

**United States Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Vale District Office
Baker Field Office
Baker City, Oregon**

**NOTICE OF FIELD MANAGER'S FINAL DECISION
The East Face Vegetation Management Project
DOI-BLM-ORWA-V000-2016-044-EA**

An Environmental Assessment (EA) that discusses the proposed East Face Vegetation Management within the 47,636 acre planning area on the La Grande and Whitman Ranger Districts of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest and the Vale Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is available for review at the Baker Field Office in Baker City, Oregon and the La Grande Ranger District Office in La Grande, Oregon.

Due to the different administrative review processes for each of the agencies, separate decisions will be issued by the US Forest Service (FS) and the Bureau of Land Management. This decision record documents the decision for the 1,200 overall acres of lands administered by the Vale District BLM within the East Face project area. A separate decision notice will be issued by the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest for the 46,036 USFS acres in the project area.

Background

The Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC) developed the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy (CWS) that responds to the requirements of the Federal Land Assistance, Management, and Enhancement (FLAME) Act of 2009. The CWS is a collaborative process with active involvement of all levels of government and non-governmental organizations, as well as the public, to seek national, all-lands solutions to wildland fire management issues.

Three primary factors have been identified as presenting the greatest challenges and the greatest opportunities for making a positive difference in addressing complex wildfire issues. They are:

- ***Restoring and maintaining resilient landscapes.*** The strategy must recognize the current lack of ecosystem health and variability of this issue from geographic area to geographic area. Because landscape conditions and needs vary depending on local climate and fuel conditions, among other elements, the strategy will address landscapes on a regional and sub-regional scale.
- ***Creating fire-adapted communities.*** The strategy will offer options and opportunities to engage communities and work with them to become more resistant to wildfire threats.
- ***Responding to Wildfires.*** This element considers the full spectrum of fire management activities and recognizes the differences in missions among local, state, tribal and Federal agencies. The strategy offers collaboratively developed methodologies to move forward.

The 47,621 acre East Face project area encompasses portions of three different wildland urban interface areas (WUIs). Within these WUI areas there are numerous buildings and residences along with industrial and non-industrial private forest and range lands. The project area is located south of

the City of La Grande Municipal Watershed, north of the North Fork John Day Wilderness, and west of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) Elkhorn Wildlife Area. The planning area straddles the Baker and Union county line.

The FS and BLM are proposing to reduce surface fuel loadings, ladder fuels, and canopy bulk densities in strategic locations throughout agency administered lands within the East Face Vegetation Management project area. Strategic locations are along key roads within the project area, ridgetops, private land interface areas, and in the vicinity of private structures. Numerous strategies for reducing hazardous fuels would be employed within the overall 47,621 acre project area. These actions are proposed to be implemented on 46,397 acres on the La Grande and Whitman Ranger Districts of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest and 1,224 acres of the 1,600 overall Vale BLM lands. However, this decision record only authorizes any project implementation for the 1,600 BLM acres of the East Face Vegetation Management project area.

An environmental assessment (EA) was prepared to determine whether implementation of the fuel reduction activities within the project area would significantly affect the quality of the human environment and thereby require the preparation of an environmental impact statement. By preparing this EA, agency policy and direction to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) has been fulfilled.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The following individuals, Federal, State, tribal, and local agencies were consulted during the development of this EA:

The East Face Vegetation Management Project was published in the Wallowa-Whitman Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA), a quarterly publication, in December 2013 and has appeared in each quarterly SOPA since then. This mailing is distributed to individuals, organizations, and agencies and is published on the forest web page. The project and proposed action have also been published on the Wallowa-Whitman Web page at: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=41765> and the East Face of the Elkhorn Mountains Project webpage at: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/wallowa-whitman/landmanagement/projects/?cid=stelprd3791060>.

The Wallowa Whitman Forest Collaborative established in June 2012, is comprised of more than 40 organizations and individuals passionate about working together on public land management efforts. They engage in landscape-scale analysis and support the USFS' restoration and job creation efforts on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. The collaborative sponsored two public field trips to the East Face Project area on July 24, 2013 and July 23, 2014. They also meet on a monthly basis to discuss and collaborate with the Forest Service on the East Face Project and others.

East Face information was made available to the public at Miner's Jubilee in Baker City, Oregon in July 2014 and the Union County Fair in La Grande, Oregon in August 2014.

