



File Code: 1950

Date: July 7, 2023

Dear Interested Party,

The Forest Service is seeking public comment on the 27 Road Fuel Break Project, a forest management project designed to reduce the risk of landscape level disturbance by establishing a linear fuel break along National Forest System (NFS) roads. 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 project area is about 3,000 acres located along NFS Roads 2700000, 2710000, 2710140, 2711000, 2711120, 2720000, 2730000, 2730120, and 4421000¹. 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. See the maps in Appendix A.

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.

Background and Landscape

Forest stands in this area have become increasingly dense over time. This has created overcrowding and less healthy stands that are more susceptible to drought stress, disease, insect infestations, and mortality. Climate change projections suggest that trends of longer and drier summers will continue, creating potential conditions for large-scale wildfires.

The project area is primarily within the designated Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), as outlined in the Central Wasco County Community Wildfire Protection Plan. Proposed acres for treatment are located in fire regime I or III, and for the most part are classified as Fire Regime Condition Class 2 or 3.

Maps in Appendix A demonstrate the purpose and need for creating a fuel break in this area. The Badger Creek Wilderness lies just to the west, south and north of roads proposed for treatment. Regulated timber harvest is not allowed in Wilderness. The absence of either large-scale infrequent fire activity or low intensity frequent fire activity have created large accumulations of fuels. The Forest boundary lies a few miles to the east of the project area, with State and private land just beyond.

Creating breaks along existing linear features (roads) in the project area provides opportunities

¹ Townships 2 South and 3 South; Ranges 10 East and 11 East

for firefighters to safely and effectively engage wildfire. A primary objective of a fuel break is to provide firefighters safer ingress and egress, while providing defensible containment lines during a wildfire. A west wind event is more typical for this area and would push fire from west to east, threatening non-Forest lands and communities. A pre-constructed fuel break would allow for safer engagement during an initial attack of a wildland fire, while allowing fire managers time to determine an effective response and allocation of firefighting resources.

A fuel break in this area provides connectivity to other project areas on the District (see prescoping materials on the project website). This connectivity is also consistent with the Potential Operational Delineations (PODs) approach. PODs were developed by the Forest Service as a risk management approach to give land managers a formal process for developing landscape-scale wildfire response options before fires start. These spatial units, or containers, are defined by potential control features (such as roads and ridge tops) within which relevant information on forest conditions, ecology, and fire potential can be summarized.²

Use of the Fuel Break Categorical Exclusion

Section 40806 of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (P.L. 117-58), also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, established a new categorical exclusion 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 scoping letter refers to this categorical exclusion (CE) as the Fuel Break CE. The extraordinary circumstances test (36 CFR 220.6) that applies for all categorical exclusions also applies when considering use of this CE. The Fuel Break CE includes specific requirements and limitations that must be satisfied, summarized below.

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.

Collaboration

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

The 27 Road Fuel Break Project is designed to meet these requirements, as described throughout this letter. I am collaborating with the Wasco County Forest Collaborative (WCFC) to develop the proposed action. Prescoping materials shared with the WCFC and their prescoping comments can be found on the project website³. I have invited consultation from the

² <https://www.fs.usda.gov/research/rmrs/projects/pods>

³ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=63368>

Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon (CTWSRO).

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.

Draft Proposed Action

The proposed action would create 1,000-foot fuel break areas along segments of the 27 Road system. Activities will be designed to be consistent with requirements of the Fuel Break CE described above, and all other relevant requirements of law, regulation and policy.

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. Vegetation targeted for removal would be that which is contributing to dense ladder fuels. Small diameter standing dead trees may be removed to reduce fuel loads.

The proposed action would not construct any system roads. Road maintenance and repairs would occur as necessary. Temporary roads may be needed for project implementation. See Appendix A.

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

Mt. Hood National Forest Plan and Northwest Forest Plan

The project 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. As Table 1 shows, over half of the acres proposed for treatment are in the Pine-Oak Habitat allocation. A small portion of the area includes Special Emphasis (Fifteenmile Creek) watershed acres. The Fifteenmile Creek watershed is a Tier 1 Key Watershed. The majority of the project area overlaps the White River Watershed (a Tier 2 Key Watershed). No treatments are proposed within the Fifteenmile Wild and Scenic River corridor.

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

Land Use Allocation	Approximate Acres in Planning Area
B4 Pine-Oak Habitat	1,834
B6 Special Emphasis Watershed	121
C1 Timber Emphasis	1,071

The Northwest Forest Plan land use allocations for the project area are Riparian Reserves, Late-successional Reserve (LSR), and Matrix. The majority of the project area consists of Matrix lands as shown in Table 2 below. Areas of riparian reserves are proposed for treatment to the extent that Aquatic Conservation Strategy objectives can be maintained or enhanced. Areas of LSR are proposed for treatment to reinforce fuel break effectiveness. The Surveyor's Ridge LSR is in the northern portion of the project area and the Douglas Cabin LSR is to the south. Both are adjacent to the Badger Creek Wilderness, carrying high stand density similar to Wilderness conditions. Linear treatments in these areas would help increase fuel break effectiveness. Treatments would be designed with consideration of the Surveyor's Ridge LSR Assessment and Douglas Cabin LSR Assessment and other Northwest Forest Plan standards and guides (See Appendix C for PDC).

