

Scenery Resource

Introduction

The Hemlock Elk Project Area is located within the Upper Swan Area of the Swan Lake Ranger District, west of Condon, MT, within the the Elk, Cold, and Glacier/Kraft Creek Drainages. Plum Creek Timber Company and private lands are located within the project area. The Mission Mountains dominate the landscape with peaks rising to 8,600 feet.

The landscape character within the project area is generally of managed land and high density of roads. Many of the proposed treatment activities are adjacent to previously harvested units with silviculture treatments ranging from clearcuts to commercial thinning.

Analysis Area Description

Spatial Bounds

The Hemlock Elk Project Area is part of the Upper Swan. Elevation within the project area varies between 3,800 to 8,600 feet. Topography is composed of valleys, ridgelines, and crests. The area has a mean slope of 25 percent, with only 12 percent of the area having slopes greater than 40 percent.

This area is used moderately by local residents and other forest users hiking into the Mission Mountains. Because of the moderate slopes, most of the units cannot be seen from State Highway 83.

The primary viewing opportunities for the general public are from Highway 83 and, to a lesser extent from the open roads within the project area. Comments were received during the scoping period that pointed out that some private land residences exist near some proposed harvest units.

Temporal Bounds

The time frames for this analysis spans from the implementation of the activities to a point in the future when grass, shrubs, and small trees are established in areas disturbed by treatments – year 1 to 20 years after treatment (2010 to 2030).

Data Sources, Methods and Assumptions Used

The Flathead National Forest Scenic Resource is managed by direction provided in the Forest Plan (1986). Visual quality is assessed and evaluated under the National Forest Landscape Management, USDA, Forest Service Handbook No. 462, April 1974. The Forest Plan describes the Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs) for each MA.

The Forest Plan includes management-wide standards for the Scenic Resource as described below. Treatment activities are proposed in MA 12, 15, and 15C for the Hemlock Elk Project.

MA-12

The VQO for this MA is *partial retention* where human activity may be evident but must remain subordinate to the characteristic landscape.

MA-15 and MA-15C

The VQO for this MA is modification or maximum modification. Modification VQO is where human activity may dominate the characteristic landscape but must, at the same time, utilize naturally established form, line, color and texture. It should appear as natural occurrence when viewed in the foreground (0 to 0.5 mile) or middle ground (0.25 to 3 to 5 miles).

Maximum modification is where human activities may dominate the characteristic landscape, but should appear as a natural occurrence when viewed as background (3 to 5 miles to infinity).

Forest-wide Standards

Forest-wide standards for visual quality include:

1. In each MA, meet or exceed the recommended VQO. Where MA goals and objectives can be fully achieved and a higher VQO met without increased cost or reduced future options, the higher VQO should be achieved.
2. With proper design and scheduling of activities, potential impacts on the visual resource will be dispersed and not concentrated within an area or travel corridor within a short time frame.

Achieving the long-term visual quality goal on the forest will work in direct proportion to how well the cumulative effects of time and space are addressed.

The time and space principles especially need to be applied to the key areas mentioned above. These areas are not viewed as a whole at one time; however, they are viewed sequentially from primary use areas, travel routes, or recreation sites.

A field review of the project area was completed in April 2008. Potential viewpoints were chosen based on the VQO of the units and visibility from the most likely public viewpoints such as Highway 83 and the open roads within the project area. Due to the gentle nature of the terrain combined with the selective harvest prescription used, the project poses little difficulty in meeting Forest Plan visual quality objectives. However, as described above, some harvest occurs near private land and visual impacts in those situations have been considered.

Management activities such as timber harvesting can affect forest scenic quality by changing the predominate form, color, line or texture in a given viewing area. The degree of visibility of these events (i.e., visual impact) depends on the interaction of certain elements to the viewer such as:

- Slope and aspect of the land;
- Surrounding landscape; and
- Frequency and duration of view.

The effect of the proposed action to these elements was reviewed and a determination was made on whether the proposed action met the assigned VQO.

Description of Measurement Indicators

A qualitative assessment of change in scenic quality is discussed. A determination is made if the proposed treatment meets or does not meet the VQO level.

Affected Environment

Existing Condition

Past timber harvest activity patterns have produced a mixture of intensively managed areas to other areas that have remained relatively natural. Since the mid-1950s, approximately 7 percent (1797 acres) of NFS land in the project area has been regeneration harvested, and 3 percent (738 acres) has been intermediate harvested. The majority of PCTC lands have been regeneration harvested. Please see Existing Condition for the Vegetation Section for more detailed information on past harvest.

The characteristic landscape consists of heavily managed low to moderate slopes interspersed with mature forest, with the Mission Mountains peaks in the background view. Past clearcuts are evident as are roads. Revegetation is occurring and hard lines between young vegetation and older vegetation are softening.

Environmental Consequences

Each of the action alternatives involves prescriptions and management activities that would result in a change in the area's existing character. All of the activities associated with the proposed alternatives are designed to meet the scenery levels as designated in the Forest Plan.

Effects Common to all Action Alternatives

Resource Enhancement Projects are grouped into three categories for the scenery analysis:

1. Fish habitat and stream improvements,
2. Noxious weed spraying along roads, and
3. Aspen restoration.

Please see Chapter 2 for a more detail description of the resource enhancement projects.

Fish Habitat and Stream Improvements: This includes replacing and/or removing culverts, stabilizing stream banks, installing sediment reduction devices on roads, stabilizing an old road prism, and removing native timber bridge abutments and fill. Effects would be short-term where soil disturbance is visible; after brush, grass and forbs are established in the disturbed sites, effects would not be noticeable.

