



United States Department of Agriculture

South Nestucca Restoration Project

Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact



Forest Service

Siuslaw
National Forest

Hebo
Ranger District

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Project Background, Area, and Needs

The 27,543-acre South Nestucca project area is located in the Nestucca watershed basin, approximately 18 miles south of Tillamook, Oregon. Approximately 82 percent of the project area is National Forest System land (22, 673 acres), 17 percent is privately owned (4,757 acres), and the remainder is owned by Bureau of Land Management (77 acres), State of Oregon (27 acres), and the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde (9 acres).

The project area is located in portions of Township 3 South, Ranges 9 and 10 West; Township 4 South, Ranges 8, 9, and 10 West; and Township 5 South, Range 10 West; Willamette Meridian; Tillamook and Yamhill Counties, Oregon.

The South Nestucca Restoration Project is a package of terrestrial restoration actions that would serve to address the needs identified in chapter 1 of the South Nestucca Restoration Project Environmental Assessment (the Project EA) and summarized below:

- Need to accelerate the development of late-successional and old-growth forest habitat in young managed stands and off-site stands (stands planted with trees not native to the local area following the 1910 Mt. Hebo fire). There is limited availability of old-growth forest habitat in the Pacific Northwest, including the project area, which in turn limits populations of associated species, such as the northern spotted owl and the marbled murrelet.
- Need to improve habitat diversity in plantations and to maintain or improve meadow, hardwood-tree, and grass, forb, and shrub habitats. There is a shortage of habitat diversity in plantations and the declining amount of hardwood-tree, grass, forb, and shrub habitats in the project area limits the ability of these habitats to support a diversity of plant and animal species.
- Need to increase availability of huckleberry shrubs utilized as part of native culture.
- Need to ensure resiliency of elegant fawn lily (*Erythronium elegans*) populations on Mount Hebo and throughout the range of the species by increasing availability and diversity of suitable habitat.
- Need to sell timber from plantations proposed for commercial thinning to help fund restoration actions that include snag and coarse woody debris creation. The shortage of funds to implement actions designed to enhance or restore ecosystem function limits the ability of the Forest to restore the ecosystem and achieve the desired conditions.
- Need to use timber sale revenue to maintain or repair key forest roads. The shortage of funds to implement road maintenance actions contributes to a deteriorating transportation infrastructure, affecting road safety and increasing risk to the environment from failed roads.

The decision to be made is whether to implement actions designed to meet the Project needs by selecting Alternative 2, the proposed project, or whether to not implement these actions by selecting Alternative 1, the no action alternative.

Decision

It is my decision to proceed with Alternative 2 as described in the Project EA, with one modification. Through further investigation it was determined the project would have no effect on Oregon silverspot butterfly. The thinning treatments proposed will neither harm nor benefit the butterfly, and the purpose and need statement, proposed action, and wildlife impacts analysis have been modified accordingly. Informal consultation with US Fish and Wildlife Service has

confirmed our conclusion. All other components of Alternative 2 will be implemented as described in the Project EA.

In my consideration to proceed with a modified Alternative 2, I have reviewed the Project EA and its appendices, the terrestrial Biological Evaluation and corresponding Letters of Concurrence from the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Fisheries Biological Evaluation, other project-file documents, and the comments received during the 30-day public comment period.

Proposed Actions

To meet the Project needs, the actions outlined in Section 2.1.2.1 of the Project EA and summarized below will be implemented (estimated quantities). Project design criteria designed to ensure protection of natural resources will also be implemented (see Project EA, Appendix A).

Stand treatments:

- *Young Managed Stands:* Commercially thin approximately 848 acres in 13 stands 18 to 80 years old, diversifying stand species and structure, creating dead wood, and creating transitory gaps (openings) in these stands.
- *Off-site Stands:* Commercially thin approximately 920 acres in 25 stands 80 to 103 years old of off-site stock, diversifying stand species and structure, creating dead wood, and creating transitory gaps (openings) in these stands.
- Commercially thin approximately 9 acres to enhance habitat for huckleberries.
- Create one-acre gaps in approximately five percent of each stand and one half-acre gaps in approximately five percent of each stand.
- Plant approximately half of the one-acre gaps within young managed stands and off-site stands. Half of all one-acre gaps will be left unplanted to encourage early-seral habitat development.
- Underplant a portion (approximately 998 acres) of the commercially thinned young managed stands and off-site stands.
- Fall and leave up to five trees per acre within the commercially thinned stands to create coarse woody debris.
- Create up to five snags per acre in commercially-thinned stands by topping live trees.
- Top live trees to create snags in mature natural stands adjacent to the treated stands.

