

Record of Decision
of the
Pilgrim Vegetation Management Project
Final Environmental Impact Statement

USDA Forest Service
Shasta-McCloud Management Unit
Shasta-Trinity National Forest
Siskiyou County, California

Location _____

The Pilgrim project is located northeast of the community of McCloud, in the area where Ash, Dry and Pilgrim Creek cross the Pilgrim Creek Road.

Legal Land Description: The legal locations (all within Mt. Diablo Meridian in Siskiyou County) are within Township 40 North, Range 1 West, Sections 2-5, 7-10, 14-18, 20-23 and 27; Township 41 North, Range 1 West, Sections 26, 27, and 31-35; and Township 40 North, Range 2 West, Section 12.

Decision and Reasons for the Decision _____

Background

Within the Pilgrim project area in recent years there has been significant tree mortality from insect attacks in overcrowded portions of the forest and from root disease in ponderosa pine. There have been a number of salvage timber sales in the area to remove dead and dying trees associated with insect and disease attacks. The Pilgrim project was designed to address the forest health conditions that caused this tree mortality. Management direction and objectives for the Pilgrim project area are described in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan as amended (Forest Plan). Additional management recommendations are found in the McCloud Flats Ecosystem Analysis (September 1995) and in the Pilgrim Project Roads Analysis (April 2005). The current condition of the Pilgrim project area is not consistent with management direction in the Forest Plan.

The Pilgrim project is designed to thin forest stands that are overcrowded with too many trees and to regenerate stands that have high tree mortality from root disease and insect infestations. Thinning within the overcrowded forest stands will improve tree growth and vigor by making more water, nutrients, and sunlight available for use by the remaining trees. Sanitation harvest in areas with insect and disease problems will remove trees that are likely to die and which may cause disease and insect infestation to spread to healthy trees. In much of the project area, dense understory trees create hazardous fuel conditions. In a wildland fire, these understory trees allow fire to travel from the ground up into the canopy of the forest. Flame heights can easily reach the low lying crowns of smaller trees in the understory. Once ignited, fires under these conditions can develop into a crown fire that increases the likelihood of high tree mortality. Removing smaller trees that act as fuel

ladders will reduce the likelihood that a fire will spread to the forest canopy and become a stand-replacing fire. In addition to increasing the resiliency of forest stands to fire, these project treatments will improve the resiliency of trees to insects and disease.

In some stands dominated by ponderosa pine, root disease and insect infestation have progressed to the extent that few healthy ponderosa pine trees remain. Where root disease and insect infestation have rendered the present stands unable to meet Forest Plan objectives for forest health and timber production, they are being regenerated by harvesting the stands and replanting them to a mix of appropriate coniferous species. Based on field review by a certified silviculturist and the Forest Service zone entomologist and pathologist, I am approving a treatment that will remove all diseased or insect infested trees in these regeneration units. In some stands, most of the trees are diseased. As a result, this treatment will depart from the Forest Plan green tree retention standard of leaving the largest and oldest trees on 15% of the area of the regeneration unit in some circumstances. Some residual trees will be retained in these regeneration units; white fir, incense cedar, sugar pine and healthy ponderosa pine will be retained as available to meet reforestation and green tree retention objectives, but will not comprise 15% of the stand area in some circumstances after diseased or insect infested trees are removed. After harvest, all regeneration units will be reforested with an appropriate mix of coniferous species. Approximately 415 acres are proposed for regeneration harvest. Of these stands approximately 160 acres will meet green tree retention standards after harvest; approximately 255 acres of these stands are not capable of meeting the green tree retention standards after harvest because of insect and disease infestation.

Another objective I considered in designing the Pilgrim project was to restore dry meadow ecosystems in the area by removing encroaching conifer trees. There has been a noticeable reduction in the area of dry meadows in the project area when comparing aerial photos from 1944 to the present time.

The Pilgrim project also improves the existing condition of aspen and oak stands in the project area. These stands are important to wildlife and vegetation diversity but are being lost to competition with more rapidly growing conifer trees that overtop and eventually shade hardwoods out.

The Pilgrim project also reduces overall open road density by closing approximately 10 miles of forest roads and decommissioning approximately 2 miles of forest roads that are not needed on a regular basis for forest management.

