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Decision Notice
And
Finding of No Significant Impact

Abla Timber Sale and Fuel Reduction Project

Forest Plan Amendment 23

Umatilla and Union Counties, Oregon

USDA Forest Service
Umatilla National Forest
Walla Walla Ranger District

This Decision Notice documents the Forest Service decision to implement Alternative C from the Abla Timber Sale and Fuel Reduction Project Environmental Assessment (EA). This decision will also include the following area improvement projects: the obliteration of 1.75 miles of road to improve water quality, 309 acres of tree planting to meet visual quality objectives, approximately 10 acres of subsoiling to restore soils from the combined effects of this action and past harvest operations, and the closure, restoration, and relocation of the Jubilee Lake overflow campground that includes sanitation facilities. The decision on other improvement projects, listed on page 18 of the EA, is being deferred until some assurance of funding for these projects can be made. Another decision document will be prepared for implementing the additional improvement projects.

The selected alternative will harvest dead and dying subalpine fir and lodgepole pine and western larch with high infestation of dwarf mistletoe. Mistletoe infections have reduced tree rigor and crowns such that mortality is expected within the next five years. In addition to the salvage and sanitation harvest a fuelbreak would be constructed to reduce the risk of a continuous fire front moving from the Walla Walla Watershed into the Lookingglass Watershed. The existing stand conditions place this area at a high risk to stand replacement fires because of the amount of late successional stage forest with high surface fuels and closed canopy.

The selected alternative includes: 1. A fuelbreak developed by reducing fuels along Forest Road 6403 between areas of low fire behavior found in the existing plantations. This would be accomplished by creating breaks in the continuity of the forest crown and reducing surface fuels. One hundred foot wide strips will be thinned and the down fuels removed leaving 3 to 5 acre islands of unharvested trees with standing and down dead material retained. This will create a random pattern of fuel reduction within the harvest unit. 2. Sanitation within subalpine fir stands and stands with high levels of dwarf mistletoe in western larch. 3. Group selections to regenerate western larch and grand fir. 4. Eighteen acres of shelterwood harvest in a stand of lodgepole pine having high mortality. 5. Road reconstruction to improve drainage and surface conditions on Forest Road 6403. A cut to length logging system would be used to reduce the impacts to soil and water quality. An estimated 5,755 mbf would be removed from units totaling 783 acres.

Information summarized in this document is described in more detail in the EA and the analysis file. These documents are available for public review in the Forest Supervisor's Office in Pendleton, Oregon and the Walla Walla District Office in Walla Walla, Washington. The EA documents the site-specific analysis conducted by an interdisciplinary team to determine the potential environmental effects connected to the proposed timber sale and other habitat restoration projects.

The analysis area covers approximately 4,340 acres in the Lookingglass Watershed and a small portion of the Walla Walla Watershed. Forest Roads 6400, 6403, and 6411 form the boundary of the area. The Walla Walla Watershed is along the

northern boundary with the roadless portion outside of the analysis area. No harvest will occur within the roadless area. The upper reaches of Summer Creek and Swamp Creek fall within the area. Bald Mountain is outside the southwest corner and Jubilee Lake is near the northeastern boundary. Dusty Springs campground is located near the center of the area. The legal location is T. 4 N. R. 38 E. sections 12, 13, 14, 24, and 26; T. 4 N. R. 39 E. sections 5, 6, 7, 8, and 18.

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 Strategies for Establishing Riparian, Ecosystem, and Wildlife Standards for Timber Sales (Eco Screens), 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 Decision Notice dated May 24, 1995.

Key Issues

Through discussions involving Forest Service resource specialists in response to comments received during public scoping , the following key issues were identified within the project area:

Key Issue 1. Visual Quality

The Forest Plan visual quality objectives provide standards for scenic quality within foreground and middleground in Management Areas A3, Viewshed 1, and A4, Viewshed 2. While the Standards and Guidelines provides management direction, it also describes a desired future condition of a healthy vigorous forest, maintained by occasional logging, that is encouraged to be park-like in appearance with big trees. The park-like appearance does not fit the disturbance processes or stand characteristics of high elevation cold and cool forest biophysical settings.

