

Decision Notice
and Finding of No Significant Impact
Upper South Fork Skokomish
Vegetation Management Project
USDA Forest Service
Hood Canal Ranger District, Olympic National Forest
Mason County, Washington
T22N R05W; T22N R06W; T23N R05W; T23W R06W

Decision and Reasons for the Decision

Background

I have decided to approve management actions to improve forested habitat conditions in the Upper South Fork Skokomish planning area. These actions include variable density thinning of approximately 880 acres of second-growth forest stands, that are currently 37 to 66 years old; utilization and post-project decommissioning of approximately 3.5 miles of temporary road, of which 2.6 miles are existing unclassified or incompletely decommissioned roads, and 0.9 mile is new temporary road. Stands selected for treatment are dense young stands that resulted from past clearcut harvest activities. Project activities are all within the Upper South Fork Skokomish River subwatershed, and are located primarily in the lower elevation portions of the subwatershed. The legal land description for this project is T22N R05W Sections 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 10, and 11; T22N R06W Sections 2, 3, and 10; T23N R05W Sections 31 and 32; and T23N R06W Sections 28, 34, 35, and 36.

Management direction for the project is contained in the 1990 *Olympic National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan* (LRMP) as amended by the 1994 *Record of Decision for Amendments to Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Planning Documents Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl* (1994 ROD). The 1994 ROD, along with its Standards and Guidelines, is commonly known as the Northwest Forest Plan. The LRMP, as amended, is referred to as the Forest Plan.

Most of the project is located in the Hood Canal South (RW 104) Late-Successional Reserve (LSR). An LSR assessment was completed in 1996. The Upper South Fork Skokomish Vegetation Management Project follows recommendations in the assessment. A small portion (less than 10 percent) of the project is located in the Olympic Adaptive Management Area (AMA). This project is consistent with the vision, desired future conditions, and all other aspects of the 1999 Olympic Adaptive Management Area Guide.

The purpose of the proposed thinning is to implement the Forest Plan by increasing forest structural diversity and accelerating the development of late-successional forest characteristics in previously managed stands in the Upper South Fork Skokomish Watershed. The forest in the project planning area has been heavily influenced by past logging activities. Approximately 15,000 acres of National Forest System land in the planning area were clearcut between 1940 and 1992. Most of this acreage was replanted after harvest. As a result of this history, much of the vegetation in the watershed currently consists of relatively dense, single-aged, second growth

plantations in a structurally simplified stage, with only one canopy layer, little understory vegetation, and low plant species diversity. Dense overstory canopy shading limits the growth of shrubs and herbs, and delays the development of a multistory canopy by many decades. There are few late-successional habitats such as large tree crowns and limbs, cavities and other tree defects, large snags, or high levels of coarse woody debris. These stands do not currently provide the habitat features necessary for wildlife associated with late-successional forests. Also, riparian areas that once supported large conifers now have high percentages of small-diameter conifers and hardwoods, and the available supply of trees for recruitment of large wood, an important component of fish habitat, into streams has been reduced. The project is needed to help address these effects of past management by accelerating the development of late-successional forest conditions in the project stands.

Decision and Reasons for the Decision

After careful review and consideration of the analyses and potential effects disclosed in the EA, and of the public comments received about the project, I have decided to implement Alternative B, the Proposed Action, as it is described in the EA, including all its associated project design criteria, mitigation measures, and best management practices. My decision is based on a examination of the project record that shows a thorough review of relevant scientific information, a consideration of responsible opposing views, and the acknowledgement of incomplete or unavailable information, scientific uncertainty, and risk.

My decision to implement Alternative B approves variable density thinning of 880 acres of second growth stands. The variable density thinning includes skips (unthinned areas), gaps (small openings), and small areas of heavy thinning. Logging systems include ground-based skidding, skyline cable yarding, helicopter yarding, and pre-bunching. Approximately 100 to 180 trees per acre will remain in the post-treatment stands, with a range of 60 percent to 90 percent canopy closure.

Alternative B also includes the reconstruction, use, and post-project decommissioning of approximately 2.6 miles of existing unclassified or incompletely decommissioned road, and construction, use, and post-project obliteration of approximately 0.9 mile of new temporary road. Decommissioning will prevent low-level casual use, and minimize resource impacts. Other roads to be used include 50.5 miles of existing, open National Forest System (NFS) roads, which will remain open after the project, and 3.1 miles of currently closed NFS roads which will be reopened for project use, then closed with traffic control barriers and other measures needed for long-term resource protection.

In making my decision, I carefully reviewed the NEPA analysis and public comments received throughout the planning process and during public review of the draft EA. Several areas of concern were raised by the public. I instructed the project's interdisciplinary team to review and respond to these comments and provide me with information to consider in making my decision. I want to assure those who provided comments that I heard and understood their concerns, and weighed them in light of the NEPA analysis and the achievement of the projects purpose. I decided that it was important to implement the project as described in the EA in order to meet the project's goals.