Decision

I have decided to implement Alternative 1 as described in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS). This alternative will commercially thin approximately 1200 of naturally occurring stands to the density of 120 to 150 square feet of basal area, commercially thin and remove insect infested and diseased trees (sanitize) about 1035 acres of naturally occurring forest stands, commercially thin about 785 acres of planted stands and commercially thin about 40 acres of mature pine to reduce ladder fuels and maintain the older trees. This alternative will also remove dead and dying knobcone pine trees from about 10 acres and replant the area with a mix of conifer species. Approximately 415 acres of disease and insect infested stands will be regenerated by harvesting and replanting the stands

with a mix of coniferous species. This alternative will also reduce woody fuels to decrease potential wildfire behavior by underburning about 200 acres and tractor piling and burning or burning slash concentrations on up to 700 acres. The project will also remove conifers encroaching on oaks (scattered individuals) and aspens (about 20 acres) and remove encroaching conifers on about 275 acres of historic dry meadow areas. The project will require construction of about 0.3 miles of new road and short lengths of temporary spur road. Approximately 10 miles of existing roads will be closed with guardrail barricades or earth berms. Approximately 2 miles of existing roads will be decommissioned and removed from the forest road system.

This decision approves a non-significant amendment to the Forest Plan (FEIS, pages 123 to 125). On 255 acres of the Pilgrim project this amendment removes the requirement on Forest Plan page 4-61 to “Retain at least 15 percent of the area associated with each cutting unit (stand) and to the extent possible, patches and dispersed retention should include the largest, oldest live trees, decadent or leaning trees and hard snags occurring in the unit.” In making this decision for a minor amendment to the Forest Plan, I considered the analysis addressing vegetative diversity that showed late successional stand objectives of the Forest Plan are still being met at the watershed scale (FEIS pages 49-50). I also considered that the Biological Opinion for this project as designed determined that the “actions are not likely to destroy or adversely modify designated critical habitat for the northern spotted owl” (Biological Opinion, page 21).

In reaching my decision, I have carefully considered public comments received on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and the analysis in the FEIS. My response to public comments is documented in Appendix K of the FEIS.

I am selecting Alternative 1 for several reasons. First, I believe it best meets the purpose and need because it reduces stand density and fuel hazards and increases stand resistance to insects and disease on the largest acreage of forest of any alternative considered. My preference is to improve the condition of the forest on as many acres as feasible in the Pilgrim area. I believe this approach best achieves the objectives of the Forest Plan by reducing the probability of losses from wildfire, insects and disease. Second, I believe this alternative will improve the biodiversity of the area by increasing the acres of early seral stage dry meadows, hardwoods and late-seral conifer forests. Third, I believe this alternative will improve overall road management by closing and decommissioning roads.

I considered not treating the 40 acres of old-growth stands as recommended in the public comments. Field surveys by the unit silviculturist indicated that these stands have areas that are overstocked and have evidence of mortality from insects and disease. A majority of these stands are adjacent to the Pilgrim Creek Road and the Pilgrim Creek Snowmobile Park, where there is dispersed camping during the summer months. These areas have a high incidence of human caused fires. Thinning and removal of fuel ladders will improve the health of these stands and their resistance to wildland fires.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the alternatives that were fully developed in this analysis, I considered three additional alternatives. Analysis showed that these additional alternatives failed to fully meet the objectives of

the Forest Plan. A more detailed comparison of the alternatives can be found on pages 30-33 of the Pilgrim Project FEIS.

Alternative 4 - No Action

This alternative would implement no activity at this time, allowing the existing forest and watershed conditions, fuel loading, and fuel ladder conditions to worsen over time. Currently about 3400 acres in the analysis area are overstocked and have areas of high mortality from insects and disease. This is causing fuel loading to increase well beyond desired conditions and greatly increasing wildland fire hazard. Dry meadows and hardwoods are being lost to encroaching conifers and riparian areas are losing vegetation cover to insects and disease. This alternative does not move the project area to desired conditions as described in the Forest Plan or the McCloud Flats Ecosystem Analysis.

