DECISION NOTICE
and
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

BEAR KNOLL THINNING

USDA FOREST SERVICE
MT. HOOD NATIONAL FOREST
HOOD RIVER RANGER DISTRICT
WASCO COUNTY, OREGON

An Environmental Assessment (EA) has been prepared for the Bear Knoll Thinning project. This area is located in T4S, R9E; T5S, R9E; Willamette Meridian. The project area is located in the White River Watershed.

The purpose of this initiative is to thin stands that are over-stocked and growing slowly, to create productive forest stands, and to provide forest products consistent with the Northwest Forest Plan goal of helping to maintain the stability of local and regional economies, now and in the future. This action is needed, because the project area contains stands of 70-95 year old trees that are growing slowly due to the effects of over-crowding, (400-600 trees per acre). If no action were taken, these stands would continue to grow slowly and would not contribute to a sustainable supply of forest products. In addition, there is a need to reduce open road density and a need to provide for wildlife security during the summer months.

DECISION
I have decided to select Alternative II, with modifications.

Alternative II
As detailed in the EA, Alternative II proposes to thin 531 acres within the Bear Knoll planning area (EA p. 22). Stands proposed for thinning consist primarily of overcrowded mid seral blocks that average 70-95 years of age. The current stands range from 120-400 square feet of basal area. This alternative would reduce the basal area to an average range of 120-160 square feet, resulting in stands with variable density. Preferred species, such as Douglas-fir, larch, and noble fir, would be left where they are present in the stands. Existing remnant trees (trees remaining after a disturbance) would be left on-site.

Snags would be left at the rate of a minimum of four per acre. Down woody debris would be retained in the treated stands at 240-500 lineal feet per acre and 3-10 % ground cover per acre. Under the proposed action, a ground based logging system would be used. Fuels reduction of logging slash would be accomplished by machine piling and burning. No riparian reserves would be entered.

The action proposes to temporarily open 3.62 miles of currently restricted-use road (closed with a gate), put 1.16 miles of currently decommissioned roads back on the Forest Service road system. (This may require some pre-haul maintenance to minor reconstruction.) and utilize 1.46 miles of temporary road (using existing disturbed ground such as skid trails). After harvest, temporary roads would be partially obliterated, which includes ripping, re-contouring, re-

vegetating and constructing water bars as needed. Currently restricted-use roads that would be opened for the timber harvest would be re-closed with the existing gate after harvest activities. Additionally, 4.85 miles of roads would be closed with a heavy duty, seasonal gate that would be open for winter recreation when snow is present and 0.62 miles would be partially obliterated. The current open road density is 3.32 miles/mile ^{2}. The resultant open road density would be 2.32 mi/mi^2.

Although the silviculture resource report does not use the term "variable density thinning", the proposal does include elements that would result in variability in the stands. Diversity and variability will be introduced in several ways: 1) Leave tree spacing will vary within units and between units, 2) Leave trees will include minor species, 3) Leave trees will include some trees with the elements of wood decay, 4) Leave trees will include some live trees where their crowns touch certain key snags, 5) Most snags and existing large down logs will be retained.

Best Management Practices (BMPs) and Design Criteria detailed on pages 28-31 of the EA are included with this decision. No significant impacts were found that would require any mitigation or further design criteria. Design criteria have been incorporated into the EA to help retain snags (EA p.29) but it is likely that some snags would have to be felled for safety reasons. Past experience indicates that the stands are expected to meet the snag Standard and Guideline from the Forest Plan. The DecAID advisor is a planning tool for snags and down logs that was considered in the development of design criteria and evaluation of effects (EA p. 64). One of the wildlife design features results in leaving live trees with the elements of wood decay which would provide habitat in the interim if there are no snags available. When these trees (those with elements of wood decay) die they would provide snags that would benefit snag dependent species. The project will retain all existing down logs but they are not necessarily at the desired level for quantity, size or decomposition class.

Modifications to Alternative II

I am selecting Alternative II, with modifications. For the reasons described below, I have decided to reduce the amount harvested in Alternative II from 531 acres to approximately 509 acres. I have decided to drop about 22 acres from various stands in response to further field verification and public concerns.

