

Forest Plan Amendment # 19

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DECISION NOTICE
for
WHEELER POINT FIRE SALVAGE SALE

USDA - Forest Service
Umatilla National Forest
Heppner Ranger District

Wheeler County, Oregon

This Decision Notice (DN) documents the Forest Service decision to implement the Wheeler Point Fire Salvage Sale as described in the Wheeler Point Fire Salvage Sale Environmental Assessment (EA) and displayed in Appendix A. Wheeler Point Fire Salvage sale will harvest an estimated 13 MMBF of timber from approximately 2635 acres. There is an identifiable salvage component since 100% of the trees to be harvested are now dead or are severely fire damaged (as identified in the marking guidelines) and are not expected to live. As such, this decision is exempt from appeal as described in the provisions of subsection 2001(e) of Public Law 104-19.

The project area is located approximately 40 air miles southwest of Heppner in Wheeler County, OR. It includes Alder/Wheeler, Brown, Buckhorn, and Lower Kahler subwatersheds. The legal description is T 07 S, R 24 E, sections 7-18 and 20-24; and T 07 S, R 25 E, section 19, Willamette Meridian Surveyed. Stands of trees to be harvested occur within the E1-Timber/Forage and C1-Dedicated Old Growth management areas. Vicinity and project area maps may be found in Appendix A of this document.

The information summarized in this document is described in more detail in the EA. The EA documents the analysis of the project and is available for public review at the office of the Forest Supervisor in Pendleton, Oregon, and at the Heppner Ranger District, Heppner, Oregon. The EA is deemed to satisfy the requirements of applicable environmental laws as listed in subsection 2001(i) of Public Law 104-19.

The EA is tiered to the *Umatilla National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan FEIS, Record of Decision*, and the accompanying *Land and Resource Management Plan*, dated June 11, 1990. This includes the clarifying direction of Plan Amendment #10 *The Interim Strategies for Managing Anadromous Fish-producing Watersheds in Eastern Oregon and Washington, Idaho, and Portions of California (PACFISH)* dated February 24, 1995, and Plan Amendment #11 *Continuation of Interim Management Direction Establishing Riparian, Ecosystem, and Wildlife Standards for Timber Sales* dated June 12, 1995. It is also tiered to the *Managing Competing and Unwanted Vegetation FEIS, its Mediated Agreement, and Record of Decision* dated December 8, 1988. In addition, it incorporates by reference the *Environmental Assessment for the Management of Noxious Weeds* and its *Record of Decision* dated May 24, 1995 and the *Umatilla National Forest Interim Snag Guidance* dated April, 1993.

KEY ISSUES

Issues are specific concerns regarding a proposed action. The issues which affect the alternative development for this project are called key issues and are analyzed in the EA. Issues were identified through the scoping process involving Forest Service Resource specialists and the public.

1. Forest Health/HRV

Managing the ecosystem within its Historic Range of Variability (HRV) is believed to be the ideal method of maintaining a biologically diverse and functioning ecosystem. Most of the stands in the project area are warm grand fir and ponderosa pine plant association groups. Historically, the predominant characteristic of the area would have been seral, late/old structure ponderosa pine.

As a result of the extensive damage caused by the Wheeler Point Fire (August 1996), the structural and species composition in the analysis area has changed dramatically. With respect to HRV, currently the area has a much higher portion of stands in the very early and early structure stages with virtually no acreage in the late/old structural stage. A majority of the area burned very intensely, killing most trees and scorching entire tree boles. In addition, soil surface litter and humus were completely destroyed along with understory shrubs and ground cover vegetation. The fire consumed all of the advanced regeneration in the severely burned areas with only a few scattered live residual trees remaining. However, in some areas the fire intensity was more moderate and the burn created a mosaic pattern of severely impacted areas interspersed with cooler burned, less affected areas. Some trees will survive where the fire intensity was less severe.

The current level of live residual trees within the project area does not provide an adequate seed source for natural regeneration. Artificial regeneration will be necessary over the majority of the project area, even if salvage logging does not occur. Appropriate species to plant would include ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, and western larch.

2. Soil Productivity/Erosion/Sedimentation

The Wheeler Point Fire burned through the analysis area and killed approximately 75% of the vegetation. Loss of vegetative cover affects the rate at which water infiltrates the soil. In addition, litter and above ground vegetation reduces raindrop impact. Organic matter from decaying vegetation also promotes soil aggregation which increases infiltration rates.

