

DECISION MEMO

Smith Bates Ridge Timber Sale

Leadore Ranger District
Salmon-Challis National Forest
Lemhi County, Idaho.

Background information

Project Purpose and Need

The purpose for the proposed Smith Bates Ridge Timber Sale is to provide commercial timber products to local communities. Leadore Ranger District is proposing to selectively harvest by thinning, under the Limited Timber Harvest (LTH) Categorical Exclusion 12, 42 acres of trees located within a stand of timber that was previously thinned in 1974. Categorical Exclusion 12 allows silvicultural treatments of up to 70 acres of live trees through timber harvest, as long as no more than one-half mile of temporary road construction is needed to access the project site. The project is needed to allow for the continuation of uneven-aged management of a Douglas-fir timber stand. The project is also needed to implement the thinning of overly-dense pockets of trees within the stand, which will result in improving the health of the remaining trees and in reducing the risk of a stand-replacing fire from being able to move through the stand.

Proposed Action

The Proposed Action is to mechanically harvest approximately 40 thousand board feet of commercial timber product, through selective thinning, of 42 acres of trees. One contiguous project site (harvest unit) of 42 acres is proposed. The proposed project site is on an east-facing slope, with site elevation ranging from 7200 to 7600 ft. Slopes within the proposed project site range from 5 to 30%. This project site has been previously harvested multiple times, in 1895, 1938, 1959, 1971 and as late as 1974. The 1895 and 1938 harvests were over-story removal harvests, while the 1959, 1971, and 1974 harvests were selective thinning harvests. Leadore District proposes to commercially harvest trees greater than 7 inches in diameter at breast height. Leadore District also proposes to precommercially thin trees that are submerchantable in size. The predominate species to be harvested is Douglas-fir. Existing timber stand basal area ranges from 30-130 sq. ft./acre. The proposed timber stand treatment will be to thin the stand from below to a residual basal area of 30-80 sq. ft./acre. The expected results will be to create an uneven-aged stand mosaic ranging from single, large diameter, second-growth trees to clusters of 2-4 dominant, large diameter, second-growth trees with small openings for regeneration to establish. The logging system proposed to be used for harvesting the project site would be tractor logging. Slash would be treated by piling and burning slash in areas where high concentrations exist, and by lopping and scattering tops and branches for natural decomposition back into designated skid trails. Harvesting would be done as soon as practical.



The proposed harvest would not be sited within suitable habitat for American lynx. The proposed harvest would not be sited in roadless areas or designated old growth habitat areas. The proposed project site is on an east-facing slope, which drains towards the Mill Creek Water Diversion Ditch.

Existing road systems would be used to access the project site, so no new construction of permanent roads would occur, and no new temporary road construction would be anticipated. Access to the harvest site would not occur through roadless or designated old-growth habitat areas. At project completion, no closure of previously existing roads or trails would be slated to occur as part of project activities.

Decision

I have decided to approve the commercial timber harvest of live trees, in one contiguous project site (harvest unit) of 42 acres (approximately 40 MBF) on the Leadore Ranger District of the Salmon-Challis National Forest. This project will recover commercial forest product value from parts of T16N, R24E, Section 15 NESW1/4 and SENW1/4; Boise Meridian, Lemhi County, Idaho. Consistent with Salmon National Forest Plan goals, this commercial tree harvest will provide sawtimber to help support the local economy (Forest Plan III-4, IV-2, IV-129).

The project site is located within a Forest Management Area 5b. The project will commercially harvest trees greater than 7 inches in diameter at breast height. The project will also precommercially thin trees that are submerchantable in size. The predominate tree species that will be harvested is Douglas-fir. The project site elevation ranges from 7200 to 7600 ft. Slopes within the project site range from 5 to 30%, therefore tractor logging will be used to bring harvested trees to designated log landings. Logging slash will be treated by piling and burning in areas where high concentrations exist, or by lopping and scattering back into designated skid trails for natural decomposition. Harvesting will occur as soon as practical and will be conducted into 2007.

The project site is not located within suitable lynx habitat. The project site does not occur in roadless areas or designated old growth habitat areas. The project site is on an east-facing slope which drains towards and into the Mill Creek Water Diversion Ditch, therefore the project does not affect ESA-listed fish species.

Existing road systems will be used to access the project site, so no new permanent roads will be constructed. No new temporary road construction is anticipated. Access to the harvest site will not occur through roadless or designated old-growth habitat areas. At project completion, no closure of previously existing roads or trails will occur as part of project activities.

