

Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact

South Summit II Forest and Fuels Project

USDA Forest Service
Methow Valley Ranger District
Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest
Okanogan County, WA

Background

The South Summit II Forest and Fuels Project Environmental Assessment (EA) analyzed the effects of implementing forest and fuels treatments and transportation system changes in the South Summit vicinity of the Methow Valley Ranger District of the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest. The EA complies with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and state laws and regulations. The project authorizes forest and fuels treatments and transportation changes in a manner that is consistent with the *Okanogan National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan*, as amended (EA, Chap. 1, pages 6-10). The EA is incorporated by reference into this decision.

The South Summit II Forest and Fuels Project area is located within the Lower Beaver Creek, Frazer Creek, Summit Creek, Chiliwist Creek, Benson Creek, Alder Creek-Methow River, Texas Creek-Methow River, French Creek and Swamp Creek sub watersheds east of Twisp, Washington. The project area, approximately 50,000 acres, lies mostly within T34N, R23E; T33N, R23E; T33N, R24E; T32N, R23E; T32N, R22E; and T31N, R23E, W.M.

About 70% of the project area burned with varying levels of severity during the 2014 Carlton Complex wildfire. In parts of the project area experiencing low fire severity or no wildfire during that event, past timber harvest and fire exclusion have caused extensive changes in forest vegetation over the past century. This includes increased tree density, decreased average tree size, increased proportion of shade tolerant Douglas-fir forest cover, and increased vulnerability to forest insects and diseases when compared to historic conditions. Some existing roads are located in areas where they impact aquatic habitat and hydrological function, and some roads within the project area do not meet current safety and design standards or are now excess to management needs because of changes in logging system practices.

Decision

I have decided to select Alternative 2 as described in the South Summit II Forest and Fuels Project EA, as modified during layout including mitigation measures and monitoring (EA, Chap. 2, pages 12 to 27). This decision allows activities including approximately 2350 acres of harvest treatments, approximately 9955 acres of fuels treatments (including post-harvest treatments), and modifications to the transportation system that include decommissioning approximately 81.5 miles of road. Harvest thinning treatments include commercial harvest thinning (1625 acres), commercial harvest thinning with dwarf mistletoe treatment (560 acres), regeneration harvest (70 acres), quaking aspen maintenance thinning (60 acres), and thinning in JR and Loup Loup Campgrounds (35 acres). Up to 1850 acres of harvest will be restricted to winter logging conditions in order to minimize compaction and displacement of ash-cap soils. Summer logging with harvesting systems to protect soils will be used to avoid disrupting winter recreation on

approximately 498 acres. The purchaser could choose to harvest in winter and/or use a cut-to-length system during the summer on up to 2 acres. Non-commercial thinning treatments will occur on 1000 acres. Tree planting includes 8285 acres of lands burned during the Carlton Complex wildfire, as well in the 70 acres of regeneration harvest units. Hazard tree thinning will remove trees that pose risks to motorists and campers, and will occur within 150 feet of the Highway 20 corridor, in 35 acres of campgrounds, and along 150 feet of roads used as haul routes during timber harvest activities.

A total of 9955 acres of fuels will be treated including commercial harvest activity fuels (approximately 2350 acres), noncommercial harvest activity fuels (1000 acres), and an additional 6600 acres of fuels treatment outside of harvest or non-commercial thinning units. Fuels treatments include thinning ladder fuels, machine pile/burn, hand pile/burn, underburn, and mastication. Connected actions include construction and use of approximately 1.8 miles of dozer-built fireline and 0.5 miles of hand-built fireline.

Fuels and vegetation treatment areas will include forest areas designated as Forest Plan Old Growth (500 acres) and Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (274 acres).

Transportation system changes will affect 40% of the 330 miles of roads within the project area. Changes include construction of new roads (0.5 miles to the new horse campground and to access existing power lines), construction of temporary road (0.4 miles), road closures (26 miles), road conversions to Nordic trails (1.8 miles), and replacement or upsizing of culverts (8 locations). Decommissioning will occur on 81.5 miles of roads; of this amount, currently 14.5 miles are closed system roads, 3.2 miles are open system roads, and 63.8 miles are unauthorized roads. Another 24.5 miles of unauthorized roads will be added to the transportation system; of this amount, 16.5 miles will be closed system roads, and 8 miles will be open system roads. The draft Decision Notice for this project would have created Administrative Motorized Access Routes on approximately 23.5 miles of closed (Maintenance Level 1) roads to provide for motorized permittee access for the purposes of allotment management, as analyzed in the EA. Recent clarification of agency manual and policy direction requires that these roads be designated instead as Administratively Closed Maintenance Level 2 roads to remain consistent with policy and direction while still providing for motorized permittee access. These roads will be closed to public use and will receive treatments to promote hydrologic stability and connection, which may include pulling some culverts, creating cross drains and/or drivable dips, and scarifying and seeding road surfaces. The effects of this change in road designation are consistent with effects analyzed in the final EA and consulted upon with regulatory agencies.