After further field verification with a logging systems specialist, it was determined that small portions of stands 164, 167, and 177 have slopes that exceed 30 percent. I have decided to drop approximately 9 acres from these stands, where it is unsuitable for a ground-based logging system.

In addition, I have decided to drop approximately 2 acres from the northwest corner of stand 174. On a field trip to the area, a representative from the Oregon Natural Resources Council (ONRC) expressed concern that this portion was unlike other stands proposed for harvest and questioned the need to enter this area. The tree characteristics of these two acres are more representative of larger, older trees than the rest of the stand, and the thinning prescription would not be applicable for that portion of the stand.

Similarly, I also am dropping all of stands 217 (3 acres) and 220 (8 acres), for a total of 11 acres due to concern expressed by ONRC. Portions of these stands are similar in characteristics to the northwest corner of stand 174, as described previously. Removing those

portions of the stands with older characteristics has reduced the commercial viability of harvesting the remainder of the stands. In addition to the change in harvested acres, removing these stands also eliminates 0.31 miles of road reconstruction that would have been needed in order to use Forest Development Road 2610026 as a haul route.

RATIONALE

I have chosen Alternative II over Alternative III because Alternative II would produce 4.4 MMBF of timber (2 million more board feet than Alternative III), better meeting the purpose and need of providing wood fiber for the local and regional economies. Alternative II treats 531 acres, while Alternative III would treat 289 acres. Alternative II would treat an additional 242 acres and improve the health and vigor in those stands. Alternative II also closes an additional 4.85 miles of roads, which would be closed with a heavy duty, seasonal gate that would be open seasonally for winter recreation.

The analysis shows that proposed stands are overstocked and experiencing slowing of growth (EA p. 53, 54). After thinning, these stands will have the spacing they need to grow, and will be healthier. Harvest in the matrix is appropriate because it enhances health and growth while providing forest products consistent with the Northwest Forest Plan goal of helping to maintain the stability of local and regional economies now and in the future (EA p. 10-12; 14, 15). The Forest Plan contains goals for these stands to maintain health and to provide wood fiber (EA, p. 8, 10, 14, 15; Forest Plan page Four-55).

Alternative II will accelerate the growth and size of trees and would eventually provide large snags and down logs much sooner than would be expected with the no-action alternative. By treating more acres, it would eventually provide more snags and down logs than Alternative III.

Other Alternatives Considered

Alternative I This is the no-action alternative. It was not selected because it would not provide any of the benefits described in the purpose and need, and it would not provide any wood fiber consistent with the Northwest Forest Plan goal of maintaining the stability of local and regional economies. If no action is taken, stands would become overcrowded resulting in trees with reduced vigor and increased mortality. Trees would stagnate and stay relatively small. The complete description of this Alternative is on page 22 of the EA.

Alternative III This alternative proposes to harvest 2.4 million board feet. It does not propose harvest in stands within the B2 (scenic viewshed) land allocation. Similar to Alternative II, this alternative does not construct any additional roads. It also address the concern for ineffective road closures by proposing to partially obliterate temporary roads, which includes ripping, re-contouring, re-vegetating and constructing water bars as needed after completion of the project. The complete description of this Alternative is on page 25-27 of the EA. It was not selected because it would not provide the benefits described in the purpose and need on as many acres as Alternative II. It would not provide as much wood fiber to the local and regional economies as Alternative II. In addition, Alternative III was not selected because it would not close any roads to increase wildlife security.

Other Alternatives Considered But Not Fully Developed

Combination of Thinning and Regeneration Treatments

The Bear Knoll Thinning project was first proposed to the public in 1998 as part of a larger project within the Bear Knoll planning area. This larger proposal included an alternative to treat 217 acres with regeneration harvest. Regeneration harvest is currently controversial and based on public feedback, I chose not to move forward with it at this time. The regeneration harvest stands identified in scoping are not proposed in this project, nor are they identified as future planning efforts.