Scoping and consultation for the project was initiated and is ongoing with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR). A meeting between the BLM and CTUIR's natural and cultural staff occurred on January 6, 2016 to discuss the project.

Scoping and consultation for the project was initiated and is ongoing with the Oregon Department of Forestry, Natural Resource Conservation Service, and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODF&W).

A detailed description of the proposed action was mailed on January 15, 2015 to approximately 210 forest users, adjacent landowners, and concerned publics soliciting comments and concerns related to this project. Fourteen comment letters were received.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the State Historical Preservation Officer (SHPO).

Consultation with National Marine Fisheries Service and US Fish and Wildlife Service for threatened and endangered species will be completed for this project.

An analysis file for this project is available for public review at the La Grande Ranger District. The analysis file includes specialist’s reports, data specific to the project, public notifications and their responses, meeting notes, and miscellaneous documentation.

FINAL DECISION

Based on the analysis described in the EA and associated project record, it is my decision to implement the modified version of Alternative 2 on BLM administered lands within the project area. This decision addresses the purpose and need elements for the project with a focus on improving stand health and meeting the goals of the Cohesive Wildfire Strategy to restore and maintain landscapes, create fire adapted communities, and improve fire response times.

The modified version of Alternative 2 will adjust fire behavior in the area, accelerate stands toward old growth stand structures, and provide wood products and forestry related employment opportunities to benefit local and regional economies.

SUMMARY OF ACTIONS TO BE IMPLEMENTED

BLM Project Area Boundary (PAB) - 1,200 acres (All treatments are within Priority One Treatment areas)			
Commercial Harvest Acres	Treatment Type*	Unit #	Acres
	HTH (S)**	3	33
	HPR (T)**	4	18
	HPR (S)**	5	20
	Total		
Non-Commercial Treatment Acres	Treatment Type*	Unit #	Acres
	WFM	417	148
	WFM	421	142
	PCT	418	80
	PCT	419	78
	PCT	420	27
	Total		

BLM Project Area Boundary (PAB) - 1,200 acres (All treatments are within Priority One Treatment areas)		
Temporary Road Miles Total		0.37
Prescribed Burning Acres	Unit #	Acres
	615	37
	616	39
	617	113
Total		189
Timber Volumes (Total Board Feet)		300,000

***HTH: Thinning harvest** - prescription is designed to stimulate the growth of the disturbance.desired residual trees.

HPR: Partial Removal harvest - prescription is the partial removal of the overstory over an established understory. Trees retained in the overstory are at levels adequate to meet green tree recruitment needs.

WFM: Fuels Reduction Mechanical consists of pre-commercial sized tree density management followed by a surface fuels reduction using a combination of hand work, mastication (slash busting) or grapple piling where surface fuel loadings exceed 15 tons/acre. Mechanical activities would not be allowed within INFISH buffers in these units.

PCT: Pre-commercial Thin is the manual pre-commercial thinning of past harvest units would result in variable spacing (14-20 feet between trees) including retention of approximately 10% of untreated area to provide for wildlife habitat needs. Species preference will be western larch, ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir. Riparian areas may be treated as described below.

Prescribed Burn Units - Over the next 10 years, prescribed burning would occur when weather and fuel conditions are appropriate to meet the objectives for each unit. Control lines would include roads, machine lines, hand lines and natural barriers.

****Harvest Methods** - Commercial harvest would include ground-based harvesting utilizing a tractor (T) or skidder that would operate on designated trails with selected spacing criteria in combination with whole tree yarding on slopes up to and including 35 percent. Skyline cable yarding (S) would use leave tops attached yarding on slopes exceeding 35 percent. Logs would be either partially or fully suspended to reduce soil disturbance.

Treatments are designed to manage stocking levels, reduce surface fuel loadings, ladder fuels, and canopy bulk densities in strategic locations throughout the project area. Strategic locations include stands along key roads within the project area; ridge tops, private land interface areas, recreation areas and residences, and along the La Grande Municipal Watershed boundary. Strategies for creating fuel reduction areas on BLM administered lands include the treatments described below. This alternative provides for opportunities to use prescribed fire across boundaries in the Elkhorn Wildlife Area, private lands, and onto BLM lands.

