
<p>Inventoried roadless areas.</p>	<p>NO</p>	<p>NO</p>

Extraordinary Circumstance	Are They Present?	Are There Significant Effects?
Research Natural areas.	NO	NO
American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites.	YES SHPO concurrence	NO, see documentation attached
Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas.	YES SHPO concurrence	NO, see documentation attached

Public Involvement

To determine issues affecting the decision, and to determine if extraordinary circumstances exist which may have a significant effect on the environment, the Forest Service conducted scoping involving an interdisciplinary team of resource specialists, regulatory agencies, interested individuals or organizations, range permittees, and nearby landowners.

Originally this project was included as a portion of the 2002 Merit Project. The analysis process was postponed and then renewed in 2005. The renewed Merit Project was revised and the precommercial thinning was identified as a separate project because it is not a connected action associated with the 2005 Merit Project. No new scoping was initiated since no additional precommercial thinning activities are proposed.

The project appeared separately in the Malheur National Forest, Forest Schedule of Proposed Action (SOPA) Spring quarter, 2005. The SOPA is published quarterly and is mailed to interested individuals or groups. The SOPA also appears on the Malheur Forest website.

Tribal Consultation included:

Burns Paiute Tribe (Also the adjacent landowner); Warm Springs Tribes; and Umatilla Tribe

Other agencies contacted included:

State Historical Preservation Society (SHPO); U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

The following public concerns were raised concerning precommercial thinning. The response to concern is italicized:

- Precommercial thinning and underburning remove cover for elk, deer, pronghorn, lynx, and wolverine and should be minimized to areas that truly represent an unnatural high fuel loading due to fire suppression in warm/dry or hot dry sites (not cool dry or cool moist). *Approximately 135 acres of the precommercial thinning stands are located within either satisfactory or marginal cover areas. Following the thinning, these areas will drop below Forest Plan cover standards. With this reduction (less than 1%), the minimum Forest Plan cover standards will be met (see Merit Project EA, 2005).*

- No commercial logging or PC thinning in connectivity corridors – potential impacts to lynx, wolverine and other wide-ranging or cover – dependent species such as pine marten. *None of the stands proposed for precommercial thinning are located in connectivity corridors.*

Findings Required by Other Laws

I have determined that this project is consistent with the Malheur National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan as Amended, and its Standards and Guidelines. Based on site-specific resource analysis it has been determined that no extraordinary circumstances exist which may have a significant impact on the environment.

The Malheur National Forest Management (MNF) direction for the project area includes 18 acres identified as Management Area (MA) 1 and 352 acres as MA 14. MA 1 is general forest lands emphasizing timber production. MA 14 is a visual corridor made up of the viewshed along FS Road 16 that is the paved main access road into Logan Valley and FS Road 1640 that accesses wilderness trailheads. The route along FS Road 16 is identified in the Forest Plan as the Wilderness Loop Corridor, Sensitivity Level 1 and the route along FS Road 1640 is the Roads End Corridor, Sensitivity Level 2. The goals for these corridors are to manage the corridor viewsheds with primary consideration given to their scenic quality and the growth of large diameter trees. The thinning will meet these goals since the thinning will not change the texture of the forested landscape in the middle ground or foreground areas. The thinning will also promote the growth of large trees sooner.

The project will meet Forest Plan summer range cover standards for big game. As previously discussed in the scoping section, the thinning will reduce the amount of satisfactory and marginal cover but will remain above the minimum amount identified in the Forest Plan. This will be true even if the proposed Merit Project commercial thinning project is implemented (Merit Project EA 2005).

The precommercial thinning meets Regional Foresters Forest Plan Amendment #2 (1995) and applies the interim riparian and wildlife standards (Scenario A). Approximately 90 acres of thinning is located in Late and Old Structure (LOS) stands. The stand structure will not be changed because none of the large trees greater than 8" dbh will be cut. Also, two of the thinning units, 24 and 39 are located within a post-fledgling goshawk area. Standards will be met since the thinning will enhance the development of LOS stands and operating restrictions will be required during the nesting season if the goshawk is present.

Specific mitigation measures for all resources include:

- To prevent the spread of noxious weeds, all off road earth moving machinery would be cleaned and free of mud, soil, and vegetation before and after project activities.
- To minimize disturbance to nesting goshawks, thinning activities are restricted between April 1 and September 30 within ¼ mile of an occupied goshawk nests or inside the post fledgling area. A survey of the recorded nest sites would be conducted for northern goshawk prior to any thinning activities. Restrictions may be waived based on District Biologist's recommendations and Responsible Official's approval.

A biological evaluation covering Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive (TES) plant species was completed 5/01/2002. A biological evaluation covering TES animal species was completed 5/01/2002. A biological evaluation covering TES aquatic species was completed 5/01/2002.

The District Archaeologist has reviewed the project and concluded that the activities will not likely affect any cultural resources sites. The heritage report and concurrence that the project meets the terms of the 2004 Programmatic Agreement for the State of Oregon was signed on 8/10/2005.

Implementation Date

Project implementation will begin immediately after the Responsible Official (District Ranger) signs the Decision Memo.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to CFR 215.12(f).

Contact Person

For further information please contact:

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BROOKS SMITH
District Ranger

8/29/05
DATE