Stray Creek Project Visual Quality Effects Analysis

Relevant Laws, Regulations, and Policy

Regulatory Framework

Clearwater National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan

The Clearwater National Forest National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP)(U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1987) provides standards and guidelines for the visual quality resource.

- The visual quality standards were developed in keeping with the Visual Management System therefor the Clearwater National Forest plan requires that the proposed project meets or exceed the adopted visual quality objectives (VQOs) assigned to the area. The visual resource has been evaluated based on visual sensitivity levels assigned to travel routes, use areas and water bodies in and adjacent to the Nez Perce - Clearwater National Forests.

Federal Law

National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (Pub. L. 91-190, 42 U.S.C. 4321-4347, January 1, 1970) ("The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended," 1969):

Directs the federal government to "… (2) assure for all Americans… healthful, productive, and aesthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings; … (4) preserve important historic, cultural, and natural aspects" of our environment. It further directs agencies to "insure the integrated use of the natural and social sciences and the environmental design arts in planning and in decision making which may have an impact on man's environment." This act directs agencies to develop methods and procedures "which will insure that [scenery and other] unqualified environmental amenities and values may be given appropriate consideration in decision making along with economic and technical considerations."

National Forest Management Act of 1976 (Pub. L. 94-588, 16 U.S. C. 1600, October 22, 1976) (1976, National Forest Management Act of 1976)

For all multiuse planning it is stated that aesthetics will be considered. "Sec. 6 (3) F (ii) the interdisciplinary review as determined by the Secretary has been completed and the potential environmental, biological, esthetic, engineering, and economic impacts on each advertised sale area have been assessed, as well as the consistency of the sale with the multiple use of the general area; (iii) cut blocks, patches, or strips are shaped and blended to the extent practicable with the natural terrain; (v) such cuts are carried out in a manner consistent with the protection of soil, watershed, fish, wildlife, recreation, and esthetic resources, and the regeneration of the timber resource."

To meet the requirements for visual quality for both the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) and the National Forest Management Action of 1976 (NFMA), the project is

required to meet the Visual Quality Objectives as outlined in the Clearwater National Forest Land Management Plan (1987). A review of how the proposed action meets the standards listed in the Forest Plan is found in the environmental consequences section.

Resource Indicators and Measures

Effects to the visual resource are discussed in general terms; however, the indicator used to measure effects is whether or not the Forest Plan Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs) are achieved. Below is a brief description of each objective level.

> ***Retention***: Human activities are not evident to the casual Forest visitor.
>
> ***Partial Retention***: Human activities may be evident, but must remain subordinate to the character of the landscape.
>
> ***Modification***: Human activities may dominate the characteristic of the landscape but must, at the same time, utilize naturally established form, line, color, and texture.
>
> ***Maximum Modification***: Human activity may dominate the characteristic landscape, but should appear as natural occurrences when viewed as background.

VQOs provide measurable standards for scenery management in conjunction with demands for goods and services from the forest. Visual resource management is integral to all management areas and implied in all management goals. The Forest Plan standard relevant to the project area for the Stray Creek project is to meet or exceed the VQO of *Maximum Modification*.

Indicator – Meet Forest Plan Visual Quality Objectives

- Meet adopted visual quality objectives (VQOs). The visual resource has been evaluated based on visual sensitivity levels assigned to travel routes, use areas and water bodies in and adjacent to the Nez Perce - Clearwater National Forests.

Table 1. Resource indicators and measures for assessing effects

Resource Element	Resource Indicator	Measure	Source
Visual quality	Visual Quality Objectives VQO	Degree to which VQOs are met	LRMP

Existing Condition

Vegetation -

The Stray Creek Project area is located five miles northwest of the community of Syringa, Idaho and approximately 15 miles northeast of Kooskia, Idaho. The analysis area is part of the Bitterroot Mountains with its large rivers, relatively steep canyon walls, and rolling uplands. The Stray Creek area is within the rolling uplands south and southeast of Lolo Creek. There are no developed camping or trail facilities within the project area.

Figure 1 - Past harvest has occurred within the project area, but the majority of harvest has occurred adjacent to the Stray Creek project.

Extensive harvest is found to the east of the project area, mostly on State of Idaho and private timberlands. Several recent projects found outside of the Forest boundary have extended the openings found here. Most of this harvesting occurred within the last five years and will appear as large openings for 20 to 25 years.

While harvest has occurred throughout the area on Forest Service ownership since the 1950s, most of the project area appears intact. Large portions of the southern and eastern sections of the project area were harvested using Salvage and Improvement Cut methods in the late 1970s. Areas where openings are still visible are found to the north and east of the project area and were harvest in the 2010s. These harvest areas will appear as openings for the next 20 to 25 years. Within the project area, commercial thinning harvest has occurred in the northeast portion of the project area with the Yakus Project (2008 – 2011). This project retained enough stand structure that the area does not appear to have man-made openings.