The cold forest biophysical setting is comprised of subalpine fir and lodgepole pine. Stands dominated by these species tend to have high stocking levels with trees under 18 inches in diameter. The stands are relatively short lived, 90 to 120 years, with high levels of mortality and surface fuels in late successional stages. A stand replacement fire would be the natural process for renewing the forest. Many of the cold forest stands are in this late stage with mortality as high as seventy percent.

Grand fir stands also have high stocking levels with the majority of trees under 24 inches. When large trees are present, they are remnants from past stand replacement events. These stands will also increase in surface fuels as the stands reach middle to late successional stage as found in sixty percent of the cool forest biophysical type.

Should a wildfire occur under present stand conditions, a stand replacement event would cover large areas of Management Area A3. The wildfire would not meet visual quality objectives, however a fuels reduction project, even though it increases the likelihood of containing or controlling the fire, may also exceed visual quality objectives for A3. Thinning the crowns would alter the overstocked appearance of stands and creating openings may exceed the Standards and Guidelines.

Key Issue 2. Effects on Wildlife Habitat and loss of hiding cover.

Approximately 35 percent of the analysis area is within Management Area C4, Wildlife, and is surrounded by A3 and isolated from other C4. The goal for C4 is to provide high levels of potential habitat effectiveness for big game and dead wood material, snags and downed logs for other wildlife species. The forest plan objectives for C4 and A3 conflict when managing for big game. Stands in C4 are opened for forage areas while A3 and A4 limits created openings to levels below optimum for big game forage. Management Areas A3 and A4 provide cover, particularly hiding cover, along the road system, however, it is above the Forest Plan standards for big game. Management areas A3 and A4 provide better habitat values for species preferring forest cover.

Hiding cover and dead wood could be lost by timber management and fuel reduction activities. Any reduction in canopy along Forest Roads 6403 or 6400 would remove tree boles providing hiding cover for big game. Down wood and snags

would be removed impacting cavity nesting wildlife species as well as lynx and pine marten. The reduction of stressed trees would reduce foraging habitat for insect eating wildlife species.

Key Issue 3. Late Old Structure Forest.

Late old structure (LOS) forests are important on the landscape in maintaining Forest Plan indicator species using old growth habitats. Fragmenting this habitat is a concern. Connective corridors between old forest and foraging habitat are necessary for the movement and reproduction of these species. Comments stated that large trees, greater than 21 inches dbh, are also important to retain and that harvest in stands with large trees should be avoided. There appears to be conflict between the need to maintain future options and the salvage of mortality or the construction of fuelbreaks within LOS stands. Mistletoe has reduced the live crowns in western larch such that the trees are not expected to live more than five years. A portion of these trees are larger than 21 inches in diameter. Harvesting seems to conflict with the standard and guidelines of the Eco Screens for retaining LOS.

Decision

Based on the results of the analysis documented in the EA, it is my decision to implement the harvest and associated mitigation of Alternative C at this time. Alternative C also includes the following improvement projects to improve water quality within this National Marine Fisheries Service designated priority watershed for Snake River chinook salmon: To obliterate 1.75 miles of roads, to close and restore the existing Jubilee Lake overflow campground and to provide sanitation facilities at a new overflow campground located at the end of Forest Road 6400231. There will be approximately 309 acres of tree planting, most if it to restore visual quality in the areas of high stand mortality around Dusty Springs. There would be approximately 10 acres of soil restoration to reduce the affects of compaction.

I have decided to defer making a decision on implementing any other improvement projects listed on page 18 of the EA. This includes sapling planting for visual quality along Forest Roads 6400 and 6403, hand piling slash within the foreground of Forest Road 6403, fencing aspen clones, and noxious weed treatments. I do not believe these proposals will be ripe for a lecision until some assurance of funding is established. At that time additional NEPA analysis will be completed to disclose effects and document the decision.

