Roads & Access

Introduction

The Forest Service Information System Database (INFRA), Travel Routes portion has been updated between DEIS and FEIS. The updated information includes open and closed status within the project area. The INFRA Travel Routes information also includes the maintenance level for each road in the project area plus roads proposed for timber hauling outside the project area. This information is compiled in Appendix B – Road Lists.

Regulatory Framework

A Roads Analysis for Easy Area was completed in June 2003 consistent with current direction (Easy Fire Recovery Roads Analysis, USDA Forest Service 2003). All roads within the fire boundary and roads that will be used for the fire recovery project were included in this analysis. The Roads Analysis did not show additional roads in the area that should be decommissioned.

Existing Condition

Most of the Forest Service land within the project boundary is roaded, with the majority of roads in Maintenance Level 1 and 2 categories. However, the fire also burned on both sides of Forest Service road, 2635, which is a maintenance level 3 road. All work needed on roads in the project area and on proposed haul roads outside the project area will be maintenance as defined on Page 3231 of the Federal Register / Vol. 66, No. 9 / Friday, January 12, 2001 / Notices.

On most roads, the roadway surface is either rutted or has rill erosion, or both. This is caused by water running down the roadway or by the passage of vehicles. This causes sedimentation to filter into adjacent streams. Maintenance needs include blading/reshaping the road surface. Forest Service Road 2600026 has a section approximately 0.3 miles in length that is currently in need of spot rocking to stabilize the running surface and to bridge over a soft spot. This road is proposed to stay open.

Included in the maintenance requirements for these roads is the following work, which can be performed as maintenance in any contracts:

- Brushing
- Blade and shape road including existing drainage dips, grade sags, and waterbars.
- Place rock in some existing drainage dips and grade sags
- Place rock in wet areas of road
- Remove hazard trees
- Repair damaged culverts
- Remove and replace culverts with same size or larger culverts up to 36 inches diameter

The following work is classified as maintenance under the definition listed in the Federal Register, but will be listed as reconstruction in any contracts that are signed.

- Construct new drainage dips.
- Construct new outlet ditches.
- Construct new waterbars.
- Place fill material in ruts in road.
- Place geotextile on existing road surface.
- Repair or replace existing cattle guards.
- Remove and replace culverts with same size or culverts greater than 36 inches diameter.

Road Densities

Road density is calculated on a subwatershed basis. The Easy Fire burned in two watersheds: the Upper Middle Fork John Day River and the Upper John Day River watersheds (5th field Hydrologic Unit Code - HUC). In the Upper Middle Fork John day River watershed the fire burned in the Clear Creek subwatershed and Bridge Creek subwatershed. A small portion (less than 30 acres) of the Dry Fork of Clear Creek subwatershed, Upper Middle Fork John Day watershed is within the project area but due to small area, the road density information is not included. In the Upper John Day River watershed the fire burned in the Reynolds Creek subwatershed. The Reynolds Creek and Bridge Creek subwatersheds have been recently modified. Reynolds Creek is now a combination of three smaller subwatersheds (Axe Gulch, Reynolds Creek, and North Fork Reynolds Creek). Bridge Creek is now a combination of two subwatersheds (Lunch Creek and Bridge Creek).

Access management plans exist for all or portions of each of these subwatersheds. It is the intent of the Forest Service to continue to implement these access plans, which will reduce subwatershed road densities. If road densities in the old, smaller subwatersheds are reduced to meet Forest Plan goals, the new, larger subwatersheds will also meet Forest Plan goals.

The following discussion shows the existing road density and foreseeable road density for the three subwatersheds affected by the Easy Fire: Reynolds Creek, Bridge Creek, and Clear Creek. Road densities have been updated in the FEIS, based on recent updates to the INFRA database.

Reynolds Creek Subwatershed Road Density

Existing Condition

Since the Mossy Decision Notice (1/22/1997) was signed some road closures have been implemented in the Reynolds Creek subwatershed. The updated Malheur National Forest INFRA data base shows the open road density for the subwatershed at 2.9 miles per square mile. Some existing closed roads were re-opened for fire suppression activities.

