



DECISION MEMO



SPORTSMAN'S PARK HAZARDOUS FUELS REDUCTION PROJECT

USDA Forest Service, Mt. Hood National Forest
Barlow Ranger District
Wasco County, Oregon

LOCATION

The location of the proposed action is approximately 15 air miles south of Dufur, Oregon, and six air miles west of Wamic, Oregon, and is located around the community of Sportsman's Park. The legal description for the project area is: T 4 S, R. 11 E, Sections 13, 14, 15, 22, 23, and 26. The proposed action is within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) for Sportsman's Park. Enclosure 1 displays the location of the proposed action.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of this proposal is to reduce the hazardous fuels around the community of Sportsman's Park. The proposed activities would reduce the risk of stand-replacing wildfire, improve community wildfire protection, and move the landscape toward more sustainable conditions. Specific management objectives and the purpose and need of the project are to:

- Protect homes in the community of Sportsman's Park.
- Reduce hazardous fuel loadings and fuel ladders to reduce fire behavior on National Forest System lands adjacent to the community of Sportsman's Park.
- Change the existing fire condition class around Sportsman's Park to a more historical condition.

PROPOSED ACTION

The Barlow Ranger District proposes to reduce hazardous fuels with mechanical treatments on 905 acres and underburn approximately 1521 acres. The primary purpose of all the activities is hazardous fuels reduction. The mechanical treatment methods would consist of tree thinning from below including the sale of vegetative material, machine piling, hand thinning, pruning by hand, mastication by machine, and manual brush removal. A total of 905 acres would be treated by mechanical means, including approximately 60 acres of the first time underburn area. A

maintenance underburning of Unit 19, (East Gobbler Underburn, burned in 1996) would treat 465 acres. An additional 281 acres would be underburned for the first time, including approximately 30 acres of riparian reserve along Rock Creek. See Table 1 for a break down of unit numbers, acres of treatment and treatment types.

Treatment would include riparian areas in Rock Creek and Wildcat Creek. Rock Creek Campground would be treated. Units would receive more than one type of treatment, with all units except Rock Creek Campground (11 acres) and approximately 59 acres of Rock Creek Riparian Area, being underburned.

Thinning typically removes trees of low vigor, poor form, or those that are competing with larger, more dominant trees. Thinning from below for the purpose of hazardous fuels reduction means that smaller-diameter trees growing in lower crown positions would be removed, leaving more space around the remaining trees. To further reduce fuel loadings, trees will be selected for removal if their spacing facilitates the spread of a crown fire or tree form contributes to the initiation of a crown fire (low growing tree branches over brush, which if burned, would burn up into the crown of the tree). Trees heavily infected with dwarf mistletoe will also be removed, as they contribute to ladder fuels and torching. Tall brush, which may contribute to the initiation of a crown fire, would be reduced. Activity fuels would be treated by piling and burning. These stands would be set up for future underburning. Fuels reduction activities are planned to occur over a one to five year period to allow adequate time for contract work to be performed, and to allow enough windows of the proper weather and fuel conditions to conduct underburning.

Underburning with pretreatment would occur on approximately 281 acres. These stands would have small diameter, non-commercial ladder fuels pre-treated (cut) where needed. A 500-foot wide pretreatment area is planned along FDR 4800. A maintenance underburn is also planned for Unit 19, the existing East Gobbler Underburn (1996). These 465 acres of previous underburn would be scheduled for a maintenance underburn in three to five years.

Approximately 97 acres of the Rocky Burn would have the ponderosa pine and oak thinned, and the brush masticated down to a height of six inches. Wildcat Creek, an intermediate tributary to Rock Creek Reservoir, flows through this treatment area. This riparian area would not be entered with equipment. Pruning, thinning and brush removal would be done by hand. Approximately five acres adjacent to Rock Creek would be treated with a commercial thin, and the logs line-pulled to the top of the unit.

All tree removal would be done with a tractor-based system. Activity fuels treatments would include a combination of machine piling, hand piling, masticating, and burning. The stands proposed for thinning would average 40 to 60 trees per acre after treatment. Pruning the lower branches of trees along the entrance to Sportsman's Park will occur after the thinning activity to reduce ladder fuels. Stocking levels would move closer to historical levels for dry forest types.