Road treatments:

- Routine maintenance and rock re-surfacing on 74 miles of haul roads at an estimated cost of \$700,000. 71 miles of haul roads are designated for wet weather haul and 3 miles are restricted to dry season haul.
- Temporarily open approximately 8 miles of closed non-key system roads which will be waterbarred and closed through the timber sale contract after harvesting activities.
- Construct approximately 3.9 miles of temporary roads on existing templates and 4.7 miles of new temporary road which will be waterbarred and closed through the timber

sale contract at the end of each operating season and decommissioned at the end of the project.

Reasons for the Decision

I intend to proceed with the modified Alternative 2 because the actions under this alternative best meet the needs identified in chapter 1 of the Project EA and summarized on page 1 of this Decision Notice.

The Project is designed to protect affected natural resources in the short term and maintain or enhance the quality and productivity of these resources in the long term Project (Project EA, chapter 3 and Appendix A). The Project will also provide timber-sale revenue in support of actions designed to improve existing terrestrial conditions, such as creating deadwood, repairing roads, storing roads, and controlling invasive plants (Project EA, chapter 3).

The modified Alternative 2 also best meets the expectations for holistic and integrated restoration. Project design criteria (Project EA, Appendix A) will ensure that proposed actions benefit natural resources in the long term and minimize or prevent adverse effects to these resources in the short term. No unacceptable cumulative effects to any resource are expected. Many beneficial effects will accrue from implementing the Project, and the risk associated with any potential negative effects, discussed in chapter 3 of the Project EA, is low.

In my review of the Project EA, its appendices, and other project-file documents, I believe the information provided to me is adequate for a reasoned choice of action. I am aware that the selected alternative will have some unavoidable adverse environmental effects, including an increase in the risk of introduction and spread of invasive plants in the project area (Project EA, page 111), short-term impacts to recreation (Project EA, page 128). I have determined that these effects and risks are outweighed by the likely benefits.

In making this selection, I have also reviewed information in the administrative record, including but not limited to the Siuslaw National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (USDA 1990), as amended by the Northwest Forest Plan (USDA USDI 1994a); the Nestucca Watershed Analysis (USDA USDI 1994b), the Late-successional Reserve Assessment for Oregon's Northern Coast Range Adaptive Management Area (USDA USDI 1998); consultation files and records involving the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; public and other agency comments; and applicable laws and regulations.

I have found that this project is consistent with the Siuslaw Land and Resource Management Plan as amended by the Northwest Forest Plan (Project EA, chapters 1 and 3).

All practical means to avoid or minimize environmental harm have been adopted in the design of the selected alternative. I have included all of the project design features and mitigation measures that I believe are necessary to avoid, minimize, or rectify impacts on resources affected by implementation of the selected alternative. My intention to proceed with the modified Alternative 2 is based on a review of the record that used the best available science.

Alternatives Considered

Prior to making the decision to proceed with the modified Alternative 2, I considered Alternative 1 (no action), and other alternatives that were eliminated from detail study in the Project EA.

Alternative 1: No Action

The no-action forms the basis for a comparison between meeting the project needs and not meeting the project needs. This alternative provides baseline information for understanding the environmental effects associated with the action alternative and expected environmental responses as a result of past management actions. Selecting this alternative would continue the following resource management actions:

- Except for the processes associated with wildland fire, forest management would rely on natural processes to develop late-successional and old-growth forests, restore watersheds, and improve biological complexity;
- Key forest roads would be retained, and the existing road network (opened, stored, closed, and decommissioned roads) would remain unchanged, with no changes in management objectives;
- Non-key roads would be evaluated and managed by reacting to individual events such as slides, road slippage, or culvert failures that make roads impassable or affect natural resources; and
- No additional projects at the landscape scale are anticipated for the next 10 years, unless a catastrophic event such as a flood or fire occurs.

Because the existing environment is not static, environmental consequences from selecting this alternative are expected. It is unlikely the off-site or young managed stands will develop the size and physical characteristics associated with late-successional habitat if no actions are taken to reduce tree density, create snags and down wood, or provide opportunities for establishment of shade-tolerant tree species. Forest Plan objectives would likely not be achieved in these stands until a natural disturbance re-establishes the stands at a lower tree density that would allow for stand development along a trajectory similar to natural stands in the project area (Project EA, section 3.1.2.1)

Reasons for Not Selecting the Other Alternatives

The no-action alternative does not create obvious negative effects, but it also does not meet any of the Project needs. Without some restorative actions, some watershed conditions would continue to degrade (EA, chapter 1). Therefore, I could find no reason to select this alternative.