The veneer of silt texture soil is highly productive but susceptible to erosion when the vegetative cover is removed. Scab flats and south facing slopes tend to be drier sites which do not support as much vegetation as other areas within the watershed. Due to erosion over the past 6800 years since much of the ash soil was deposited, much of the soil within the analysis area is shallow and rocky.

Within the project area only category 2 and 4 streams (Class 3 and 4) occur. Stream-side vegetation is non-existent along most of the streams within the fire boundary at this time; however, most of the riparian hardwood vegetation burned in the fire has resprouted and stream-side vegetation should recover quickly.

3. Economics/Social

The use of forest resources has contributed to the quality of life for many residents who live in the vicinity of the Umatilla National Forest and the Heppner Ranger District. Many communities are closely tied to the Forest in work and recreation. These communities are directly influenced by changes in the timber supply produced from the Forest and by the Forest production of firewood, game, scenic resources, and recreational opportunities.

There are many different "stakeholders" with varying opinions as to how fire recovery efforts should be implemented. These viewpoints range from "do nothing, let nature take its course" to "maximum recovery efforts of timber value." In between is the viewpoint of efficient use of renewable natural resources on a sustainable basis.

DECISION

In reviewing the public comments received during the scoping for this project and after the 20 day pre-decision review, I found that most respondents held one of two viewpoints. Some felt strongly that recovery of the burn area would best be accomplished by allowing natural disturbance processes to restore ecosystem integrity, and suggested that a custodial approach was best suited to management of the area. Others felt that intensive management, based on scientific principles, should be employed to hasten restoration of the burned area to a more sustainable condition. Many also pointed out the

economic benefits that the local economy would experience from salvage harvest receipts. They were concerned that a delay in salvage harvest for one year would allow blue stain to enter the ponderosa pine killed by the fire and severely reduce its value.

In making my decision, I considered all these viewpoints. I realize that there is no simple, clear answer to post-fire management on this area. I believe, as Richard Everett suggests in his August 17, 1995 memo to the Regional Forester, that intensive science-based management can be used in concert with natural processes to restore sustainability of burned areas. With these concepts in mind, I have selected a strategy that integrates both active management on some areas of the burn and a less intensive approach on others.

Based on the Interdisciplinary Team analysis, resource specialist input, other agency consultation, as well as the recommendations from District Ranger Delanne Ferguson, I have decided to implement Alternative 3 with its associated mitigation and monitoring. This alternative integrates both active and passive techniques for restoration of the burned area. Salvage harvest will occur on approximately one-third of the total 7,500 acres of Forest Service ownership burned. This will yield approximately 13 MMBF of wood products. Treatments will focus on areas with a low risk for additional resource damage and areas in most need of post fire restoration activities. Reforestation will occur on approximately 4,000 acres and other appropriate restoration activities will also be employed.

RATIONALE FOR THE DECISION

The criteria I used in arriving at my decision included:

- Restore the burned area, including the plantations destroyed in the fire, to historical vegetative structure and species composition.
- Hasten the salvage of fire killed timber to optimize economic recovery.
- Protect natural riparian function and provide for long-term soil productivity.
- Provide snags and down wood for wildlife habitat.
- Protect the downstream anadromous fisheries resource.

The selected alternative meets all of my decision criteria well. Almost all of the area burned lies within Forest Plan Management Area E1, which emphasizes the production of wood fiber and forage. This will be accomplished through the harvest and reforestation activities planned. Tree planting will help develop a species composition that will closely match the historical one. In the future, intermediate harvest treatments may be used to develop stand structure similar to those historically on the site. Salvage harvest can occur as early as the 1997 operating season, assuring that fire killed ponderosa pine will not be degraded by bluestain.

Most of the area planned for harvest has relatively flat topography and only category 2 and 4 (class 3 and 4) streams occur in the area. Consequently, the area has a low risk for soil and water degradation when compared to many other areas on the Forest. Harvest will occur on 2635 acres, however soil and water resources will be adequately protected through various mitigation measures, including PACFISH buffers along all category 2 and 4 streams.

