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# Scenery

## Introduction

The Easy Fire Area is most readily seen from US Highway 26 and State Highway 7. From these vantage points, onlookers experience distant views of the middleground. Pre-fire, the project area contained managed stands of mostly mixed conifer species. Post fire, more than half the project area has burned at moderate to high severity. About 33 percent remains unburned or lightly charred. Due to the distance separating the Easy Fire Area from the roadway, there is little change in the amount of topography and land features that can be discerned. The fire has not measurably changed the overall visual condition of the vicinity.

## Regulatory Framework

The Malheur National Forest scenic resource is managed by direction provided in the Malheur National Forest Plan (1990). Visual Quality is assessed and evaluated under Landscape Aesthetics (USDA Forest Service Handbook Nr.701, December 1995).

## Visual Management System

Effects to Visual Quality are measured in terms of whether alternatives meet Visual Quality Objectives as outlined in the Malheur National Forest Plan. The Visual Management System adheres to guidelines set forth by Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs). VQOs consist of the following clearly predicated definitions: Preservation, Retention, Partial Retention, Modification and Maximum Modification. Except for preservation, each describes a degree of acceptable alteration of the natural landscape based upon the importance of aesthetics. The acceptable degree of alteration is measured in terms of visual contrast with the surrounding natural landscape. Two additional short-term management goals may also be required. The first is used to upgrade landscapes containing visual impacts that do not meet the quality objectives set forth for the particular locale. The second is utilized for landscapes having a potential for greater natural appearing variety. Together, these short-term goals incorporate both rehabilitation and enhancement.

## Existing Condition

### Viewshed Corridor

About 667 acres (12%), of the project area is within the US Highway 26 and State Highway 7 visual corridor. This corridor lies in Management Area 14 (Viewshed Corridors, page IV – 108, Malheur LRMP) and encompasses those locations that can be seen from the two highways. This is classified as a Sensitivity Level 1 viewshed. The locations that can be viewed from the highways are distant ridge tops (middleground) within the project area.

Management goals describe managing corridors as scenic viewsheds with primary consideration given to their scenic quality and the growth of large diameter trees. Forest Plan Correction #1, dated January 31, 1995, allows salvage harvest in a visual corridor without a corridor viewshed plan. The Forest Plan direction is to manage the corridor with visual quality objectives of partial retention in the middleground (Appendix L, page L-1: Malheur LRMP). The existing visual condition is slightly altered in appearance.

The project area within the visual corridor middleground had forests that included mostly mixed conifer species, lodgepole pine, Douglas fir, grand fir and ponderosa pine. High burn

severity areas (where over 90 percent or more of the trees were killed), cover about 28 percent of the visual corridor. About 39 percent of the visual corridor has a moderate burn severity where mortality ranges from 60 to 90 percent. About 33 percent of the visual corridor has a low burn severity where mortality ranges from 0 to 50 percent or is unburned.

Currently, there is little change in the amount of topography and land features that can be observed. The fire has not changed the visual condition. Partial retention is currently met within the existing condition.

As viewed from US Highway 26 (traveling east near Prairie City), the fire area is visible along a distant ridge top approximately 9 miles away. There is no visible contrast in color or form between the unburned forested area or the closer unburned ridges and the burned ridge on the skyline. The view into the project area is very limited along the US Highway 26 from Dixie Summit to Blue Mountain Summit due to the orientation of the road and screening from the foreground vegetation (Conover 2000). The same is true as viewed from State Highway 7. Over 50% of the middleground in the project area has been harvested in the previous 30 years. Due to lengthy viewing distance, these harvest areas are difficult to see even though previous harvest treatments removed most of the larger trees in the stands, greatly changing stand density and species composition. Other harvest locales on the ridge between Mossy Gulch and the John Day valley (outside the project area) are visible especially during the winter, when snow provides a bright contrast between more thickly stocked forest vegetation and previously harvested stands.

The visual corridor is enjoyed for positive natural elements, such as landform and vegetative patterns. It provides those traveling the highway a contrasting view of forested hillsides and the Strawberry Mountains to the south. The primary forest type in the area is the mixed conifer/dry forest that includes a majority of ponderosa pine. Other species present include Douglas-fir, grand fir, lodgepole pine and western larch on the more northerly aspects.

### **Outside the Viewshed Corridor**

The visual management goal for Management Area 1 (General Forest) is to manage for maximum modification, which is heavily altered in appearance. Deviations may strongly dominate the landscape character; however, they must be shaped and blended with the natural terrain so that elements such as unnatural edges, roads, and landings do not dominate the composition. Management Area 13 (Old growth) and Riparian Management Areas are managed for visual management objectives consistent with adjacent lands.

## **Environmental Consequences**

### **Direct and Indirect Effects**

#### Alternative 1 (No Action)

The visual quality rating would remain the same for the next 15 to 20 years until natural reforestation has been established. With 28 percent of the visual corridor having high burn severity, it will take 20 to 50 years to reforest these areas through natural regeneration depending on the distance from seed trees, except where lodgepole pine existed prior to the fire. The visual quality rating would not improve for about 50 years, until trees are large enough to give a forest-like appearance. The visual quality objectives of obtaining large ponderosa pine and western larch will take about 180 years with natural regeneration.

Alternatives 2, 3, and 4

The salvage harvest acres within the middleground are similar for each of the harvest alternatives (Alt 2 - 239 acres; Alt 3 - 165 acres; Alt 4 - 144 acres). Magnitude and duration will also share a similar effect on the viewshed. The visual quality in the middle ground would be impacted somewhat from current conditions. Since the viewing distance is between 5 and 10 miles, texture and color differences would not be obvious to those driving either Highway 26 or 7. The relatively small amount of harvest acres would not be easily seen along the ridgetops. The most noticeable feature of the harvested stands would be the scattered snags retained for wildlife habitat in Alternatives 3 and 4 along the horizon near the ridges. Again, due to remote viewing distance, this would be difficult to discern.

Tree planting would result in prompt reforestation. By year 25, trees would have grown enough to improve visual quality and most dead trees retained as snags will have fallen over. The visual quality objective of accommodating large ponderosa pine and western larch trees would occur by age 150, (about 30 years sooner than under the No Action alternative).

Alternative 5

The visual quality rating would remain the same for the next 15 to 20 years. The tree planting will result in prompt reforestation such that after 25 years, the trees will have grown enough to improve the visual quality and most dead trees retained as snags will have fallen over. The visual quality objective of large ponderosa pine and western larch trees will occur by age 150, about 30 years sooner than under the No Action alternative.

### **Cumulative Effects**

Alternatives 1 and 5

No visual cumulative effects of past, ongoing, or foreseeable activities are anticipated with the implementation of Alternatives 1 or 5.

Alternatives 2, 3, and 4

Past harvest activities (e.g., partial cutting) are a dominant feature as viewed east from Highway 26 near Prairie City. The effect is especially pronounced during the winter when partially cut stands are covered with snow. Partial cut stands are less dense and have more texture than uncut stands.

Following salvage harvest, the ridgeline would become more evident and lose some of the current texture of a forested stand. During the winter, more of the white snow cover would be seen. The condition would slowly change over the next 150 years when large trees would again be present in the forested landscape within the Easy Project Area.

### **Consistency with Direction and Regulations**

Visual Quality Objectives are minimum objectives and can be managed to a higher level where feasible. The proposed treatments identified in Alternatives 2, 3, 4 and 5 will meet Forest Plan standards.

### **Irreversible and Irretrievable Commitments**

There are no irreversible and irretrievable commitments that would affect visual resources by implementing any of the proposed alternatives.