I examined the proposed thinning and related activities in relationship to the goals and objectives

of the *Olympic National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan*, as amended (Forest Plan). I also considered the resource concerns noted in the watershed analysis and the EA. I considered the responsiveness of Alternative B to the issues identified in the EA (p.10): minimizing the need for road construction and reconstruction, particularly in riparian reserves; minimizing potential impacts on northern spotted owl and marbled murrelet suitable habitat; minimizing road closures and other activities that might temporarily limit access to recreation facilities; ensuring public safety during project operations; and maintaining economic viability. I examined the proposed activities in light of applicable laws, regulation, and policy; Tribal Treaty rights; and public input. I considered the effects of implementing the project alternatives on the physical, biological, social, and economic environment. I believe that Alternative B, the proposed action, balances these considerations, meets the purpose and need for action established for this project, and is consistent with the goals, standards, and guidelines of the Forest Plan. Implementing Alternative B with its project design criteria, mitigation measures, and best management practices will result in minimal impacts to resources, and provide long-term benefits to the resources.

Alternative B will accelerate the development of late-successional forest characteristics on 880 acres and so would meet the project's purpose and need. Temporary road construction, use, and decommissioning will create some short-term effects, these are outweighed by the longer term benefits of reducing sedimentation from the existing roads used for and properly decommissioned as a result of the project. Use of the 3.5 miles of temporary road will also facilitate a more efficient and economical implementation of the variable density thinning treatments. Implementing this alternative will generate KV funds available for enhancement work in the project area. My decision also approves the restoration, habitat enhancement, and sale area improvement activities that are described on pages 15 to 18 of the EA.

Alternative B meets requirements under the National Forest Management Act, National Environmental Policy Act, Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and all other applicable environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

Other Alternatives Considered

Under Alternative A, the no-action alternative, no thinning or associated activities would take place. I did not select this alternative because it does not meet the purpose and need of accelerating development of late-successional forest characteristics. Over time, opportunities for thinning could be reduced or lost, and development of late-successional habitat characteristics would be considerably delayed. Under this alternative, there would also be no treatment of existing unclassified roads and no associated long-term improvement in watershed conditions. Alternative A would not generate any KV funds that would be available for additional restoration or enhancement work.

In addition to the proposed action and no-action alternatives, I considered one other alternative that would have excluded any temporary road construction. Such an alternative would greatly reduce the possibility for using ground-based logging systems. The resulting higher reliance on helicopter yarding systems would result in an economically unfeasible project. The low likelihood that such a project could be implemented means that this alternative would be unlikely to meet the purpose and need established for the project. The Proposed Action was intentionally developed to minimize temporary road development while retaining overall project feasibility. I

determined that a no-temporary-road alternative was economically unfeasible, and that the Proposed Action minimizes road construction to the greatest extent possible while still maintaining project feasibility. Therefore, an alternative that excluded any temporary road construction was eliminated from consideration in the EA.

Design Features and Mitigation Measures

Project design criteria, mitigation measures, including best management practices, were developed for Alternative B to ensure compliance with direction in the *Olympic National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan*, as amended, as well as to avoid or minimize potential adverse effects of project implementation. Specific management requirements were identified for the following resource areas: riparian areas, wildlife and wildlife habitat, recreation sites, public safety, sensitive plant species, invasive plant infestations, heritage sites, project-generated fuels (slash), aquatic resources, fish and fish habitat, and soils. These requirements are described on pages 19-35 of the EA.

Monitoring and Adaptive Management

Monitoring activities will be implemented to assure elements of my decision are carefully tracked during project implementation. Implementation and effectiveness monitoring associated with Alternative B are described on pages 36 and 160-161 of the EA. Monitoring results will be used to inform future management activities.

Public Involvement

As described in the background, the need for this action arose from the discrepancy between the existing conditions in previously managed stands in the project area, and the desired future conditions described in the Forest Plan. A proposal to thin previously managed stands in the Upper South Fork Skokomish River subwatershed was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions on January 1, 2011. The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping, which was initiated in a letter dated January 28, 2011. In addition, as part of the public involvement process, the agency provided updates and project information at Skokomish Watershed Action Team (SWAT) meetings and field trips in 2011 and 2012. The draft Environmental Assessment was released to the public for a 30-day comment period that began on April 24, 2012.