A cut to length logging system would be used on 783 acres removing an estimated 5,755 mbf of timber. Because harvest prescriptions will not treat the total unit acres, tree removal and fuels reduction will actually occur on approximately 526 acres. Harvest prescriptions include group selections, thinning, sanitation and salvage, shelterwood, and precommercial thinning. Logging slash would be treated using a variety of methods. Jackpot burning would be used in areas having heavy fuel loads and in areas that can be regenerated to western larch. Hand piling may be necessary within the foreground along Forest Road 6403 where logging slash increases the focus on management activities. Jackpot burning is permitted within foreground where the fire intensity would be low and additional tree mortality would not occur. In areas of low fuel levels, slash generated by harvest and precommercial thinning may be scattered outside the foreground area rather than piling and burning.

Fuels would be reduced through harvest and jackpot burning on approximately 469 acres to create a fuelbreak along Forest Road 6403. The fuelbreak will reduce a fire's rate of spread and provide fire conditions that are more readily controlled. The harvest will reduce crown closure and remove large down fuels along 8 miles of Forest Road 6403 between older plantations. The plantations are areas of low fuel levels were fire tends to creep and remain localized. The combined actions of salvage and special harvest along Forest Road 6403 will allow for easier control of a wildfire.

Units 2, 3, 4, and 5 are within the fuelbreak and will be salvaged because of high levels of mortality in the subalpine fir, approximately 200 acres.

Special harvest prescriptions will be used to create the fuelbreak in Units 1, 10, 12, 22, 23, and 25. Harvest from approximately 269 acres, will create a mosaic of canopy closure and areas of reduced surface fuels. Group selections and thinned strips 100 feet wide will be used to separate and thin crown closures. Uncut areas, 3 to 5 acres in size, would remain along with associated down wood and snags. Approximately 46 percent of the unit area would have harvest while removing approximately 36 percent of the volume.

Additional sanitation will occur on 126 acres to reduce dwarf mistletoe infections in western larch in Units 7, 11, 14, 15, 18, 24, and 27. Group selections will occur in Units 13, 16, 17, 20, and 21 from 155 acres with harvest occurring on 27 acres. Shelterwood harvest would occur in Unit 8, 18 acres of dead and dying lodgepole pine.

There would be 8.8 miles of road reconstruction to Forest Road 6403, improving surface drainage and reducing sediment yields. Drain dips will be constructed and the surface reinforced with rock.

A non-significant Forest Plan amendment will be needed to implement this alternative. It is my decision to implement the following changes to Management Areas A3, C1, and C4 under the authority of 36 CFR 219.10. This will be a site specific amendment and was analyzed and documented with the EA for this project completing the necessary NEPA procedures and associated public notification required under 36 CFR 219.10.

- Management Area A3, Viewshed 1, along Forest Road 6403 will be changed to A4, Viewshed 2. Constructing the fuelbreak using group selection and thinning would have greater impacts to the foreground than would be permitted in Management Area A3. This road has low traffic and is protected by Management A4 further north. The modifications will increase the chance of controlling a wildfire coming from the Walla Walla Watershed because fuels and crown closures could be reduced. This is further discussed under How Issues are Resolved in the Decision later in this document.

- The amendment will also include changing the boundaries of several Dedicated Old Growth, C1, areas away from Forest Road 6400 and the Developed Recreation, A6, area around Jubilee Lake. The replacement areas are stands of old growth forest adjacent to the C1 along Forest Road 6400. The old growth in A6 will be moved to a new location in section 15, a mile east of the current location. There would be no net loss of C1. The C1 near Jubilee Lake would change from the current 86 acres to 190 acres. Moving the C1 boundary away from Forest Road 6400 would allow for the removal of hazard trees in the future. Though hazard trees along the haulroute can be removed with this timber sale contract, the current conditions do not indicate any removal is necessary. These changes preserves the goals of the C1 network.

Modifications to Alternative C that I have Decided to Implement

During the internal review of the final EA, questions regarding the completeness of the noxious weed analysis were raised. In response to these concerns I directed the IDT to complete additional analysis to determine if all requirements for the FEIS for Managing Competing and Unwanted Vegetation, the Associated Mediated Agreement, The Guide for Conducting Vegetation management Projects in the Pacific Northwest Region, and the Umatilla National Forest Environmental Assessment for the Management of Noxious Weeds were being met. I have reviewed this report and have determined that the requirements in these documents have been met. I have also decided that the additional mitigation recommended in this report will be incorporated into selected Alternative 2. I have determined that this additional mitigation will not add to effects already disclosed for this alternative and in fact, will reduce the effects disclosed in the EA. I am directing that the noxious weed report for this project be added to the planning record and a list of additional mitigation be included as an enclosure to this Decision Notice.

