

Visual Quality

Affected Environment

Regulatory Framework

Visual Resource management direction for the project area is contained in the IPNF Forest Plan (1987) and is described in terms of Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs). VQOs were established during the Forest planning process and were mapped using a computer. The mapping was based on the seen area from travel corridors and other features having a high visual sensitivity level. Visual Quality Objectives were assessed using guidelines contained in the Visual Management Handbook, Volume 2, Chapter I of the National Forest Landscape Management Series (project file).

Methodology

1. Visual Quality Objective Analysis

VQOs are determined by (1) landscape variety class, (2) viewer sensitivity level, and (3) distance from the viewer. Based on these factors, VQOs are defined as the acceptable degree of alteration of the natural landscape. The degree of alteration is measured in terms of visual contrast with the surrounding natural landscape.

The visual analysis for the project area considers only National Forest lands, and includes the following criteria:

Variety Classes represent the physical features of the landscape, such as landforms, vegetation patterns and unique features. A *distinctive variety class* refers to those areas where landform, vegetation patterns, water forms and rock formations are of unusual or outstanding visual quality. A *common variety class* refers to an area where features are common throughout the character type and are not outstanding in visual quality. A *minimal variety class* refers to those areas whose features have little change in form, line, color or texture.

Sensitivity Levels are a measure of the public's concern for scenic quality for areas viewed when traveling through the forest. The three sensitivity levels employed are:

Level 1 - Highest Sensitivity. This category applies to all areas seen from primary travel routes where at least one-fourth of all Forest visitors have a major concern for scenic qualities.

Level 2 - Average Sensitivity. This category applies to all areas seen from secondary travel routes, use areas, and water bodies that have high use.

Level 3 - Lowest Sensitivity. This category applies to all areas that are seldom seen by the public and have no outstanding scenic features.

Distance Zones are foreground, middle ground and background, described as follows:

Foreground is usually within one-half mile of the observer. It is defined as the distance from which detail, such as tree limbs, can be identified.

Middleground extends from the foreground to about 3-5 miles from the observer; overall texture is emphasized, while individual tree forms are only discernible in open or sparse areas.

Everything beyond middleground is *background*. In background, colors and patterns dominate the visual impression. Texture in stands of uniform tree cover is generally very weak or nonexistent.

Tumbledown VQOs - The visual quality objectives, or the degrees of acceptable alteration of the natural landscape, within the project area are:

Retention – management activities are not visually evident. Activities may only repeat form, line, color, and texture which are frequently found in the characteristic landscape. Retention should be accomplished either during operation or immediately after.

Partial Retention – management activities may be evident, but remain visually subordinate to the characteristic landscape. Activities may repeat form, line, color, or texture common to the characteristic landscape; but changes in their qualities of size, amount, intensity, direction, pattern, etc., remain visually subordinate to the characteristic landscape.

Modification – management activities may visually dominate the original characteristic landscape. However, activities of vegetation and land form alteration must borrow from naturally established form, line, color, or texture so completely and at such a scale that their visual characteristics are those of natural occurrences within the surrounding area or character type.

Rehabilitation – is a short-term management alternative used to restore landscapes containing views that do not meet VQOs to a desired visual quality. It may not always be possible to immediately achieve the prescribed visual quality objective with rehabilitation but it should provide a more visually desirable landscape in the interim.

2. Scenery Management Objectives

Timber harvest, temporary road construction and fuels treatments can affect the appearance of a forested landscape due to contrasts created between natural appearing landforms and vegetation and those modified by management activities. These changes are often expressed in terms of form, color, line and texture.

The ability to control how management impacts will appear when seen from certain viewpoints depends on the vegetation management prescriptions, logging systems, terrain orientation to viewers, and logging slash disposal methods.

One objective of long-term scenery management would be to reintroduce a more representative mix of the long-lived trees and timber stands more “natural” to the region. Accomplishment of this goal tends to present unacceptable social effects. For instance, most people who live here now would not accept a policy of letting wildfires run their natural course with no attempt to suppress them. Nor would people accept widespread

clearcut logging to artificially open the land. After clearcutting, as with fire aftermath, trees could be planted and tended so that, in a hundred years or so, tree species (colors, textures, etc.) would more closely resemble historic conditions.

The goal, therefore, of scenery management is to generally maintain the views people now enjoy from the key points of high visual sensitivity identified in the existing condition section of this document. Where opportunity exists, tree planting would introduce a tree species component that would help to diversify color and texture in the stand. Openings created on forested slopes would be irregularly shaped.

Fire and associated smoke, helicopters, and logging equipment are considered as short-term impacts to scenic integrity, and are not considered in the effects analysis.

Existing Condition

The scenic character of the project area has been a forested environment with a mix of tree species for many millennia. Large stand-replacing fires have been the primary disturbance agent in this forested landscape. Forest composition has been altered in more recent decades by the exclusion of fire, resulting in a much higher percentage of Douglas-fir, grand fir and other shade-tolerant species than under historic conditions. This has resulted in a more uniform textured and colored timber canopy. This uniform canopy is currently undergoing a change to patchy openings created by root disease and bark beetles. These openings generally have tall brush and shrubs, which are a lighter color than that of the timber stands around them. Roading, logging and human installations such as power transmission corridors and towers have also altered the scenic character from historic conditions. The BPA/Avista powerline corridor runs the length of the project area..



The project area is bordered by National Forest system lands (NFS) to the east and a mix of private and NFS land to the north, west and south including the town of Lakeview approximately ¼ mile to the south. Much of the privately owned land has had some development or timber harvesting. The developments are home sites and wood lots.