A summary of these treatment methods and activities is listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Hazardous Fuels Reduction Treatments in Sportsman's Park

| Unit # | Acres | | | Treatment Methods | Special Considerations | Activity Fuels Treatment |
|----------------------|-------|------------|------------|--|--|---|
| | Total | Mechanical | Under burn | | | |
| 1, 2, 3, 9, 11, & 12 | 200 | 200 | 200 | Thin to 40-50 Trees per Acre (TPA) , prune ladder fuels along entrance, create a fuels break around the boundary. Set up for future underburning. | Tractor yard, do entrance work and fuels break around park by hand, Protect Rock Creek Guard station | Limb remaining trees up to 6 to 8 feet, pile activity fuels, burn when dry, prep to underburn, hand treat 100' each side of 4820200 & around SP, thin < 4"dbh, limb pile fuels, prep for future underburn |
| 4, 5, 6, 7, & 8, | 355 | 355 | 355 | Thin to 60 to 70 TPA, thin from below, set up for future underburning. | Tractor Yard | Pile and burn slash and natural fuels Prep for future underburn. |
| 10 | 11 | 11 | -0- | Variable density thinning | Rock Creek Campground | Whole tree yard, pile slash near campground for camper use. |
| 13 | 68 | 68 | 68 | Thin oaks, | Emphasize pine | Utilize oaks for firewood, underburn |
| 14 | 97 | 97 | 97 | Masticate brush with mechanical method, hand treat riparian area, hand treat adjacent to park, PCT trees | No equipment in Riparian Area | Hand treat 100' around SP, limb remaining trees, pile activity slash, burn |
| 15 | 89 | 89 | 30 | Treat approximately 5 acres between dam and FDR 4800 with Unit 1, line pull, Treat riparian area by hand, maintain shading along creek, prune ladder fuel. | No equipment in 55 ft no-cut buffer, Line pull, Protect irrigation ditch & pipe | Thin trees < 4"dbh , prune larger trees, Let underburn creep into Riparian reserve, do not light in Riparian reserve. |
| 16 & 17 | 281 | 60 | 281 | Under burn, pre-treat small diameter, non-commercial ladder fuels where needed. | Fire lines along private land boundaries, Rock Creek Work center | Pile slash as needed, prep for underburn, Prune fuels around Rock Creek Work center, pre-treat a 500-foot strip along 4800 road. |
| 18 | 25 | 25 | 25 | Thin to approx. 40 TPA. Set up for future underburn. | Whole tree yard | Whole tree yard. Underburn after treatment |
| 19 | 465 | -0- | 465 | Maintenance underburn of Gobbler Underburn (1996) | | Low intensity maintenance type burn, use existing roads for lines. Exclude the old Hazel II unit |
| | 1591 | 905 | 1521 | Total Acres | | |

TPA == Trees per Acre. DBH ==diameter at breast height. PCT ==Pre-commercial Thin * Acreages are approximate based on geographic information system mapping. Actual on-the-ground layout may vary slightly.

This area is heavily roaded from past forest management activities and recreation uses. It is not anticipated that any new temporary roads would be needed. Tree removal activities would make use of existing roads and skid trails.

DECISION

I have decided to approve the proposed action, along with the design criteria and mitigation measures described in this document. The rationale for my decision is based on: 1) the proposed action fully meeting the purpose and need of reducing the hazardous fuels around Sportsman Park. 2) the project's consistency with regulatory framework, 3) on-the-ground review and discussion with district resource specialists, 4) review of the Biological Assessment (BA) and Biological Evaluation (BE) and 5) moving 80% of the treatment area from a Condition Class 3 towards a historical Condition Class 1. The Rocky Burn is currently in a Condition Class 2 and will move towards a Condition Class 1.