Harvest prescriptions have been designed to provide habitat for cavity nesting species. Enough standing dead material will be left to meet the needs of primary cavity nesters at the 100% potential population level. Existing down woody material, as well as all pre-existing snags and non-merchantable trees will be left. Potential harvest of standing dead trees in approximately 1000 acres of shelterwood

and seedtree units established before the fire will not occur. I believe this is necessary to assure that adequate snags and down wood will be left in these units. In addition, a replacement for a C1 (Dedicated Old Growth) area destroyed in the fire will be designated in a site specific Forest Plan Amendment.

Although the project area includes only class 3 (non-fish bearing) and class 4 (intermittently flowing) streams, an anadromous fisheries resource is located approximately 3 miles downstream from the Forest boundary in Kahler Creek. Negative changes in water quality resulting from the burn and post burn activities could effect this resource. However, I believe that implementation of Alternative 3 will result in only minor changes to water quality. When taken in context of the entire burn area, any changes resulting from this proposal will be negligible. The prescribed restoration and mitigation activities will reduce this effect even further. Timber harvest will not occur in PACFISH category 4 RHCA's and harvest will only occur in the outer half of selected category 3 RHCA's. Implementation of timber BMP's will also reduce the possibility of negative effects. Planned restoration activities including seeding and reforestation is expected to accelerate recovery more rapidly than if no action were taken.

HOW ISSUES ARE RESOLVED IN THE DECISION

1. Forest Health/HRV

The selected alternative will harvest approximately 2635 acres. However, almost one-third of the largest remaining dead trees, and all live trees expected to survive, will be left to provide temporary late/old structure. Standing dead and live trees will not be removed from seedtree and shelterwood units established before the fire.

Tree planting following harvest will assure that units are regenerated to species suited to the site. Reforestation is also planned in existing plantations destroyed by the fire. This will substantially reduce the time needed to restock stands and assure a desirable species mix. As these new plantations get older, various silvicultural practices may be used to adjust stand structure to meet HRV goals.

2. Soil Productivity/Erosion/Sedimentation

The interactive effects of the Wheeler Point Fire, as well as timber harvest and temporary road construction in Alternative 3, would not be much higher than no action, due to the overwhelming effects of the fire. Effects of implementing Alternative 3 will be further reduced through the use of PACFISH buffers, Best Management Practice's (BMP's), and other mitigation measures.

Soil compaction will be minimized through the use of BMP's. Where necessary, subsoiling will be used to reduce soil compaction. Existing down material, as well as standing dead trees left in harvest units, will provide a minimum of 2-3 tons/acre of woody material. This will provide benefits for wildlife in addition to providing for long-term nutrient recycling.

3. Economics/Social

It is estimated that alternative 3 will make approximately 13 MMBF of timber killed in the fire available for harvest. The timber will be sold in a timely manner so the value of the ponderosa pine component will not be reduced by bluestain. The sale of this timber will provide direct as well as indirect benefits. Receipts from the sale of timber are estimated to be 6.5 million dollars. Local loggers as well as mill workers will benefit directly. Counties will receive a portion of the sales receipts and some restoration activities will be funded through the use of coop dollars.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

Alternative 1 - No Action This alternative constitutes the "no action" alternative and serves as a baseline against which the "action alternatives" and their effects are compared. Current biological and ecosystem processes would continue as they are in the present condition. Current management direction and existing activities such as grazing, fire protection, and road and trail maintenance would

continue. No restoration activities, other than those already accomplished in the Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation (BAER), would be undertaken.

Alternative 2 This alternative was developed to follow Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines for maximum salvage treatment within the fire boundary.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

On September 25, 1996, the District sent scoping letters to 127 individuals, agencies, organizations, permittees, and local state and tribal governments concerning the initiation of planning for the Wheeler Point Fire Salvage Sale project. A notice requesting public comment was published in the East Oregonian, the Condon Times Journal, and the Heppner Gazette Times. In addition, this project was also published in the 1996 fall quarterly issue of the Umatilla National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA). The District received 10 letters and 5 phone calls in response to scoping.

A Notice of Availability for public review of the EA was published on November 15, 1996 in the East Oregonian and November 13, 1996 in the Heppner Gazette Times. Letters were sent to 139 individuals, agencies, organizations, and local tribal governments (20 of which received a copy of the EA). I received seven letters and one phone call about the project during the 20 day comment period. The comments and responses are summarized in Appendix A of the Environmental Assessment.

