

DECISION NOTICE

Corral Creek Road Relocation and Restoration Project Environmental Analysis

USDA Forest Service
Wallowa-Whitman National Forest
La Grande Ranger District
Union County, Oregon

An Environmental Assessment (EA) that discusses the proposed Corral Creek Road Relocation and Restoration Project within the 15,343 acre planning area on the La Grande Ranger District of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest is available for review at the La Grande Ranger District Office in La Grande, Oregon.

The Decision

Based on the analysis described in the EA and associated project record, it is my decision to implement Alternative 2 as the method of treatment and management of these National Forest lands. This decision addresses the purpose and need to improve fish habitat and fish passage by decreasing erosion and fine sediment sources, improving floodplain function and connectivity, improving instream habitat (increase pool quality and quantity, fish cover, habitat complexity, spawning gravel recruitment), improvement of riparian vegetation and improved future large wood recruitment potential.

Alternative 2 responds to issues related to aquatic and fisheries habitat and access. The following describes the preferred alternative.

Preferred Alternative Description:

Approximately 0.6 mile of open road adjacent to South Fork Catherine Creek and Corral Creek, and 0.53 miles of closed road adjacent to Corral Creek will be obliterated and re-contoured. Approximately 0.35 mile of new road construction will occur to relocate the road outside of the Corral Creek riparian area and floodplain and maintain existing levels of motorized access through the area. In addition to the restoration work described below, one existing gravel pit would be enlarged (refer to map) to provide crushed rock for road construction needs.

Corral Creek

Culvert Removal: Three culverts will be removed to allow for improved fish passage. Two of these culverts are associated with the road re-contour. The channel will be reestablished similar to up and downstream channel characteristics. One of the culverts (furthest one upstream) will involve removing the culvert and reestablishing a ford.

Wood & Boulder Placement: A combination of cut logs and root wads will be placed within 1.75 miles of Corral Creek; 1.45 miles utilizing an excavator for placement of wood, and 0.3 miles of wood placement by hand. Boulders taken from on site will be placed at each end of the re-contoured segment of road to protect the restoration work and within the stream channel to facilitate creation of pools. All of the woody debris (logs & rootwads) will be obtained on site from dense stands adjacent to Corral Creek (up to 300 feet from the stream). Trees will be felled or pushed over. All of the trees will be less than 21" in DBH and imported into the creek with the use of an excavator and chokers where needed. All excavators will be required to use biodegradable hydraulic fluids ("fish friendly") during project activities.

Road Re-contour: An estimated 0.4 miles of open road and 0.53 miles of closed road located in close proximity to the stream channel and floodplain will have culverts removed and the road prism re-contoured. Floodplains and natural drainage patterns will be reconstructed where necessary. Wood will be placed on the re-contour to prevent erosion and create microsites to facilitate re-vegetation.

Planting: Planting of conifer seedlings and native grass and forb seed will occur on approximately 1 mile of Corral Creek. This will occur primarily with the re-contour portions of the project.

Road Reconstruction: Approximately 0.5 mile of existing road adjacent to Corral Creek will be retained and reconstructed. Two non-fish bearing culverts will be replaced and the road will be out-sloped and resurfaced to improve drainage and reduce sediment potential. One cattleguard will be moved from the existing road prism at the mouth of Corral Creek to the newly constructed road. A 12-foot side gate will be constructed to allow passage of livestock and equipment.

South Fork Catherine Creek

Road Re-contour: There will be 0.2 miles of open road in close vicinity with the stream and floodplain re-contoured and obliterated including removal of one drainage relief culvert. Wood will be placed on this project area to prevent erosion and allow for planting microsites.

Planting: Planting of conifer seedlings and grass/forb seed will occur on approximately 0.2 mile of South Fork Catherine Creek in association with the recontoured portions of the road.

Road Reconstruction: Approximately 0.8 miles of road adjacent to South Fork Catherine Creek will be reconstructed. Two culverts associated with road drainage will be replaced and the road will be out-sloped and resurfaced to improve drainage and reduce sediment potential.

Pole Creek

An enclosure fence will be constructed on 0.15 miles of Pole Creek. The fence will be a 3-strand barbed wire let-down fence. Two cattleguards will also be installed as a part of this fence construction.