Another change between the draft and final Decision Notice clarifies an oversight on road access in the Russian Springs area of the project. The draft decision would have provided access to the only water source for engines in this area on a road across private land that is not maintained for agency fire engines, and then inadvertently closed this road approximately 0.1 miles before the water source, essentially eliminating its effective use during fire suppression. An adjacent road of approximately 0.1 miles length provides adequate access to agency engines in lieu of the road across private land, with no additional need for maintenance. This adjacent road was to be decommissioned by this decision but will now be kept open to provide adequate access to the water source. The last 0.1 mile of road before the water source will also be kept open to provide the necessary access for fire engines. These minor adjustments require no immediate road maintenance, and will not affect hydrologic continuity or stability because the roads are on level ground and do not cross streams. This clarification in road access is within

the range of resource effects evaluated in the final EA and consulted upon with regulatory agencies.

A new horse campground will be constructed adjacent to the North Summit SnoPark. This facility will provide fourteen campsites with an outhouse and buried water tank, mounting ramp, and a day-use area with picnic shelter for forest visitors using horses.

Adaptive Management

Adaptive strategies have been included to allow treatments to change if conditions do not meet fuel prescriptions, market conditions do not allow for some treatments, or a drivable ford cannot be built (EA Chap. 2, pages 17 to 19), as follows:

- Mastication (using machinery to crunch or grind debris into smaller pieces) is proposed on 300 acres where thinning will occur; where mastication equipment is not readily available, or if soil conditions have not stabilized from recent wildfire effects, debris may be hand-piled and piles burned.
- If machine piles are burned before ladder fuel reduction thinning occurs in harvest units, then the debris from LFR thinning will be hand-piled and burned after curing. This will affect up to 1575 acres.
- Biomass utilization (utilizing woody materials such as small-diameter trees and woody debris to create wood products and bio-energy) is proposed as a method of removing debris created by thinning. If market conditions make biomass utilization uneconomical, landing piles will be burned within about two years of harvest, after adequate time for the material to be utilized as firewood where open road access is allowed.
- If 200 feet of road with a drivable ford cannot be built across Frazer Creek to provide Okanogan PUD access to the power line, approximately 0.9 miles of road that currently provides PUD access to this area will not be decommissioned and will continue to be used as a power line access road.

Changes during Layout

During the layout of harvest units included in the South Summit II Forest and Fuels Environmental Assessment (EA), there were adjustments to harvest unit boundaries based on stand conditions, topography, ground conditions, and other features. Overall, out of an initial 2,350 acres of planned harvest activity, approximately 2,180 acres were laid out on the ground. The 2,180 acres of timber harvest meet all of the objectives and Forest Plan requirements included in the South Summit II EA. Eight commercial harvest units were dropped completely and decreased the total harvest unit acreage by about 93 acres. These units were dropped for a number of reasons, including: lower than expected timber volume, poor economic viability, stand conditions not matching silvicultural prescriptions, difficult topography for logging, and a lack of road access due to post-fire flood damage. An additional 165 acres were also dropped from portions of other harvest units for similar reasons.

Similarly, approximately 88 acres were added to various harvest units. These 88 acres were all surveyed as part of the South Summit II Forest and Fuels Project Environmental Assessment (EA) but extend beyond the mapped unit boundaries in the EA.

Forest Plan Amendments

The proposal includes several project-specific amendments to Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines. One amendment is permanent and the remaining amendments are temporary. Amendments are related to adjusting a management area boundary, recreation, soils, old

growth, and wildlife disturbance to acknowledge existing conditions that exceed standards or to allow short-term, low-intensity, minor impacts that will provide long-term, moderate, beneficial impacts, thereby making the ecosystem more resilient over time (EA Chap. 2, pages 21 to 24). The following Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines will require amendments to accomplish the resource objectives:

Resource Objective: Campground Management

The location of the proposed 15-acre horse campground is currently divided between MA5 and MA17. The project will permanently adjust the MA17 boundary so the entire campground falls within MA17, which is the appropriate management area for a developed campground.

Resource Objective: Soil Protection

Winter harvest on frozen or snow-covered ground will help protect sensitive ash cap soils from compaction, rutting, displacement or other disturbance. To implement winter harvest, the following standards and guidelines will be amended:

Forest-wide Standard and Guideline Access 17-6

Temporarily amend the Forest Plan to allow temporary snow plowing on a portion of Forest Road 41 for the purpose of implementing harvest activities in winter conditions favorable to soil protection. The South Summit SnoPark and the initial 2.1 miles of Road 41 between Highway 20 and Road 4100500 will remain open for snowmobile and Nordic ski grooming and use. Plowing 1.3 miles of Road 41 between the junctions with Roads 4100500 and 4100450 under this amendment will facilitate winter logging of many units along this road and along spur roads leading from it. Plowing will essentially preclude snowmobiling on Road 41 from its junction with Road 4100500 to the south for up to three seasons. Groomed snowmobile and cross-country ski routes are available in adjacent areas to provide continued opportunities for these activities.

Management Area Prescription MA5-17E & MA14-17B

Amend these prescriptions prohibiting motorized vehicles on deer winter range from December 1 to March 31 to allow temporary winter operations and access for the purpose of implementing the South Summit II project. Disturbance to deer will be temporary and short-term. Adjacent undisturbed areas at lower elevations are usually favored by deer during the winter and are available for animals to use. Previous experience in the North Summit area has demonstrated that deer may not be displaced from an area by logging, but may remain in the area to forage on lichens found on logging slash. In the longer term, harvest will encourage growth of shrubs used as forage, providing more food resources. The goals of the Management Areas will be met.