Rationale for the Decision

The criteria I used in arriving at my decision were:

1. The action needs to maintain or improve water quality.
2. The action needs to increase the likelihood of controlling a wildfire moving between the Walla Walla and Lookingglass Watershed.
3. The action needs to minimize the loss of wood fiber due to deterioration, weather checking, and stand diseases such as dwarf mistletoe.
4. The action needs to have little to no affect on listed threatened, endangered, or sensitive species.

The selected alternative, which includes the Forest Plan Amendment and improvement projects, meets these criteria well. The cut to length logging system reduces impacts to soil and water quality. The past three years of monitoring cut to length systems on the Walla Walla District indicates that soil displacement occurs on less then 2 percent of the area. This compares

well with the results from the Limber Jim study that indicated 4.3 percent displacement occurred in the study units along with '.7 percent compaction. Impacts to water quality is not expected to be measurable in streams because of the low impact ɔgging systems, PACFISH buffers, and Best Management Practices (BMPs) implemented with this action. There is additional reduction of non-point sources of impacts to water quality by reconstructing Forest Road 6403 for better drainage and surface reinforcement, the obliteration of 1.75 miles of road, and the closing, restoration, and relocation, with sanitation facilities, of the Jubilee Lake overflow campground.

Approximately 60 percent of the analysis area is middle to late successional forest with high surface fuels and closed canopy. To the west is the Walla Walla Roadless Area, protected under the Forest Plan by Management Area F4. The area is to remain natural appearing and largely undeveloped. Eighty percent of the forest in the Walla Walla Watershed is late successional with high levels of surface fuels and closed canopies. The risk of a fire moving out of the Walla Walla Watershed and into the Lookingglass Watershed as a crown fire is high. Prevailing winds carry from the Walla Walla Watershed into the Lookingglass Watershed. Breaking up the fuel structure along the ridge between the two watersheds is important to the control of a fire. Thinning the crowns would help be bring the fire to the ground. Reducing the surface fuels would lower the rate of spread and increase the efficiency of constructing fire lines. Not only are the values of protecting the plantations and the existing forest cover from a stand replacement event accomplished but recreation values are protected as well. Jubilee Lake receives high use during the summer and there are numerous hunter camps along Forest Road 6403 that increase the risk of man caused fires. The fuelbreak will help to reduce the intensity of fires while isolating areas of higher risk to stand replacement events. This alternative provides greater modification of fuels than the other alternatives and lowers the risk of a continuous fire front. The fuelbreak constructed under this alternative would break up fuel continuity, both within the crowns and on the surface. Suppression forces would be needed to supplement the fuels reduction, and the fuelbreak would provide an anchor point for any suppression activity.

Sanitation and salvage will be used to develop almost half the fuelbreak. The area of Dusty Springs is experiencing high mortality in the subalpine fir and lodgepole pine. Approximately 45 percent of the sale volume will be salvage and sanitation. The stands with the highest mortality have been identified. Stands that do not require immediate treatments to maintain health and vigor have been deleted from the alternative. The alternative focuses on the removal of dead and dying timber while at the same reduces the risk for a wildfire moving across the ridge system. This action will minimize the loss of vood fiber due to deterioration, weather checking, and stand diseases.

Biological evaluations of the project indicate there would be no affect on bull trout, Snake River fall and spring/summer chinook salmon, Snake River steelhead trout, and mid-Columbia steelhead trout. There may be an impact to individual or habitat of Californian wolverine or American Lynx but the action will not likely contribute to a trend toward federal listing. Canopy and stand conditions have been greatly altered by the mortality and the action will regenerate stands while leaving down wood and snags above Eco Screen requirements. In other areas of lynx and pine marten habitat, the created openings would be narrow enough to allow animals to cross. Canopy cover greater than 40 percent, will be retained on 60 percent of the area. The project meets all the Eco screens direction of the Forest Plan; it does not lead to fragmentation of the LOS stands and provides for connectivity between LOS stands.