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

Land Use Allocation	Approximate Acres in Planning Area
Riparian Reserves	463*
Late-successional Reserve (LSR)	693
Matrix	1,978

*Some Riparian Reserves acres overlap with LSR.

Anticipated Effects

The interdisciplinary team has begun to consider extraordinary circumstances and potential impacts to resources in the project area. PDC (Appendix C) have been drafted and may be edited before the Decision Memo is signed based on the outcomes of the analysis. PDC ensure consistency with the Forest Plan, Northwest Forest Plan, and all other relevant law, regulation and policy. Resource specialists on the interdisciplinary team include: 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. I would like to highlight the following resource conditions that are known to occur for which effects will be evaluated during the analysis process. These resource conditions pertain to extraordinary circumstances as defined in 36 CFR 220.6 that must be considered for use of a categorical

exclusion.

Wildlife

The project area contains some foraging and dispersal (suitable) habitat for northern spotted owl and portions of the project are in designated northern spotted owl critical habitat. Proposed activities will remove some foraging and dispersal acres along roads. The anticipated effects determination is **Likely to Adversely Affect (LAA)** northern spotted owl and northern spotted owl critical habitat. Project design criteria (PDC) will protect historic sites and the critical breeding season. 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. PDC will be included to protect these sites if found. The anticipated effects determination is **Not Likely to Adversely Affect (NLAA)** Gray wolves.

Wildlife Region 6 (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 PDC, proposed activities **May Impact Individuals or Habitat 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 Inland Columbia Basin redband trout, Cope's giant salamander, and may include Rocky Mountain darters. The Rocky Mountain darters is also an R6 survey-and-manage species. The project area lies between known populations of Basalt Jugs, therefore, this R6 survey-and-manage species is assumed to be present. Because of PDC, 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 known from this project area include vascular plants: *Allium nevii*, *Boechera atropurpurea* and *Delphinium nuttallii* (see project record for full list of species considered and included during survey efforts). Survey and Manage species known from this project area include vascular plants: *Botrychium minganense*, *Castilleja thompsonii*, *Cypripedium montanum*; bryophytes: *Schistostegia pennata*; lichens: *Leptogium rivale*. Because of PDC, 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).**

Flood Plains, wetlands, and municipal watersheds

There are no jurisdictional floodplains within the project area as per Executive Order 11988. Floodplains are limited and localized within the project area, and would be within the Riparian Reserve network. Activities proposed within riparian reserves would be limited in intensity and in extent as defined by PDC. The proposed action would be consistent with Section 404 of the Clean Water Act.

There are three inventoried wetlands in planning units 16, 31, and 90 of the project area. They would be within the riparian reserves where proposed activities would be limited in intensity and

extent as defined by PDC. The proposed action would be consistent with Section 404 of the Clean Water Act.

There are no municipal watersheds within or adjacent to the project area.

Congressionally designated areas

There are no congressionally designated areas in the project area, including Wilderness, Wilderness study areas, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and National Recreation Areas. The Badger Creek Wilderness (designated 1984) and additions (designated 2009) are adjacent to the planning area and will be excluded from treatment. The Fifteenmile Wild and Scenic River corridor is outside of the project area.

Inventoried Roadless Areas

There are no Inventoried Roadless Areas in the project area.

Research Natural Areas

There are no Research Natural Areas in the project area.

American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites

The proposed action will have no impact to American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites due to PDC and the location of the treatment areas. The planning area is located within the ceded lands of the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon (CTWSRO) and CTWSRO was contacted about this project. See the Cultural Resource Inventory Report that was submitted to the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and CTWSRO for more details.

Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas

All cultural resources within or immediately adjacent (approximately 30 meters) to project activities will be avoided. Therefore, this project will have no effect on cultural resources. This project meets the criteria under the terms of the 2004 Programmatic Agreement with the State of Oregon for a No Historic Properties Affected determination (Stipulation III (B)(5)). See the Cultural Resource Inventory Report that was submitted to SHPO for more details.

Anticipated 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 is anticipated to meet the categorical exclusion requirements for fuel breaks as described by Section 40806 of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (P.L. 117-58), also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Requirements are described earlier in this document. If the analysis process determines that there are no extenuating circumstances that would preclude the use of a categorical exclusion, the project would adhere to the requirements of this law.

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 **August 7, 2023** will help to inform the analysis and decision-making process.

Project information including this letter and appendices can be found on the project website at [27 Road Fuel Break Project](#).⁴ Please submit your comments using this website by clicking on the link titled "[Comment/Object on Project](#)".⁵ If you are unable to submit comments electronically, please send them to: 27 Road Fuel Break 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 Rick Lancaster, Fuels Planner at 541-340-4285 or richard.lancaster@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

⁴ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=63368>

⁵ <https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/CommentInput?Project=63368>