Restoration Only Alternative

Some of the comments received from the public indicated they were interested in seeing a restoration alternative, where actions within the Bear Knoll planning area would be limited to projects that restore natural forest conditions and do not include commercial logging. This alternative was not analyzed because it did not meet the purpose and need to provide wood fiber for the local and regional economies, and did not decrease overcrowding in stands that were identified as needing to have competition reduced.

Helicopter Logging Alternative

Alternatives II and III were initially analyzed for helicopter logging. This alternative focused on using helicopters to log the area, rather than a ground based system. Due to the cost of the helicopter logging, neither alternative was determined to be economically feasible with a helicopter logging system. There is already a road system in place, yet no suitable helicopter landing. To avoid impacts to soils in both action alternatives, logging operations were restricted to existing roads and temporary roads were located on previously disturbed ground.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (40 CFR 1508.27)

Based on the site-specific environmental analysis documented in the EA and the comments received from the public, I have determined that this is not a major Federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment; therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement is not needed. This determination is based on the design of the selected alternative and the following factors:

1. Adverse and beneficial impacts have been assessed and found to be not significant. The analysis considered not only the direct and indirect effects of the projects but also their contribution to cumulative effects. Past, present and foreseeable future actions have been included in the analysis (EA p. 99-117). The analysis considered the proposed actions with BMPs and design criteria. The EA elaborates on cumulative impacts related to resources such as water quality, range, soils and wildlife. No significant cumulative or secondary effects were identified.

2. The project will not affect public health or safety (EA p. 119). Potential conflicts between log hauling and public traffic on major access routes are minimized by appropriate advisory signing and/or traffic control. The effects to recreational use in the area are disclosed in the EA on page 72-74, 113, 114.

3. There will be no effect to Wild and Scenic Rivers and State Scenic Waterways, wetlands, wilderness areas, research natural areas or any other areas with unique geographic

characteristics. The area is not affected by the recent wilderness proposal. There are no inventoried roadless areas within the project boundaries. No adverse effects are expected to riparian areas, as riparian areas were excluded from treatment (EA p. 69, 91, 108, 110, 120).

4. The effects of this project are not likely to be highly controversial. The analysis completed and comments received did not identify any significant controversy or disagreement concerning effects of the decision on the quality of the human environment (EA p.123, 124, 16-19; Response to Comments, Appendix A).

5. The effects of this project are not highly uncertain, and do not involve unique, or unknown risks. The Mt. Hood National Forest has implemented similar thinning projects.

6. This action will not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects because other similar actions have occurred in the past. The decision implements the Mt. Hood Forest Plan, as amended (EA, p.9, 10).

7. The activities are not connected to any other action or part of a larger action, and therefore the decision will not result in any known cumulatively significant impacts on the environment (EA, Cumulative Effects Section, p. 99-117).

8. Field surveys have been conducted for heritage resources. The heritage resource report concludes that there will be no effect to any properties on or eligible to the National Register of Historic Places (Heritage Resource Report 01/06/03). Documentation was forwarded to the State Historic Preservation Office (EA, p. 97, 98).

9. The proposed action does not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or critical habitat as determined by the Endangered Species Act of 1973. There is no bald eagle or Canada lynx habitat in the planning area. The area is not identified as a critical habitat unit (EA, p.49-52, 57-60, 109, and 110).

   Formal consultation with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service concerning the northern spotted owl has been completed for this project. The Biological Opinion written by U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and dated March 29, 2005 concluded that this project may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect. Additional mitigation for the LSRs and unsurveyed suitable habitat will be a seasonal restriction (March 1-July 15) on all harvest operations (including mechanical noxious weed control) within 65 yards (chainsaw noise) of the stands (Alternative 2 = 146, 160, 164, 225) (Alternative 3 = 160, 164, 211) associated with these LSRs (Design Criteria, Wildlife #5, EA, p. 29).

   I have considered the new information that has been recently published about northern spotted owls in the *Status and Trends in Demography of Northern Spotted Owls* (Foresman et.al., 2004). The new information would not lead to a change in the effects determination and no additional analysis is needed for this project (EA, p. 60, 111).