SCOPING AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The Forest Service participated in collaboration meetings to identify issues and concerns of the local population. Collaboration meetings were held on February 2, March 5, April 2 and April 30, 2005. Discussion between those attending the collaboration meetings resulted in the design of the proposed action to meet concerns raised. I participated in these meetings and feel the resulting proposed action reflects the concerns identified during this process. Notes of these meetings, as well as attendance lists can be found in the project file. Maps were sent to participants along with notes of all four meetings. This project also appeared in the Winter 2004 and Spring 2005 Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA). No comments were received from these SOPA listings.

As a result of the first letter asking for participants, one letter was received, supporting thinning and the use of fire in ponderosa pine/oak savannah ecosystems.

Another letter was received after the first collaborative meeting, addressing the urban/rural interface. This letter stated the Forest Service has a duty to protect the communities of Sportsman's Park, Pine Hollow and Wamic from catastrophic wildfire on federal land /or state land escaping into the urban fringe between Badger Creek and White River in South Wasco County.

REASONS FOR CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations at 40 CFR 1507.3 provide that agencies may, after notice and comment, adopt categories of actions that do not normally have significant impacts on the human environment and that do not require preparation of an environmental assessment (EA) or an environmental impact statement (EIS). It is my determination that this action may be categorically excluded from documentation in an EA or EIS as it is within Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15, Section 31.2, Category 10.

Category 10 was approved in July of 2003 and allows up to 1,000 acres of hazardous fuels reduction activities by mechanical methods, and allows up to 4,500 acres for hazardous fuels reduction activities using fire. This Category can be used in wildland-urban interface areas or in Condition Classes 2 or 3 in Fire Regime Groups I, II, or III, which lie outside the wildland urban interface. This category allows activities including the use of prescribed fire and mechanical methods such as crushing, piling, thinning, pruning, cutting, chipping, mulching and mowing. This category allows the sale of vegetative material if the primary purpose of the activity is hazardous fuels reduction. This category applies to activities identified through a collaborative framework. The Sportsman Park proposal meets all of these criteria because:

1. The project area is located in the Sportsman Park WUI.
2. The proposed treatments are within the allowable acreages and consist of allowable fuel reduction activities.

3. The primary purpose of the tree removal activities is for hazardous fuel reduction.
4. The proposal was identified thru a collaborative framework with the local community.

EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES

After review of the Biological Analysis (BA), Biological Evaluation (BE), documents in the project file, and specialist reports, I have there are no extraordinary circumstances that indicate a presence of possible significant effects for the following reasons.

- a. **Federally listed threatened or endangered species or their designated critical or essential habitat.** Findings in the Wildlife BA show implementation of the proposed action would have *no effect* on bald eagles or Canada lynx and *is not likely to adversely affect* the Northern spotted owl. There is no suitable nesting, roosting, or foraging habitat in the treatment areas and it is unlikely that spotted owls would be using this area.

There are no federally endangered, threatened or proposed threatened fish species that reside in streams in or near the WUI project area. None of the project area is designated as bull trout critical habitat, proposed steelhead or chinook critical habitat, or considered as essential fish habitat for chinook and Coho salmon.

- b. **Species proposed for federal listing or proposed critical habitat or Forest Service sensitive species.** There would be **no impact** to the wolverine, as no habitat would be altered. There would be a **may impact individuals but not likely to cause a trend to federal listing or loss of viability** for the Dalles sideband and Oregon slender salamanders. Neither of these species was found in the area surveyed in 2001 for the East Gobbler Underburn (1996), a portion of the proposed project. The proposed project area would be managed long term for reducing fire risk to the Sportsman's Park WUI area. Both species depend on down woody material for survival and it is not likely that this proposed project area would be suitable habitat for either species in the future, because frequent (5-10 year) fuels treatment would continue to occur.

There would be a **May Impact Individuals and Individuals Habitat but not likely to cause a trend to federal listing or loss of viability** determination on Sensitive aquatic species interior redband trout, or Columbia dusky snails due to short-term turbidity.

There are no sensitive plant species or known habitats in the proposed project area.

- c. **Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds.** The project area is not located in, or will not affect, any floodplain or wetland. There are no municipal watersheds within the planning area.