Fire has also changed the vegetation in the area. Fires have occurred in the area with the most major occurrence in 2015 with the Woodrat fire that mostly effected areas to the south of the project area. Trees damaged or killed in this fire event will eventually fall, leaving large openings that will eventually revegetate.

Figure 2 - The Upper Yakus Creek Road forms the northern boundary of the project area. Past Salvage harvest occurred in the area to the right of the picture, but the area no longer appears as an opening.

The rolling uplands of the project area, as seen in the photo above, are relatively moist and have a mix of coniferous vegetation that forms a continuous vegetative cover. The creek in this area is are not distinctive and have no rock features or rapids. The vegetation patterns and river courses are commonly found in the upland areas within the Bitterroot Mountains and have few distinctive areas of vegetation or landform. Occurrences of insect and disease activities are found throughout the project area.

Figure 3 - Past harvest has occurred throughout the area beginning in the 1950s and continuing through 2011. These harvest areas are found to the east of the project area and were harvested in the early 2010s.

Constituents –

Recreation users visiting the Stray Creek project area participate in dispersed recreational pursuits including berry-picking, and hunting. All roads in the area have some use, but are not considered sensitive travel corridors. There are no system trails within the project area. To the northeast of the project area is the Orogrande Creek drainage where portions of the Lolo Trail National Historic Landmark are found. This area is approximately five miles away, therefore the project area may be visible in the background viewshed from this area.