Resource Objective: Protection, Restoration, and Maintenance of Old Growth Stands

Forest-wide Standard and Guideline Old Growth 5-1

Forest-wide Standard and Guideline Protection (Fire and Fuels) 19-8

Amend to allow harvest thinning and fuels treatments within 500 acres of old growth stands as described in the South Summit II EA.

Fire exclusion has changed the character of some mixed conifer old growth stands. Multi-story stand canopy conditions have developed with a general absence of natural fire disturbance for nearly a century. Canopy and surface fuel loading has increased from pre-settlement levels due to past fire exclusion. Existing tree stocking and fuel levels have increased the risk of insect outbreaks and crown fires which could eliminate the larger overstory tree component of mixed conifer, Forest Plan old growth. Tree stocking levels are hindering the development of future large trees to maintain the old growth stand structure. There is a need to treat some Forest Plan old growth stands with harvest and fuels treatments to maintain long-term old growth

characteristics and improve resiliency to natural disturbances. These proposed treatments will be consistent with the 2010 and 2012 Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest Restoration Strategy guidelines.

Resource Objective: Restoration and Maintenance of Connectivity Corridors

Revised Interim Management Direction Establishing Riparian, Ecosystem and Wildlife Standards for Timber Sales (Regional Forester's Forest Plan Amendment #2 Scenario A, 3a) (2).

Amend standard to reduce canopy closures within connectivity corridors below the top one-third of site potential through harvesting and ladder fuel reduction thinning. The Carlton Complex wildfire caused high levels of tree mortality in a four-mile-wide swath of the central portion of the planning area, truncating pre-fire connectivity corridors established to meet Eastside Screen requirements. At this time there is no potential for delineating connections between the northern and southern parts of the analysis area due to the truncation in the middle portion, and this standard cannot be met. Connectivity corridors within the northern (north of Highway 20) and southern portions are fairly intact, although in many areas they are no longer connecting late/old structure stands, as approximately 40% of those features were burned with moderate/high severity.

In the remaining connectivity corridors and late/old structure stands, management activities in the last century caused extensive changes in forest vegetation, including increased tree density, decreased average tree size, increased proportion of shade tolerant Douglas-fir forest cover, increased proportion of multiple canopy layer stands, and increased vulnerability to forest insects and diseases and wildfire compared to historic pre-settlement conditions. Stands of large trees with a high proportion of ponderosa pine and western larch stocking currently are less common in the project area than historically. Treatments will release or maintain larger and medium sized trees. Allowing harvest treatments on approximately 19 acres in connectivity corridors spread over 14 proposed harvest units (approximately two percent of the remaining connectivity corridors) will reduce canopy closure below the top one-third of the site potential. Beneficial effects include reducing fuel ladders from surface through understory to overstory, which lowers the risk of crown fire initiation and spread and improves resiliency to natural disturbances. Increasing resilience helps provide sustainable forested landscape connections between late and old structure, old growth, and management requirement habitats.

These proposed treatments will be consistent with management direction applicable under Scenario A of the Regional Forester's Forest Plan Amendment #2 direction (Goodman 2003) to utilize site-specific treatments to provide flexibility implementing eastside screens direction in order to better meet late and old structure (LOS) and other screens objectives and Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest Restoration Strategy guidelines. No trees greater than or equal to 21 inches DBH will be prescribed for removal with this project.

Resource Objective: Forest Health

Management Area Prescription Wildlife MA5-6A, MA 14-6A, and MA26-6A

Amend to allow for thermal cover percentage levels below prescription for deer winter range. Currently, this standard and guideline is not being met and there is no potential for meeting it for several decades due to the fire in MAs 5 and 26. In MA 14, around half of the thermal cover was destroyed in the wildfire. Proposed treatments will reduce the total winter thermal cover by 1% in one management area. Recent science suggests that providing for thermal cover was over-emphasized in the current plan. Thermal cover is not as critical as other factors such as forage quality and quantity, and human disturbance (Cook et al. 1996, 1998). Treatments proposed in these stands will increase forage and create a more sustainable cover component

and will be consistent with the 2010 and 2012 Forest Restoration Strategy. To reduce the impact of proposed treatments, thinning in fuels and non-commercial thinning units will leave 20% of the area untreated in patches from 0.1 acre to several acres in size. Fuels treatments in proximity to the moderate to high severity burned areas will be deferred until 2017, and then reviewed to assess cover needs.

Resource Objective: Limit Wildlife Disturbance

Management Area Prescription Roads MA5-17C, MA14-17A, and MA25-17C Amend standards to temporarily allow for increased open road density during project implementation. Current open road density and proposed post-project open road density in discrete Management Areas 5-08, 14-07, and 25-10 will remain within the Forest Plan standards. During project activities, it is possible that open road density may exceed the standards if all closed roads were opened at the same time.

Mitigation and Monitoring

Mitigation measures will be incorporated to further minimize resource impacts. There are 144 design criteria and mitigation measures listed in Appendix A (EA, pages 333-375).

