



**File Code:** 1950

**Date:** February 6, 2014

Dear Interested Citizen,

The Hood River Ranger District on the Mt. Hood National Forest has identified you as an individual, agency, or organization that may have interest in the **North Fork Mill Creek Revised Environmental Assessment**. We are undertaking an analysis to assess the changed conditions to the landscape resulting from the Government Flats fire and to assess how these changes impact existing contractual obligations. This project is located on the Hood River and Barlow Ranger Districts within the Mill Creek Watershed. The legal description for the project is: T1S, R11E, Sections 4-9 in Hood River and Wasco Counties.

### **Background**

The Government Flats Fire started from lightning strikes on August 16, 2013 on Oregon Department of Forestry lands. On August 21, the fire burned onto National Forest System (NFS) lands. Approximately 2,200 acres burned on the NFS and the total fire covered 11,354 acres on a variety of land ownerships. The fire occurred in an area with a complex mix of land allocations from the Mt. Hood Land and Resource Management Plan, Northwest Forest Plan, Tier 1 Watershed and Northern spotted owl Critical Habitat. The fire burned two stewardship contracts that were sold (Roan and Eques) as well as several unsold and planned units. All of the stewardship units were analyzed as part of the North Fork Mill Creek Restoration Opportunities Environmental Assessment (2008).

Within the fire perimeter on NFS lands, approximately 27 percent of the lands were classified as low severity burn, 29 percent as moderate severity, and 30 percent as high severity burns. On the moderate to high severity areas, combustion of the litter and humus layers on the soil surface was complete; several inches of grayish-white ash cover the ground; fine roots were consumed within the top half to one inch below the soil surface; and soil color and structure was not altered to depth except in some places a thin layer at the surface, or where large fuels were in contact with the ground burned for a prolonged period of time. The moderate severity areas represent a broad range of burn characteristics with much of the moderate severity burn on the high end of the moderate severity class. The overstory tree and shrub mortality was often greater than 50 percent, but needle-cast has been covering the ground since burning has ceased. It is possible that many of the stands that experienced moderate to high severity burns would not have an adequate natural seed source to regenerate the forest to the desired future conditions. Also, the fire burned along approximately six miles of roads. Many of the trees along these roads pose a safety hazard.

### **North Fork Mill Creek (2008) Environmental Analysis**

The Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact (DN/FONSI) for North Fork Mill Creek Restoration Opportunities (signed December 19, 2008) authorized fuels reduction activities on 2720 acres. Fuel reduction activities include 1896 acres of commercial thinning to open dense stands and reduce fuel ladders, 153 acres of non-commercial treatments, 61 acres of



aspen cottonwood enhancement, and 610 acres of underburning. The overarching objective of the treatments in the North Fork Mill Creek planning area was to reduce fuels and restore stands to their historical species composition while also providing for wildlife habitat needs. The prescriptions were designed to move treated areas toward the appropriate condition class based on the fire regime classification and to address fuels reduction needs in the treated areas.

To implement this decision, the project area was broken into six stewardship sales (Appy, Buckskin, Clyde, Roan, Eques, and Lokai Stewardship Sales). Of the six stewardship sales, three sales have been fully implemented (Appy, Buckskin and Clyde Stewardship Sales) and two other sales are partially completed (Roan and Eques Stewardship Sales). The last sale (Lokai Stewardship Sale) is scheduled to be awarded in fiscal year 2014. The Government Flats Fire burned 89 percent of Roan and 54 percent of Eques (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Stewardship Sales Impacted by Government Flats Fire**

Stewardship Sale	Total Sale Area	Acres Burned	Acres Thinned	Percent of Sale Impacted
Roan Stewardship	273	243	92	89%
Eques Stewardship	304	165	0	54%

The fire area includes the stewardship units under Integrated Resource Timber Contracts (Roan and Eques Stewardship). As time progresses fire-killed trees lose economic value due to staining, insects, and checking (cracks in the wood that occur as the burned wood dries). By the early summer to late fall 2014 up to 60% of the economic value of these trees could be lost. Both of these stewardship sales were determined to have catastrophic damage as defined by the stewardship contract. The contract defines catastrophic damage as: “major change or damage has affected the value of trees or products within the Contract Area and is estimated to total either: More than half of the estimated timber volume or more than 2,000 CCF or equivalent (1,000 MBF).” Therefore, there is a contractual obligation to analyze the changed conditions resulting from the Government Flats fire. These changed conditions would be utilized to provide the necessary context for contract modifications.

### **Change Condition Analysis**

The changed condition analysis is based on the Adaptive Management Model from Forest Service Handbook 1909.12, Chapter 20 to address the question on what change condition analysis is required and what changes are needed to the original proposed action. This analysis considers the original desired future condition which is “to develop an uneven-aged stand with canopy closure that will allow fire behavior to change from crown fire to surface fire, and to have stand species composition reflecting Condition Class 1 (ponderosa pine, western larch, white oak, and dry climate Douglas-fir)” (NFMDC DN/FONSI, page 3). The analysis also considers that status of work completed under the original NEPA and consistency with Forest Plan standards and guidelines.

All activities outside the fire perimeter as well as completed activities (e.g., seasonal and year-round road closures) regardless of location do not have a changed condition and may proceed under the original DN/FONSI. Although the culvert replacements and road decommissioning have not been fully implemented, these do not have a changed condition since the overall road infrastructure was not impacted by the fire. As such, these activities will be implemented under

the original DN/FONSI.

All other treatment and activities analyzed under the original Proposed Action that were affected by the fire will be considered in the changed condition analysis. These treatments include: restoration thinning, sapling thinning, cottonwood aspen enhancements, underburning and road maintenance. In addition to changes in the treatments, any changes in law, regulation or policy within the analysis area (fire perimeter) will be applied and incorporated into a revised Proposed Action, as necessary. Some of these changes include: compliance with the 2001 Survey and Manage Record of Decision; updated critical habitat for northern spotted owls; updated critical habitat for steelhead; updated sensitive species list; and updated analysis on management indicator species.

### **Next Steps**

The North Fork Mill Creek Revised Environmental Assessment will proceed under Section 428 of The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2012 which included a provision establishing a pre-decisional objection process (36CFR218) for projects. Since this project is a non-fuels reduction act (HFRA) project, it is subject to the project level Pre-decisional Administrative Review Process (Objection process) as identified in 36 CFR 218, Subparts A and B.

Rather than being able to seek higher-level review of unresolved concerns after a project decision has been made (Appeal process), those who are eligible will be able to seek that review before the project decision has been signed (Objection process). The Forest Service believes that considering public concerns before a decision is made aligns with our collaborative approach to public land management and increases the likelihood of resolving those concerns resulting in better, more informed decisions.

Individuals and entities (non-governmental organizations, businesses, partnerships, state and local governments, and tribal governments) who have submitted timely, specific written comments regarding a proposed project or activity during any designated opportunity for public comment may file an objection. Opportunity for public comment on this project will include a 30-day public review period. The public comment period is estimated to take place in March 2014.

We will send out a letter at the beginning of the notice and comment period notifying you of the revised proposed action and availability of a preliminary assessment. If you have any questions on this process or if you would like to be removed from the mailing list, please contact either Jennie O'Connor Card at [jennieoconnorcard@fs.fed.us](mailto:jennieoconnorcard@fs.fed.us) or 406-522-2537; or contact Whitney Olsker at [wolsker@fs.fed.us](mailto:wolsker@fs.fed.us) or 541-467-5155.

We look forward to working with you on this project.

*/s/ Janeen Tervo*

Janeen Tervo  
Hood River District Ranger