Desired Condition

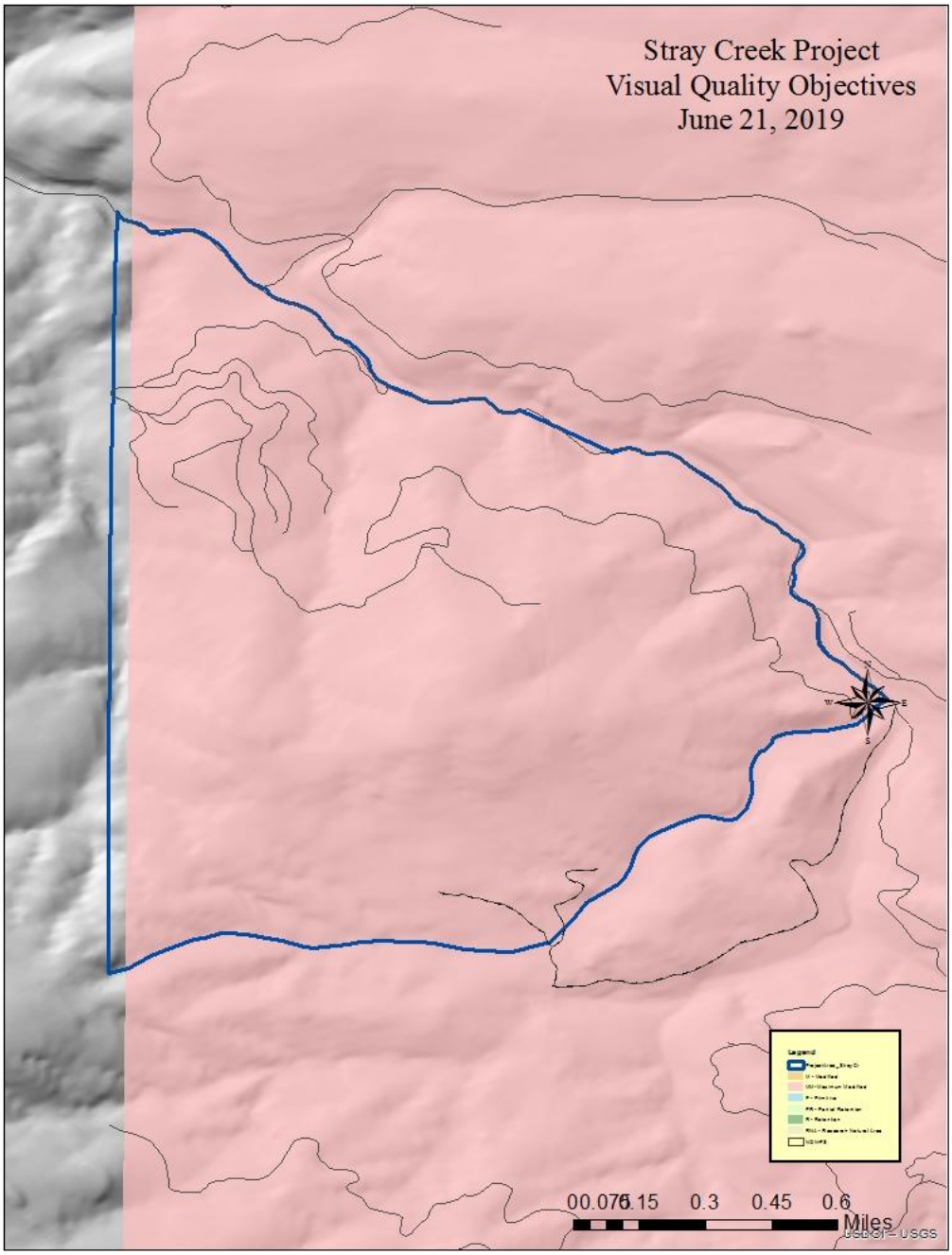

Figure 4 - Clearwater National Forest Plan Visual Quality Objective Map (1987) shows the entire Stray Creek Project area within the *Maximum Modification* Visual Quality Objective (pink).

There are no roads, trails or use areas that are listed as having a moderate or high concern for scenery.

Environmental Impacts

Spatial and Temporal Context for Effects Analysis

Direct/Indirect Effects Boundaries

The geographic scope of the scenery analysis for the Stray Creek Project includes areas visible from locations both within and outside the area of interest. All roads within and adjacent to the project area have a low concern for scenery. All of the project area and areas adjacent to have been designated as *Maximum Modification* in the 1987 Clearwater National Forest Plan. Direct and indirect effects analysis focuses on the viewshed and viewpoints from which the proposed activities can be seen, and the extent proposed treatment units affect the visual quality objectives assigned to that piece of ground. The cumulative effects area evaluates the scenic effects on the area that is traditionally used by visitors, which includes only the project area and a few viewpoints from the Yakus – Pete King Road 454 and the Highline Road 455. To the north of the project area is found portions of the Lolo Trail National Historic Landmark including the Lolo Motorway and the Lewis and Clark Trail #25. The project area would not be visible from the Lolo Motorway as it is screened by topography and any potential viewpoints from the Lewis and Clark Trail, if not screened by vegetation would be viewed in the background viewshed. This would be consistent with the VQO of *Maximum Modification* designated for this area.

Temporal Context

The temporal scope of the analysis is limited to the 25 to 30 years following harvest activities. This time period is the length of time openings created by regeneration harvest are likely to be evident given the growing conditions of the area. For example, harvest units from the Upper Yakus sale of the early1990s found to the southeast of the analysis area have re-vegetated to the point that, while somewhat visible in aerial photograph due to color differentiation from surround timber stands, they are no longer recognizable as openings in the field.

Cumulative Effects Boundaries

The cumulative effects boundary of the project would include areas adjacent to the project area as these areas contribute to the overall visual quality and landscape character of travel corridors in the area. The cumulative effects boundary would include the project area and some area to the east where past harvest has modified the landscape in the recent past and to the west where activities on private and state lands have changed the vegetation and to the south in the Woodrat area where past fire occurred.

No Action

Direct and Indirect Effects

Under the no action alternative there would be no direct long or short-term effects to the scenic condition of the Stray Creek analysis area within or adjacent to the project boundary. The existing openings within and adjacent to the project area that are visible as a result of past forest management and fire activities would continue to recover tree growth, and over time would revegetate to the point that these units would not be apparent as openings. Most of the existing man-made openings in the project area would remain visible for another 10 to 15 years and newer openings that occurred in the 2010s would remain visible for 20 to 25 years.

Processes affecting forest dynamics would continue, including continuing changes related to insect and disease activities evident in the area. Dead and dying trees, which currently appear as

individuals and groups of dead trees scattered across the landscape, would be visible throughout the area. The future risk of wildfire increases as the amount of dead and dying vegetation increases. There have been significant wildfires in adjacent areas in the last four years and the fire risk would continue to grow as insect and disease activities increase. Some may perceive wildfire as having a negative impact on the scenic quality of the area, but these dynamic processes are considered natural, and the resource area would continue to meet designated VQOs.

Cumulative Effects

Past harvest areas within the project area have plantations that are reaching 15 feet in height which act as a vegetative screen to reduce the visual effects of that past harvest. There are past harvest areas to the east of the Stray Creek project which are still visible that will continue to revegetate. Most openings should no longer appear as openings within 20 to 25 years. Harvest on private timberlands and State of Idaho lands would continue into the future and past harvest areas would revegetate at about the same rate as the Forest Service lands. Insect and disease activities would continue to expand and areas of past fire activity would also revegetate.

Summary

There would be no direct, indirect or cumulative effects with the no action alternative. The no action alternative would meet Forest Plan VQO of *Maximum Modification*, since the existing condition currently meets the Forest Plan standards. Past harvest areas have mostly revegetated within the project area and existing openings adjacent to the project area would continue to revegetation and over time would appear more natural. Most of these openings would no long appear as openings within 20 to 25 years.