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study

I considered several alternatives, based largely on public comments received during scoping and during the 30-day public review of the draft environmental analysis. The following alternatives represent those that I considered, but for various reasons, eliminated from detailed study.

Treat All Managed Stands in the Project Area

This alternative was rejected because many of the managed stands in the project area are not mature enough to make commercial thinning a viable option, yet they are beyond the period suitable for pre-commercial thinning.

Maximize Carbon Sequestration

Silvicultural treatments to maximize carbon sequestration focus on maximizing total stand growth and stocking. This alternative was rejected because the silvicultural treatments would be inconsistent with management direction in the Northwest Forest Plan.

No new temporary roads

An alternative that would not build any new temporary roads for periodic, temporary administrative use was considered. The Team evaluated the purpose and need of building temporary roads for periodic, temporary administrative use, including the following:

- Temporary roads access landing sites needed to feasibly thin and harvest stands; for example, the shorter tower heights associated with small yarders often require extensions of existing roads to reach the slope break;
- Temporary roads would access landing sites that would minimize the need for sidehill and downhill yarding, which cause soil disturbance and damage to residual trees;
- Temporary roads would access landing sites that would minimize the need for yarding through riparian buffers; and
- Temporary road impacts would be localized and minimized through application of the project design criteria listed above and in Appendix A.

Based on the design criteria and effects evaluation, the Team determined that temporary roads proposed by Alternative 2 are needed and pose no substantial adverse impacts, individually or collectively, that would require the need to fully develop a no-new-roads alternative. These roads are temporary, they do not cross any streams, and they would be decommissioned after use. Therefore, this alternative was eliminated from detailed study.

Treat alder dominated stands

The Team considered treatment of alder dominated stands where the alder was reaching senescence. Due to concerns raised by the public and the desire to have a more focused analysis, treatment of alder dominated stands was deferred at this time.

Additional Considerations

Project actions included in the modified Alternative 2 have been designed to have no effect on Oregon coast coho salmon (listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act) or designated critical habitat. Project actions would not adversely affect Essential Fish Habitat for coho salmon, as designated by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Project EA, chapter 3, fisheries Biological Evaluation (BE)).

The South Nestucca Restoration Project is consistent with the January 2001 Record of Decision and Standards and Guidelines for Amendments to the Survey and Manage, Protection Buffer, and other Mitigation Measures Standards and Guidelines. Survey and Manage pre-disturbance survey were initiated (defined as at least one occurrence of actual in-the-field surveying undertaken according to applicable protocol) in reliance upon the 2011 Consent Decree species list on or before April 25, 2013. As such, the project utilizes the December 2003 species list. This list incorporates species changes and removals made as a result of the 2001, 2002, and 2003 Annual Species Reviews with the exception of the Oregon red tree vole, *Arborimus longicaudus*.

The Project EA applies a Pechman exemption for thinning in stands under 80 years of age, therefore survey and manage does not apply to the 13 stands under 80 years of age proposed for treatment. Stands proposed for treatment that did not fit within this exception were analyzed to determine if habitat was available for any of the species on the December 2003 list for which pre-disturbance surveys were required, and to determine if there were conditions requiring the pre-disturbance surveys for red tree voles. The results of these surveys are described in the Project EA, chapter 3.

Public and Agency Involvement

Public Involvement

This proposal first appeared in the Siuslaw's National Forest's quarterly "Project Update" in the Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) in the Fall 2012 issue, and was updated periodically during the analysis. People were invited to review and comment on the proposal primarily through mailings, news releases, and field trips.

After identifying the actions that the Project would implement to address the problems in chapter 1 of the Project EA, I sought public comment on them. Scoping letters, describing the actions considered in the proposed project, were mailed to about 170 potentially interested parties on August 8, 2012. Comments on the proposed project were requested by September 21, 2012. Through these scoping efforts, four parties responded.

Public comments within the scope of the Project and not covered by previous environmental review or existing regulations, were reviewed for substantive content related to the Project. Based largely on public comment, some alternatives were considered, but eliminated from detailed study. The alternatives are described in the Project EA, chapter 2. Comments relevant to clarifying how the Project would be implemented or relevant to the effects of implementing the Project are addressed in the Project EA, chapters 2 and 3; the Project design criteria (EA, Appendix A); or the Project file. Agencies and individuals consulted are identified in the Project EA, chapter 4.

