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East Face Project Nears Completion of the Planning Process

BAKER CITY, Ore. – The final Environmental Assessment (EA) for the 47,000 acre East Face Vegetation Management Project area has been completed and is now available on the forest website. The EA describes a range of five alternatives developed to meet the purpose and need of this project and respond to the key issues raised during scoping. Alternatives ranged from no action to the creation of an extensive network of strategic fuel reduction areas focusing on key ridges, road systems, private land boundaries, wildland urban interface areas, and developed recreation areas.

The preliminary EA was released in October 2015 for a 30-day comment period during which 21 people and organizations provided the Forest Service with extensive comments. The team of resource specialists who designed the project and analyzed the effects of each of the alternatives considered and responded to each comment raised by the commenters. These responses are an appendix to the EA available on the forest website.

The Wallowa-Whitman Forest Collaborative worked closely with the Forest Service on the project, including developing the Purpose and Need and leading several field trips to increase understanding about the proposed project. The group's monthly meetings and conversations helped the agency identify opportunities to improve ecological, economic and social outcomes.

The project is now in the 45-day pre-decisional objection process during which those individuals or organizations that provided specific written comments during the scoping or 30-day comment period may provide feedback and object to the final EA and the draft Decision Notice. Based on the feedback received

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from the public and the Forest Collaborative group, Forest Supervisor Tom Montoya modified one of the alternatives from the EA as the preferred alternative for this project described in the draft Decision Notice required under the 36 CFR 218 Objection process. The modifications respond to support of biomass removal, concerns over temporary road construction, project economics, and retention of undeveloped areas.

“We appreciate the thoughtful comments provided by the commenters and the on-going open discussions with the Forest Collaborative and I believe the modifications I have made in the draft Decision Notice reflect this,” said Montoya. While the East Face Vegetation Management Project only deals with Federal lands, “I believe it will be a significant contribution to the All Hands, All Lands approach the Cohesive Wildfire Strategy promotes by reducing fuel loadings and reintroducing prescribed fire in key areas in combination with the activities currently being completed on our neighbors lands.”

The complete EA, draft Decision Notice, maps, data tables, and comment responses are available online at: www.fs.usda.gov/goto/EastFace

About the East Face Partnership

The East Face of the Elkhorn Mountains project is funded by the Joint Chief’s Landscape Initiative – a collaboration between the chiefs of two USDA agencies, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the U.S. Forest Service. The project aims to accomplish goals of the Cohesive Wildfire Strategy (CWS) by reducing the risk of loss to catastrophic wildfire through forest fuels reduction, restoring and maintaining landscapes, and improving fire response.

The East Face project combines the skills and expertise of the NRCS, the Forest Service, the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF), the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). These agencies are working together to proactively address wildfire issues in the East Face project area with an “All Hands, All Lands” approach spanning both public and private lands. The project targets fuels reduction treatments on more than 46,000 acres in the Wallowa Whitman National Forest; 1,224 acres of BLM land; 4,000 acres of ODFW land; as well as adjacent private lands.

The long term goal is to minimize potential impacts from wildfire on private residences, natural resources, and public infrastructure, while also improving overall forest health.

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The East Face project will reduce the impacts of wildfire to the watersheds supplying the irrigation needs of local farmers, and create areas of reduced fuel loadings near the municipal water supplies for La Grande and Baker City. It will also protect key habitat for federally-threatened bull trout, steelhead, and Chinook salmon.

NRCS' role in the partnership is to provide funding and manage contracts for eligible landowners to implement conservation practices on private lands; while ODF provides technical assistance to private landowners to support the development of forest management plans.

For more information about the East Face project website at: www.fs.usda.gov/goto/EastFace

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