
File Code: 1950
Date: February 6, 2023

Dear Interested Party,

The Forest Service is seeking public comment on the Gate Insect and Disease Project, a forest management project designed to reduce the risk of landscape level disturbance and increase forest resiliency to insect and disease. The project is located on the Barlow Ranger District, Mt. Hood National Forest. You are being contacted because you have expressed an interest in projects on the District. Please see the "How to Comment" section of this letter for information on how and when to provide input into this proposal.

Project Location

The Gate Insect and Disease planning area is located in the southeastern portion of the Barlow Ranger District. It is bordered to the west by Forest System Road (FSR) 4811000; to the north by the Souva Creek drainage; and to the south by the FSR 4800000. The project area is within the White River watershed and Gate Creek subwatershed. The planning area is primarily characterized by dry mixed conifer. It is just outside the designated Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), as outlined in the Central Wasco County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). The entire planning area is comprised of Fire Regimes I and III, and is in Fire Regime Condition Class 2 or 3.

The planning area is approximately 2,975 acres. The planning area is located in: Township 4 South, Range 10 East, Section 24; and Township 4 South, Range 11 East, Sections 19, 20, 21, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32, 33, and 34.

Purpose and Need

The primary purposes of this project are to reduce the risk of landscape level disturbance and increase forest resiliency to insect and disease. The Mt. Hood National Forest has experienced widespread tree mortality in the recent past. Given the projections of increasing temperatures and drier summers, forest conditions are at a higher risk for mortality as the period of summer water deficit lengthens and becomes more severe. Additionally, these conditions have caused landscape-scale areas on the forest to be at high risk of insect and disease epidemics.

Background

Landscape-scale areas were designated on Mt. Hood National Forest to address insect and disease threats under Section 602 of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003 (16 U.S.C. 6591a), as added by Section 8204 of the Agricultural Act of 2014 (Public Law 113-79). These landscape-scale areas are experiencing decline in forest health based on annual forest health surveys and are at risk of substantial tree mortality over the next 15 years based on the National Insect and Disease Risk map.



A total of 580,048 acres were designated on Mt. Hood National Forest by the Forest Service Chief on April 16, 2019. These designated areas exclude Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas, and non-Forest Service inholdings. The request letter, designating letter, and corresponding map can be found at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/farm-bill/area-designations>. Since the Gate project is located within this designated area, the project may be considered under Section 603 of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, which established a categorical exclusion for qualifying insect and disease projects. For a project to be considered under Section 603, it must meet the following requirements:

- The project is limited to areas in the wildland urban interface (WUI) or, if outside the WUI, must be in condition classes 2 or 3 fire regime groups I, II, or III.
- The project is not located: in congressionally designated Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas; in areas where the removal of vegetation is restricted or prohibited by statute or by Presidential proclamation; or in areas where the proposed activities would be inconsistent with the applicable Land and Resource Management Plan.
- The project's number of acres treated does not exceed 3,000 acres.
- The project does not include the establishment of permanent roads, but may allow for necessary maintenance and repairs of the existing permanent road system and may allow for the construction of temporary roads that would have to be decommissioned no later than three years after completion of the project.
- The project is developed and implemented through a collaborative process.
- The best available scientific information is considered to maintain or restore ecological integrity, including maintaining or restoring the structure, function, composition, and connectivity.
- The project maximizes the retention of old growth and large trees, as appropriate for the forest type, to the extent that the trees promote stands that are resilient to insect and disease.

The Gate project is designed to meet these requirements, as described through this letter. Prior to initiating scoping, I requested input about this project from the Wasco County Forest Collaborative and invited consultation from the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon (CTWSRO).

Draft Proposed Action

In order to address insect and disease threats within the project area, the proposed action would reduce stand density on approximately 2,975 acres (see Tables 1 and 2). The proposed action would move density levels to a more desired condition. All treatment areas would be thinned from below, with the intention of prioritizing the retention of the largest and healthiest trees available within the stands. A variety of methods, including mechanical and non-mechanical (i.e., hand- crews), would be used. These methods include but are not limited to: non-commercial thinning, commercial thinning, and fuels treatments (including, but not limited to mastication, piling and prescribed burning). Non-commercial units would be treated with non-commercial thinning and fuels treatments. Commercial unit treatments may include a combination of non-commercial thinning, fuels treatments, and commercial thinning.

The proposed action would not construct any system roads. Road maintenance would occur on all roads needed along timber haul routes, and temporary roads are anticipated to be needed in order to facilitate activities. These temporary roads would be decommissioned within three years of project completion.

Appendix A includes draft project design criteria (PDC). Appendix B includes a table which shows existing unit conditions. Appendix C includes project maps.

Mt. Hood National Forest Plan and Northwest Forest Plan

The Gate planning area is made up of several Management Areas (land use allocations) which are described in detail in the Forest's Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) as amended.

Table 1. Mt. Hood National Forest Plan Land Use Allocations in the Gate planning area.

Land Use Allocation	Approximate Acres in Planning Area (Percent)
B2 Scenic Viewshed	501 (17%)
B4 Pine-Oak Habitat	893 (30%)
C1 Timber Emphasis	1,581 (53%)
Total Planning Area Acres	2,975

*The B5 land use allocation overlaps with C1.