Monitoring will be conducted to ensure that activities are implemented as designed and to determine the effectiveness of Alternative 2 at minimizing resource impacts (EA, Chap. 2, pages 25 to 27). There are monitoring actions for forest vegetation and reforestation, sensitive plant sites, fuel loadings, prescribed burning, activities in riparian habitat conservation areas, goshawk and western gray squirrel nesting, invasive plant infestations, and soil disturbance.

Decision Rationale

I am selecting Alternative 2 because it best meets the purpose and need (EA, Chap. 1, pages 7-10 and Chap. 2, pages 13-21) to improve, maintain, and restore forest and fuels conditions, reduce fire hazard, manage the project area's road network, and to improve recreational opportunities by constructing a horse campground. Treatments will be conducted in a manner that is consistent with the *Okanogan National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan* (Forest Plan), as amended by standards and guidelines described in *The Interim Management Direction Establishing Riparian, Ecosystem and Wildlife Standards for Timber Sales Regional Forester's Forest Plan Amendment #2 (Eastside Screens)*(USDA Forest Service 1995) and the *Record of Decision for the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Pacific Northwest Region Invasive Plant Program Preventing and Managing Invasive Plants* (2005).

Alternative 2 will provide for forest vegetation management consistent with the amended Forest Plan and meet the project's purposes and needs as follows:

1. *Improve or maintain the resiliency of mixed conifer forests to disturbances including insects, diseases, and wildfire. Maintain and restore mixed conifer forest conditions that more closely reflect historical tree density, spatial patterning, species composition, and size classes, including large fire-resistant trees. Maintain and develop sustainable vegetation and fuels conditions in Forest Plan Old Growth stands that limit the likelihood of losing mature forest stands during wildfires and other natural disturbances, including insect and disease outbreaks. Reduce fire hazard on National Forest lands within the wildland-urban interface.*

Alternative 2 will implement approximately 9955 acres of vegetation management treatments to reduce susceptibility of forest stands to uncharacteristic disturbances. These actions will maintain and improve the resiliency of mixed conifer forests to disturbances such

as insects, diseases and wildfire by reducing stand densities to more closely reflect historical tree density, spatial patterning, species composition and size classes, including large fire-resistant trees (EA, Chap. 3, pages 44-57 and 67-70). Tree stocking levels will be reduced to decrease competitive stress, prevent bark beetles from killing large ponderosa pine and maintain vigorous, large diameter Douglas-firs (EA, Chap. 3, pages 46-49). Harvest thinning will decrease susceptibility to insect defoliators and dwarf mistletoe in treated stands by reducing the proportion of Douglas-fir stocking in the upper and understory tree canopy (EA, Chap. 3, pages 48-52). Treatments will maintain existing large trees, increase the resilience of Forest Plan Old Growth stands to disturbance, provide for the sustained recruitment of dead and down trees while reducing fuel loads and the risk of wildfire (EA, Chap. 3, pages 50-51, 69). Treatments will reduce the fire hazard in the wildland-urban interface on National Forest System lands by thinning understory trees, increasing canopy spacing, and treating surface fuels (EA, Chapter 3, pages 67-70).

- 2. Maintain and restore the species composition (including large-diameter broadleaf trees such as aspen), structural diversity, and natural disturbance patterns of plant communities found within RHCAs to provide large conifers and maintain and attain riparian management objectives.*

Under Alternative 2, vegetation management treatments will be implemented on approximately 274 acres to maintain and restore the species composition (including broadleaf trees such as aspen), structural diversity, and natural disturbance patterns of plant communities found within Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCAs) to maintain large trees and attain riparian management objectives. Of this amount, harvest thinning, noncommercial thinning, and subsequent fuels management treatments will be applied on approximately two percent of the total RHCA acres in the project planning area, and tree planting will occur on another 7% of the total RHCA acres (EA, Chap. 3, pages 51-52). Proposed fuel treatments will affect up to about 7% (about 190 acres) of the RHCAs in the project area, increasing the proportion of RHCA with high fire resilience over the next 15 years. Ladder fuel reduction and prescribed fire treatments will re-introduce disturbance in the RHCA and increase fire resiliency by reducing surface fuel loading and small-diameter conifer stocking (EA, Chap. 3, pages 68-69).

- 3. Modify the current transportation system to provide for long-term sustainable resource management, safe recreation use, reduced maintenance costs, and reduced impacts on aquatic habitat, wildlife habitat and hydrological function.*

Alternative 2 will result in a long-term decrease in the number of open roads and overall existing roads, reduction of overall maintenance costs, the elimination of unauthorized roads, and continued stabilization of existing roads through road maintenance activities, thereby minimizing sedimentation levels (EA, Chap. 3, pages 201-209). This will have reduced impacts from the road network on sediment (EA, Chap. 3, page 205), aquatic habitat (EA, Chap. 3, pages 120-121, 125-127) wildlife habitat (EA, Chap. 3, page 159), and hydrological function (EA, Chap. 3, pages 97-101), while maintaining a safe and efficient transportation network for land management activities and public access.