- d. **Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas.** The proposed harvest sites are not located within any of the congressionally designated areas or in proposed wilderness areas.
- e. **Inventoried roadless areas.** The proposed harvest site is not located within any inventoried roadless areas.
- f. **Research Natural Areas.** Candidate sites for Research Natural Areas are part of MA A3 as defined in the Forest Plan (pages Four-147 to Four-150). The proposed area does not include land designated as MA A3.
- g. **American Indian and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas.** A cultural resource overview and field survey was completed for this project. Several Heritage Resource sites were located within the area proposed for treatment. There would be **no effect** to heritage resources from this project. For some sites, it will be acceptable to burn through them. Other sites will be avoided for thinning. Refer to the Heritage section in the Project File.

In addition to the above, I have considered the proposed Swisher Underburn, an adjacent underburning categorical exclusion, in the analysis for this project. These projects fit within the parameters of their appropriate CE categories and no extraordinary circumstances have been identified. This information is located in the project file and is available upon request. Monitoring of the effects of past underburn and harvest operations within the project subunit can be found at the Barlow Ranger District Office.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

National Historic Preservation Act: No cultural resources would be adversely affected by the proposed action. Cultural resources have been surveyed and site-specific mitigation has been applied. If further sites are identified during project implementation, activity would cease and the District Archaeologist would be consulted.

Endangered Species Act: The District Wildlife Biologist evaluated the proposed action with regard to the Endangered Species Act as documented in the BA. The Biological Analysis found implementation of the proposed action would have *no effect* on the bald eagle, Canada lynx, or bull trout and *may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect*, the Northern spotted owl. The District Fish Biologist evaluated the proposed action with regard to the Endangered Species Act as documented in the BE. The BE found implementation of the proposed action would have *no effect* on the Middle Columbia River steelhead trout or essential habitat for Chinook and Coho salmon

National Forest Management Act Requirements for Vegetation Manipulation: The National Forest Management Act and accompanying regulations require that several specific findings be documented at the project level. All proposals that involve vegetation manipulation of tree cover for any purpose must comply with the requirements found in 36 CFR (Code of Federal Regulations) 219.27(b). The proposed activity complies with NFMA (refer to the

Consistency with NFMA document in the Vegetation Section of the project file). A Noxious Weed Assessment was completed and the project has a MODERATE to LOW risk of introducing or spreading know populations of noxious weeds. Weed control measures are identified under the mitigation section of this document.

Clean Water Act and State Water Quality Laws: The District fisheries biologist has determined that this project complies with the Clean Water Act, state water quality laws, and would protect beneficial uses. Rock Creek is listed on the Oregon Department of Water Quality 303(d) list for both temperature and sedimentation. With design features and BMP's in place, water quality would be maintained throughout implementation of this project.

Environmental Justice: I assessed the proposed action to determine whether it would disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations, in accordance with Executive Order 12898. No impacts to minority or low-income populations were identified during scoping or the effects analysis.

Migratory Bird Treaty Act: I find that there are no known substantial losses of migratory bird habitat expected from the implementation of this proposal (refer to the BE in the Wildlife Section of the project file). For other migratory birds that may use the project area, the proposed action **will not cause a trend toward federal listing or loss of population viability** within the subunit.

Other Laws or Requirements: The proposed action is consistent with all other Federal, State, or local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment and cultural resources.

CONSISTENCY WITH REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

The proposed activity is within Management Area-B10 (Deer and Elk Winter Range). The goal of this MA is to provide high quality deer and elk habitat for use during most winters, while maintaining a healthy forest condition through a variety of timber management practices and to provide dispersed summer and developed recreation opportunities. Vegetation management activities are used to create and maintain a long-term desired landscape character. The proposal will remove a portion of the ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir and oak trees, thin understory trees, masticate brush, and hand thin, prune and brush in riparian areas.

Forest Development Road 4800 is classified as B2 (Scenic Viewshed). The Visual Quality Objective for this road is Partial Retention in the foreground, and Modification in the middle and background. The goal in this management area is to provide attractive, visually appealing forest scenery with a wide variety of natural appearing landscape features. The proposal will allow for a more open, natural appearing landscape in this vegetation type. This proposal is consistent with the Mt. Hood National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan.

