

REGIONAL ECOSYSTEM OFFICE

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MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 9, 2019

TO: Kristin Bail, Forest Supervisor, Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest

FROM: Becky Gravenmier, Regional Ecosystem Office Representative to the Regional Interagency Executive Committee

SUBJECT: Regional Ecosystem Office Review of the Taneum Restoration Project, Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest

Summary: The Regional Ecosystem Office (REO) interagency Late-Successional Reserve (LSR) Work Group has concluded its review of the Taneum Restoration Project (Project), in the Manastash Ridge LSR on the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest (Forest). The Forest proposes to treat approximately 5,950 acres within the LSR by thinning and prescribed burning in previously harvested stands, stands stocked with off-site pine, and naturally regenerated stands; none of which are currently functioning as suitable nesting, roosting or foraging habitat. These stands also have some scattered older remnant trees. The objectives of the Taneum project are to reduce the risk of habitat loss to uncharacteristically severe wildfire, and restore habitat towards developing late successional characteristics. While the majority of the project was designed to be consistent with both the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) standard and guidelines (S&G's) and commercial thinning exemptions, there will be approximately 380 acres of stands where gaps will be created up to 2 acres in size. Additionally, 510 acres of proposed silvicultural treatments are planned to occur in stands over 80 years old, and the Forest is pursuing a project specific Northwest Forest Plan amendment to treat these stands which will need to be reviewed by the Regional Interagency Executive Committee (RIEC). The REO, based upon the review by the LSR Work Group, concurs with the Forest's finding that the proposed actions are consistent with the NWFP S&Gs, except for the thinning that is planned in stands greater than 80 years old. This will require a Forest Plan Amendment that will need to be reviewed by the RIEC.

Basis for the Review: The Manastash Ridge LSR is addressed under the Manastash Ridge LSRA which was reviewed by the REO (September 16, 1996) and found to be consistent under the NWFP S&Gs (C-11 and C-12-13).

Limiting factors for Late Successional Forest development in the Manastash Ridge LSR include a lack of existing old forest due to past harvest, particularly in the moister portions of the LSR. At the stand level, limiting factors include the lack of large trees and multiple canopy layers, as well as restoration of off-site pine plantations.

The 5,950 acres of commercial thinning in the Taneum Restoration Project are in stand types identified by the LSRA.

- From the Manastash Ridge LSRA –Management within this LSR will focus on protecting existing NSO habitat, and management objectives to reduce risk of habitat loss to wildfires, insects and pathogens by reducing stand densities, treating areas where root disease is a major problem by altering species composition, and thinning stand from below to accelerate late successional characteristic development (LSRA p. 125).

Background and Project Description: The primary objectives for the Taneum Restoration Project are to 1) reduce the risk of habitat loss to uncharacteristically severe wildfire and 2) restore habitat to more rapidly develop late successional characteristics than if they were left untreated. The project avoids treating in any currently functioning nesting, roosting, foraging spotted owl habitat, and instead focuses treatments in stands that currently do not have late successional characteristics, many of which are unlikely to develop late-successional characteristics without treatment. Treatments include 823 acres of early successional stand thinning in previously harvested stands; 368 acres of treatment of stands planted with off-site pine designed to reduce off-site pine densities, diversify species composition, and increase additional canopy layer development; 756 acres of stem exclusion closed canopy stands thinned to increase heterogeneity, including gaps up to 2 acres in size; 753 acres of young forest multi-story thinning designed to retain the largest Douglas-fir and increase the development of multiple canopy layers; 422 acres of thinning in grand fir dominated young forest designed to increase stand heterogeneity through variable density thinning, reducing grand fir densities in favor of more fire resistant tree species and treating existing root rot pockets; 2,825 acres of prescribed fire treatments and 110 acres of shaded fuel breaks. Thinned stands will retain approximately 40-50% canopy cover, and will focus on the retention of the largest, most fire resistant tree species (Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine and western larch) spaced into a diverse combination of individual trees, clumps of trees and openings. Overall, 5,320 acres of stands would be treated by a combination of thinning and prescribed fire.

A project specific Forest Plan amendment is proposed for approximately 510 acres of over 80 years old stands where past timber harvest selectively removed the largest trees; the remnant stands do not currently have the structural characteristics (large trees, snags, etc.) of late successional and old forests.

Review of the Project: The LSR Work Group received the final consistency review documents on August 27, 2019, and a Powerpoint presentation on the project was presented to the LSR Work Group on August 29, 2019. The review of the Taneum project consistency with the standards and guidelines of the NWFP is based on this final document and presentation.

The proposed silvicultural treatments consisting of thinning and prescribed burning on approximately 510 acres of stands over 80 years old is not consistent with the NWFP Record of Decision (ROD) that limits silvicultural treatments for purposes other than risk reduction to stands less than 80 years old (NWFP ROD, pg. 8). However, this action is necessary in order to achieve the NWFP LSR objectives of developing late-successional characteristics for the following reasons:

- These stands currently do not have late-successional characteristics such as large trees and snags, or multi-layered canopy.
- These stands are not likely to develop late-successional characteristics without treatment due to high stocking of small diameter grand fir and prevalence of root disease and dwarf mistletoe.

Thinning to improve growth and creating gaps to allow natural or artificial regeneration of long-lived species such as Douglas-fir is needed to put these stands on a path to growing into late-successional structure and composition as emphasized in NWFP LSR objectives. Therefore, the need for the proposed plan amendment to conduct silvicultural treatments in stands greater than 80 years old is consistent with meeting NWFP LSR objectives. This treatment is also consistent with the Manastash Ridge LSRA.

All other treatments proposed are consistent with NWFP standards and guidelines for the following reasons:

- Risk reduction treatments, and silvicultural treatments to accelerate development of late-successional characteristics are consistent with treatment types and stand conditions identified in the Manastash Ridge LSRA.
- Risk reduction treatments will reduce risk of loss of late-successional characteristics within the treatment footprint as well as a larger area of the LSR by reducing stand- and landscape-level fire behavior through careful design and strategic placement relative to likely fire spread.
- Some relatively large openings will result, and some stands will receive relatively large density reductions. These treatments are needed due to the stand conditions created from past management that are not conducive to developing late-successional characteristics. These include uniform grand fir with prevalent root disease that must be replaced with non-host species to provide longevity to allow growth into larger size classes, and significant mistletoe infection that must be removed to allow new age classes to develop without being infected at a young age. These pathogens will not be eliminated from the stands, but their current pervasiveness is preventing young trees from growing into the larger and older size classes needed for late-successional character.
- Forest Vegetation Simulator modeling included with the project documents demonstrates the risk reduction and stand development benefits of the proposed treatments, as well as failure to develop late-successional characteristics in the absence of treatment.

/s/ Becky Gravenmier

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cc:

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