

Nez Perce National Forest
Route 2, Box 475
Grangeville, ID 83530
208-983-1950



Clearwater National Forest
12730 Highway 12
Orofino, ID 83544
208-476-4541

NEWS RELEASE

Contact: Laura Smith

Contact: Kimberly Delgado-Nelson

November 22, 2004

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Focus on forest plan revision: terrestrial ecosystems

Note: This is the third in a six-part series. The first five articles will feature each of the five proposed revision topics. The sixth article will provide information about the comment process.

Kamiah – Change. It is one constant in forested landscapes. It is also continual and unpredictable.

What has changed in the terrestrial, or land based, ecosystems in this area over the years? According to Clearwater National Forest Supervisor Larry Dawson and Acting Nez Perce National Forest Supervisor Steve Williams, there are three primary trends: (1) there is more vegetation on the land; (2) there are different types of vegetation on the land; and (3) trees tend to be more uniform in age.

Why have things changed? Both humans and Mother Nature played a role.

Weather patterns over the past decade have been warmer and drier than in preceding decades, making some vegetation more susceptible to fire, insects and disease.

An exotic fungus, white pine blister rust, invaded the area in the early 1900s, decimating expansive stands of western white pine and whitebark pine.

People have successfully extinguished thousands of fires since the early 1930s. Prior to that time, fire was a natural force that frequently “cleaned up” the forest floor and created openings. These openings would regenerate into areas of “young forest” rich with forage for wildlife.

Without these fires, shade-tolerant species such as grand fir and Douglas-fir flourished, growing into thick stands of trees. Fires that start in these heavily-forested areas can burn with greater intensity.

Existing forest plans relied heavily on timber harvest and prescribed fire to maintain desired tree species and to create a patchwork of trees in a variety of age classes. They permitted an annual harvest level of up to 173 million board feet of timber on the Clearwater National Forest and up to 138 million board feet on the Nez Perce National Forest. These calculations represented the upper limit of sustainable harvest that could be achieved.

Currently, each forest is cutting closer to 10-30 million board feet a year.

Dawson and Williams attributed the gap in projected versus actual harvest levels to several factors.

Timber harvest methods have changed through the years. When the 1987 plans were approved, clear-cutting was a common practice. Social and environmental concerns have prompted the agency to favor more selective cutting that removes less timber volume from each acre.

Existing plans also envisioned active management in roadless areas. Public opposition, changing agency direction and escalating development costs have caused the forests to limit activities in roadless country.

An increase in appeals and litigation has made environmental analyses necessary to produce timber sales more complex and more costly. At the same time, agency budgets have declined.

These changes have created a dilemma for forest managers charged with providing a sustainable flow of products to the local area while maintaining healthy ecosystems.

Dawson and Williams propose to respond to the complex situation by managing for the health of the terrestrial ecosystems. Both predict a sustainable flow of forest products will result from the proposed management strategy. It includes:

Expanded use of fire. Both supervisors envision fire will be the primary management tool in designated wilderness and roadless areas.

Timber harvest as the primary management tool in roaded areas. Harvest units will be designed to mimic conditions that could be expected to result from natural processes.

A re-calculation of expected outputs, particularly timber harvest, to more accurately reflect a level that can be produced and sustained. Dawson and Williams understand people are frustrated with the current discrepancy between forest plan projections and actual harvest levels.

According to Dawson and Williams, the proposed fire and timber harvest will improve habitat for wildlife species, including elk. Declining elk herds have been a concern to many citizens in the region.

Individuals interested in learning more about the forests' proposal for managing forest vegetation are encouraged to read the proposed action and notice of intent to revise forest plans. Both are available at local Forest Service offices and on the internet at www.fs.fed.us/cnpz.

###

For additional information contact Elayne Murphy or Ihor Mereszczak (208)935-2513.