

5/31/06 PAC Vegetation Sub-Group Meeting Notes

Attending: Arnie Arneson, Jen Watkins, Steve Buck, Mike McFeeley, Scott King, Liz Tanke, Phil Jahns, Rick Acosta. Bill Gaines attended for the first hour of the meeting.

For the first hour of the meeting, Bill Gaines gave a presentation and led a discussion related to Late Successional Reserves and the challenges associated with managing spotted owl habitat on the east side of the Cascades.

The result of this discussion is that the PAC vegetation sub-group indicated it was interested in exploring and assisting with this situation.

Information and discussion related to this topic follows.

This topic can be controversial and a point of contention. We need enough habitat for spotted owls and also need to keep the habitat from literally “going up in smoke”. Late Successional Reserves (LSRs) serve as part of the conservation strategy for spotted owls. These were set aside to protect and conserve spotted owls.

The eastern ½ of the Okanogan National Forest and the Colville National Forest are not part of the Northwest Forest Plan or the LSR network. The regional office of the Forest Service has given some direction that **minor** adjustments to LSR boundaries may be made to enhance or facilitate administration of LSRs.

Our challenge: clarify how to integrate the fire ecology of our area (frequent fires) into management of LSRs. Many components of the Northwest Forest Plan are suited more closely with the west side of the Cascades and don't fit as closely with the conditions present on the east side of the Cascades.

Fire exclusion has allowed more shade tolerant trees such as grand fir and douglas-fir to grow up underneath overstory pine. This has allowed spotted owls to be more prevalent on the east side of the Cascades. Although, spotted owls were probably present at some level even before fire exclusion occurred.

A rich database of owl sites exists for the Wenatchee National Forest going back to the 1980s. 1/3 of the owl population on the forest is in the dry forest and is in the situation where we're concerned about the sustainability of the habitat. A monitoring report was released about a year ago. We may be able to manage how to retain owl habitat and also reduce the risk of fire to the habitat.

1998: the Dry Site Forest Strategy was implemented on the Wenatchee National Forest. In 1997, a LSR assessment was completed. This assessment evaluated the risk of LSRs to insect, disease, and fire. A risk assessment was completed to figure out where we're at greatest risk for losing owl habitat.

In the dry parts of LSRs, we have two kinds of owl habitat: dense fir forest and old pine. The old pine forest is fairly open habitat with fairly open understory. This type of forest is somewhat rare these days.

Fuel reduction treatments would allow fire suppression to be more successful in the dry forest.

Owls are currently declining especially in our part of the world. A new owl recovery plan is currently being developed and should be completed in three to four years.

We're trying to balance and manage spotted owl habitat with reduction of fuels.

Bill talked about the following proposal. For dry forest portions of LSRs, manage 40% of the dry forest for northern spotted owl habitat forest structure and 60% of the dry forest LSRs for fuel reduction. Spotted owl habitat on the east side of the Cascades is usually at the bottom of drainages with some fingers going up ridges. The east side of the Cascades is naturally fragmented in vegetation structure.

60% of LSR dry forest proposed for fuel treatment would be geared toward restoring the open old pine forest. The old pine forest is good habitat for old growth dependent species such as white headed pileated woodpecker. The treatments would consist of thinning from below (smaller trees up to a certain size class). The objective of fuel reduction treatments would be to break up the fuels across the landscape. Feathering edges of treatment areas may help alleviate rate of spread of fires in fine fuels. Bill, however, points out that rapid surface fire spread is preferable over crown fire to retain spotted owl habitat. We would also need to deal with the fuels produced by the treatments.

Computer models are being developed to help determine effects of fuel reduction treatments on spotted owl habitat. We can be more efficient and effective in how we implement treatments across the landscape.

The following areas provide good northern spotted owl habitat: riparian areas, benches, and north facing slopes. These areas currently only comprise about 20% of the spotted owl habitat present within LSRs so we're needing to manage land that is not considered primo habitat for the spotted owl.

Question: What is the source of controversy/contention with this proposal?

Answer:

Some don't understand the disturbance ecology of the east side of the Cascades and feel that LSRs should not be treated. (Some have the view that we would be harvesting old growth which is not the case.)

There's a concern that we'd be reducing spotted owl habitat.

Question: What's the reason for the decline of the spotted owl?

Answer: Possible causes for the decline of the northern spotted owl include:

1. lag effect of habitat loss/reductions that occurred five to six years ago,
2. presence of barred owls,
3. and habitat loss due to wild fire.

Logging in the 1990s did not adversely impact spotted owls on the east side of the Cascades as it may have elsewhere.

A concern was raised that there would be a lack of funding for monitoring of fuel reduction treatments to understand the effects of reducing ladder fuels, and retention of

spotted owl habitat, and the implementation of adaptive management. The new Environmental Management System (EMS) mandated by the 2005 planning rule emphasizes monitoring and adaptive management. It's unknown how much funding would be a part of this.

Bill Gaines thinks that if the PAC wanted to take on this issue, he would suggest that the PAC consider developing a separate management theme which would focus on dry forest LSRs along with desired conditions.