   Informal consultation with NOAA Fisheries was not necessary as there were no threatened or endangered anadromous fish or Essential Fish Habitat identified in this project. Mid-Columbia River steelhead trout and Columbia River bull trout are not

present in the planning area. A no effect determination is warranted to chinook and coho essential habitat. (EA, p. 48-52).

There are no threatened or endangered plant species in the planning area (EA, p. 76, 77).

10. The project does not threaten a violation of any Federal, State, or local law. The project complies with Executive Order 12898 regarding environmental justice (EA, p. 118). No disproportionately high adverse human or environmental effects on minorities and/or low-income populations were identified during the analysis and public information process (EA, p. 118-121).

OTHER FINDINGS AND REQUIRED LAWS AND REGULATIONS

The proposed action is consistent with Management Area goals, desired future conditions, and standards and guidelines identified in the Mt. Hood National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended (Forest Plan).

It is consistent with **late-successional reserve** (LSR) objectives. The project is not in an LSR or any 100-acre LSRs. There are two 100-acre LSRs outside of the planning area that have been considered in the analysis (EA, p. 11, 13, 58-60, 110, 113).

There will be no significant adverse effects to **sensitive species.** The project will not jeopardize the continued existence of any listed aquatic species nor will it cause a trend to federal listing or loss of viability for any proposed or sensitive species. A no impact determination is warranted to resident interior Redband trout, and Columbia duskysnail (EA, p. 51). For wildlife species, presence has not been confirmed for Pacific fishers. The analysis determined that there would be no impact to Columbia oregonium, Larch Mt. Salamander or Oregon Slender salamander. The analysis concluded that for wolverines the decision may impact individuals but would not likely cause a trend towards federal listing of the species (EA, p.62, 63). Potential suitable habitat for plant species *Botrychium minganense, Botrychium montanum, and Shistostega pennata* has been found only in the riparian reserves. Activities will not include entering riparian reserves, therefore the project has a no impact determination (EA, p. 75, 76).

I have considered the effects to **management indicator species** (MIS) as disclosed in the EA (EA, p. 49 and 112, 113). Wildlife MIS include mule/blacktailed deer, Rocky Mountain elk, pine marten, pileated woodpecker, western gray squirrel, wild turkey and snag and down log associated species, and fisheries include all salmonids.

I have considered the relevant information from the White River Watershed Analyses. The project is consistent with the **Aquatic Conservation Strategy** objectives. I have also considered the existing condition of riparian reserves, including the important physical and biological components of the fifth-field watersheds and the effects to riparian resources. I find that Alternative II is consistent with the recommendations of the watershed analyses, is consistent with riparian reserve standards and guidelines, and will contribute to maintaining or restoring the fifth-field watersheds over the long term (EA, p. 11).

The FSEIS to Remove or Modify the Survey and Manage Mitigation Measure Standards and Guidelines was issued in 2004. The Record of Decision moved many species from the requirements of the **Survey and Manage** Standards and Guidelines to sensitive species. However, it also indicated that projects still in the planning stage that had begun or completed surveys using the Survey and Manage Standards and Guidelines could proceed without conducting a new sensitive species analysis. Surveys have been competed to the Survey and Manage protocol and no species were found that require the management of known sites (EA, p .12).

It is consistent with standards for deer and elk management, threatened, endangered and sensitive species protection, noxious weeds, hydrology, air quality, heritage resources, scenery, and timber management (EA, deer and elk: 112, 113; TES Species: 51, 62, 63, 75, 76; noxious weeds: 76-79, 115, 116; hydrology: 36-48; air quality: 87-90; heritage resources: 98-100; scenery: 73-75; timber management: 53-56). The Bear Knoll Thinning project is consistent with Forest Plan objectives for snags and down logs. The standard and guideline for snags is FW-215 and the standards and guidelines for down logs are FW-219 through FW-229 (EA, p. 65, 67, 72, 112).

It is consistent with the National Forest Management Act regulations for **vegetative management**. There will be no regulated timber harvest on lands classified as unsuitable for timber production (36 CFR 219.14) and vegetation manipulation is in compliance with 36 CFR 219.27(b), (EA, p. 53-56; and project file).