SITE-SPECIFIC FOREST PLAN AMENDMENT

It is my decision to implement the following adjustments UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF 36 CFR 219.10. The changes have been determined not to be significant for the purpose of the planning process and represent a non-significant amendment to the Umatilla National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. This amendment was analyzed and documented within the EA for this project, completing the necessary NEPA procedures and the associated public notification required under CFR 219.10.

Alternative 3 is not consistent with the Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines in Management Areas E1 and C1 due to the tree mortality caused by the Wheeler Point Fire. The Forest Plan is based on healthy forest conditions. My decision to issue this site-specific, non-significant Forest Plan amendment will not alter the desired future condition in these management areas. This amendment is as follows:

MANAGEMENT AREA E1-TIMBER AND FORAGE

Habitat Effectiveness Index (HEI) and Cover

In management areas E1 Timber and Forage, Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines require and HEI of no less than 30. This project area does not meet this requirement currently, and under this alternative will not meet this requirement for 30 years. The Forest Plan is amended by allowing an exemption from this standard (Forest Plan 4-179) for the Wheeler Point Fire Project Area.

Dispersion of Created Openings

Following the fire, the subwatersheds within the Wheeler Point Fire Project Area do not meet Forest Plan standards for no more than 30 percent of general forested lands in the 0-10 age class. The Forest Plan is amended by allowing an exemption from this standard (Forest Plan 4-77) for the Wheeler Point Fire Project Area.

MANAGEMENT AREA C1-DEDICATED OLD GROWTH

In the event of catastrophic loss of existing designated old growth habitats causing a drop below the minimum distribution requirements, replacement units in the most advanced successional stage available will be selected in close proximity to the original location (Forest Plan 4-145).

Dedicated Old Growth Area located in T 07 S, R 24 E, sections 10, 14-16 was destroyed and will be replaced by a similar suitable area located in T 07 S, R 24 E, sections 11, 13, 14, and 24 and T 07 S, R 25 E, sections 18 and 19.

OTHER FOREST PLAN CONCERNS

Created Openings

This alternative will "create" openings of over 100 acres. This is permitted through exemption language in the Forest Plan for catastrophic situations such as the Wheeler Point Fire (Forest Plan 4-73).

NFMA CONSISTENCY

Any project proposed for implementation has to meet the requirements of the National Forest Management Act (NFMA). In accordance with these requirements, I conclude from the results of site specific analysis documented in the Environmental Assessment and Analysis File that:

The selected alternative is consistent with the Umatilla National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan and Record of Decision dated June 11, 1990 and as amended in Plan Amendment #10 (PACFISH) and Plan Amendment #11 (Ecoscreens) and is in compliance with the requirements of 36 CFR 219.27 (e) (f).

All alternatives were developed to be consistent with the requirements of the Record of Decision for the Pacific Northwest Region, Final Environmental Impact Statement for Management of Competing and Unwanted Vegetation and the associated Mediated Agreement.

In addition, I find that there will be no expected irreversible or irretrievable commitment of resources. There will be no adverse impact on any Threatened, Endangered, or Sensitive species of plant or animal or their habitat; wetlands or floodplains; prime farmland, rangeland or forestland; public health or safety; or minority groups, civil rights, women, or consumers. This project will also have no effect (as defined in 36 CFR 800.4(b)(1)) on any listed or eligible cultural resources.

Judicial Review of Salvage Timber Sales

This decision will be implemented immediately to facilitate Forest rehabilitation and recovery in the Blue Mountains and to capture the economic benefit from dead timber.

This decision for the Wheeler Point Fire Salvage sale qualified as a salvage sale as described in the provisions of subsection 2001(e) of Public Law 104-19. Under that legislation, salvage sales are not subject to the provision of the appeal regulations of 36 CFR 215.

The documents and procedures required for the preparation, advertisement, offering, awarding, and operation of these salvage sales shall be deemed to satisfy the requirements of the applicable environmental laws as listed in subsection 2001(l) of Public Law 104-19.

This decision is subject to judicial review only in the United States district court for the district in which the affected Federal lands are located. As required under Section 2001(f) (1) of Public Law 104-19, any challenge to this salvage sale project must be filed in the district court within 15 days after the advertisement of the sale.