Foreseeable Condition

Approximately 32.4 miles are road are proposed to be closed by gate, obliteration, earthen barrier in the Reynolds Creek subwatershed from the Mossy Decision. These closures would occur primarily in the North Fork of Reynolds Creek and Axe Gulch areas. Prior to the Easy Fire, a portion of the Mossy Access Plan had been implemented. It is foreseeable

that the Mossy Access Plan will continue to be implemented in the Reynolds Creek subwatershed, which would reduce the open road density to 2.0 miles per square mile.

Bridge Creek Subwatershed Road Density

Existing Condition

Several road closures have been implemented in this subwatershed as part of the Punch Timber Sale Access Plan (Punch Decision Notice signed 8/16/1991). The updated data in the INFRA data base shows the current open road density for the subwatershed at 3.7 miles per square mile. This includes the current status of closed roads opened for fire suppression activities.

Foreseeable Condition

Approximately 17 miles of road would be closed in the Bridge Creek subwatershed in the Punch Timber Sale Environmental analysis. The Punch Access Plan was partially implemented at the time of the Easy Fire. It is foreseeable that the Punch Access Plan will continue to be implemented in the Bridge Creek subwatershed, which would reduce the open road density to 3.5 miles per square mile in this subwatershed.

Clear Creek Subwatershed Road Density

Existing Condition

Since 1998 several road closures have been implemented in the subwatershed following the signing of the Decision Notice for Clear Creek-91B on 1/6/1997. The updated data in INFRA currently shows the open road density as 4.2 miles per square mile. At the time of the Easy fire there were several timber sales that were almost completed, after which the remaining road closures would have been implemented. Several of the closure devices (such as gates) were already installed, and were to be closed once sales were completed.

Foreseeable Condition

An access travel management plan was developed in the Clear Creek Analysis for the entire Clear Creek subwatershed. Several miles of road closures and decommissioning had been implemented in the Clear Creek subwatershed from the Clear Creek Analysis prior to the Easy Fire. The Clear Creek Analysis modified the Grouse Timber Sale Access Plan (signed 8/91). It is foreseeable that we would continue to implement the Clear Creek Access Plan, which will reduce the open road density to 3.0 miles per square mile for most of the year and 2.8 miles per square mile seasonally.

Environmental Consequences

Alternative 1

Direct and Indirect Effects

The consequences of Alternative 1 would be to leave the road system in the same condition it is in now (See Figure 27, Map Section). There would be no opportunity to close roads or to improve drainage by installing additional drainage dips, waterbars, or cross ditches. This could result in sedimentation into streams at the current level or higher and would remain at the same cost to the Federal government to meet road maintenance standards.

Cumulative Effects

Past activities and occurrences have affected roads and access in the analysis area. Past and proposed activities that affect roads and access have been analyzed in direct and indirect effects.

In review of past, ongoing, and foreseeable actions, ongoing and foreseeable maintenance and recreational use could pose cumulative effects. Routine surveys of roads would provide condition and effectiveness information to drive ongoing management and maintenance of roads. Road use by motorized vehicles on the open roads would continue to degrade road conditions, especially during wet periods since most of the roads are native surfaced. All other ongoing and future actions are not expected to affect roads and access. The cumulative effect of roads and access on other resources is discussed in each resource section of Chapter 3 of the FEIS.

Road 2600391 would have a seasonal closure in the foreseeable future when all of the road closures in the Clear Creek Access Plan are implemented. The open road density in the Clear Creek subwatershed would then be 3.0 miles per square mile most of the year and 2.8 miles per square mile seasonally. All other ongoing and future actions are not expected to affect roads and access. The cumulative effect of roads and access on other resources is discussed in each resource section of Chapter 3 of the FEIS.

Alternatives 2, 3, 4, and 5

Direct and Indirect Effects for Alternatives 2, 3, 4, and 5

The maintenance work which would be done on many of the open roads would include blading to eliminate existing ruts, brushing for safety, maintenance of existing drainage features such as drainage dips, waterbars, and cross ditches, placing rock in areas where it will help to decrease sedimentation into streams, and seeding.

The accomplishment of this maintenance and the closures will make open roads safer to travel, reduce sedimentation, lower open road densities, and improve fish habitat by closing a road that passes through two RHCAs.

Approximately 5.2 miles of existing road in the Clear Creek subwatershed (4.6 miles within the project area), which is currently planned for seasonal closure for wildlife, would be closed year-round to public use under each of these alternatives. (Figures 28, 29, 30, and 31 Map Section).