DESIGN CRITERIA AND/OR MITIGATION

Design features are used to minimize the environmental impacts of the proposed actions. Included are regional and Mt. Hood NF standards, guidelines and policies designed to address resource management concerns.

Vegetation:

- Allow fire to burn in a mosaic pattern to allow another generation of ponderosa pine to become established as the overstory ages.
- Remove needle buildup around residual pines before prescribed fire is applied.

Heritage Resources:

- If additional heritage sites are discovered during implementation, provisions to ensure heritage resource protection would be enacted.

| Unit Numbers | Sites Identified | Mitigation |
|---------------------------------|------------------|---|
| 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, &13 | Yes | Avoid for thinning, can burn over |
| | Yes | Avoid for burning, hand line or wet line OK |
| 12 & 18 | Yes | Avoid for thinning and burning |
| 16 & 17 | Yes | Avoid for thinning, can burn over |

Soils:

- Oregon State Best Management Practices and Soil and Water Conservation Practices would be applied to all proposed harvest and fuel reduction activities. A list of practices that would be applied for this project is contained in the Water/Soils Section of the project file. Application of BMPs would follow the guidance in the Soil and Water Conservation Practices Handbook (Forest Service Handbook 2509.22).
- Existing skid trails would be used where practical.
- In order to protect the soil resource, operations would occur on sufficiently dry, frozen, or snow-covered soils.

Noxious Weeds:

- All tree removal and road maintenance equipment would be cleaned of dirt and plant parts prior to entering the sale area.
- All skid trails and landings would be seeded with certified weed-free seed following treatment if soil disturbance occurs.
- Continue to monitor/survey project area for new invader weed species after the project.

Recreation and Visuals:

- No landing piles would be placed along Road 48 and 4820.

Wildlife:

- Access should be restricted between December 1 and April 1 to reduce interaction with wintering deer and elk.
- Working with variations in stand structure and topography, areas of hiding cover would be left within the unit.

Fisheries:

- In the event that additional seeps, springs or wet areas are found, consult with fisheries or watershed personnel before treatment occurs.
- Pruned tree limbs in all riparian reserves should be hand piled.

Rock Creek:

- Establish a 55-foot no-cut buffer along both sides to maintain existing stream shading and water temperatures.
- There will be no line pull across the open irrigation ditch downstream of Forest Development Road (FDR) 4800.

Wildcat Creek:

- Thin valley bottom by hand
- Pile and burn slash outside the valley bottom where possible. No piles burned within 50 feet of the creek channel.
- Excess slash and small trees can be placed in Wildcat Creek channel, under the direction of a fish biologist or hydrologist.
- Establish a 25-foot no thin buffer along both sides of the wet area/seep originating from the Sportsman's Park water storage tank. Pruning by hand up to the edge of the wet area is acceptable. Burn slash at least 50 feet from the wet area.

Gate Creek Irrigation Ditch & Threemile Creek Lateral Diversion Ditch #1:

- Establish a 25-foot no-cut buffer along either side of the ditches to maintain shade and water temperature.
- No skidding or log pulling across the ditch.

Rock Creek Reservoir:

- Where possible, directionally fall trees away from the reservoir.

Transportation:

- Restrict commercial haul to the normal operating season (BMP).
- Rehabilitate temporary roads and skid trails, which includes ripping, re-vegetation, and water barring as necessary (BMP).
- Time construction activities to minimize erosion. (BMP)
- Control surface road drainage to disperse runoff and minimize erosion and sediment from the road. (BMP)
- Traffic Control Plans will be in place in advance of any activity.

APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to CFR 215.12 (f). Detailed records of this environmental analysis are available for public review at the Barlow Ranger District.

IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation of the project may begin immediately after the signing of this document given satisfactory weather and road conditions.

CONTACT PERSON

For further information about this decision, please contact Becky Nelson at the Barlow Ranger District, 780 N.E. Court Street, Dufur, OR, 97021, or phone; 541-467-2291.

SIGNATURE OF DECIDING OFFICER

S/s Michael J. Hernandez

Michael J. Hernandez
District Ranger

Date June 23, 2005

Enclosure

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Enclosure 1