A legal notice, advertising the availability of the South Nestucca Restoration Project Draft Environmental Analysis for a 30-day public review and comment period, was published in the Corvallis Gazette-Times on December 12, 2014. Letters were mailed to interested parties prior to December 12, 2014, notifying them of the availability of the Draft EA. The legal notice and letters indicated the beginning and end of the 30-day comment period, described the comment process, and identified a Forest Service contact person. Copies of the Draft EA were made available at the Hebo District office and on the Siuslaw National Forest website.

Comments from three parties were received and generally indicated support for the Project, although some concerns were expressed. These comments and the Forest Service responses to them are summarized in Appendix D of the Project EA.

Consultation with US Fish and Wildlife Service

The US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) concluded that the Project would not jeopardize the continued existence of the northern spotted owl or marbled murrelet (Letters of Concurrence for habitat modifications for fiscal years 2013-2014 OIEOFW00-2012-1-0124; and for disturbance reference LOC 01E0FW00-2013-1-0190 for fiscal years 2014-2017). The terms and conditions associated with the biological opinions are included in Appendix A of the Project EA.

Project actions will not jeopardize the continued existence of these species or result in adverse modification to their designated critical habitat.

Changes to the Environmental Assessment

The draft EA was edited to address two items that came to light during the 30-day comment period.

Following informal consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, it was determined that, since the units previously identified to benefit the Oregon silverspot butterfly were not in critical habitat or occupied habitat, the project will have no effect. Therefore, we modified the statements of purpose and need, the project description, and the wildlife effects analysis to reflect that the project will have no effect on the Oregon silverspot butterfly.

A comment was received requesting that a portion of the planning area be analyzed for potential wilderness. A section summarizing project effects on the unroaded area was added to chapter 3 of the Project EA. It was concluded that the area did not meet the Natural Conditions criteria for wilderness since it had been planted following the 1910 Mt. Hebo fire with off-site stock. These off-site plantations have not developed the structure expected from local sourced stock and seem to be more susceptible to Swiss Needle Cast. Review by scientists from the Corvallis Forest Sciences laboratory concluded that the off-site stands provide little or no habitat for either the Northern Spotted Owl or flying squirrels. Thinning to open the stand and underplanting with local source tree stock is expected to greatly improve the habitat over time.

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

Based on the site-specific environmental analysis documented in the South Nestucca Restoration Project Environmental Assessment, I have determined that the activities described will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment; therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement is not needed. This determination was made in light of the following factors (40 CFR 1508.27):

Context

Project activities have been viewed and approved in a Regional context through the Siuslaw National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (USDA 1990), as amended by the Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement on Management of Habitat for Late-Successional and Old-Growth Forest Related Species within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl (USDA USDI 1994a). This action only affects a small portion of the Forest, which in turn, is a very small portion of the Region.

The site-specific activities that are authorized and guided by this decision are limited in scope and duration. Some minor adverse effects are expected. However, given the renewable nature of the resources and the high growth rates of coastal vegetation, these effects are expected to be short-term. No long-term adverse effects are expected.

Intensity

1. Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.

Project actions will have both beneficial and adverse effects. (Project EA pp. 31-34, 41, 43, 46, 48-50, 55-56, 62, 67, 76, 103-104, 107-111, 117, 125, 128, 133, 135-137, 142). Commercial thinning may be considered an adverse effect. However, I have considered the benefits that the ecosystem will receive from implementing the Project actions and find that the overall beneficial effects to the ecosystem outweigh any short-term adverse effects. Further, I find that when considered alone, the adverse effects of this project are not significant.

2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.

No significant adverse effects to public health or safety have been identified (Project EA pp. 116-118, 128-130, 138-140, 145-146).

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area, such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

The characteristics of the geographic area do not make it uniquely sensitive to the effects of project actions. Past actions of similar intensity in similar areas have not indicated any significant adverse effects (Project EA pp. 2, 6-9, 29-34, 145-146).

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

The effects from the Project on the quality of the human environment are not found to be highly controversial (Project EA pp. 146-148).

5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

The Project's environmental effects are not uncertain or unknown. Planned actions are similar to those already accomplished on similar lands within the Siuslaw National Forest and several scientific studies have been conducted that support the Project's treatment strategies for plantations (Project EA 11-15). However, I have asked scientists with the Pacific Northwest Forest and Range Experiment Station to evaluate the short and long-term effects of thinning plantations on wood recruitment in Coast Range streams (Project EA 16). Because the questions on effects on wood recruitment have not yet been resolved, the stream buffers under Alternative 2 have been designed to avoid any effects to coho salmon or its habitat (Project EA 16, 100, A-17).