Design features and mitigation measures. Standard timber sale contract provisions include protections needed to assure that damage to residual forested stands is minimized. In addition, mitigation measures prescribed in the individual specialist reports (located in the project file) will be followed during implementation. These include:

1. Design a collector skid trail network with an average of 100 feet spacing between skid trails. Where they exist utilize skid trails from previous harvest operations.



2. Skidding off of collector skid trails will be limited to 2-3 passes, unless frozen ground conditions are met. Frozen ground conditions exist when there is 4 to 6 inches of frozen ground.
3. If more than 50 feet of 4-inch ruts develop on a skid trail the operator should switch to another trail. If more than 10 percent of the skid trails become rutted, skidding operations will be shut down until site conditions improve.
4. Skid trails and other soil disturbances within the harvest unit will be limited to 10 percent of the unit.
5. All skid trails will be rehabilitated by redistributing the berm and slash back on the skid trail, or by constructing water-bars and seeding with a native or non-invasive species seed mix. If water bars are constructed, the spacing of water-bars will meet the guidelines in the Salmon National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan Standards according to the quartzite parent material and the percent slope. Water-bars must be installed BEFORE the ground freezes.
6. Erosion control work will be kept current with the logging operation.
7. Trees will be limbed and topped at the landing site. Slash accumulations at landings will be piled and burned. Some slash will be lopped and scattered back onto skid trails to reduce soil erosion. To provide for long-term soil productivity, 5-8 tons per acre of fuel loading will be left on-site. This would be apportioned to approximately 5 tons per acre for material greater than 3 inch in diameter, and 3 tons per acre of material less than 3 inch in diameter. The less than 3 inch diameter material to be left includes herbaceous material.
8. To prevent the spread of noxious weeds in the project area all mud, dirt, seeds or other plant materials must be removed from all off-road equipment and an inspection of cleaning by a Forest Service official made prior to moving equipment into the sale area. Cleaning must occur off National Forest lands.
9. The timber sale contract shall include clause BT6.6, which states that Purchasers operations shall be conducted reasonably to minimize soil erosion. Equipment shall not be operated when ground conditions are such that excessive damage will result.
10. The normal operating season for timber sale will be June 1 to December 15. This is the period of time that the ground is generally snow free, not saturated from spring snowmelt, and extra-ordinary snowplowing is not required.
11. Timing of logging related activities:
 - a. Avoid conflict with snowmobile recreation on designated routes.
 - b. No snow plowing or logging Dec. 1 to May 15 on designated snowmobile routes, except under the coverage of Special Provisions CT6.312# and CT5.46#- Sale Operation Restrictions, which state "If snowplowing is done on a snowmobile route, a minimum of 4 inches of snow will be required to be left on the road surface", and "to prevent user conflicts, snowplowing and hauling will be prohibited on weekends and holidays."



13. Raptor nests will be protected. When nests are discovered within ½ mile of a cutting unit the zone wildlife biologist will be consulted to determine appropriate protection measures. Sale operations in the vicinity of the suspected nest shall be halted until consultation with the district wildlife biologist has been concluded and documented.
14. Leave on average four snags or immanently dead trees per acre in the following size classes:
 - a. One greater than 25 inches in diameter,
 - b. Two between 18 and 25 inches in diameter, and
 - c. One between 8 and 18 inches in diameter.
15. No trees will be harvested within PACFISH Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCAs). If trees felled outside of the RHCAs land or roll into the RHCAs, their boles may be removed, but the tops and limbs will be left behind. The RHCAs are:
 - a. within 300 feet of fish-bearing streams.
 - b. within 150 feet of permanently flowing, non-fish bearing streams.
 - c. within 100 feet of seasonally flowing or intermittent streams.
 - d. within 150 feet of ponds, lakes or wetlands > 1 acre in area.
 - e. within 50 feet of ponds, lakes or wetlands < 1 acre in area.
 - f. within 50 feet of landslide prone areas.
16. If drafting from fish bearing streams occurs, intake hoses must be fitted with a screen mesh equal to or smaller than 3/32 inches. Intake hoses would be placed in low velocity portions of the stream channel (< 0.4 feet/second of flow).
17. The Forest Service roads will be posted to advise other traffic of log hauling activities.

Reasons for Categorically Excluding this Action: I find the proposed action can be categorically excluded from documentation in an EA or EIS because it fits category 31.2-12 for the limited harvest of live trees, described in Forest Service Handbook Interim Direction (ID) 1909.15-2004-3, July 6, 2004, and because no extraordinary circumstances exist.