- 4. Maintain or improve the overall health of trees within and adjacent to Loup Loup and JR Campgrounds by reducing tree competition and susceptibility to attack by insects and diseases. Reduce ladder fuels between ski runs at the Loup Loup Ski Area to improve forest health and reduce the threat of wildfire. Reduce the risk of hazard trees that pose a*

threat to public safety along Highway 20 and in the campgrounds. Reduce mortality of large Douglas-fir trees caused by beetles.

Under Alternative 2, vegetation management treatments will be implemented to maintain and improve overall health of trees within and adjacent to Loup Loup and JR Campgrounds by reducing (inter-) tree competition and susceptibility to attack by insects and diseases. The campground thinning harvest treatment will be applied on approximately 35 acres total within the (fenced) administrative boundaries of both campgrounds (EA, Chap. 3, pages 52 and 262-263). Ladder fuel reduction thinning will reduce the risk of crown fire initiation and help improve forest health (EA, Chap. 3, pages 55, 67). Hazard-tree thinning along Highway 20 will reduce the risk to public safety (EA, Chap. 3, pages 258, 266).

5. *Provide commercially valuable timber and other forest products that are economically viable and sustainable.*

Alternative 2 will provide about 7000 MBF or 14,000 CCF of saw timber and an un-estimated amount of biomass from 2350 acres of harvest treatment. It will have an expected stumpage value of \$296,500 and a delivered mill value of \$1,094,000 (EA, Chap. 3, page 79).

6. *Ensure reforestation occurs in areas where stand-replacement wildfire eliminated reliable seed sources for natural conifer regeneration.*

Alternative 2 will reforest 8285 acres where wildfire killed all or most of the trees. Stands will be re-planted to provide timely regrowth of desirable species, accelerating reforestation of 59% of the dry forest areas deforested by wildfire (EA, Chap. 3, page 53).

7. *Provide camping opportunities specific to horseback riders in the North Summit area.*

Alternative 2 provides for the creation of a 14-site horse campground on 15 acres in the North Summit area (EA, Chap. 3, page 263-264). The campsite will provide both day-use and overnight facilities for horseback riders.

Other Alternatives Fully Analyzed

Because this project is being prepared under the July 24, 2008 Forest Service National Environmental Policy Act regulations, and there are no unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources, no alternatives to the proposed action are required [36 CFR Part 220, Section 220.7 (b) (2) (i)]. The Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) considered comments made during public scoping and where the purpose and need for the project could still be met, adjusted the original proposed action to resolve the concerns that were within the scope of the project, or addressed the concern by developing project design criteria (PDFs), including Best Management Practices (BMPs); or by disclosing effects in the analyses of Chapter 3. The proposed action was modified to include additional tree planting, increasing this activity from 6550 acres to 8285 acres (EA, Chap. 2, page 14).

Alternatives Considered, but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis

Comments were received suggesting that the project include salvage logging. An alternative was considered in response, but eliminated from detailed study because fire-killed ponderosa pine will have little commercial value by the time harvest occurred, and areas with sufficient

Douglas-fir salvage opportunities where timber value may last longer were scarce. This proposal does not meet Purpose and Need #5 (EA, Chap. 2, pages 12-13; Appendix I, page 458).

Comments were received requesting additional analysis and restoration of wetland and aspen communities within the project area. An alternative was considered in response, but eliminated from detailed study because aspen regeneration (the suggested component of wetland restoration) is anticipated to be rapid and abundant in many areas of the project area due to recent fire activity. In addition, further wetland restoration could not be evaluated with current staffing for this project. This alternative was already being addressed by natural vegetative response to fire or did not meet Purpose and Need #2 (EA, Chap. 2, pages 12-13; Appendix I, page 452).

Internal staff discussions considered the development of alternatives to include post-fire repair and rehabilitation work at the Pole Pick Seed Orchard (i.e. fence rebuilding, pollen buffer and fuel break establishment, and storage shed reconstruction) in the project proposal. This alternative was considered but dropped from further analysis because proposed activities were not fully developed at the time of this analysis, and because maintenance and repair of administrative sites such as the seed orchard is generally considered to be part of a category of actions ("Categorical Exclusion") not requiring documentation in an EA, EIS, or Decision Memo (EA, Chap. 2, page 12). This alternative did not meet any of the project's Purposes and Needs.

Another internal consideration included developing an alternative that provided for additional hazard tree felling adjacent to system roads burned by the wildfire for public, personnel, and contractor safety. This alternative was considered but dropped from further analysis because other actions already permitted or analyzed in the EA will address hazard tree removal. During harvest, Forest Service Manual direction allows for hazard tree removal along roads used for timber hauling described below as "Hazard Tree Removal along Haul Routes." Hazard tree felling along the Highway 20 corridor is included and analyzed in the EA. Public firewood gathering is anticipated to remove hazard trees along open system roads where consistent with the current firewood policy. Remaining hazard trees can be felled at up to 2 trees per mile of road under the current programmatic agreement covering this activity. These actions are expected to be sufficient to remove hazard trees where firewood gathering is not allowed along open roads (EA, Chap. 2, page 12). This alternative did not meet the Purpose and Need #4.