Aspen Restoration: Light underburning would occur in aspen groves located in Units 11 and 12, to stimulate aspen regeneration. The majority of aspen trees in these two units are mature aspen trees with little or no regeneration occurring. Effects of a light underburn would be an occasional dead tree and some minor charred patches on existing live trees. Within a year, the aspen regeneration (suckers) would come back and establish an understory.

Noxious Weed Spraying: Spraying of noxious weeds would occur, in addition to the spraying of haul routes. Generally, effects would not be noticeable as new vegetation becomes established after the noxious weeds die off.

Vegetation Manipulation

Implementation of any action alternative may create some changes to views into and within the project area. Tree canopy openings of various sizes resulting from logging may be visible. The proposed treatments would be spread throughout the project area. Structure of the forest would change from dense stands of trees to stands with more openings and fewer trees per acre. Delineation between the dense stands of trees and openings with fewer trees may be noticeable until new vegetation is established.

Alternative A – No Action Direct and Indirect Effects

Since there would be no removal of vegetation or fuel treatments with this alternative, the process of forest succession would continue. Alternative A would not improve or maintain the general health, resiliency, and sustainability of forest vegetative communities. Fuels would continue to build up from tree mortality and undergrowth, creating a higher risk of mixed-severity fire than the action alternatives. In the event of such an occurrence, visual change to the landscape could be dramatic. As mixed-severity fires are part of the historic fire regime, this change would be natural appearing. Mixed-severity fires generally burn in mosaic patterns across the landscape creating diverse visual landscapes and would help in “softening” hard lines between harvested and non-harvested lands. The existing condition section of the Fire and Fuels Section contains more detailed information on fire regimes.

Alternatives B, C, and D Direct & Indirect Effects

From the general public viewpoints of Highway 83 and the open roads within the project area, forest plan standards would be met. From these viewpoints, forest plan visual quality objectives would be met in all action alternatives within a year of harvest. Alternatives B and C would have the same visual impact as the difference in between the two alternatives is the timing of harvest of some of the units. Alternative D would have less visual impact from open roads within the project area than Alternatives B and C since it contains no regeneration harvest.

Some comments received during the scoping period requested that we consider visual impacts of units close to private property. Units most close to residences were reviewed. A private residence exists relatively close to proposed treatment Unit 1. The prescription for this unit is Thin From Below, which focuses on removing smaller (with the majority of trees being merchantable) and suppressed trees while keeping most of the larger trees. Slash would be treated by mechanical treatment and/or prescribed fire. There would be about 50 to 150 trees per acre left in the unit resulting in a more open understory with larger trees scattered throughout the unit. This same property also adjoins Unit 2. The proposed treatment for Unit 2 is to Salvage, which focuses on removing dead, dying, or damaged trees. The existing stand structure would generally remain intact following treatment.

Short-term effects include views of stumps, reduced canopy cover, reduced understory vegetation, log landings along roads, burn piles along roads, and skid trails from mechanical treatment, if applicable. These effects would last until understory vegetation re-establishes and covers stumps and skid trails (1 to 5 years), logs are removed from landings, and burn piles are disposed.

These units would meet the Forest Plan standards and even from private property would likely achieve a partial retention VQO within 1 year of final activity.

The following units have a modification/maximum modification VQO, but are considered sensitive visual units because of the view from private residences.

These units 3a and 3b adjoin private property. The proposed treatment for Units 3a and 3b is Pre-Commercial Thin, which focuses on removing sapling and pole-size trees generally less than 5 inches in diameter. Slash would be treated by hand piling and pile burning. There would be about 50 to 300 trees per acre left in the unit resulting in a more open understory with larger trees throughout the unit.

Short-term effects include views of stumps, reduced understory vegetation, and possible views of burn piles. These effects would last until understory vegetation re-establishes and covers stumps (1 to 5 years) and burn piles are disposed.

These units would meet the Forest Plan standard of modification/maximum modification VQO within one year of final activity and would not be apparent from Highway 83.

Unit 7 adjoins private property. The proposed treatment for Unit 7 is a Thin From Below, which focuses on removing smaller and suppressed trees while keeping most of the larger trees (with the majority of trees being merchantable). Slash would be treated by mechanical treatment and/or prescribed fire. There would be about 50 to 150 trees per acre left in the unit resulting in a more open understory with larger trees scattered throughout the unit.

Short-term effects include views of stumps, reduced understory vegetation, log landings along roads, burn piles along roads, and tractor skid trails from mechanical treatment if applicable. These effects would last until understory vegetation re-establishes and covers stumps and tractor skid trails (1 to 5 years), logs are removed from landings, and burn piles are disposed.

These units would meet the Forest Plan standard of modification/maximum modification VQO within 1 year of final activity.

Alternatives B, C, and D Cumulative Effects

As discussed above, a managed landscape has remained due to vegetation management, fuels management, and wildfire suppression activities from past activities. Visibility of some of these features would continue. Similar actions to reduce fuels buildup and thinning may occur on surrounding private lands within this project area. Riparian areas for the most part, would likely be left untreated.

All action alternatives would leave varying amounts of trees within all harvest units. Regeneration of both conifers and broadleaf species would help screen out views of stumps and debris within 5 to 10 years. In addition, encouraging natural and planted western larch in regeneration harvest units would help add interest with a difference in color and texture, especially viewed from the middle ground and background. Cumulative effects to the Scenic Resource would include changes to the shapes and textures on the landscape seen from the viewpoints discussed above.

Regulatory Framework and Consistency

All alternatives would meet Forest Plan standards for the Scenic Resource.

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