Areas that currently are experiencing problems with insects and disease would continue. The risk of wildfire within the project area would increase as more of the project area experiences the affects dead and dying vegetation. Dead and dying trees within past fire boundaries would continue to fall, creating more natural openings within the viewshed of the river and increasing the fire risk.

Table 2. Resource indicators and measures for no action

Resource Element	Resource Indicator (Quantify if possible)	Measure (Quantify if possible)	No Action
Visual quality	Visual Quality Objectives	Do past activities meet Visual Quality Objectives designated for this area?	Yes

Proposed Action

Direct and Indirect Effects – Proposed Action

Road Reconstruction

Road reconstruction on approximately 6 miles of road could include approximately 9 live water culvert replacements or upgrades with structures sized for a 100-year even, the addition of cross drain structures near stream crossings, application of surface aggregate gravel materials, road realignment or reshaping, and placement of roadway fill and installation of new signs or gates. Other activities could include installation of drainage dips, road blading, brushing and removal of obstructions. While the ground disturbance associated with this activity may have short term

visual effects, there would be no long-term scenic effects as the roads would not change significantly from what they area now.

Temporary Road Construction

Temporary roads would be necessary to access several timber harvest areas. Approximately 4 miles of temporary road construction would occur on existing road prisms or would be new temporary road construction. Temporary roads would be constructed on or near ridge tops with no stream crossings and would be hydrologically disconnected from any stream network. All temporary roads would be obliterated after use; including all on existing road prisms used as temporary roads. There may be a short term visual effect (less than five years) from the construction of these temporary roads, but the since the roadways will be obliterated and revegetation would occur the long term effect to visual quality would be minor.

The minor changes created by road reconstruction and temporary road construction would meet the VQO of *Maximum Modification* for the area.

Harvest Activities

Regeneration harvest is proposed on approximately 425 acres to improve forest health and restore early seral species. Retention within these stands proposed for regeneration harvest would depend on other resource needs that may include patches or clumps for wildlife, soils, or visual quality. Leave tree designations, including clumps and patches, would be identified where necessary to meet wildlife needs, and would be determined by the wildlife biologist and silviculturist for treatment unit layout.

This analysis is mainly concerned with the landscape that can be observed from viewpoints identified along the roads found within or adjacent to the project area. There are no roads within the analysis area that are listed in the Clearwater National Forest Plan (1987) as roads and trails with high or moderate concern for scenery. Proposed management actions that may affect scenic resources are evaluated for how they conform to naturally occurring features that exist, or could be created by natural events. The project was analyzed from seven viewpoints within and adjacent to the project area. The viewpoints were selected to determine what if any would be seen from the main roadways. That review is as follows:

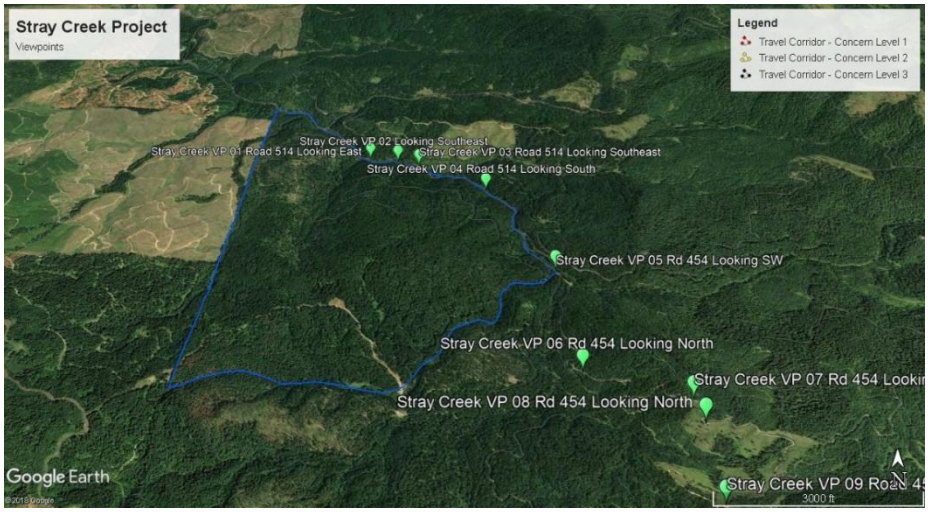

Figure 5 - This aerial view of the project area shows harvest to the west of the project across State of Idaho and private timberlands and to the north and east of the project area.