Alternative 2 - Proposed Action modified to retain an average 60% canopy cover

This alternative was developed in response to a significant issue raised during scoping in regards to maintaining habitat for the Northern Spotted Owl within a critical habitat unit. This alternative would retain an average of 60 percent canopy closure on-average on approximately 535 acres of overstocked stands. Research has shown that this stand density (about 200 square feet per acre) in ponderosa pine type are in the zone of imminent mortality from bark beetles (FEIS, pages 5,7 & 38). This is currently the situation in these stands and others that have been thinned in the past to a 60 percent or greater canopy closure. With recent mortality from western pine beetle on the McCloud Flats in the hundreds of acres, I did not select this alternative because it would leave these stands susceptible to future loss from insects or disease and subsequent higher than desired fuel loadings and fire hazard.

Alternative 3 - Proposed Action modified to maintain 15% green tree retention in harvest and replant units

This alternative was developed to meet the current Forest Plan Standard and Guideline to maintain 15 percent (generally the largest and oldest trees) of the area associated with each cutting unit in areas to be regenerated. This alternative will leave approximately 255 acres with some root disease infested trees and continues the root disease cycle (FEIS, page 44). I did not select this alternative because review of these area by the forest entomologist and pathologist indicated that many, if not all the root disease retained trees will probably die within two to ten years and many of the trees that would be planted will become infected with the root disease. Also, future fuel loading will be much higher than desired conditions (FEIS page 54) on these acres.

Public Involvement

The Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare this environmental impact statement was published in the Federal Register on February 14, 2005. The NOI asked for public comment on the proposal from February 14 to March 14, 2005. In addition, the agency published news releases in the *Redding Record Searchlight* on February 14, 2005 and the *Mount Shasta Herald* on February 16, 2005. Letters, including a copy of the NOI and a map of the proposed action, were sent to four

organizations known to be interested in vegetation management projects in the McCloud area and one private landowner with property adjacent to the project area. This project has also been listed in the *Shasta-Trinity Schedule of Proposed Actions* (SOPA) since January 2004. The unit met with both the Winnemem Wintu and Pit River Tribes and presented each with a copy of the Pilgrim proposed action map. Additional public notice was published in the *Mount Shasta Herald* and *Record Searchlight* newspapers, on September 21 and 22, 2005, respectively, requesting public comment on the proposed non-significant Forest Plan amendment. In addition, letters requesting comments on the proposed non-significant Forest Plan amendment were mailed to all organizations and individuals on the project mailing list.

The Forest invited the public on two field visits to the project area. Invitations for a field tour on June 25, 2005, were mailed to eight persons or groups that expressed interest in the project (letter dated June 16, 2005). No members of the public turned out for the June field tour. A notice was published in the *Mount Shasta Herald* newspaper on November 2, 2005, inviting the public on a field tour of the project area on November 15, 2005. Additionally, invitations were mailed to persons or groups that expressed interest in the project (letter dated November 1, 2005). Two interested citizens, a timber industry member, California Fish and Game, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service participated in the November tour. Comments made during the tour were supportive of the proposed action.

The NOI for the Pilgrim Vegetation Management Project DEIS was published in the Federal Register on June 23, 2006. A copy of the DEIS was mailed to eleven Federal Agencies, two California State Agencies, one Siskiyou County Agency, seven organizations, two tribal groups and thirteen individuals. A Notice of Availability of the DEIS was published in the *Redding Record Searchlight* on June 28, 2006.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

Alternative 1 is the environmentally preferred alternative. This alternative is environmentally preferred over other alternatives considered because it effectively reduces the likelihood of future insect and disease pathogens and the risk of large catastrophic wildland fires. Of all the alternatives, Alternative 1 would result in conditions that most benefit forest health, vegetation diversity and wildland fire hazard reduction. This will result in fewer acres of forest landscape being impacted by insect and disease pathogens and will substantially reduce the risk of high intensity wildland fires in treated stands. High intensity fires have a high potential to cause loss of large areas of forest, damage soils, and adversely affect critical wildlife habitat.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

I have determined that this action is consistent with the following legal requirements:

The National Forest Management Act: The National Forest Management Act requires projects to be consistent with the Forest Plan. My decision to harvest timber and conduct associated activities, treat fuels, and implement road actions is consistent with the intent of the Forest Plan's long-term goals (Forest Plan, pages 4-4 through 4-6). The project was designed to conform with Forest Plan

goals, desired conditions, and standards and guidelines for the following Management Prescriptions:– Riparian Reserves (Forest Plan, pages 4-53 through 4-60), Wildlife Habitat Management (Forest Plan page 4-66) and Commercial Wood Products Emphasis (Forest Plan page 4-67). Consistency with Forest Plan goals, desired conditions, and standards and guidelines is addressed throughout the EIS and supporting documents. I have determined that not meeting the green tree retention standards on approximately 255 acres of proposed regeneration harvest units is not a significant amendment to the Forest Plan (FEIS, page 125).