The Northwest Forest Plan Land Use Allocations for the planning area are Matrix and Riparian Reserves. The majority of the planning area consists of Matrix lands as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Northwest Forest Plan Land Use Allocations acres in the Gate planning area.

Land Use Allocation	Approximate Acres in Planning Area (Percent)
Riparian Reserves	603 (20%)
Late-successional Reserve (LSR)	0 (0%)
Matrix	2,372 (80%)

Anticipated Effects

The interdisciplinary team has completed a preliminary effects analysis to consider extraordinary circumstances and potential impacts to resources in the project area. A consistency review of the Forest Plan was also part of this preliminary effects analysis. This preliminary effects analysis considered impacts to fish species and habitat, wildlife species and habitat, botanical species and habitat, invasive species, hydrology, soils, fuels, forest vegetation, transportation, heritage resources, recreation, and visual quality. Because impacts for most resources are anticipated to be minimal and/or short-term, only the anticipated effects for federally-listed and Region 6 sensitive species and habitat are summarized below. Project activities are anticipated to be consistent with the Forest Plan as amended by the Northwest Forest Plan and other relevant law, regulation, and policy.

Wildlife

The project area contains dispersal and foraging (suitable) habitat for northern spotted owls (NSO), and NSO designated critical habitat. The anticipated effects determination is **Not Likely to Adversely Affect (NLAA)** NSO and NSO critical habitat. This is because proposed activities would maintain all foraging and dispersal habitat and no treatments would occur in the single historic nest patch in the project area. Also, project design criteria (PDC) would protect NSO and NSO habitat. The analysis is anticipated to reveal no extraordinary circumstances that would preclude use of this Categorical Exclusion. Gray wolves may travel through the project area but there are no known den or rendezvous sites within the project boundary. Project design criteria are included to protect these sites if found. Proposed activities are **Not Likely to Adversely Affect (NLAA)** Gray wolves and the analysis is anticipated to reveal no extraordinary circumstances that would preclude use of this Categorical Exclusion. Wildlife R6 sensitive species include the Dalles sideband, White-headed woodpecker, and Lewis's woodpecker. The Dalles sideband is also a Survey and Manage species. Because of project design features, proposed activities **may impact individuals but will not likely contribute to a trend towards federal listing or cause a loss of viability of the population or species (MIIH)**.

Fish and aquatic fauna

There are no federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat for aquatic species in the project area. Aquatic R6 sensitive species include Rainbow/interior redband trout and Cope's giant salamander. Survey and Manage species include the Basalt juga. Because of project design features, proposed activities **may impact individuals or habitat but will not likely contribute to a trend towards Federal listing or loss of viability to the population or species (MIIH)**.

Botany

There are no federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat for botanical species in the project area. Botanical R6 sensitive species include Nevius' onion. There are no known sites for Survey and Manage species. Because of project design criteria, the proposed activities **may impact individuals or habitat but will not likely contribute to a trend towards Federal listing or loss of viability to the population or species (MIIH)**.

Anticipated Analysis

Based on this preliminary analysis, I have determined this project will likely fall within a category of action that is excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement. Specifically, this project meets the requirements of Section 603 of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (16 U.S.C.6591b). An insect and disease project may be categorically excluded under this authority in a project that is designed to reduce the risk or extent of, or increase the resilience to, insect or disease infestation (HFRA, Sections 602(d) and 603(a)). If the analysis process determines that there are no extenuating circumstances that would preclude the use of this categorical exclusion, the project would adhere to the specifications of that authority.

How to Comment

The purpose of this letter is to invite your participation during our public scoping process. Any

comments you may have at this stage of project development are welcome. In particular, if you have information you feel that I may not be aware of, or have concerns regarding this proposed action, please participate in this process. Comments received by **March 8, 2023** will help to inform the environmental analysis and decision-making process.

Project information including this letter and appendices can be found on the [Gate Insect and Disease project website](#)¹. Please submit your comments using this website by clicking on the link titled "[Comment/Object on Project](#)"². If you are unable to submit comments electronically, please send them to: Gate Insect and Disease Project, c/o Ashley Popham, Barlow Ranger District, 780 NE Court Street, Dufur, OR, 97021.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will become part of the public record for this proposed action and may be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, anonymous comments will not provide the agency with the ability to provide the respondent with subsequent environmental documents nor will it provide the respondent with standing to participate in subsequent administrative judicial review.

Additionally, pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27(d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that, under the FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and where the requester is denied; the agency will return the submission and notify the requestor that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address within seven days.

Additional Information and Project Contact

For questions, please contact Lisa Garrigues, Silviculturist at 541-467-5127 or lisa.garrigues@usda.gov or Ashley Popham, NEPA Planner at 541-340-4073 or ashley.popham@usda.gov. I can be contacted at 541-980-2600 or kameron.sam@usda.gov.

Sincerely,

ACTING FOR KAMERON C. SAM
District Ranger

¹ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=62944>

² <https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public//CommentInput?Project=62944>