This category:

- allows the limited timber harvest of live trees not to exceed 70 acres;
- allows commercial thinning of overly dense stands of trees to improve the health of remaining trees;
- allows no more than ½ mile of temporary road construction;
- allows the incidental removal of live trees for temporary roads, landings, and skid trails;
- does not allow even-aged regeneration harvest, or vegetation type conversion, and



- is not allowed in wilderness, wilderness study, national recreation, inventoried roadless, or research natural areas;

I have determined that this project meets each of these criteria and, as described in FSH 1909.15 Chapter 30.3(2), no resource conditions are present that lead to a finding of extraordinary circumstances that might cause the action to have significant effects. Based on these findings, I believe that the effects on the quality of the human environment are not individually or cumulatively significant; therefore, the action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment. The table below and the project file support this conclusion.

| Resource Condition | Applicability to the Project |
|--|---|
| a. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species. | <p>The proposed action alternative would have No Effect on Gray wolf, North American lynx, or Bald eagle populations because there are no wolf dens, rendezvous sites, or pack activity centers, and no suitable lynx or bald eagle reproductive or foraging habitat in the area.</p> <p>The proposed action would have No Effect on Snake River sockeye and Chinook salmon, steelhead trout, and bull trout.</p> <p>The project will not impact some sensitive species. Impacts to other sensitive species are minor in nature. They may impact individuals or habitat, but will not likely result in a trend toward federal listing or result in reduced viability for the population or species. (BA/BE for fisheries and wildlife species, and the BE for sensitive plant).</p> |
| b. Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds. | <p>The project will result in no net loss of wetlands or alter the current floodplain.</p> <p>The project area is not in a municipal watershed (hydrology specialist report).</p> |
| c. Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas. | <p>The project is not located within a wilderness, wilderness study area, or national recreation area (project file maps).</p> |
| d. Inventoried roadless areas. | <p>The project is not located within an inventoried roadless area (project file maps).</p> |
| e. Research natural areas. | <p>The project area is not located within any research natural area (project file maps).</p> |
| f. American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites. | <p>No known cultural sites will be affected (heritage specialist report).</p> |
| g. Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas. | <p>No known cultural sites will be affected (heritage specialist report).</p> |

Public Involvement: This proposed action has been listed on the Salmon-Challis National Forest (Leadore District) Schedule of Proposed Actions in the 3rd quarter of 2005. Also, a scoping letter dated 15 February 2005 was sent to 31 individuals, organizations or agencies requesting comments.



I received 1 public personal comment, 2 public hardcopy comment letters, and 3 public electronic comment letters. USDI BLM forestry management professionals reviewed the project and replied with one comment. The 2 public hardcopy letters specifically supported and encouraged the harvest of commercial timber products, among other topics raised. The 3 public electronic comment letters represented 3 different organizations. These organizations primarily listed resource conditions they felt needed to be considered and additional analysis they felt should be conducted before making a decision. One of these letters specifically suggested that an EA or EIS should be prepared. I have read and considered these comments as well as our analysis and evaluations of the proposal. No extraordinary circumstances have been identified that would prevent this project from going forward under the designation of a categorical exclusion.

D. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

National Historical Preservation Act: The project area has been surveyed for cultural resources, and results have been submitted to the S.H.P.O. No effects to any listed or eligible cultural resources for the National Register of Historic Properties are expected.

Executive Order 11990 (wetlands) and 11988 (floodplains): Any impacts to wetlands or floodplains would be mitigated through implementation of BMPs, the Idaho Forest Practices Act, and mitigation measures for soil and water resources as described in this decision and project file. This commercial timber harvest action will be in compliance with both of these orders.

Executive Order 12898, “Environmental Justice”: This order requires the Forest Service to take action to the extent practicable and permitted by law to make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health effects, of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations in the United States and territorial possessions. In compliance with this executive order, the Leadore Ranger District, through scoping attempted to identify interested and affected parties, including minority and low-income populations for this project. The forest analyzed the consequences of the proposal on the human environment, and held a 30 day scoping period for the proposed activities. The decision for this document will not amend or preclude any existing private or treaty rights in the project area. No minority or low-income populations were identified during public involvement activities.

Endangered Species Act (ESA): Biological Assessments (BA's) have been completed for Threatened, Endangered and Proposed wildlife, fisheries and plant species and critical habitat. These BA's resulted in a **No Effect** determination for Snake River sockeye and Chinook salmon, steelhead, bull trout, Gray wolf, North American lynx, and Bald eagle.