Visual Simulations of the Proposed Action -

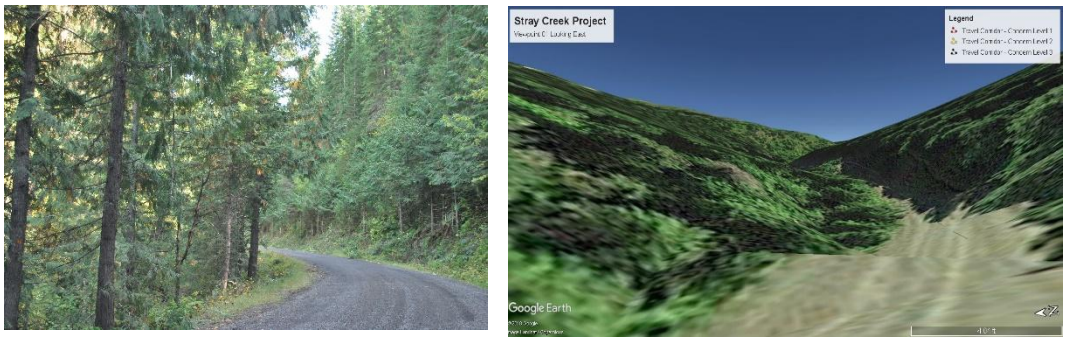

Figure 6 - Viewpoint 01 near the project boundary. Harvest would be on the right side of the photo. The steepness of the topography and vegetation adjacent to the roadway would screen views of harvest activities in the foreground.

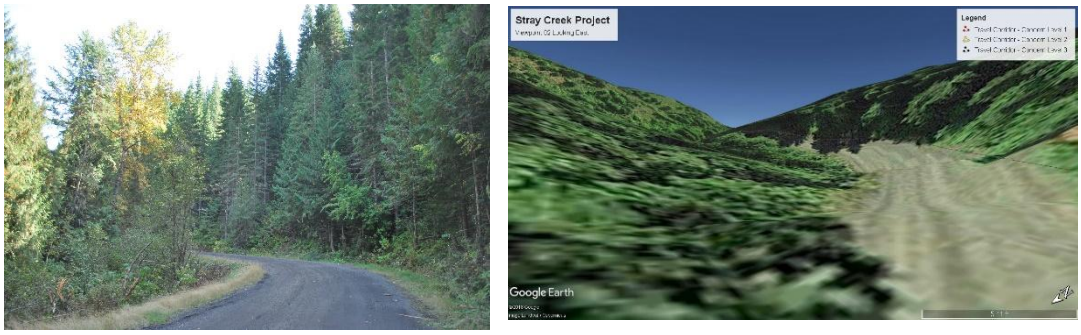

Figure 7 – Viewpoint 02 along the Yakus Road looking southeast toward the harvest area. Again the steepness of the slope and retain vegetation in the foreground will screen views of the harvest.

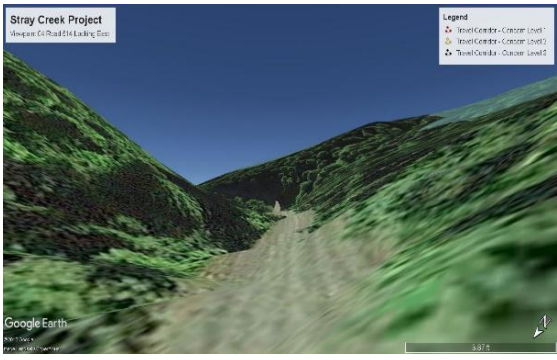

Figure 8 - Viewpoint 03 looking southeast along the Yakus Road, some harvest may be visible along the ridge to the right of the photos.

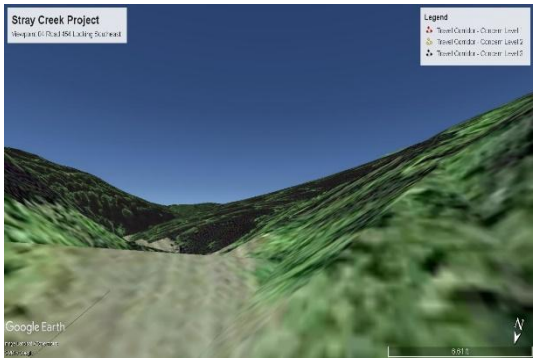

Figure 9 – Viewpoint 04 looking southeast along the Yakus Road, the harvest will be screened by vegetation and topography in the foreground viewshed.

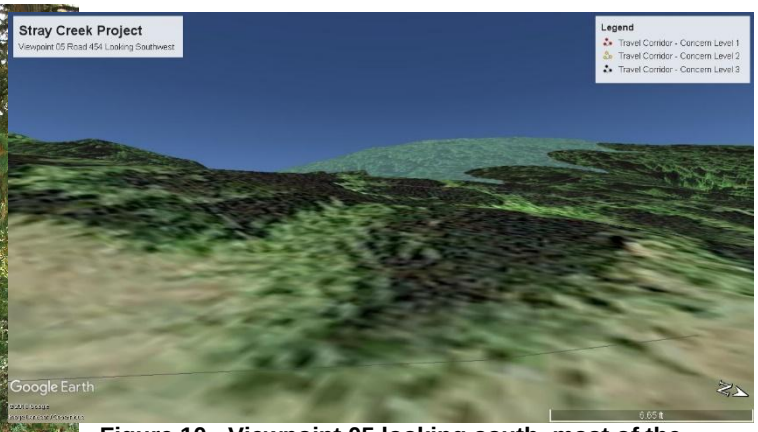

Figure 10 - Viewpoint 05 looking south, most of the foreground has large trees that will screen some of the harvest activities. The simulations show what will be visible along the ridgetop.