The National Forest Management Act also requires projects to be consistent with minimum specific management requirements as provided in the implementing regulations at 36 CFR 219.14 and 219.27.

1. No timber will be harvested from lands not suited for timber production pursuant to 36 CFR 219.14.
 - All areas proposed for treatment have been field reviewed by a certified silviculturist and determined suitable for timber production.
2. All vegetative manipulation complies with the seven requirements listed in 36 CFR 219.27(b):
 - (b)(1) “Be best suited to the multiple-use goals established for the area with potential environmental, biological, cultural resource, aesthetic, engineering, and economic impacts, as stated in the regional guides and forest plans, being considered in this determination.”
 - The project has been designed to meet multiple-use objectives in the Forest Plan as described above.
 - (b)(2) “Assure that lands can be adequately restocked as provided in paragraph (c)(3) of this section, except where permanent openings are created for wildlife habitat improvement, vistas, recreation uses and similar practices.”
 - Based on field surveys by the unit soil scientist, all treatments expected to create understocked openings are in areas that can be adequately restocked within 5 years.
 - (b)(3) “Not be chosen primarily because they will give the greatest dollar return or the greatest output of timber, although these factors shall be considered.”
 - As described in the Purpose and Need section of the EIS, management prescriptions were developed primarily to improve forest health, to treat forest fuels, and to improve wildlife habitat - rather than the greatest dollar return and timber output.
 - (b)(4) “Be chosen after considering potential effects on residual trees and adjacent stands.”
 - Management prescriptions were specifically developed for their beneficial effects on residual trees and adjacent stands by improving resistance to insects and

disease, improving timber growth and yield, and by reducing the risk of intense wildfire.

(b)(5) “Avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and ensure conservation of soil and water resources.”

- The project does not propose any activities expected to impair site productivity or to have adverse effects on soil and water resources. Project specific Best Management Practices have been identified and will be implemented that protect water quality.

(b)(6) “Provide the desired effects on water quantity and quality, wildlife and fish habitat, regeneration of desired tree species, forage production, recreation uses, aesthetic values, and other resource yields.”

- See Chapter 3 of the FEIS. The project has long-term beneficial effects to water quality and quantity, wildlife, vegetation diversity, forage production, recreation use and visual quality.

(b)(7) “Be practical in terms of transportation and harvesting requirements, and total costs of preparation, logging, and administration.”

- The project has an existing transportation system to the extent practicable minimizing construction of new roads. The project uses existing timber harvesting technology. I believe the Pilgrim Project is economically practical given current market conditions and recent timber sale history on the Shasta-Trinity National Forest.

Endangered Species Act (ESA): I find the selected alternative to be consistent with the Endangered Species Act. Analyses of federally listed species and consultation with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) have been completed, fulfilling Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act consultation requirements (19U.S.C. 1536 (c)).

The FWS has determined that the selected alternative is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the Northern Spotted Owl. The FWS has determined that the proposed actions would have an adverse effect on designated spotted owl critical habitat. However, due to the limited amount of dispersal habitat affected in the action area, the Service does not expect that this action will impede the ability of the action area to provide for the intended conservation needs of the Northern Spotted Owl (Biological Opinion, page 21).

Clean Water Act: The proposed action would not cause any long-term direct or indirect effects that would exacerbate runoff and sediment delivery to beneficial uses of water (FEIS page 98). Implementation of project design standards and use of specific erosion and sediment control measures for the protection of water quality through Best Management Practices are incorporated in the proposed Pilgrim Project. The proposed action complies with the Clean Water Act, Porter-Cologne Water Quality Control Act, applicable water quality control plans, and was designed to meet specific

eligibility criteria for categorical waiver coverage by the Regional Water Board specified in order number R5-2005-0052.

