

Scenery Resource

Introduction

The Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Project Area is located within the Upper Swan Area of the Swan Lake Ranger District, north of Condon, MT, within the Lion, Goat, and Piper Creek Drainages. National Forest System and private lands are located within the project area. The Swan and Mission Mountains dominate the landscape with peaks rising to 8,600 feet.

The landscape character within the project area is generally of managed land with a high road density. The proposed treatment activities are to salvage trees blowdown from wind events during the summer of 2008.

Analysis Area

Spatial Bounds

The Mid Swan Blowdown Salvage Project Area is part of the Upper Swan Valley. Elevation within the project area varies between 3,300 to 4,140 feet. Topography is composed of valleys and stream bottoms. 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 Swan Mountains. Because of the moderate slopes and screening, 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. No comments were received during the scoping period regarding scenery.

Temporal Bounds

The timeframes 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 (2009 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, and 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 5 and MA 9.

MA-5

The VQO for this MA is retention where management activities are not visually evident. Forest Plan standards for this MA require a visual absorption capability analysis (VAC); due to the small amount of acreage in this MA (Unit 23 has 3 acres) and the estimated canopy removal of >15 percent, the Scenery Specialist determined that a VAC was not required.

MA-9

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

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 September 2008. Potential viewpoints were chosen based on the VQO of the units and visibility from the most likely public viewpoints such as Highway 83.

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.

Measurement Indicators

A qualitative assessment of change in scenic quality is discussed. A determination is made if the proposed treatments meet or do 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 remained relatively natural. Since the mid-1950s, approximately 18 percent (791 acres) of NFS land in the project area has been regeneration harvested, and 8 percent (361 acres) has been intermediate harvested. Wildfire has occurred on 16 percent (717 acres) of the project area since 1910. Section 17 was previously PCTC and has had 26 percent (167 acres) of regeneration harvest and 25 percent (162 acres) of intermediate harvest. Please see Existing Condition for the Vegetation Section for more detailed information on past harvest.

The characteristic landscape consists of moderate to heavily managed low to moderate slopes interspersed with mature forest, with the Swan Mountain 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

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.

Vegetative Manipulation

Implementation of any action alternative could create some changes to views into and within the project area. Tree canopy openings of various sizes resulting from salvage logging may be visible though the trees targeted to be removed have already been blown down. The proposed treatments would be spread throughout the project area. Structure of the forest would generally remain the same; there would be frequent smaller openings throughout the stand as the dead and dying trees are removed.

Alternative A - No Action Direct and Indirect Effects

Since there would be no removal of vegetation with this alternative, the process of forest succession would continue. Alternative A would not recover merchantable timber from areas blown down by wind or provide wood products for local economies. Fuels would continue to build up from tree mortality and undergrowth, creating a higher risk of stand replacement and 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 and stand replacement fires are part of the historic fire regimes, 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. Stand-replacement fires generally leave less than 10 percent

forested canopy cover remaining. Please refer to the Fire and Fuels Section for more detailed information.

***Alternatives B, C, and D
Direct and Indirect Effects***

From Viewpoint #1 (Project File Exhibit P-1), Forest Plan VQOs would be met in all action alternatives within a year of harvest. Alternatives C and D would have less visual impact than Alternative B as the scope and scale of the salvage logging is less.

Short-term effects include views of stumps, exposed root systems (likely to about the same extent as in Alternative A), reduced canopy cover (very similar in extent as in Alternative A), reduced understory vegetation, log landings along roads, burn piles along roads, and skid trails from mechanical treatment. 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.

All the harvest units with the exception of 3 acres in Unit 23 have a partial retention VQO; Unit 23 has a retention VQO. These units would meet the Forest Plan standard of retention/partial retention VQO within 1 year of final activity with the application of the Scenery Resource Design Criteria (See Table 2-14).

***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 could 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 and ponderosa pine in salvage units that might result in areas of openings 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 viewpoint discussed above.

Regulatory Framework and Consistency

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