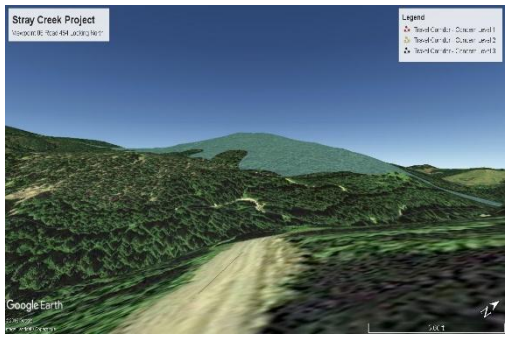

Figure 9 – Viewpoint 06, looking northwest from the Yakus - Pete King Road 454 toward the harvest area for Stray Creek Project. There is some screening, but harvest across the ridgetop would be visible.

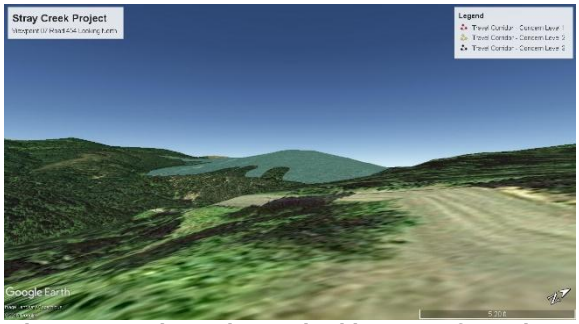

Figure 11 – Viewpoint 06, looking west from the Yakus-Pete King Road toward the harvest area. Vegetation will screen some of the view, but the harvest area will be visible along the ridgetop.

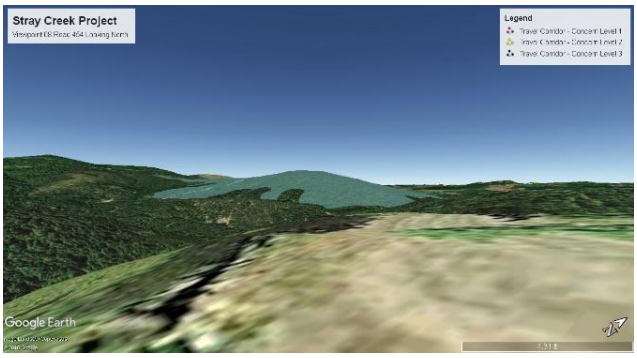

Figure 12 - Views of the project area from Viewpoint 08 are very similar to views from VP 07. There is additional vegetative screening, but sections of the harvesting would also be visible.

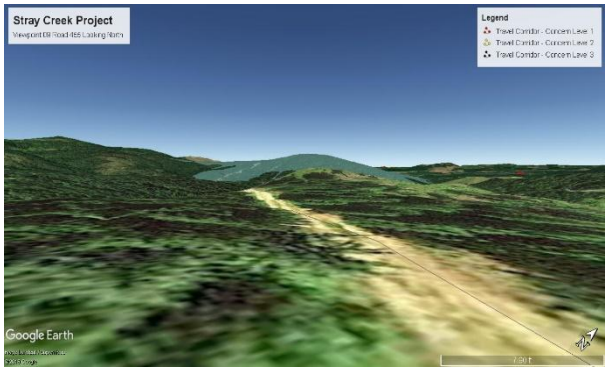

Figure 13 - View of the project area in the middleground viewshed would be very open in Viewpoint 09 from the Yakus - Pete King Road. The harvest are would be visible, but would appear as a natural event that mimic the openings created by wildfire events as seen in the area on the right of the photo where the opening was created by the Woodrat fire.

Summary

While the harvest area is visible from a number of the viewpoints, the harvest would be designed to mimic the shapes of natural fire activities as evidenced in viewpoint 09 where areas burned in the Woodrat fire are seen adjacent to the proposed harvest area. The harvest area is large, but is in keeping with the size of naturally occurring openings from past fire events. When viewed in the background, this opening would appear natural, exhibiting the same shapes created in natural wildfire openings. Harvest would be concentrated along the ridgetops, while vegetation will be retained in riparian corridors. Stand structure would also be retained within the harvest areas in clumps and individual trees. A small portion of harvest proposed by the Stray Creek project would potentially be seen from the Lolo Trail National Historic Landmark (MA A6). It would be screened by vegetation and would meet the VQO of *Maximum Modification* in the background viewshed. Overall the openings created by the project and the related roadwork to complete the project would meet the Clearwater National Forest Plan Visual Quality Objectives of *Maximum Modification*.