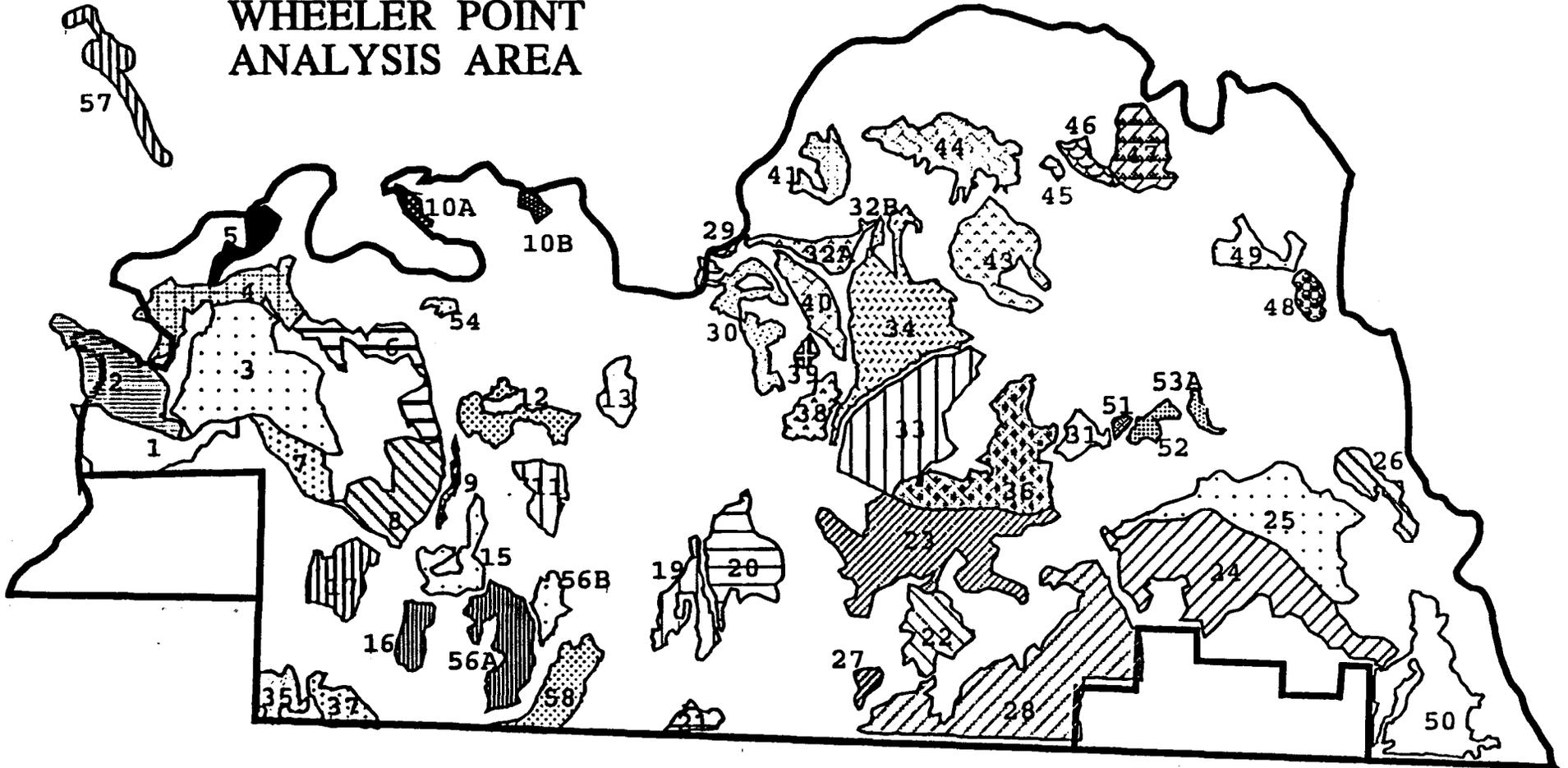
For further information, contact Delanne Ferguson, District Ranger, Heppner Ranger District, P.O. Box 7, Heppner, OR 97836 or at (541) 676-9187.

