

# Steamboat Creek Watershed Restoration Project

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**Issue:** Restoring the aquatic and terrestrial ecosystem while balancing human access needs for recreation, silviculture and fire management.

**Background:** The project is within the Steamboat Creek 5<sup>th</sup> field watershed on the North Umpqua Ranger District. The analysis area covers 40,905 acres, approximately 40 percent, of the watershed. Steamboat Creek Watershed is part of the largest and most intact blocks of Late Successional Reserves in the Western Cascades of Oregon. It is also a Tier 1 Key Watershed. Steamboat Creek Watershed is the Forest's top priority for restoration of aquatic habitat. The purpose of this project is to progress with restoring the Steamboat Creek Watershed using the results of previous road and watershed analyses as a starting point. Reducing road density is a priority for aquatic health. The following road system information was included to put the project into perspective at different landscape scales:

- ❑ Of the 4,800 miles of road on the Umpqua National Forest, we have decommissioned 2.5 percent of the roads since 1996.
- ❑ Of the 1,460 miles on the North Umpqua Ranger District, 5 percent (73 miles) have been decommissioned.
- ❑ 8 percent (41 miles) of the 575 miles in the Steamboat Watershed have been decommissioned.
- ❑ The current analysis area includes approximately 230 miles, of which 7 percent (16 miles) of roads have been decommissioned.

The project began in 2001 and alternatives were developed. Scoping included contacting groups having previously been interested in similar projects, as well as putting up signs along the main roads that would be impacted. Very little response was received. Due to a large fire in 2002, the project was shelved while fire restoration and salvage sales were completed.

When the project was resumed in 2004, it was a surprise to many members of the public due to the break in continuity. The Environmental Assessment was released on September 23, 2004, with public comments due by October 23, 2004. During the comment period it became apparent that the project was extremely controversial, especially to area hunting groups. A public meeting was held on December 1, 2004, at which some members of the public were very confrontational in opposition to decommissioning any roads regardless of the agency's findings. In response, District Ranger Carol Cushing instructed the team to develop a new alternative which would incorporate fewer road miles.

Six alternatives were considered in the Environmental Assessment. Under all action alternatives large wood would be added to approximately 14.3 miles of stream. Potential trees would include roadside blowdown, as well as falling or pulling trees into the channel. The alternatives include:

- ❑ **No Action – Alternative 1.** The road system would remain as it currently is. This alternative is required by law to be analyzed.
- ❑ **Proposed Action – Alternative 2.** This alternative reflects the outcomes of the previous Roads Analysis and ATM plan. Approximately 86.7 miles of road would be improved and 72.3 miles would be decommissioned along with inactivation of 0.8 miles of road.

- ❑ **Alternative 3 – Focus on Aquatic Ecosystem.** Approximately 78.5 miles of road would be improved and 80.5 miles would be decommissioned. Also proposed is the inactivation of 0.8 miles of road.
- ❑ **Alternative 4 – Blend Alternative with Focus on Silvicultural, Fuel/Prescribed Fire and Recreation/Minerals.** Approximately 85.0 miles of road would be improved and 55.6 miles would be decommissioned. Also proposed is the inactivation of 12.1 miles of road.
- ❑ **Alternative 5 – Focus on Fire, Silviculture and Public Access.** Approximately 101.3 miles of road would be improved and 42.9 miles would be decommissioned. Also proposed is the inactivation of 7.2 miles of road.
- ❑ **Alternative 6 – Focus on recreational access and immediate resource risk.** Approximately 45.7 miles of road would be improved and 12.4 miles of road would be decommissioned. Alternative 6 also proposes to inactivate 2.4 miles of road.

The decision was made to implement Alternative 6 for several reasons: it addresses all elements of the purpose and need while focusing on the areas identified by the resource professionals assigned to this project, as having the highest potential for risk to resources within the next five years; there was not strong, local, public support for an aggressive decommissioning program in the planning area, especially in the Big Bend and Reynolds Creek area; we do not have the resources, primarily financial, to implement any other action.

Currently we have a backlog of decommissioning which amounts to one million dollars; and alternative 6 provides the most access to areas in need of future land management such as, fuels reduction, precommercial thinning and commercial thinning.

The Decision was appealed and affirmed by the Appeal Deciding Officer.

Although very controversial, several new partnerships are developing. District employees are exploring a road maintenance agreement with Douglas County as a cooperating agency; Oregon Hunters Association will volunteer in spring 2006 to complete much needed restoration work.

We are using Steamboat Creek Watershed Restoration Project as a marketing tool to develop lasting partnerships with many organizations in order to continue restoration which will improve both wildlife habitat and the transportation system.

### **Stakeholders:**

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| ❑ Local contractors and businesses          | ❑ Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife        |
| ❑ Douglas County Commissioners              | ❑ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service                |
| ❑ Oregon Hunters Association                | ❑ NOAA Fisheries                                |
| ❑ Communities of Roseburg, Glide, Dry Creek | ❑ Cow Creek Band of the Umpqua Tribe of Indians |
| ❑ North Umpqua Foundation                   |   |
| ❑ Umpqua Watersheds, Inc.                   |   |

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