Five separate silvicultural thinning prescriptions and fuels reduction prescriptions will be implemented across the 1200 acres of BLM administered land within the project area. All BLM administered lands are considered Priority One¹ treatment areas as defined in the East Face Vegetation Management EA. Associated with the commercial removal units the following activities would occur:

1. Treatments would reduce overstocking of trees less than 7” diameter at breast height (dbh) to recommended stocking levels per plant association.
2. All snags ≥ 12 ” dbh would be retained.
3. Down wood would be retained at levels identified in the wildlife project design feature(s)(EA page: 49). All other materials <3” in diameter could be reduced to three tons or less per acre.

¹ **Priority One Treatment Area:** All WUI areas and areas and generally within 1.5 miles of private land.

Thinning Prescriptions on BLM Administered Lands

Thinning harvest (HTH) prescription is designed to stimulate the growth of the desired residual trees. Commercial tree removals will be implemented with skyline yarding systems over 33 acres.

Partial Removal harvest (HPR) prescription is the partial removal of the overstory over an established understory. Trees retained in the overstory are at levels adequate to meet green tree recruitment needs. Commercial tree removals will be implemented with ground-based tractors and skyline yarding systems over 38 acres.

Post-harvest follow-up - Units would be monitored following harvest activity for site preparation, regeneration, or stand improvement needs. Reforestation work will be accomplished on sites that are below recommended stocking levels (180 – 300 trees per acre depending on the site) through natural regeneration. Other post-harvest treatments may include pre-commercial thinning, and/or fuels reduction with fire.

Prescribed Fire - Over the next 10 years, prescribed burning (Broadcast, jackpot, pile) will occur when weather and fuel conditions are appropriate to meet the objectives for each BLM administered unit. No more than 10% of the available forage within the project area would be burned per year. Existing plantations and pre-commercial thinning areas would be avoided during burn layout and implementation. Control lines would include roads, machine lines, hand lines and natural barriers.

General Prescribed Fire Prescriptions:

1. Fires would generally be low intensity (1-3 foot flame lengths).
2. Desired fuel loading would be as listed in the following table:

Table 3 - Fuel Size Class

Fuel Size Class	Desired Tons/Ac	Lineal Feet
0-3" Diameter	<2	0
3-9" Diameter	<3	0
12" Plus Diameter	5	120-140

- a. Trees $\leq 2''$ dbh would be reduced to desired levels.

Fire line (less than two feet wide) would be constructed between road segments or natural barriers to provide containment lines prior to unit ignition. Burning along private land boundaries would be coordinated with adjacent landowners.

Low intensity fire would be allowed to back into all drainages or seasonal and ephemeral streams. Reducing these fuels will enhance forage habitat and increase overstory growth rates by making nutrients readily available after burning is completed.

Less than one half mile of temporary road would be constructed on BLM administered lands.

Alternatives analyzed other than the proposed action include:

All action alternatives analyzed in the East Face EA would result in identical treatments across the 1,600 acres of BLM administered lands within the project area. The alternatives are summarized below.

Alternative 1 - No Action

This alternative constitutes the "No Action" alternative. Fuels reduction, timber harvest, and other management activities identified in the East Face analysis area will be deferred. This alternative forms a baseline for comparison of the action alternatives.

Alternatives 3-5 – These alternatives are action alternatives that were developed by the USFS and reviewed and approved by BLM managers and specialists to respond to issues such as: retention of old growth habitat; retention of roadless areas; protection of connective corridors; wildland urban interface concerns regarding fire protection and suppression management; focus on dry warm forest types; and biomass extraction opportunities. All action alternatives result in the same range of fuels reduction and stand enhancement treatments on the BLM administered lands as described in the proposed action.

RATIONALE

After reviewing the EA developed for this project and the comments received on impacts, the BLM has selected Alternative 2 as modified (Alternative 2) with the listed design elements. This alternative will meet the purpose and need through meeting the objectives described below.

Alternative 2 as modified will reduce risks associated with large-scale, high severity wildland fire in the project area, especially in forests and woodlands that are adjacent to private and publicly owned forest lands (i.e., Wildland-Urban Interface areas).