Clean Air Act: I find the selected alternative to be consistent with the Clean Air Act as discussed in the Air Quality Section of the FEIS (pages 117-119). The project was designed to minimize air pollution. Burning will be compliant with Burn Day, Marginal Burn Day and No Burn day designations, and coordinated with the local air pollution control district.

National Historic Preservation Act: The project proposals are in accordance with Provision III (D) (1) of the Programmatic Agreement for Compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (FEIS pages 112-113).

Environmental Justice: Executive Order 12898 relating to environmental justice requires an assessment of whether implementation of this decision would disproportionately affect minority or low-income populations. Although there are a high proportion of lower income people living in this portion of the State, as well as a number of tribal groups of Native Americans, neither action alternative will affect them any differently than any other member of the public. Adverse environmental effects and effects on human health are minor. Tribal groups have been contacted about proposed actions on the Forest and did not express any interest in this particular project.

Roads Analysis: I find the selected proposal incorporates management opportunities identified in the project level road analysis as directed by the National Forest System Road Management Rule published in the Federal Register on January 12, 2001 and Interim Directive 7710-2001-3 published December 20, 2001. A copy of the road analysis is included in the project file.

Survey & Manage: The proposal complies with the January 9, 2006, court order regarding the protection of species under current Survey and Manage standards and guidelines.

Management Indicator Assemblages: The Forest Plan selects nine wildlife and three fish assemblages as management indicators at the forest level.¹ The Forest Plan directs the Forest to “use appropriate indicator species or habitat components to represent the assemblage.”² The purpose of this representation is to determine the relationship between habitat changes and population trends (36 CFR 219.19). The analysis summarized in the FEIS (pages 71-86) indicates that the Pilgrim Vegetation Management Project will not alter or contribute to existing forest-wide population trends for management indicators. See Appendix L.

Aquatic Conservation Strategy Objectives: The proposed project is consistent with the nine Aquatic Conservation Strategy Objectives as discussed in Appendix G and pages 98-100 of the FEIS.

All action alternatives will maintain and restore riparian-dependent structures and functions, provide benefits to riparian-dependent and associated species, and be consistent with the Aquatic Conservation Strategy. Most riparian reserves within this project occur on intermittent or ephemeral waterways. These riparian reserves are similar to surrounding upland areas with regard to fuel loading, ladder fuels and overcrowded stand conditions. During late summer, after seasonal streams dry, the environmental conditions within the riparian reserves are nearly identical to nearby upland conditions, leaving areas near stream channels at risk of stand replacing wildfire. Thinning and

¹ LRMP 1995, 3-11 and 3-24 through 3-26.

² LRMP 1995, 5-16.

treating fuels within riparian reserves will lower the risk of stand replacing wildfires that would damage riparian areas and increase erosion potential.

Implementation

Implementation Date

This project will be implemented no earlier than calendar year 2008.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

My decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215. Appeals must be filed within 45 days from the publication of a legal notice in the Record Searchlight, a newspaper of general circulation. Individuals and organizations must have participated in the comment period for the draft environmental impact statement in order to meet administrative appeal eligibility.

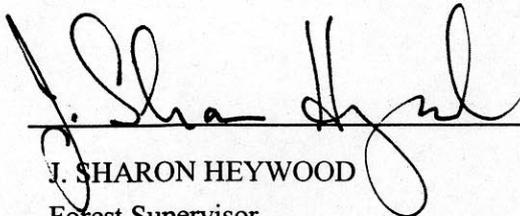
Copies of the notice of appeal must be filed with the appeal deciding officer:

Bernard Weingardt, Regional Forester,
USDA Forest Service,
1323 Club Drive
Vallejo, CA 94592
Attn: APPEALS

Electronic appeals can be sent via email to: appeals-pacificsouthwest-regional-office@fs.fed.us or fax to (707) 562-9229.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this project and decision, contact Dennis Poehlmann, Shasta-McCloud Management Unit, 204 W. Alma Street, Mt. Shasta, California 96067, (530) 926-9656.



J. SHARON HEYWOOD
Forest Supervisor
Shasta-Trinity National Forest

1 Jun 07

Date

