

27 Road Fuel Break Project

Briefing Paper

for the

Wasco County Forest Collaborative

May 5, 2023

Purpose and Need

The purpose of the 27 Road Fuel Break project is to reduce the risk of landscape level disturbance by establishing a linear fuel break along National Forest System (NFS) Roads.

Project Location

The project is located on the Barlow Ranger District, Mt. Hood National Forest. The planning area is located along NFS Roads 2700000, 2710000, 2720000, 2730000 and 4421000. The area runs roughly north to south from Fifteenmile Creek to Bonney Crossing Campground. The Badger Creek Wilderness makes up part of the western planning area boundary. Maps are included with this briefing paper.

Background

In 2022, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law established a new categorical exclusion (CE) for forest management activities with a primary purpose of establishing and maintaining linear fuel breaks up to 1,000 feet wide and on treatment areas up to 3,000 acres.

This CE authority is independent of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) and does not amend that Act. At this time the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is not codified in USC yet and is cited as "Public Law No. 117-58, section 40806". This document refers to the CE as the "Fuel Break CE."

This CE differs from earlier, similar CEs. For example, the Wildfire Resilience CE is focused on methods that maximize the retention of old-growth and large trees, to the extent that the trees promote stands that are resilient to insects and disease, and reduce the risk or extent of, or increase the resilience to, wildfires.

Alternatively, the Fuel Break CE is focused on at-risk community protection through establishment of linear fuel breaks. Since the Fuel Break CE is used in conjunction with an existing linear feature, it approaches reducing fire risk differently than the Wildfire Resilience CE.

Requirements for use of the Fuel Break CE

General

This CE applies to the establishment and maintenance of linear fuel breaks which are:

- Up to 1,000 feet in width contiguous with or incorporating existing linear features, such as roads, water infrastructure, transmission and distribution lines, egress corridor, maintenance of existing fuel breaks and/or pipelines of any length on Federal land.

- The fuel break must be located adjacent to or incorporating an existing linear feature, it cannot be established or unattached to a linear feature.
- Intended to reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire on Federal land or catastrophic wildfire for an adjacent at-risk community.

Activities permitted

Mowing or masticating; thinning by manual and mechanical cutting (including commercial and/or non-commercial thinning); piling, yarding, and removal of slash or hazardous fuels; selling of vegetation products, including timber, firewood, biomass, slash, and fence posts; targeted grazing; application of pesticide, biopesticide or herbicide; seeding of native species; controlled burns and broadcast burning; and burning of piles, including jackpot piles.

Locations

Acres treated may not exceed 3,000 acres and shall be located primarily in:

- The wildland-urban interface (WUI) or a public drinking water source area.
- If located outside the wildland-urban interface or a public drinking water source area, an area within Condition Class 2 or 3 in Fire Regime Group I, II, or III that contains very high wildfire hazard potential, or
- an insect or disease area designated by the Secretary as of November 15, 2021.

Project activities may not occur in Wilderness, on Federal land on which the removal of vegetation is prohibited or restricted by Act of Congress, Presidential proclamation (including the applicable implementation plan or regulation); in a wilderness study area; or in an area in which carrying out the activity would be inconsistent with the applicable land management plan or resource management plan.

Roads

- Permanent roads: A project under this section shall not include the establishment of permanent roads.
- Existing roads: The Secretary concerned may carry out necessary maintenance and repairs on existing permanent roads.
- Temporary roads: The Secretary concerned shall decommission any temporary road constructed under a project under this section not later than 3 years after the date on which the project is completed.

Collaboration

Projects using this CE must be prepared collaboratively among State and local governments and Indian Tribes and with participation of interested persons.

The entire project area is located in fire regime I or III. All mapped areas are classified as Fire Regime Condition Class 2 or 3. Additionally, the majority of the project is overlapped with identified WUI zones, as designated by the Wasco County Community Wildfire Protection Plan.

Draft Proposed Action

The proposed action will create a 1,000' fuel break along areas of the 27 Road system (approximately 2,900 acres total). Activities will be designed to be consistent with requirements of the Public Law No.

117-58, section 40806 (discussed above). Broadly, a combination of commercial thinning, non-commercial thinning, and fuels treatments will be used. The proposed action would not construct any system roads. Road maintenance would occur on all roads needed along a timber haul route. Temporary roads may be constructed if determined to be needed.

Mt. Hood National Forest Plan and Northwest Forest Plan

The 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 27 Road planning area.

Land Use Allocation	Approximate acres proposed for treatment (percent)
B2 – Scenic Viewshed	15 (<1%)
B4 – Pine-Oak Habitat	1,699 (59%)
B6 – Special Emphasis Watershed	106 (4%)
C1 – Timber Emphasis	1,071 (37%)
Total Planning Area Acres	2,891

The Northwest Forest Plan Land Use Allocations for the planning area are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Northwest Forest Plan Land Use Allocations acres in the 27 Road planning area*.

Land Use Allocation	Approximate acres proposed for treatment (percent)
Riparian Reserves	455 (15%)
Late-successional Reserve (LSR)	693 (23%)
Matrix	1,775 (59%)
Not designated	75 (3%)

*About 107 acres of riparian reserves and LSR overlap.

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.

Draft Collaboration Timeline

The following draft timeline is proposed by the Forest Service to the Wasco County Forest Collaborative (WCFC). This timeline is subject to change.

- May 2023 – FS introduces project in the field; WCFC develops input for proposed action and submits pre-scoping recommendations to Forest Service
- June 2023 – Field trip with WCFC
- July 2023 – 30 day public scoping period
- September 2023 – Sign decision