Approximately 78 percent of the project area is currently within fire regimes that would exhibit mixed² to high severity stand replacement fires in the event of a wildfire. Of these, approximately 50 percent have a moderate to high departure from the historic fire return interval. There is a long history of large stand replacing fires within the East Face project area, with the most recent being the 4,000 acre 1989 Tanner Gulch fire and the 1,000 acre 2006 Red Mountain Fire. These factors contribute to the identified need to reduce fuel loading and to restore historic conditions, as the area continues to have a high incidence of fire starts from summertime lightning activity. Historically, fire was a dominant disturbance process in the Blue Mountains and the fire history within this project area indicates fire has played a major role in shaping the East Face forest landscape. Normally, low intensity fires crept through the drier forests and grasslands every 7 to 35 years while moister sites generally experienced fire every 30 to 100 years (Barrett et al. 2010).

A community at risk” (CAR) is defined as a group of homes or other structures with basic infrastructure and services within or near federal land. A wildland urban interface (WUI) area

² **Mixed Severity Fire Regime:** Forests under a mixed severity fire regime occupy a broad moisture gradient between lower elevation forests typified by low-severity fires and higher elevation forests in which high-severity, stand replacing fires are the norm.

surrounds a CAR, including a community's infrastructure or water source, and may extend beyond 1.5 miles of the CAR, depending on topography and geographic features used as an effective firebreak. The BLM administered lands in the project area are within the Beaver Creek Watershed, which is the municipal watershed for the city of La Grande. The area within this WUI and along the 20+ miles of private land interface on the eastern side of the project area are considered a high priority for fuel reduction treatments to reduce the risk of undesirable wildfire impacts.

Alternative 2 as modified moves fire adapted ecosystems in the drier portions of the project area towards their range of historic conditions. Treatments are designed to increase the percentage of fire tolerant tree species such as ponderosa pine, western larch and Douglas fir. Reintroduction of fire into the project area will assist with managing surface fuel loadings which would promote fire-adapted vegetation and decrease the departure in vegetation characteristics from historical to current conditions.

In summary, forest management and fuel reduction activities in Alternative 2 would reduce undesirable effects of future wildfires by reducing potential rates of spread and flame lengths in strategic locations within the project area, helping to protect important values at risk on private and public lands. In combination with the forest thinning and fuels treatments on adjacent private and Forest Service lands, Alternative 2 would help restore and maintain resilient landscapes, create fire-adapted communities, and improve fire response times (EA, pages 70-98) on BLM administered lands..

COMPLIANCE

Alternative 2 as modified has been reviewed and found to be in conformance with the Baker Resource Management Plan (RMP) (1989) and federal fire management policy, as described in the National Cohesive Wildfire Strategy (2013), The National Fire Plan (2000), A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment: Ten-Year Comprehensive Strategy (2001), and the local Baker County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) (2012).

Alternative 2 as modified has been found to be in conformance with Section 7(a)1 of the Endangered Species Act. It is in compliance with Federal laws that mandate the management of public land resources (Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976). It is in compliance with the various Federal laws, regulations, and Executive Orders dealing with cultural resources. In addition, the proposed action is in conformance with State, local, and Tribal land use plans, laws, and regulations.

The decision does not result in any undue or unnecessary environmental degradation. Resource values are protected through observation of project design elements.

The decision considered multiple resources and uses including wildlife habitat, riparian restoration, range, fisheries, cultural, local economies and communities, and forest health and fuels. The BLM concludes the selection of Alternative 2 best meets the fuels management and restoration purpose and need statement. The proposed action will move approximately 1,600 acres of BLM administered forestland toward pre-settlement reference conditions.

AUTHORITY

This wildfire management decision will become effective on August 1, 2016. A notice will also be posted in the Baker City Herald.

Authority for this fuels reduction and treatment decision is found under Title 43 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), subpart 5003.1. Effect of decisions; general (b) Notwithstanding the provisions of 43 CFR 4.21(a)(1), when BLM determines that vegetation, soil, or other resources on the public lands are at substantial risk of wildfire due to drought, fuels buildup, or other reasons, or at immediate risk of erosion or other damage due to wildfire, BLM may make a wildfire management decision made under this part and parts 5400 through 5510 of this chapter effective immediately or on a date established in the decision. Wildfire management includes but is not limited to: (1) Fuel reduction or fuel treatment such as prescribed burns and mechanical, chemical, and biological thinning methods (with or without removal of thinned materials); and (2) Projects to stabilize and rehabilitate lands affected by wildfire.