for 
THOMAS K. REILLY
Acting Forest Supervisor

Date 12-10-96

ALTERNATIVE 3

WHEELER POINT ANALYSIS AREA



LEGEND

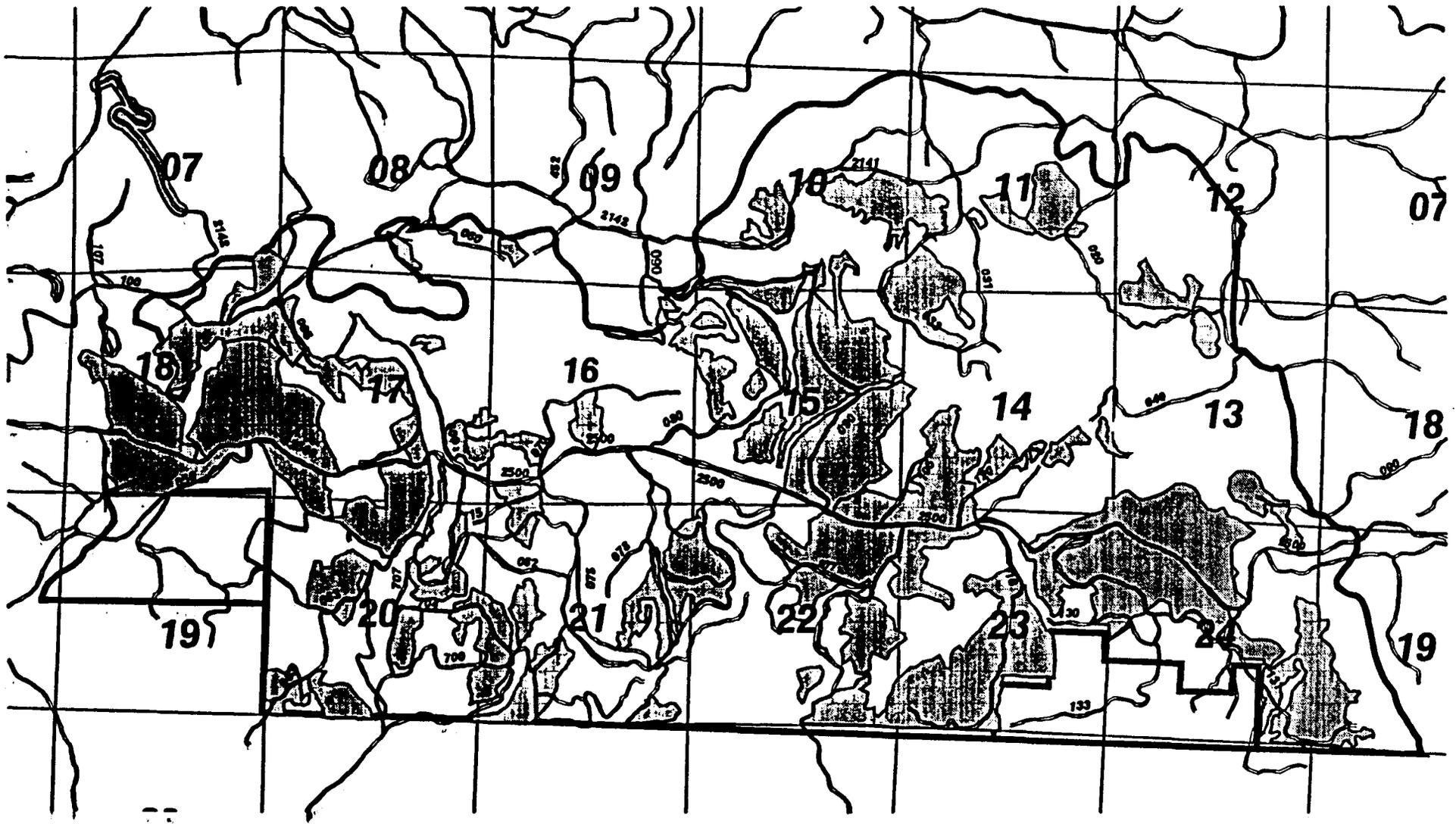
-  Proposed Units
-  Wheeler Point Fire

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ALTERNATIVE 3

WHEELER POINT ANALYSIS AREA



LEGEND

- ▣ Proposed Units
- ≡ Roads
- Wheeler Point Fire

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