Indicator - Meet Forest Plan Visual Quality Objectives

Overall the Proposed Action would create a landscape that appears more open, with thinner vegetation across the rolling uplands. Proposed openings would be designed to mimic natural fire effects. When proposed harvest activities are complete, the project area would look similar to an area where natural wildfire had occurred. It is anticipated that the project area would be more resilient in the future to wildfire given the proposed removal of dead and dying vegetation and reduction in ground fuels build up. Harvest activities are proposed that retain stand structure in riparian areas and create naturally shaped openings. The proposed harvest and burning activities for the Stray Creek project area would meet the designated Clearwater National Forest Plan Visual Quality Objectives of *Maximum Modification*.

Table 3. Resource indicators and measures for Proposed Action direct/indirect effects

Resource Element	Resource Indicator	Measure	Proposed Action Direct/Indirect Effects
Visual quality	Visual Quality Objectives	Do Proposed Action activities meet Visual Quality Objectives designated for this area?	Yes

Cumulative Effects – Proposed Action

Past, Present, and Foreseeable Activities Relevant to Cumulative Effects Analysis

Past Harvest - As discussed in the existing condition several intermediate harvest activities occurred between the 1950s and the 1990s. The Yakus Timber Sale of 2011 created a number of larger regeneration harvest units to the north and east of the project area that appear as openings today. In 2016 the Woodrat Project completed fire salvage harvest across areas to the south of the

Figure 14 - This past harvest area from the Yakus Timber Sale was completed in the early 2010s would no longer appears as an opening within 20 to 25 years.

Stray Creek area.

While some openings are still evident from travelways with low concern for scenery, they do not tend to dominate the existing landscape character in the project area. All openings created in past harvest projects completed for Forest Service projects in the area meet the Clearwater National Forest Plan Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs) for the area of *Maximum Modification*.

Private and State Lands: There are private and state lands to the west of the project area. Much of the land adjacent to Forest Service ownership was harvested in the past. State lands to the west were harvested after the 2015 fires, removing much of the vegetation to the north and west of the Woodrat mountain area. These areas would appear as man-made openings for 20 to 25 years.

Present Harvest– There are no active timber projects occurring in the Stray Creek area currently.

Reasonably Foreseeable Actions Timber Harvest – There are no proposed projects within the Stray Creek analysis area.

Fire - There have been numerous natural wildfire events that have occurred adjacent to the Stray Creek project area. The Woodrat fire in 2015 burned the hillside to the northwest of the community of Syringa. This fire burned across Forest Service, State and private timberlands, and threatened additional private and state lands near Syringa. Wildfire is a constant threat in this area due to mature vegetation, dry conditions and steep landscapes.

Scenery Cumulative Effects - Proposed Action

The area adjacent to the Yakus and Yakus – Pete King Roads has been managed for timber harvest in the past. Prior harvest activities are currently visible as man-made openings from the Yakus – Pete King Road, especially the regeneration harvest units created in the Yakus project of the early 2010s. There are examples of several decades of harvest, but all past openings except for the Yakus project openings have revegetated to the point they are no longer considered openings. Areas to the south of the project area that experienced stand replacing fire will eventually fall, leaving some small openings. Past harvest areas on State and private lands are screened from view of the travel corridors within the project area by vegetation and topography so timber harvest in those areas would not be evident.

The Stray Creek project proposes changes that would affect the rolling uplands to the south of the Yakus Road. The proposed changes would be designed to mimic natural dynamic processes that can been seen in several areas within the Yakus Road viewshed. A small portion of the harvest proposed by the Stray Creek project would potentially be seen from the Lolo Trail National Historic Landmark (MA A6). It would be screened by vegetation and would meet the VQO of *Maximum Modification* in the background viewshed from these travelways. Proposed regeneration harvest across the rolling uplands would be designed to regenerate landscape in the rolling uplands, replacing them with more fire resistant seral species. In the short term (less than 5 years) the vegetation of the area would have a relatively large opening, but would appear very similar to areas where natural wildfire created a mosaic of openings across the landscape. In the long term (20 – 25 years) these changes would improve the health of the vegetation and potentially reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. In the foreseeable future it is likely that harvest would continue on State and private lands. Harvest across State and private lands is not visible from the project area so the effects of additional harvest would not be significant. The proposal would therefore meet the Forest Plan VQO of *Maximum Modification* when considered in the context of existing condition of the landscape.