The Bear Knoll Thinning project is consistent with Forest Plan objectives for long-term **soil productivity**. In many units, ground based yarding will occur on areas where there is existing soil disturbance. Units using ground based logging systems will have temporary roads partially obliterated, which includes ripping, re-contouring, re-vegetation, and construction of water bars as needed. Surface erosion and runoff from old skid trails is not occurring. Even though there was no standard for long-term soil productivity when the original stands were logged, the stands continue to grow well and are projected to continue to grow well after the proposed thinning.

Public Involvement:

A letter describing the initial Bear Knoll project and requesting comments was initially sent out on January 8, 1999. Soon after this initial scoping period, however, other priorities on the Forest arose and the Bear Knoll project was postponed. The interdisciplinary team and deciding official returned to the Bear Knoll project in 2002. Due to the length of time between the original scoping letter and returning to the analysis two years later, a second scoping letter was sent out on March 27, 2002. Approximately 140 responses to the scoping letter were received in the form of letters and postcards. These comments came from private citizen, environmental groups, one federal agency and one recreation user group.

In addition to the scoping letters, the project appeared in the Fall 1998 edition of *Sprouts*, the Mt. Hood National Forest's quarterly Schedule of Proposed Action, and has appeared in subsequent editions since. Comments have been received periodically since the initial scoping period.

There was a field trip to the planning area on July 30, 2001with interested public groups, including members of BARK and the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT). An

additional field trip was conducted on March 9, 2005, in response to a request by BARK and ONRC.

The proposed action and a preliminary analysis were available for a 30-day public comment period that began on December 21, 2004. The preliminary analysis included the need for the proposal, alternatives to the proposed action, and an analysis of environmental consequences. I have considered the substantive comments that were received. The responses to the comments are contained in Appendix A of the EA.

Appeal Rights:
This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to Forest Service regulations at 36 CFR 215. Any individual or organization that submitted substantive comments during the comment period may appeal. Any appeal of this decision must be in writing and fully consistent with the content requirements described in 36 CFR 215.14. The Appeal Deciding Officer is Linda Goodman, Regional Forester. An appeal should be addressed to the Regional Forester at any of the following addresses. Postal: ATTN.: 1570 APPEALS, P.O. Box 3623, Portland, OR 97208-3623; Street location for hand delivery: 333 SW 1st Ave, Portland, OR (office hours: 8-4:30 M-F); fax: 503-808-2255. Appeals can also be filed electronically at: appeals-pacificnorthwest-regional-office@fs.fed.us. Electronic appeals must be submitted as part of the actual e-mail message, or as an attachment in Microsoft Word (.doc), rich text format (.rtf), or portable document format (.pdf) only. E-mails submitted to email addresses other than the one listed above, or in formats other than those listed, or containing viruses, will be rejected. It is the responsibility of the appellant to confirm receipt of appeals submitted by electronic mail.

The appeal, including attachments, must be postmarked or received by the Appeal Deciding Officer within 45 days of the date legal notice of this decision was published in the Oregonian. For further information regarding these appeal procedures, contact the Forest Environmental Coordinator Mike Redmond at 503-668-1776.

Should this project be appealed, the responsible official offers to meet with appellants to attempt to informally resolve the appeal on June 8, 2005 at 2:00pm at the Hood River Ranger District, 6780 Highway 35, Mt. Hood, OR, 97041.

Project Implementation:
Implementation of this decision may occur on, but not before, 5 business days from the close of the 45-day appeal filing period described above. If an appeal is filed, implementation may not occur for 15 days following the date of appeal disposition (36 CFR 215.10).

The EA can be downloaded from the Forest web site at http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/mthood in the Projects & Plans section.

For further information contact Becky Nelson, Hood River Ranger District, 6780 Highway 35; Mt. Hood/Parkdale, OR 97041. Phone: (541) 467-2291 Email: bnelson@fs.fed.us

Recommended By:

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Responsible Official:

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Forest Supervisor

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