The analysis team also discussed the anticipated long-term increase in large-diameter fuels created by the eventual collapse of fire-killed trees in the burned portion of the project area. An alternative was considered that would create strategic fuel breaks in moderate- to high-burn severity areas. This alternative was dropped from further analysis because it is beyond the temporal scope of the identified purpose and need for this project. The interdisciplinary analysis team agreed that the need for soil stabilization and vegetation recovery is more immediate and tractable given current conditions and available funding than long-term fuel reduction. This alternative did not meet Purpose and Need #1.

Public Involvement and Consultation

A scoping notice describing the project components and querying comments was sent to approximately 150 members of the public on December 29, 2014, which initiated the scoping period. This was followed by the publishing of the South Summit II Forest and Fuels Project in the 04/01/2015 – 06/30/2015 Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA). The Forest Service received a total of five comments expressing a range of mixed to full support for the project.

The Tribal governments (Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation and the Yakama Nation) were sent a letter describing the project and soliciting issues on December 18, 2014. There were no responses to those letters from either government.

The South Summit II Forest and Fuels Project Record contains a detailed scoping summary that describes Forest Service outreach efforts, the scoping comments received for the project, and how the Forest Service addressed scoping comments in the South Summit II Forest and Fuels Project EA. Comments that raised concerns were identified and resolved by clarifying the Purpose and Need or the Proposed Action in Chapter 1, addressing the concern by developing project design criteria (PDFs), including Best Management Practices (BMPs), or by disclosing effects in the analyses of Chapter 3. As these concerns were resolved, they did not drive the development of an alternative to the Proposed Action (EA, Chap. 1, pages 10-11).

The Preliminary South Summit II Forest and Fuels Environmental Assessment (EA) was mailed on March 6, 2015 to groups and individuals who provided comments in response to the scoping letter or who requested a copy. A notice of EA availability for a 30-day comment period was published in the Wenatchee World newspaper on March 6, 2015. We received comments from five parties; these comments showed a range of full to mixed support for the project. Comments were considered in the development of the final EA, with specific consideration of comments available in Appendix I.

Consultation on effects to federally threatened and endangered fish and wildlife species occurred with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration – National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA-NMFS) during the spring of 2015. Concurrence from USFWS was received on June 25, 2015; concurrence from NOAA-NMFS was received on July 1, 2015. The resulting determinations are described under Findings of No Significant Impact.

Finding Of No Significant Impact

I have determined through an evaluation of the results of the South Summit II Forest and Fuels Environmental Assessment that this is not a major federal action individually or cumulatively that will significantly affect the quality of the human environment; therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement is not needed. This determination is based on analysis of the context and intensity of the environmental effects, including the following factors:

1. Significant effects may exist even if the Federal agency believes on balance the effect will be beneficial.

Both beneficial and adverse effects have been taken into consideration when making this determination of non-significance. No moderate or major beneficial or adverse effects will result from this project (EA, Chap. 3, pages 30-302). This project is consistent with the January 14, 2011 Council on Environmental Quality Memo. The end result of this project will be beneficial, long-term impacts.

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

There are limited health and safety hazards to Forest Service Employees, permittees, and the general public from the project. None are unusual or unique to this project. Recreationists, nearby homeowners, and permittees could be exposed to smoke during burning (EA, Chap. 3, page 75, 262). All burning will be done under WA State Smoke Management Requirements, and

will maintain air quality within State standards (EA, Chap. 3, pages 76-77). Recreationists could encounter logging traffic. Most logging roads will remain closed to the general public to minimize traffic conflicts and impacts to wildlife, and log hauling will not occur on some roads on weekends (EA, Appendix A, page 339). Hazard trees will be removed at JR Campground, Loup Loup Campground and along roads to meet safety concerns (EA, Chap. 3, pages 263, 266). The safety of the area will be beneficially improved for recreationists and wildland firefighters by the reduction of fuels creating safe escape routes, safer fire suppression conditions, and an increased ability to protect homes and structures in the area. The proportion of WUI with high fire resilience will increase (EA, Chap. 3, pages 57-70).

3. The unique characteristics of the geographic area:

No prime farm lands or park lands are found within the project area (EA, Chap. 3, page 298-299). Although prime forest lands may be harvested or burned, all actions are designed to maintain and improve their health (EA, Chap. 3, pages 44-52, 67-70). Within the analysis area there is no critical habitat for Upper Columbia River (UCR) spring Chinook, UCR steelhead and bull trout and Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) for spring Chinook and Coho (EA, Chap. 3, page 112). There will be no effect to critical habitat for the Northern Spotted Owl or to critical habitat for the lynx (EA, Chap. 3, page 147, 165). See also #9 below.

There are no Wild and Scenic Rivers within or near the South Summit II Forest and Fuels Project area. There are no new recreational off road use, overhead power lines, development of common variety mineral sources or any new impoundments or water diversions proposed in this project. The Visual Quality Objectives will be met (EA, Chap. 3, pages 272-284). No effects are expected to cultural resources or historic properties (EA, Chap. 3, pages 297). Consultation with the Washington State Historical Preservation Office (SHPO) occurred during spring 2014 and spring 2015. SHPO concurred with these findings on May 5, 2014, June 1, 2015, and June 4, 2015. See also #8 below.