Using the comments from the public and other agencies, the interdisciplinary team identified several issues regarding the effects of the proposed action. Main issues of concern included minimizing the need for road construction and reconstruction, particularly in riparian reserves; minimizing potential impacts on northern spotted owl and marbled murrelet suitable habitat; minimizing road closures and other activities that might temporarily limit access to recreation facilities; ensuring public safety during project operations; and maintaining economic viability. Because of the recent emphasis on road decommissioning in the South Fork Skokomish watershed, a high emphasis was placed on minimizing new road construction (EA p.10). The interdisciplinary team developed the Proposed Action to include design criteria, mitigation measures, and best management practices designed address these concerns. No issues were identified that necessitated the development of action alternatives other than the Proposed Action.

I have reviewed and considered all the comments received in response to the draft EA, and have used these comments to enhance the project analysis via updates to the final EA, and the Response to Comments appendices (Appendices F and F (Supplemental)).

Tribal Consultation

Tribal consultation with the Skokomish Tribe has been ongoing throughout the life of the project. A letter inviting official government-to-government consultation was sent to the Tribal Chairman on January 12, 2011, and a copy of the draft Environmental Assessment was provided for review in April of 2012. No formal responses were received.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

Context of Action: The context of the Upper South Fork Skokomish Vegetation management Project will be local and short-term in nature. Thinning and related activities will occur on 880 acres of National Forest Lands, about 2.3 percent of the Upper South Fork Skokomish subwatershed. The activities would probably be spread out over the next five to seven years.

Intensity of Effects: The environmental effects of the following actions are documented in chapter 3 of the Upper South Fork Skokomish Vegetation Management Project Environmental Analysis: commercial thinning of trees; using and maintaining open National Forest System roads; constructing or reconstructing and then decommissioning and rehabilitating temporary and existing unclassified roads; constructing and rehabilitating helicopter landings; developing existing rock quarries; and treating activity-generated slash. The beneficial and adverse direct, indirect, and cumulative effects discussed in the EA have been disclosed within the appropriate context, and effects are expected to be low in intensity because of standard operating procedures, project design criteria, and mitigation. Significant effects on the human environment are not expected. The rationale for this determination of non-significance is based on the environmental assessment, in light of the following factors:

1. Beneficial and adverse effects were considered during analysis of the proposed action. Beneficial effects of the activities proposed under Alternative B include promoting development of characteristics of late-successional habitat, and improving watershed conditions by decommissioning some existing unclassified roads. Several potential adverse effects were identified, including the potential for increased erosion and sedimentation, and the potential for increased detrimental soil conditions. Alternative B has been designed to minimize these and other potentially adverse environmental impacts (EA p.10 and pages 19-36). Neither the beneficial nor adverse effects as disclosed in the EA are deemed to be of sufficient intensity to be identified as significant.
2. There will be no significant effects on public health and safety, because the project incorporates design features and other measures to ensure the safety of the public during

project operations, and to ensure worker safety during implementation (see EA p.21, 22, 35, 209-210). Effects on water quality (sediment) are expected to be very limited (EA p.134-139; 157-158; 166-171). Any burning of project-generated slash will be conducted in compliance with all State and Federal laws, including the Clean Air Act – there will be no effect on air quality (EA p.25, 207).

3. There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area, because there are no prime farm lands, range lands, wild and scenic rivers, inventoried roadless or designated wilderness, potential wilderness, ecologically critical areas, or historic or cultural resources that would be affected (see EA pages 186-195). Scenic resources would not be degraded (EA. p.184-185). Wetlands and undiscovered cultural resources would be protected by specific mitigation measures described in chapter 2 of the EA (p.19-20, 24-25).
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial, because there is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the project (EA p.209). The Forest Plan, as amended, permits all the proposed activities within the project area, and all the activities have historically been conducted in the area.
5. My decision will not impose any highly uncertain, unique, or unknown environmental risks. We have considerable experience with the types of activities to be implemented, and all proposed activities have been implemented successfully on the Olympic National Forest in the past, meeting regulations concerning these activities and the protection of national Forest resources. The effects analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk (EA chapter 3).
6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because it does not involve controversial practices or practices with unpredictable consequences (EA chapter 3). Commercial thinning and road work are not new activities to the Forest, and follow common practices with known results. The project design criteria and mitigations (EA p.19-36) are known to reduce risks associated with the proposed activities. The EA effectively addressed and analyzed all major issues associated with the project.
7. Implementation of Alternative B does not represent potential cumulative adverse impacts when considered in combination with other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions. The EA effects analysis (EA chapter 3) indicates no likelihood of cumulatively significant impact to the environment.
8. The action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, because no sites were found during project surveys (EA p.183). The Washington State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (SHPO) concurred with the No Effect finding.
9. This action is covered by and consistent with the programmatic Biological Opinion (USDI Fish & Wildlife Service. 2003. *Biological Opinion and Letter of Concurrence for Effects to Bald Eagles, Marbled Murrelets, Northern Spotted owls, Bull Trout, and*