6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

Actions that will be implemented by the Project do not set a precedent for future actions because similar actions have been implemented in the past (Project EA p. 146).

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulatively significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by breaking it down into small component parts.

The South Nestucca Restoration Project EA describes the direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to soil, water, aquatic and terrestrial species, and other components of the human environment (Project EA pp. 25-146). There are no significant direct, indirect, or cumulative effects anticipated from implementing project actions. Project actions will accelerate the development of late-successional habitat and improve watershed function (Project EA pp. 10-15, 17, 29-34). The analysis of cumulative effects considered past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions on National Forest lands as well as for other ownerships in the affected watershed (Project EA p. 24).

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant, scientific, cultural, or historic resources.

The pre-project survey and record search of the Project area indicates that actions associated with the Project will have "no effect" (as defined in 36 CFR 800.5 [b]) on any listed or eligible heritage (cultural) resources (Project EA pp. 126-127). Implementation of Project Design Criteria (Project EA A-12) will ensure that if any sites are uncovered during project implementation, effects, if any, to cultural resources will be minimal.

9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

The wildlife report, botany report, and fisheries biological evaluation prepared for the Project indicate the project will not significantly affect any federally listed species or their habitat (Project EA pp. 36-37, 40-48, 100, 102).

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

The Project is in compliance with relevant Federal, State and local laws, regulations and requirements designed for the protection of the environment (Project EA pp. 145-146). The Project will meet or exceed State water and air quality standards and is consistent with the Oregon Coastal Management Program as required by the Coastal Zone Management Act (Project EA pp. 145-146).

Other Disclosures

All measures contained in the Project EA and Appendix A will be incorporated to comply with the Record of Decision (October 2005) for the Pacific Northwest Region Invasive Plant Program, Preventing and Managing Invasive Plants Final Environmental Impact Statement. Actions will be designed to prevent the spread of invasive plants, including noxious and undesirable weeds (Project EA, section 3.4.2). Cleaning of off-road equipment pursuant to Executive Order 13112, dated February 3, 1999, will be required (Project EA, Appendix A).

The Project will have no significant adverse effects on wetlands, floodplains, farm land, range land, park land, wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, or inventoried roadless areas; minority groups, civil rights, women, or consumers; Indian social, economic, subsistence rights, and sacred sites; and heritage resources (Project EA pp. 7, 127, 133, 143, 145-146). Actions will be consistent with the scenic quality objectives for the planning area (Project EA pp. 132-133).

Findings Required By Other Laws and Regulations

As required by the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) Section 1604(i), I find this project to be consistent with the Forest Plan (Chapter 2 and Appendix A of the EA disclose information on the activities proposed in each alternative along with design features, Chapter 3 discloses information on the environmental effects of implementing each alternative and the findings of consistency with the Forest Plan and applicable laws, regulations, and policies). This decision is tiered to the 1990 Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Siuslaw National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. Management direction comes from the *Siuslaw National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan* (USDA 1990) as amended by the *Record of Decision for Amendments to Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Planning Documents Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl* (USDA USDI 1994) and is designed to meet or exceed the objectives of the Aquatic Conservation Strategy as set forth in the Northwest Forest Plan (Project EA, Appendix C).

Objection Process

The draft Decision was subject to an objection process pursuant to Forest Service regulations at 36 CFR 218. No objections were filed during the 45-day objection filing period. This Decision is being issued no fewer than 5 business days after the close of the filing period (36 CFR 219.58(c)).

Implementation Date

Implementation of this project may proceed immediately.

Contact Person

For further information regarding this project, contact Lorena Wischart at (503) 392-5119, Hebo Ranger District, 31525 Hwy. 22, PO Box 235, Hebo, OR 97122.

References

United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 1990a. *Siuslaw National Forest. Land and Resource Management Plan ("Forest Plan")*. Available online at: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/main/siuslaw/landmanagement/planning>.

United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management. 1994a. *Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision for Amendments to Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Documents within the Range of the northern Spotted Owl and Standards and guidelines for Management of Habitat for Late Successional and Old Growth Forest Related Species within the Range of the Northern Spotted owl*.

United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management. 1994b. *Nestucca Watershed Analysis*. 74 p. plus appendices.

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3/24/15
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