No impacts to designated floodplains or wetlands are projected (EA, Chap. 3, page 298). Project activities will occur in some RHCAs although not in areas with riparian vegetation. Effects are described in the forest vegetation, water resources, aquatic resources, sensitive plants and fuels sections of this chapter (EA, Chap. 3, pages 51-52, 67-70, 95-104, 118-126, and 227-231). Floodplains and wetlands will be protected through project design details and mitigation measures, which conform to Executive Orders 11988 and 11990.

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

There has been no scientifically backed information presented that indicates substantial controversy about the effects disclosed in the South Summit II Forest and Fuels Project Final EA.

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

There were no highly uncertain, unique, or unknown risks identified for the South Summit II Forest and Fuels Project. Activities approved in this decision notice are routine projects similar to those that have been implemented under the Okanogan National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan over the past 25 years. None are unique or involve unknown risks.

6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects:

Activities approved in this decision notice are routine projects similar to those that have been implemented under the Okanogan National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan over the past 20 years. None are new or precedent setting.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant, but cumulatively significant impacts:

Each resource effects analysis contained in the South Summit II Forest and Fuels Project EA discusses cumulative effects; none were found to have more than negligible to moderate effect (EA, Chap. 3, Resource Cumulative Effects sections). When considered together, the cumulative effects on all resources will have between no impacts to less than moderate impact.

8. The degree to which the action may affect scientific, cultural, or historical resources:

There are no scientific resources in the South Summit II Forest and Fuels Project Area. No districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places will be affected. No effects are expected to cultural or historical resources (EA, Chap. 3, pages 294-297). If any undiscovered sites are located during project activities, work will stop until the requirements of Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act are met (EA, Chap. 3, page 297). The Confederated Tribes of the Colville Indian Reservation and the Yakama Nation were consulted on this project; no comments were received from either Tribal government. All sites and resources found during cultural resource surveys were determined to be ineligible for the National Register of Historic Places (EA, Chap. 3, pages 294-297). SHPO concurred with these findings on May 5, 2014, June 1, 2015, and June 4, 2015.

9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect endangered or threatened species or habitats:

The effects on endangered or threatened species and their habitats are discussed in the Biological Assessments with results summarized in the EA on pages 157-194 for wildlife, pages 121-126 for aquatic species, and pages 227-231 for plant species.

Endangered or threatened wildlife species that may inhabit the area will not be adversely affected. No critical wildlife habitat will be adversely affected. The project may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect gray wolf and grizzly bear. The project will have no effect on lynx, and lynx critical habitat (EA, pages 164-165). The project is outside the range of the northern spotted owl and the marbled murrelet.

No endangered or threatened fish species inhabit the project area. No critical fish habitat will be affected. The project may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect Columbia River bull trout and steelhead. The project will have no effect on Chinook salmon, bull trout critical habitat, or on essential fish habitat (EFH) for chinook or Coho salmon (EA, pages 112-113).

Consultation on effects to federally threatened and endangered fish and wildlife species with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration – Fisheries occurred in spring 2015. Concurrence with the findings above was received on June 25, 2015 and July 1, 2015.

No threatened or endangered plant species are known to occur within the analysis area (EA, page 228).

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of environmental laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment:

Discussion of compliance with environmental laws or requirements is identified in the following section on compliance with other laws and regulations. This project will meet requirements of environmental laws and regulations. None of the project effects were found to be substantial.

Findings Required By Other Laws and Regulations

This project was planned consistent with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act, its implementing regulations, and the Forest Service NEPA regulations (36 CFR 220) and Handbook (FSH 1909.15). As noted above, the project is consistent with the *Okanogan National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan* (Forest Plan), as amended by standards and guidelines described in The Interim Management Direction Establishing Riparian, Ecosystem and Wildlife Standards for Timber Sales Regional Forester's Forest Plan Amendment #2 (Eastside Screens)(USDA Forest Service 1995) and the *Record of Decision for the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Pacific Northwest Region Invasive Plant Program Preventing and Managing Invasive Plants*. This decision is consistent with the National Forest Management Act because it is consistent with the Okanogan Forest Plan as amended, and fisheries, wildlife and plant species viability is maintained (EA, pages 118-127, 157-194, 227-231). The project was designed in conformance with Forest Plan, Forest-wide and Management Area standards and guidelines, with the exception of the project specific Forest Plan amendment identified previously in this document, management area specific direction, and the Interim Management Direction Establishing Riparian, Ecosystem and Wildlife Standards for Timber Sales Regional Forester's Forest Plan Amendment #2 (Eastside Screens). All areas planned for harvest are suitable for timber production.

The project incorporates direction from the *Record of Decision for the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Pacific Northwest Region Invasive Plant Program Preventing and Managing Invasive Plants* (EA, pages 7, 231, and 247). It is in compliance with the pertinent Prevention Standards listed in the R6 2005 FEIS; includes the prevention measures listed as Design Details, and the prevention standards listed in the Prevention and Management Strategy (EA, Appendix A, pages 331-333, 335-337).