Biological Evaluations (BE's) have been completed for Region 4 sensitive fish, wildlife and plant species. These BE's resulted in a determination of **no harmful impact**, to any sensitive species in the project area that would result in a trend toward federal listing or loss of population viability.

Copies of the BA's and BE's are in the Smith Bates Ridge Timber Sale Project File at the Leadore Ranger District Office.



Migratory Bird Treaty Act: The salvage activities would have no impact on the productivity of deciduous habitats, both aspen and willow, preferred by many species of neotropical migratory birds. Snags and replacement trees will be retained in clumps at a density of about 20 dead and 40 live trees per 10 acres to maintain habitat for cavity associated migratory birds. No trees, dead or alive, would be removed from riparian habitat conservation areas which would protect this preferred habitat component of several migratory bird species.

Clean Water Act: Rules pertaining to the Clean Water Act would be implemented and compliance with the Idaho Water Quality Standards and Wastewater Treatment Requirement would be achieved. The beneficial uses of water in the streams draining the project area would be maintained during and following project implementation through proper implementation of BMP's and soil and water mitigation actions.

Clean Air Act: Air Quality will not be affected because no prescribed burning will occur.

National Forest Management Act: The National Forest Management Act and accompanying regulations require that several specific findings be documented at the project level:

Forest Plan Consistency: Management activities are to be consistent with the Forest Plan which guides management activities {36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 219.1 (b)}. The decision to implement this commercial timber harvest action is consistent with the Salmon National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, its goals, objectives, standards, guidelines, and desired conditions. The 5b management area prescription for the project area emphasis is on a medium level of commercial sawtimber production and medium investments in timber.

Vegetation Manipulation: All proposals that involve vegetation manipulation of tree cover for any purpose must comply with the seven requirements found in 36 CFR 219.27 (b).
Management practices shall:

Be best suited to the goals stated in the Forest Plan. Goals for Management Area 5B are described on page IV-129 of the Forest Plan and state that management emphasis is on a medium level of commercial sawtimber production and utilization. The proposed action of commercial thinning harvest of live trees will achieve the goal of providing a flow of raw wood product material to dependent manufacturing communities, and will have a beneficial effect on the future production of sawtimber. The live tree thinning harvest will improve new tree establishment, growth, health, and vigor, while maintaining other resource values (SNFLRMP, IV-2).

Assure that technology and knowledge exists to adequately restock lands within five years after final harvest. There is not a requirement to artificially reforest these areas within a five-year period. This project is a thinning, and is not a regeneration harvest.

Not be chosen primarily because they give the greatest dollar return or the greatest output of timber (although these factors shall be considered). This decision was governed by the opportunity to provide commercial forest products, such as sawtimber, to communities. The harvest unit has been designed to maintain other



resource values. The decision was not driven by dollar outputs but by the Forest Plan goal to achieve a moderate level of wood product utilization.

Be chosen after considering potential effects on residual trees and adjacent stands. Proposed timber harvest activities will harvest live trees, but measures have been incorporated into the project design to ensure adequate snag retention. Timber sale contract clauses will protect residual trees and tree regeneration during the harvest process. Access to the harvest unit will not require any new road construction or skidding through adjacent stands. The removal of trees within the harvest units will not adversely impact adjacent stands.

Be selected to avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and to ensure conservation of soil and water resources. The use of specific mitigation and identified BMP's will protect site productivity and ensure conservation of the soil and water resources. This decision fully complies with the Regional and Forest Plan standards and guidelines for detrimental soil disturbance, sediment, and water quality. (See resource specialists reports in the project file.)

Provide the desired effects on forest resource yields such as water quality, fish and wildlife habitat, tree regeneration, etc. The project meets the purpose and need of harvesting trees to provide commercial forest products to communities. The project has been designed and located to protect and maintain other resource values, and to not have adverse impacts to wildlife, fish, water quality and soils. The treatments will not impact the long-term sustainability, resilience, and productivity of forest stand habitats. Project activities will not occur in Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas, in order to protect and maintain soil and hydrologic processes.

Be practical in terms of transportation and harvesting requirements and total costs of preparation, logging, and administration. The proposed action has been field reviewed by members of the ID Team, including a presale forester and logging systems specialist. It is a practical and economically viable action.

Implementation: I intend to implement this project as soon as practical.

Review and Appeal Opportunities: Pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12(f), this decision is not subject to a higher level of review.

For more information about this project, contact me at (208) 768-2500, or IDT Leader Michael Steck at (208) 768-2515.

/s/ Dennis Hilliard
Dennis Hilliard
Leadore District Ranger

22 March 2005
Date