Summary of Environmental Effects

There would be a change to the existing vegetative cover within the Stray Creek analysis area where timber harvest is proposed. It is anticipated that harvest activity would change the visual condition of the area in the short and long term, but that overall these changes would appear similar to natural occurring dynamic events such as wildfires that have created a mosaic of openings and thinned vegetation throughout the Middle Fork of the Clearwater drainage.

Of greatest concern for scenery within the Stray Creek analysis are visual conditions adjacent to the Yakus and Yakus – Pete King Roads. Both of these roads have a low concern for scenery. Found within the rolling uplands south of Yakus Creek and northwest of the headwaters of Pete King Creek, proposed regeneration harvest units are located primarily across the ridgetops and would be designed to blend with existing openings created by past harvest activities. The proposed harvest units would be designed to have relatively natural shapes and generally would following the topographic features of the landscape. Trees to be retained would be a mix of individual and groups of trees. With retention of stand structure in riparian areas and creation of

natural appearing openings, the harvest proposed in the Stray Creek Project would meet the Forest Plan VQOs of *Maximum Modification*.

Resource Element	Indicator/ Measure	No Action	Proposed Action
Visual Quality	Meet Maximum Modification Visual Quality Objective as designated in the Clearwater National Forest Plan 1987.	Would meet VQOs as the existing condition currently meets the Forest Plan standards. Past harvest areas have revegetated and existing openings would continue to appear more natural. Most of these openings would no long appear as openings within 20 to 25 years. Current harvest activities outside of the analysis area could take 25 – 30 years to revegetate. Areas that currently are experiencing problems with insects and disease would continue. Areas where moisture is lacking would see increased in insect and disease activities. The risk of wildfire in this area would increase as more areas have dead and dying vegetation.	Harvest activities in the interior of the project area would be obvious from roads in the area including the Upper Yakus Creek Road 514, the Yakus – Pete King Road 454 and the Highline Road 455, all of which have a low concern for scenery. The harvest openings would be designed to appear as natural openings in background viewshed from travelways such as the Lewis and Clark Trail (MA A6) and would therefore meet the VQO of *Maximum Modification* designated for this area. In the short term the area would appear more open, with a mix of openings intermingled with young timber stands from past harvest events, and riparian areas where harvest has not occurred. This would be similar to an area where fire has occurred, with the ridgeline areas showing the most change and the riparian corridors retaining mostly mature vegetation. In the long term the vegetation would be more resilient to insect and disease and less susceptible to wildfire.

Table 4. Summary comparison of environmental effects to visual resources

Compliance with LRMP and Other Relevant Laws, Regulations, Policies and Plans

All landscape-altering activities would meet adopted Clearwater National Forest Plan Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs). Duration of visual impacts should meet the guidelines outlined for each VQO in Agriculture Handbook No. 462-Chapter 2. With design measures outlined in Chapter 2, the proposed harvest activities would meet the Adopted VQOs for the Stray Creek Project area. The project would comply with Forest Plan forest-wide standards for visual resources in the Clearwater National Forest Plan (USDA Forest Service 1987a, pp. II-3 through III – 49 and Table 4). Full details of consistency of the project with the Forest Plan are located in the project record.

Other Relevant Mandatory Disclosures

There are no other mandatory disclosures.

Intensity Factors for Significance (FONSI)

As the activities for the Stray Creek project are implemented there would be a change in the appearance of the overall landscape that would have some effect on scenery. For the viewshed from the Upper Yakus, Yakus – Pete King and Highline Roads, these changes would include large areas of regeneration harvest that would remove the majority of the vegetation. While the change would be apparent, especially in areas adjacent to the roadways, there would still be some forest canopy, generally grouped in riparian areas, which would appear as natural vegetative cover. The

harvested openings would appear different, but would mimic fire activity in the short term and would create a healthier, more resilient landscape in the long term. The visual impacts of the harvest would be limited to the project area, as the harvest would not be visible from any other significant roadways or trails.

Vegetative harvest activities have occurred across adjacent lands, on both private and State of Idaho lands. The greatest change to the existing landscape has occurred due to wildfire. In the past few years several large, catastrophic fires have occurred that effected the vegetative character of large sections of the lands to the south of the project.

After the proposed action has been implemented, the vegetation would appear different than prior to the regeneration harvest, but this removal of dead, dying or over-mature vegetation would not change the landscape character of the area, only modify the vegetation in a way that the landscape is more open and other characteristics of the landscape are more visible. Visual changes to the landscape from current and past activities would be indicative of what the proposed activities would look like in the future. As these activities mature and the grasses and shrubs cover any evidence of man-made harvest activities these changes would become less apparent. Improvements to the stand condition and reduction of wildfire risk would improve the visual conditions of the area in the long term.

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