The BLM has made the determination that vegetation, soil, or other resources on the public lands are at substantial risk of wildfire due to drought, fuels buildup, or other reasons, or at immediate risk of erosion or other damage due to wildfire because high fuel loading within coniferous forests, woodlands and rangelands has increased the risks of ground fires becoming crown fires, and small fires becoming stand-replacement wildfires. Reducing hazardous fuels will help protect life, property, and resource values, as well as increase the safety of personnel involved in wildland fire management actions. Degraded landscape conditions and threats to resources, private property and fire fighter safety were determined by comparing existing conditions of hazardous fuels, wildfire risks, rangeland plant communities, forest health, and wildlife habitat to the desired condition for those resources. Fire behavior in these areas can be expected to have low rates of spread, low fire intensities, and low flame lengths immediately following fuel treatment.

Thus, notwithstanding the provisions of 43 CFR 4.21(a) (1), filing a notice of appeal under 43 CFR Part 4 does not automatically suspend the effect of the decision. Appeal of this decision may be made to the Interior Board of Land Appeals in accordance with 43 CFR 4.410. The Interior Board of Land Appeals must decide an appeal of this decision within 60 days after all pleadings have been filed, and within 180 days after the appeal was filed as contained in 43 CFR 4.416.

RIGHT OF APPEAL

This decision may be appealed to the Interior Board of Land Appeals, Office of the Secretary, in accordance with the regulations contained in 43 CFR, Part 4 and Form 1842-1. If an appeal is filed, your notice must be filed in the Baker Field Office, 3100 H Street, Baker City, Oregon 97814, within 30 days of receipt. The appellant has the burden of showing that the decision appealed is in error.

Filing an appeal does not by itself stay the effectiveness of a final BLM decision. If you wish to file a petition for a stay of the effectiveness of this decision, pursuant to 43 CFR 4.21, the petition for stay must accompany your notice of appeal.

If you request a stay, you have the burden of proof to demonstrate that a stay should be granted. A petition for stay is required to show sufficient justification based on the standards listed below.

Standards for Obtaining a Stay

Except as otherwise provided by law or other pertinent regulation, a petition for a stay of a decision pending appeal shall show sufficient justification based on the following standards:

1. The relative harm to the parties if the stay is granted or denied.
2. The likelihood of the appellant's success on the merits.
3. The likelihood of immediate and irreparable harm if the stay is not granted.
4. Whether or not the public interest favors granting the stay.

A notice of appeal electronically transmitted (e.g. email, facsimile, or social media) will not be accepted as an appeal. Also, a petition for stay that is electronically transmitted (e.g., email, facsimile, or social media) will not be accepted as a petition for stay. Both of these documents must be received on paper at the office address above.

Persons named in the *Copies sent to:* sections of this decision are considered to be persons "named in the decision from which the appeal is taken." Thus, copies of the notice of appeal and petition for a stay must also be served on these parties, in addition to any party who is named elsewhere in this decision (see 43 CFR 4.413(a) & 43 CFR 4.21(b)(3)) and the appropriate Office of the Solicitor (see 43 CFR 4.413(a), (c)) Office of the Solicitor, US Department of the Interior, Pacific Northwest Region, 805 SW Broadway, Suite 600, Portland, Oregon 97205, at the same time the original documents are filed with this office. For privacy reasons, if the decision is posted on the internet, the *Copies sent to:* section will be attached to a notification of internet availability and persons named in that section are also considered to be persons "named in the decision from which the appeal is taken."

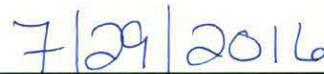
Any person named in the decision, *Copies sent to:* section of the decision, or who received a notification of internet availability that receives a copy of a petition for a stay and/or an appeal and wishes to respond, see 43 CFR 4.21(b) for procedures to follow.