Question: Would 40% of the dry forest within a LSR be alright to be managed as spotted owl habitat?

Answer: This figure was arrived at with the assistance of the regulatory agencies such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). It has been observed that the northern spotted owl is present in areas that contain less than 40% of northern spotted owl habitat. When studying this, analysis has typically been conducted at the 5th field watershed level (2000-3,000 acres in size).

Question: Please outline the process for getting approval from the regulatory agencies, etc. to allow a proposal such as this to be implemented.

Answer:

1. The first step was to obtain RIEC (Regional Interagency Executive Committee) approval. This was obtained 1/06.
2. Crafting of desired conditions and objectives. Participation by the PAC on this would be very helpful.
3. USFS regional office review.
4. USFWS review.
5. Formal Level 1 consultation at the project level would occur.

Broad themes related to management of the LSRs in the dry forest would also be helpful if the PAC was interested in crafting these.

It was pointed out by a member of the PAC that if the PAC were to take this issue on, suitability, guidelines, and criteria would be necessary and needed along with the identification of desired conditions. Also, perhaps an adaptive management theme would be possible.

It was also pointed out by a member of the PAC that if the Forest Service was to enter LSRs to do treatments of fuels, follow through ten years later with subsequent maintenance treatments is important and necessary. Without the follow-up, entry into LSRs would be pointless.

Timber sale contracts can be useful tools to reduce fuels in size classes 6" and above. Timber sale contracts are not effective in dealing with material (fuel) size classes smaller than 4-6".

Possible barriers to proposal

Reluctance by some to permit treatment in LSRs
Follow through/maintenance not planned or implemented
Forest Service has made promises in the past to do monitoring and then doesn't do it due to lack of funding.

Bill recommends the use of words such as “effective treatments”, “strategies” and “framing LSR management in an adaptive management framework”.

A member of the PAC pointed out that lots of issues related to riparian areas and fish coincide with the dry forest. Bill said that lots of owl habitat overlaps with important riparian areas also.

The group expressed interest in pursuing this topic/issue.

Agreements

The group also formally concurred that the term, “unroaded” where stated in the title of a vegetation management theme is defined as inventoried roadless areas, 5000 acres in size and larger and as adjusted by the 2006 inventory.

All titles of management themes will be changed if the titles of the management themes contain the word, “unroaded”. “Unroaded” will now be changed to “roadless” where present in the titles of the vegetation management themes.

The sub-group then spent some time refining and coming to a common understanding of the meaning of some terms. These follow.

Wildland Urban Interface (WUI): the definition is as stated in the Healthy Forest Restoration Act. It is ½ to 1 ½ miles from a structure with the understanding that this distance may be modified by a Community Wild Fire Protection Plan.

Vegetation Management: this term includes dealing with noxious weeds and non-commercial activities such as pre-commercial thinning, fuel reduction, pruning, burning piles, and planting, etc.

Timber Production: the group concurs with the definition in the “glossary”. The group concurs that “timber production” can also include forest restoration activities.

Unscheduled timber harvest: can include forest restoration activities, fire salvage, LSR harvest to promote old growth conditions.

Livestock grazing: is a permitted activity of cattle, horse, and sheep grazing (under a national forest grazing permit).

The sub-group agreed to delete the term, “**forage utilization**” as a use for purposes of the suitability exercise.

Developed facility: examples of this are campgrounds, shelters, bulletin boards, etc.

Personal use products: include fire wood, berries, mushrooms, boughs, transplants, rocks, Christmas trees, poles, etc.

The group spent the majority of the day discussing suitability of uses/activities for each of the vegetation management themes. Rationale was also identified for many of the situations in which the sub-group identified a use as “limited”. At the end of the day the sub-group also prioritized objectives (focus areas). These are also attached in a separate document.

The group outlined priorities for vegetation management at the end of the day.

Priorities for Vegetation Management

50% (+ or – 5%) efforts and funding to **Wildland-Urban Interface**.(Vegetation Management Themes #1 & #5).

As directed by HFRA legislation.

30% (+ or – 5%) efforts to **Dry Forest Restoration** (Vegetation Management Themes #2 & #6).

20% (+ or – 5%) efforts to **other forest restoration measures** with habitat projects (e.g. thinning) (Vegetation Management Themes #3 & #5)

The vegetation sub-group set 6/13/06 9:30 to 3:30 as a possible meeting time if needed. The following bin items could possibly be discussed at this meeting:

explore Bill Gaines’ proposal related to dry forests in LSRs,
Identify criteria that will allow the Forest Service to react expediently to crises/emergencies. (Example: produce salvage from fire more quickly). The group agreed to try to do some of this via e-mail.
Develop guidelines that would allow restoration activities in roadless areas and not adversely affect roadless character. Is there ability/authority to control/define roadless areas present on forest through revision of the forest plan. How can restoration activities be achieved in roadless areas without compromising the character of roadless areas?

It was also suggested that our consultants, Susan Hayman and Kathy Bond be asked to lead us toward achieving a product related to adaptive management at the next meeting of the entire PAC.

Please see the attached document to view the suitability of activities with rationale that the group discussed related to each vegetation management theme.