Implementation - Wood placement and culvert removal will occur from August 1, 2014 through August 15, 2014. Road obliteration and relocation, culvert removal and replacement, road resurfacing, in-stream wood placement and floodplain work, fence construction and boulder placement will occur from August through October of 2014. Seeding will occur in the fall of 2014. Planting will occur from April 2015 to June of 2015.

Mitigations and Monitoring:

Mitigation measures incorporated as part of this decision include specific treatment design features as well as a variety of specific resource measures described in the EA on pages 7-12. Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines that apply to Management Area 1, where project activities will occur, are also incorporated into project design.

Monitoring of project activities incorporated into this decision are discussed on pages 12 and 13 of the EA.

Alternatives

Based on public scoping of the proposed action, no additional alternatives to the proposed action were developed. As described below, the No Action Alternative (Alternative 1) was the only other alternative considered in this analysis.

Alternative 1 - No Action

This alternative constitutes the "No Action" alternative. Road relocation, fish passage, instream enhancement, and fence construction and other management activities identified in the Corral Creek analysis area will be deferred. This alternative forms a baseline for comparison of the action alternatives.

Alternative 2 – [Refer to map in Appendix A of the EA]

This is the preferred alternative as described in the EA and under The Decision above.

Scoping Process

The Forest Service consulted the following individuals, Federal, State, tribal, and local agencies during the development of this EA:

The Corral Creek Road Relocation project was published in the Wallowa-Whitman Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA), a quarterly publication, in October 2011 and has appeared in each quarterly SOPA since then. This mailing is distributed to a mailing list of individuals, organizations, and agencies and is published on the forest web page.

Scoping and consultation for the project was initiated and is ongoing with the Nez Perce Tribe, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW).

A detailed description of the proposed action was mailed on February 19, 2013 to approximately 95 forest users and concerned publics soliciting comments and concerns related to this project. Two email letters were received from local tribes indicating an interest in this project, concern over protection of cultural resources, and asking questions about some of the site specific aspects of project design and implementation.

An email from an interested public was received asking for clarification on aspects of the project including establishment of a ford on Corral Creek at the junction of road 7700620 and 7700621. Additional email correspondence responded to the questions including clarification that a ford will be established at the 7700620 and 7700621 junction retaining access to the 7700621 and 7700623 roads.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the State Historical Preservation Officer (SHPO).

Consultation with National Marine Fisheries Service and US Fish and Wildlife Service for threatened and endangered species has been completed for this project.

An analysis file for this project is available for public review at the La Grande Ranger District. The analysis file includes specialist's reports, data specific to the project, public notifications and their responses, meeting notes, and miscellaneous documentation.

Reasons for Decision

I have chosen to implement Alternative 2 because it provides a balanced response to the issues and concerns raised in this project while best achieving stated purpose and need objectives aimed at improving instream aquatic habitat, providing fish passage, and protecting riparian habitat from grazing impacts. This project moves this habitat toward the desired future conditions outlined in the amended forest plan. The reasons for this decision follow:

Aquatic Habitat Conditions

Alternative 2 will remove the draw bottom road along Corral Creek which has been a chronic source of sediment to Corral Creek and the South Fork of Catherine Creek. Riparian areas along portions of Corral Creek and the South Fork of Catherine Creek will no longer be occupied by a roadway and will be restored resulting in better hydrologic connectivity for the stream with its riparian habitat area. Alternative 2 will also result in increased levels of future recruitment of large wood to the stream as floodplain and riparian areas formerly occupied by roads are restored and returned to productivity. Road surface and drainage upgrades will occur under Alternative 2 reducing or eliminating chronic sources of sediment to Corral Creek. Construction of the enclosure fence on Pole Creek will protect the stream and streamside

vegetation from livestock impacts by protecting and improving streambank stability, streamside vegetation, and stream shade.

Fish Passage and Habitat

Alternative 2 will maintain and enhance riparian management objectives related to water quality, stream channel integrity, channel processes, and the sediment regime; instream flows to support healthy riparian and aquatic habitats; riparian vegetation to provide the amount and distribution of large woody debris; improve summer and winter thermal regulation within the riparian and aquatic zones; and reduce erosion. These all contribute to high quality fish habitat.

Through road obliteration and relocation, road storm proofing, floodplain restoration, plantings, and large woody debris additions, Alternative 2 will create and maintain high quality fish habitat. While some short-term impacts may occur during project implementation, in the long term, it is expected that water quality and instream flows will be improved through a connected, accessible, and functioning floodplain that will adequately store water for safe release throughout the low flow period.