CONTACT PERSON

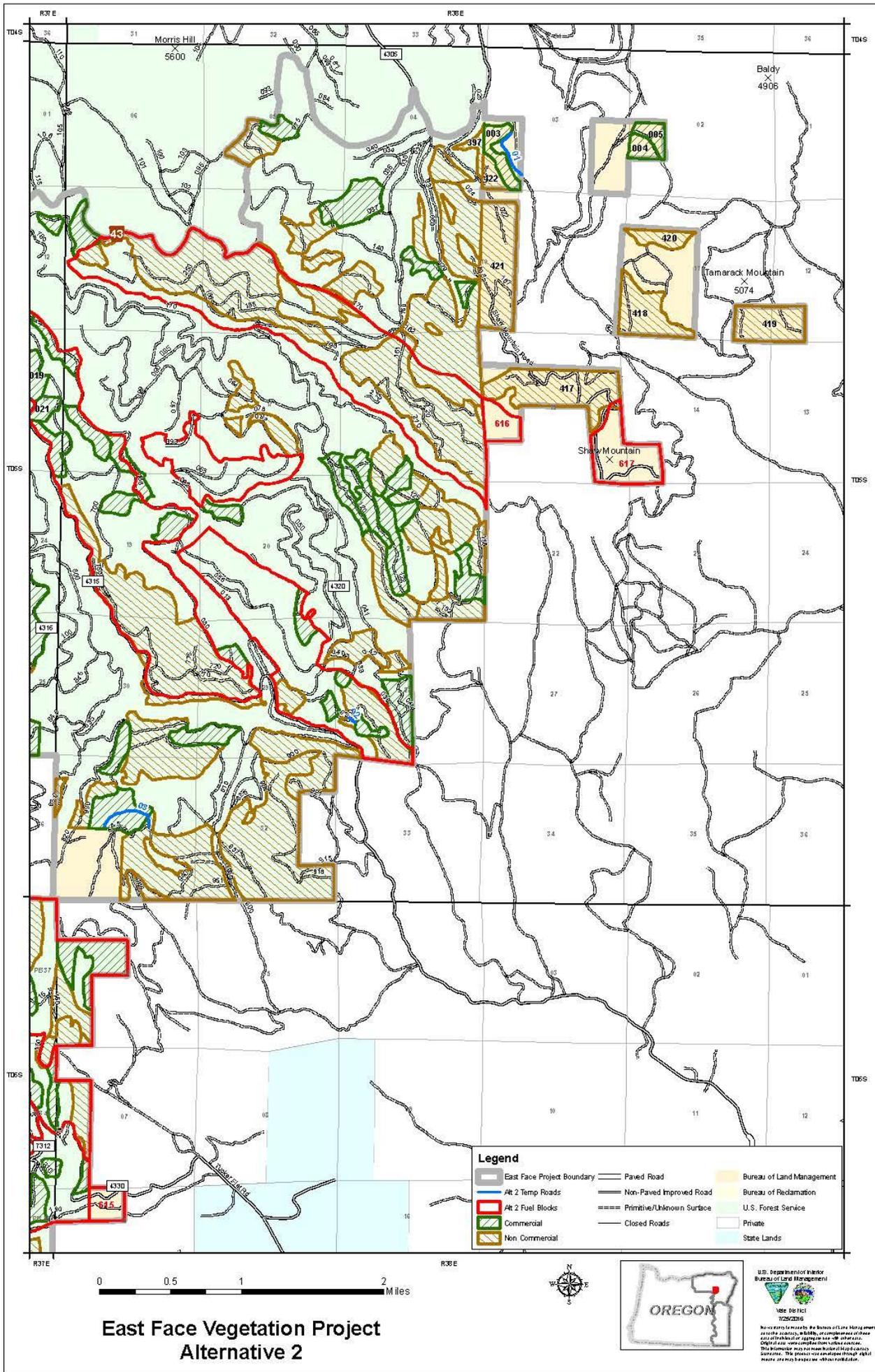
For additional information concerning this decision, contact Don Rotell, Vale BLM, 100 Oregon Street, Vale, Oregon 97918; telephone (541) 473-3144.



Lori D. Wood
Field Manager
Baker Field Office

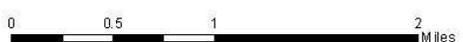


Date:



East Face Vegetation Project Alternative 2

Legend	
	East Face Project Boundary
	AR 2 Temp Roads
	AR 2 Fuel Blocks
	Commercial
	Non-Commercial
	Paved Road
	Non-Paved Improved Road
	Primitive/Unknown Surface
	Closed Roads
	Bureau of Land Management
	Bureau of Reclamation
	U.S. Forest Service
	Private
	State Lands



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