This project is consistent with the Okanogan National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. The proposed action alternative will maintain High Landscape Character and Scenic Integrity (Condition) and will meet the established Visual Quality Objectives of Retention in Management Area 5 and Management Area 17 with High Visual Significance (ONFP 4-65-69). Foreground landscapes (up to ½ mile distance zone or seen area) will have the visitor perception of a natural appearing environment and will have high scenic integrity. The proposed treatments will be consistent with Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines for Visual Quality (EA, page 293).

The project will meet or exceed all Forest Plan standards and guidelines that apply to riparian habitat conservation areas (EA, pages 56, 68-70, and 127). Proposed vegetation management activities in Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCA) and adjacent uplands will be consistent with PACFISH Riparian Goals, Riparian Management Objectives (RMOs), and RHCA Standards and Guidelines (EA, page 56). Fuels treatments will be consistent with PACFISH and Forest Plan Guidelines (EA, page 70). Design Criteria numbers 4-16 and 50-85 are for riparian area management (EA, Appendix A, pages 328-381). All activities in the Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas will be monitored to determine if the project is implemented

correctly and if the design details and mitigation measures were effective in achieving the goals for resource protection (EA, Chap. 2, page 26).

Deer cover (EA, Chap. 3, pages 185-189); snags (EA, Chap. 3, pages 158-194) and coarse wood (EA, Chap. 3, pages 157-158) will be retained in accordance with Forest Plan standards.

Forest Plan old growth treatments will contribute to sustaining stands over time because thinning and prescribed fire will decrease fire severity and help increase resilience of these stands to wildfire. Treatments in these stands will provide for retention of large down wood to meet Forest Plan standards and guidelines. (EA, Chap. 2, pages 50-51, 69).

The planned actions adhere to the R6 soil quality guidelines for maintaining soil productivity. The South Summit II Forest and Fuels project actions will not create detrimental soil condition in excess of 20 percent in units that are currently below 20 percent detrimental soil disturbance and will move all units above 20 percent towards net improvement in soil quality. Therefore the project is consistent with Forest-wide standards for site productivity (USDA 1989). The project will also comply with R6 erosion standards following activities. This project includes appropriate design criteria to ensure these standards are met following project implementation (EA, Chap. 3, page 146, Appendix A, pages 345-358).

Management Indicator Species viability for mule deer, pine marten, pileated woodpecker, three-toed woodpecker, barred owl, northern spotted owl, ten species of primary cavity nesters, ruffed grouse, and Canada lynx in the project area will be maintained (Project File, Wildlife MIS Notes, EA, Chap. 3, pages 157-194). The South Summit II Forest and Fuels project *may impact individuals or habitat, but will not likely contribute to a trend towards federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species of aquatic Management Indicator Species* (EA, Chap. 3, pages 122-123). Fine sediment delivery in the project area will be decreased as soon as project activities begin because some roads will be decommissioned before any other ground-disturbing activities occur. Reduced sediment delivery will be maintained after the project is completed through decommissioning some roads, and because fuels treatments will further reduce the risk of severe wildfire. Therefore, the project will not contribute to a negative trend in viability on the Okanogan National Forest for these species.

The project is designed to meet Clean Air Act standards and meet goals of the Washington State Smoke Management Program (EA, Chap. 3, page 77, Appendix A, page 328). Effects to air quality in the Pasayten Wilderness, the nearest Class I airshed, are expected to be minimal because prescribed fire treatments in this project will produce minimal smoke for short durations, the distance between the project area and the Class I airshed will allow for complete dispersal, and burning will be conducted in compliance with state smoke management regulations that prevent impacts to these airsheds (EA, Chap. 3, page 77).

Clean Water Act standards will be met. Decreases in sedimentation and no increase in temperature are expected (EA, Chap. 3, pages 93-104). There will be less than negligible impacts to wetlands, floodplains, prime range lands, and farm lands through avoidance, design criteria, or lack of the presence of these resources. Mitigations measures will be implemented to ensure that water quality standards are met where forest lands are treated (EA, pages 300-301).

Findings for Endangered Species Act and National Historic Preservation Act are discussed in the FONSI above.

The project is not expected to have any disproportional effects on minorities or low-income populations (EA, page 298).

My conclusions are based on a review of the record that shows a thorough review of relevant scientific information, a consideration of responsible opposing views, and the acknowledgment of incomplete or unavailable information, scientific uncertainty, and risk.

Administrative Review or Objection Opportunities

The draft Decision Notice and Final EA were made available for a 45-day objection period under 36 CFR 218 subpart A through a legal notice in the *Wenatchee World* on April 29, 2015. The 45-day period ended on June 12, 2015, and no objections were received during this time. This decision is not subject to further administrative review.

Implementation

Implementation may begin as early as practical upon signature of this Decision Notice, but not sooner than 5 days following the end of the objection period and only after the public is informed of my decision in accordance with 36 CFR 220.7(c).

Contact Person

For more information, please contact Meg Trebon, Project Lead; Methow Valley Ranger District, 24 West Chewuch Road, Winthrop, WA 98862; phone (509) 996-4032, fax (509) 996-2208.

The EA and supporting documents are available for inspection during regular business hours (Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) at the Methow Valley Ranger District office. Please call ahead to schedule an appointment. The Final EA will be posted on the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest website at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=46112>.



Michael R. Williams
Forest Supervisor
Okanogan and Wenatchee National Forest

7/14/2015
DATE

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