Direct and Indirect Effects for Alternative 2

Alternative 2 would perform more haul road maintenance than Alternatives 3 and 4, but less than Alternative 5. There would be slightly more temporary road construction than Alternatives 3 and 4 (See Figures 28 and 32, Map Section).

Direct and Indirect Effects for Alternative 3

Alternative 3 would perform more haul road maintenance than Alternative 4, but less than Alternatives 2 and 5. There would be slightly less temporary road construction than Alternative 2 and slightly more than Alternative 4 (See Figures 29 and 33, Map Section).

Direct and Indirect Effects for Alternative 4

Alternative 4 would perform less haul road maintenance than Alternatives 2, 3, and 5. There would be slightly more new temporary road construction than Alternative 3 but the same as Alternative 2 (See Figure 30 and 34, Map Section).

Direct and Indirect Effects for Alternative 5

Alternative 5 would perform more haul road maintenance than Alternatives 2, 3, and 4. There would be no temporary road construction. This alternative would not have any commercial timer harvest so associated road maintenance would have to be funded through other (often competitive) sources. Road work could be delayed until other funding is obtained. (See Figures 31 and 35, Map Section)

Cumulative Effects for Alternatives 2, 3, 4, and 5

Past activities and occurrences have affected roads and access in the analysis area. Past and proposed activities that affect roads and access have been analyzed in direct and indirect effects.

In review of past, ongoing, and foreseeable actions, ongoing and foreseeable maintenance and recreational use could pose cumulative effects. Routine surveys of roads would provide condition and effectiveness information to drive ongoing management and maintenance of roads. Road use by motorized vehicles on the open roads would continue to degrade road conditions especially during wet periods since most of the roads are native surfaced. Implementation of the existing access plans for Punch, Mossy, and Clear Creek Analyses is a foreseeable action. As a result of closing Road 2600391 year-round, the road density in the Clear Creek subwatershed will be 2.8 miles per square mile year-round when all of the road closures in the Clear Creek Access Plan are implemented. All other ongoing and future actions are not expected to affect roads and access. The cumulative effect of roads and access on other resources is discussed in each resource section of Chapter 3 of the FEIS.

Consistency with Direction and Regulations

Alternative 1 would not bring this area any closer to meeting the Standards and Guidelines for road densities, fish habitat, or water quality, which are contained in the Malheur Forest

Plan. Through implementation of Alternative 2, 3, 4 and 5 the Forest would move closer to meeting those Standards and Guidelines.

Inventoried Roadless Areas and Unroaded Areas

The project area is not within any inventoried roadless areas. (See maps contained in Forest Service Roadless Area Conservation, FEIS, Volume 2, 11/2000, page 149 and Easy Fire Recovery Project, Project Scale Roads Analysis, May 28, 2003). Baldy Mountain inventoried roadless area is approximately three miles to the south of the Easy Fire project area. No road construction/reconstruction or timber harvest would occur in any of the alternatives in inventoried roadless areas. This meets the requirements of the Roadless Area Conservation Final Rule, 36 CFR 294.

Low Road Density Areas (Unroaded Areas)

The project meets low road density recommendations identified in the Road Density Analysis Task Team Final Report (01/30/2002). The project does not contain any areas that meet the unroaded 1,000 acre standards in the report. An analysis was completed using the protocols established in Appendix D of the Final Report, Land Management Recommendations Related to the Value of Low Road Density Areas in the Conservation of Listed Salmon, Steelhead, and Bull Trout, pg 37 -41. The maps created are located in the Easy Project File.

Irreversible and Irretrievable Consequences

Alternatives 2, 3, 4, and 5 if implemented, would use rock on roads for spot rocking. This would be an irreversible commitment of rock (considered to be a resource). This rock would come from one or more of the following sources:

T11S, R35E, Section 27, W 1/2 (Austin Pits):

T12S, R35E, Section 4, NE/NE (Unnamed):

T13S, R35E, Section 4, NE/SW (Unnamed):

T 13S, R35E, Section 12, NW/NW (Wigwam Spring).

See Figures 32-35 for location of these rock sources.

There would be a short-term loss of productivity where temporary roads are built, but those areas would be returned to productivity when the roads are rehabilitated.