Designated Critical Habitat for Marbled Murrelets and Northern Spotted Owls from Olympic National Forest Program of Activities for August 5, 2003 to December 31, 2008. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Lacey, Washington. Revised 2004, 2010). The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species act of 1973. Endangered Species Act effects determinations for Northern Spotted Owl and Marbled Murrelet are: “may affect, likely to adversely affect” action to individual owls and murrelets potentially nesting in suitable habitat within the planning area due to harassment (246 acres) from project activities during the early breeding season; and “may affect, not likely to adversely affect” action to designated critical habitat within the Planning Area (EA p.105). Effects determinations for threatened and endangered fish species are: “no effect” to Hood Canal summer chum and Puget Sound Chinook; and “not likely adversely affect” Coastal Puget Sound bull trout and Puget Sound steelhead. The proposed action would have “no effect” on critical habitat for Hood Canal summer chum; and “not likely adversely affect” critical habitat for Puget Sound (EA p.175).

10. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Analysis has determined that Alternative B is consistent with the Olympic National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended (the Forest Plan), and is in compliance with the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act (EA p.207).

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This decision to approve and implement Alternative B of the Upper South Fork Skokomish Vegetation Management Project is consistent with the intent of the forest plan's long term goals and objectives. The project was designed in conformance with land and resource management plan standards and incorporates appropriate land and resource management plan guidelines in its design, and in the design criteria and mitigation measures listed in chapter 2.

In particular, I have reviewed the EA and supporting documents for consistency with the Northwest Forest Plan Aquatic Conservation Strategy objectives in accordance with the 1994 ROD, Attachment B, p.B-10. The applicable watershed analyses and the EA include descriptions of the existing conditions, range of natural variability of important physical and biological components of the watershed, and how the proposed project maintains the existing condition or moves it within the range of natural variability (EA p.175-181). Based on my review of those materials, I have determined that this project does not prevent attainment of the Aquatic Conservation Strategy objectives.

I have determined that this project is consistent with the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) requirements at 16 USC 1604, as documented in the EA (p.207-208).

Implementation Date

If no appeals are filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of the decision may occur on, but not before, 5 business days from the close of the appeal filing period. When appeals are filed, implementation may occur on, but not before, the 15th business day following the date of the last appeal disposition.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

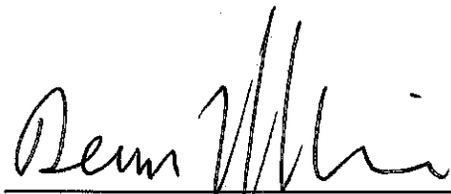
This decision is subject to administrative review (appeal) pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215. Any individual or organization who submitted comments during the comment period specified at 36 CFR 215.6 may appeal. Written notice of appeal must be postmarked or received by the Appeal Deciding Officer, Forest Supervisor, ATTN: Appeals, USDA Forest Service, 1835 Black Lake Blvd SW Olympia, WA 98512, within 45 days of the date of publication of notice regarding this decision in *Peninsula Daily News*, newspaper (Port Angeles, Washington). The appeal must state that the document is an appeal pursuant to 36CFR 215, and at a minimum it must meet the content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14, and include the name and address of the appellant, and must identify the decision by title, subject, date of decision, and name of the Responsible official. The appeal narrative must be sufficient to identify the specific change or changes to the decision sought by the appellant, or the portions of the decision to which the appellant objects, and must state how the Responsible Official's decision fails to consider comments previously provided. If applicable, the appeal should state how the appellant believes this decision violates law, regulation, or policy.

Appeals (including attachments) may be filed by regular mail, fax, e-mail, hand delivery, express delivery, or messenger service. The publication date of the notice regarding this decision in the newspaper of record (*Peninsula Daily News*) is the sole means of calculating the appeal filing deadline, and those wishing to appeal should not rely on timelines from other sources. E-mail appeals must be submitted to: appeals-pacificnorthwest-olympic@fs.fed.us, and must be in one of the following three formats: Microsoft Word (.doc or .docx), rich text format (.rtf), or Adobe Portable Document format (.pdf). FAX appeals must be submitted to 360-956-2330. Appeals may be hand-delivered to the 1835 Black Lake Blvd SW Olympia, WA 98512, between the hours of 8:00 AM and 4:30 PM Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays.

It is the responsibility of all individuals and organizations to ensure that their appeals are received in a timely manner. For electronically mailed appeals, the sender should normally receive an automated electronic acknowledgement from the agency as confirmation of receipt. If the sender does not receive an automated acknowledgement of receipt, it is the sender's responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other means.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Greg Wahl, Environmental Coordinator, Olympic National Forest, at 1835 Black Lake Blvd SW, Olympia, WA, 98512; by email at gtwahl@fs.fed.us, or by phone at 360-956-2375.



DEAN YOSHINA

District Ranger, Hood Canal
Olympic National Forest

3/5/2013
Date

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