Replacement and removal of several culverts in Alternative 2 will also improve fish passage to habitat that was previously inaccessible. This will increase the quantity and quality of habitat to not only resident fish species but threatened and endangered species as well.

Access and Safety

Alternative 2 will maintain access into the project area for public, administrative, recreational, and fire suppression needs. Access to the Sand Pass trailhead and to Buck Creek Campground will not be affected by this project. During construction activities there will be short term impacts to access through the area. Over the long term the planned reconstruction and resurfacing of the project roads will improve access and safety for public recreationists.

The Corral Creek road is essential to fire suppression and public safety. Alternative 2 will maintain access in to and out of the South Fork Catherine Creek drainage to the north and south. This road and the improved quality of the road will provide for more timely fire suppression response and provides safer ingress/egress for firefighters and public if a wildfire should occur.

Maintenance activities associated with implementation of Alternative 2 will ensure the road is constructed to withstand both commercial and recreational traffic; therefore, impacts to ongoing commercial and recreational activities will be minimized. Road maintenance performed with this project and in adjacent projects will improve the condition of roads for travel, safety, and resource protection.

Tribal Treaty Rights and Traditional Cultural Uses

The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) and Nez Perce Tribe expressed concerns over potential impacts to cultural resources and traditional cultural properties. Cultural surveys and associated reports completed for Corral Creek (Corral Creek cultural resource report was incorporated into the larger Sandbox Cultural Resource Report) were shared with the tribes and included discussions of important traditional cultural uses including key First Foods important to the CTUIR. The decision to implement Alternative 2 retains and improves access to the area maintaining opportunities for tribal members to practice traditional uses and implements activities to improve to water quality and fish habitat – resources that are highly valued by the Tribes. Specifically, the improvements to water quality and fish habitat will enhance First Foods opportunities important to the CTUIR and restoration of habitat for endangered steelhead and Chinook salmon important to the Nez Perce Tribe and CTUIR alike.

Other Issues:

Further consideration of the environmental consequences of other issues is disclosed in the EA on pages 13-50. In review of these consequences, Alternative 2 best meets the purpose and need while mitigating

impacts to soils, water quality and fisheries, threatened and endangered species, cultural resources, noxious weeds, other wildlife, visual resources, recreation, tribal treaty rights, and public safety. Alternative 2 integrates the purpose and need of the project, meets the legal requirements of National Forest Management Act, meets forest plan direction and protects resources within the project area. (EA, pages 13-50)

In summary, my decision to select Alternative 2 is based on thoughtful consideration of the public input, ecological conditions of the landscape, predicted environmental effects, and long-term access needs for administrative and public activities within the project area.

Findings

The Corral Creek Road Relocation and Restoration Project Assessment was developed in accordance with the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act, as amended by the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) and its implementation regulations codified at Title 36, Part 219 of the Code of Federal Regulations. It also was developed in accordance with Council on Environmental Quality Regulations for Implementing the Procedural Provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (Code of Federal Regulations, Title 40, Part 1508.27). These implementation regulations require specific findings to support decisions subject to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). These findings include (1) Finding of No Significant Impact and (2) Finding of Consistency with Management Direction for the Forest Plan.

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

The selected alternative, with the specified management requirements, constraints, and mitigation measures, provides the best combination of physical, biological, social, and economic benefits.

Based on the site-specific environmental analysis documented in the Environmental Analysis and FONSI on pages 50-55 of the EA, I have found that this is not a major Federal action, individually or cumulatively, and will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not needed.

Finding of Consistency with Forest Plan Management Direction

From the results of site-specific analysis documented in the EA, I conclude that this action is consistent with the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended (EA, Chapter 3).

Pre-decisional Administrative Project Review

As provided by the Pre-decisional Administrative Review process under 36 CFR 218 Subpart A for Forest Service proposed actions implementing land and resource management plan activities documented with a Record of Decision or Decision Notice, this project is not subject to objection under Section 218.4. The 30-day comment period for this project ended on January 9, 2014.

Implementation

This project may be implemented immediately upon signature of this decision notice.

For further information, contact Cindy Christensen, Project Analyst, at the La Grande District, 3502 Highway 30, La Grande, Oregon 97850, or telephone (541) 962-8501.



Bill Gamble
District Ranger
La Grande Ranger District



Date

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