



File Code: 1950-3

Date: April 13, 2009

Dear Reader:

I would like to update you on our progress with the EXF Vegetation Management and Research Project. Since our initial scoping letter was sent last April, the interdisciplinary team has reviewed the public's responses, considered issues that were brought up, and hosted a field trip with interested organizations. Also, the Pacific Northwest Research Station has finalized their Study Plan "Forest Dynamics after Thinning and Fuel Reduction in Dry Forests." In summary the purpose of the project is to address the high stand density in the area while meeting the research objectives for which the Experimental Forest was established.

There have been questions about Experimental Forests in general, so this letter offers information on how activities are guided in this portion of the Forest, as well as some further description of the actions that are proposed.

Description of Management Direction

Deschutes National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan

The 1990 Deschutes National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan), as amended, guides all natural resource management activities and provides standards and guidelines for the Deschutes National Forest. The project area is entirely within the Experimental Forest (MA-16). The goal in this management area is:

To provide an area where field research activities are conducted while considering other resource values. Administrative coordination between the National Forest System and Research within the Forest Service will provide for long-term protection of the Forest Environment to assure future research needs are met." (LRMP 4-152).

Northwest Forest Plan

The project falls primarily within an Administratively Withdrawn Area (AWA) under the Northwest Forest Plan which amended the LRMP in 1994. AWAs are areas where existing Forest Plan direction focuses on recreation, visual areas, backcountry and other kinds of management areas that do not involve a scheduled timber harvest, such as experimental forests. Deschutes Forest Plan standards and guidelines for the Experimental Forests Management Area (MA-16) apply where they are more restrictive or provide greater benefits to late-successional forest related species than other provisions of the NWFP standards and guidelines (NWFP C-2).

The northeast corner of the project area (160 acres) falls within the Sheridan Mountain Late Successional Reserve (LSR). An LSR Assessment was completed for the area in 1996 (USFS 1996). The proposed treatments are consistent with the management recommendations in the LSR Assessment. There is no spotted owl Critical Habitat Unit associated with the Sheridan LSR. The LSR Assessment can be found on the Forest Service web site at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/centraloregon/projects/planning/major-plans/lsr-cultussheridan.pdf>.

The project area is not within a Key Watershed, and there are no Riparian Reserves.



Revised Continuation of Interim Management Direction Establishing Riparian, Ecosystem and Wildlife Standards for Timber Sales (Eastside Screens)

Approximately 370 acres in the southwest corner of the project area lies east of the spotted owl range, and is subject to this amendment, also known as the Eastside Screens. This direction was the result of a large-scale planning effort to determine the best approach for maintaining future options concerning wildlife habitat associated with late and old structural stages, fish habitat, and old forest abundance.

Experimental Forests

The EXF project is located within the Lookout Mountain Unit of the Pringle Falls Experimental Forest. The Pringle Falls Experimental Forest is a diverse field laboratory within the Deschutes National Forest. It was the first experimental forest to be established in the Pacific Northwest in 1931, as a center for silviculture, forest management, and insect and disease research in ponderosa pine forests east of the Oregon Cascade Range. It is divided into two units: Lookout Mountain Unit and Pringle Falls Unit. The Lookout Mountain unit, where the current project is located, was added to the Experimental Forest in 1937.

Much of the knowledge on current eastside ponderosa pine silviculture was developed at Pringle Falls Experimental Forest. The proposed project will focus on long-term effects and understanding of vegetation dynamics. This research will provide land managers valuable information to help guide management on the National Forests.

Alternatives

The project's Interdisciplinary Team has identified planning issues that were used to develop alternatives. Other concerns and issues will be addressed through the project design, mitigated, or analyzed and disclosed fully in the Draft EIS.

The following alternatives will be fully analyzed in the environmental impact statement:

Alternative 1. No Action. There would be no change from current activities and direction with the planning area. Ongoing research activities would continue.

Alternative 2. Proposed Action. This alternative was presented to the public on April 4, 2008. The actions include commercial thinning across approximately 2,550 acres, followed by mechanical shrub mowing and prescribed underburning. The design of the proposed action is based on the Pacific Northwest Research Station's study plan "Forest Dynamics after Thinning and Fuels Reduction in Dry Forests," which assigns one of four different thinning regimes to each unit. Thinning is from below, which means the smallest trees are removed first, until the desired basal area is achieved. Four different thinning regimes are proposed. The attached map (see Figure 1) displays treatment types 1 -thin to the upper management zone (UMZ¹), 2 – thin to 75% UMZ, 3 – thin to 50% UMZ, and 4 – thin to 75% UMZ and create small openings.

Alternative 3. This alternative was developed to address the issue of northern spotted owl habitat. The thinning prescriptions are the same as in Alternative 2 except that no nesting, roosting, foraging (NRF) habitat would be treated (166 acres) and no treatment would occur in the Late Successional Reserve (210 acres). Actions under Alternative 3 include commercial thinning across approximately 2,180 acres. Thinning would be followed by mechanical shrub treatment and prescribed underburning. See Figure 2.

¹ The Upper Management Zone is the density level at which a suppressed class of trees begins to develop. In pine plant associations, this is the level beyond which there is imminent risk of catastrophic loss of overstory trees to bark beetles. See the EXF project web page for more information on the UMZ concept.

Forest Plan Amendment

During the evaluation of these alternatives with the current management direction, it was found that certain areas and treatments were not consistent with the Forest Plan, as amended by the 1995 *Revised Interim Direction Establishing Riparian, Ecosystem, and Wildlife Standards for Timber Sales (Eastside Screens)*.

There are approximately 263 acres of treatment that are subject to the interim wildlife standard (p. 10 of Eastside Screens): “6.d.2.a. Maintain all remnant late and old seral and/or structural live trees ≥ 21 ” dbh that currently exist within stands proposed for harvest activities.” In order to meet the desired basal area in these areas, it is necessary to remove trees larger than 21” dbh. Therefore, a Forest Plan Amendment would be required to implement either Alternative 2 or 3.

Draft Environmental Impact Statement

We intend to have a Draft Environmental Impact Statement ready for public review this summer. To ensure that you receive a copy of the Draft EIS, please indicate your preferred format on the enclosed post card and return as soon as possible. Please make sure your name and address are correct and legible so I can keep you informed throughout this process.

Please stay tuned for information on an upcoming field trip to be hosted by the Pacific Northwest Research Station. Details will be posted to the Deschutes National Forest web site at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/centraloregon/projects/units/bendrock/exf/index.shtml> as soon as available.

Project Documents

We've updated the project web page so that you can access the study plan, maps, and other documents: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/centraloregon/projects/units/bendrock/exf/index.shtml>.

For further information, contact Beth Peer, Interdisciplinary Team Leader, at 541-383-4769.

Sincerely,

/s/ A. Shane Jeffries
A. SHANE JEFFRIES
District Ranger