This area is characterized as predominantly a common variety class. It can be seen from Sensitivity Level 1 and 2 viewpoints. The sensitivity Level 1 viewpoints are Lake Pend Oreille and the Whiskey Rock Campground. The highest portions of the project area can be seen from the lake as midground with some small portions occurring in the foreground. These areas have an assigned VQO of *Retention* and *Partial Retention*. The Sensitivity level 2 viewpoint is Road 278. Road 278 provides many foreground and middle ground views of the power line corridor.

Environmental Consequences

Introduction

Management activities are designed to meet, at a minimum, the VQOs assigned by the Forest Plan. The following discussion describes how disturbances such as timber harvest, road construction and fire affect the visual resource.

Disturbances caused by the construction of roads, fire and the cutting of trees can have an impact on visual quality. This impact is caused by contrasts between natural forest landscapes and managed landscapes. These contrasts consist of visual changes in form,

line, color, and texture of the soil and vegetation. Visual effects generated by timber removal and associated activities vary in duration and intensity according to the vegetation cover left on site and the cover in the surrounding landscape.

The tree removal prescription for a particular area can influence the potential visual impact on the landscape, but generally does not determine the degree of contrast created. More important is how tree removal fits with the natural landscape. The more varied the natural lines, color, texture, and forms are, the easier it becomes to blend activities into the landscape.

No Implementation

Direct and Indirect Effects

Without timber harvest or road construction, there would be no short-term effects to the scenic conditions of the area. The existing power line corridor and roads would continue to dominate many of the foreground and middle ground views from Road 278. The continued growth of trees would mute the visual effects of tree lines and unnaturally shaped openings over time.

Cumulative Effects

With no treatment of forest fuels in the project area, the ability to suppress an unwanted fire could be difficult. Fire can have a short-term or long-term effect on the visual landscape, generally depending on the intensity of the burn. If conifers dominate the landscape, a high-intensity, stand-replacing fire can completely change the visual character of that landscape. In summer, the observer would see changes from textures and colors of dark green vegetation (conifers) to a period of black and gray, then to a lighter color and textured shrub and regeneration. In winter, the landscape would change to a nearly all white snowfield. A high-intensity, stand-replacing fire tends to be very large, and could potentially affect the entire appearance of the landscape.

Effects - Proposed Action

Direct and Indirect Effects

Timber harvest would result in a discernable change in pattern, form and color. However, these changes would blend with the natural landscape because layout and timber marking would incorporate Group boundaries and leave-tree patterns into the design of the units. Vegetation removal would repeat the form, line, color, and texture of the natural occurrences common to the surrounding areas. Prescribed burning activities would be expected to produce short-term effects. There would be a discernible change in color as spotty patterns are created due to needle scorch. This would be short-term and would appear somewhat like the dying clumps of Douglas-fir and grand fir in root disease pockets currently occurring across the project area.

A low- to moderate-intensity underburn of group shelterwood, dry site thinning, and rehabilitation units would have a short-term effect by showing varying degrees of color change (from shades of dark green to reds and yellows). The color changes would

usually last for one growing season after the burn. Prescribed underburns generally leave a natural appearing landscape with a mosaic of vegetation patterns. This mosaic includes areas that do not burn at all, areas underburned with varying degrees of needle scorch, and areas where trees are killed. Open shrub fields would have a short-term color change from light green to black, or gray. This would generally last until spring green-up. In winter, the remaining mosaic of trees and shrubs would retain the texture and color of the landscape, unlike that of a high-intensity fire. Low- to moderate-intensity fires tend to be smaller and generally affect only a portion of the landscape viewed as middle-ground and background.

The proposed action would tend to reduce the appearance of artificial straight lines along the power line corridor wherever a regeneration cutting is applied next to them. Units that are treated with a thinning prescription would not be as effective as those treated with a regeneration prescription, but thinning would have a tempering effect on the artificial straight line. This would move the view towards its assigned VQO as well as that of a less altered but more open landscape. This change would provide a more visually desirable landscape in the interim and achieve the Forest Plan assigned VQOs in the long term.

One of the longest-lasting visual alterations to the landscape is soil disturbance from road construction. On steep terrain, roads tend to leave unnatural horizontal lines across the landscape. Exposed soil is rarely the color or texture of the surrounding landscape and will contrast with the landscape until fully regenerated with shrubs and trees. On steep terrain, careful road location and design are critical to maintenance of the natural-appearing landscape.

Temporary road construction, as proposed, would be evident but would have a short-term effect on visual quality, given the landforms and the existing evidence of human activity on the landscape. Road cuts and fills would cause soil color contrast. However, decommissioning these roads after use would help reduce the amount of time the color contrast remained on the landscape. All roads would be fitted to the landform to achieve minimal cut and fill slopes.

Cumulative Effects of the Proposed Action

The cumulative effects analysis area consists of the project area and associated viewpoints outside the project area as described in the existing condition. Since project activities are designed to meet VQOs, there should be no cumulative effects on viewpoints outside the project area.

Reasonably Foreseeable Actions

The visual change in the landscape caused by additional development on private lands (i.e. the powerline and associated corridor) cannot be predicted or designed. Therefore, there are no cumulative visual effects associated with proposed action.

No other reasonably foreseeable actions are expected to affect the visual resource.

Consistency with the Forest Plan

The proposed action would manage the visual resource by maintaining the visual quality objectives as described and required by the Forest Plan.