How Issues are Resolved in the Decision

1. Visual Quality

Currently the A3 and the proposed A4 areas do not meet Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines for created openings within the analysis area. Past harvest, before adoption of the Forest Plan, is responsible for this condition. The openings created by the mortality in the subalpine fir and lodgepole pine are from the occurrence of catastrophic conditions caused by insect and disease attacks and add to this condition. Group selections will be less than 2 acres in size and placed in the interior of the stands to minimize visual impacts. The group selections will not occur within foreground. The forwarder routes will be designed so views into the stands would be avoided. The 374 acres of harvest within the viewsheds will generate 71 acres of created openings of which 43 acres come from the salvage. Created openings would increase from 21 percent to 23 within the A4 along Forest Road 6403 while the foreground would increase from 18 percent to 19 percent. Several of the group selections will be placed in areas that have blowdown or in areas of past lightning fires. Created openings from the special harvest creating the fuelbreak, makes up less than 1 percent of the total openings.

The created openings, in combination with the thinnings, would break up the continuity of the fuelbed and crown closure, solate stands, create openings where fire resistant tree species can regenerate, and remove dead and down wood. This will

reduce the momentum of a running crown fire so that the mechanism of spread would become spotting rather than a continuous flaming front. The short term negative effect of additional created openings, beyond that caused from past harvest or insect and disease, will be offset by improvements in forest health and increased efficiency in controlling a wildfire. The thinned stand along Forest Road 6403 will regenerate under the canopy. This will provide additional visual screening, hiding cover, and areas of lower fire intensity. The normal process for stand regeneration for these stands would have been several hundred to several thousand acres regenerated by stand replacement fires. Large openings would be considered normal for this landscape, however, this action will try to keep this from happening and attempt to increase the number remanent trees that remain after a catastrophic fire.

Forest Plan Amendment changing the Management Area from A3 to A4 along Forest Road 6403.

Changing the Forest Plan management area from A3 to A4 would give greater flexibility in constructing the fuelbreak. The construction of the fuelbreak will be visibly noticeable in the foreground however the feel of passing through an overstocked forest would remain. The foreground within 50 feet of Forest Road 6403, would be thinned while the distant foreground would look nearly untouched. By allowing management activities to be obvious in the middleground and background a network of forwarder routes can be constructed that would separate crowns and make for a more effective fuels reduction. Constructing the fuelbreak to meet A3 standards would still retain the potential for a crown fire to carry through the stands as a continuous flaming front. The low user traffic and the fact that the road is given A4 protection further north warrants changing this portion of Forest Road 6403 to A4.

2. Effects on Wildlife Habitat and loss of hiding cover.

The area would continue to provide good, high elevation, elk summer range and meet all Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines. Canopy cover would be lost in areas of high mortality when the dead and dying trees are removed. The buildup of down wood would be removed, reducing the impediment to big game travel. The salvage harvest and required planting in the visual corridor will allow for a quicker return of cover values. Summering elk would be somewhat more vulnerable to disturbance due to the thinning along Forest Road 6403, however uncut strips fifty to hundred feet from the road should provide adequate hiding cover. Once the thinned portions along the road fill in with regeneration, distant view into the stand would be obscured. Forwarder routes leaving Forest Road 6403 will be designed so that distant views into the stands would not occur. The removal of existing dead and dying trees and the construction of the fuelbreak would reduce cover values, total cover would be reduced to 60 percent, but the action would also help to protect these values from a loss by wildfires. The access and travel management plan for the area would not be changed. Open roads do not access the interior, C4 area.

Impacts to lynx and pine marten habitat will not contribute to a loss of viable populations. Created openings made by group selections, will be shaped so they can be crossed. These narrow, 100 to 200 feet, openings will provide rodent habitat and down wood adjacent to them will be retained at existing levels. In the thinned portions of the fuelbreak, the canopy closure will remain above 40 percent and provide adequate cover for pine marten. Harvest in the salvage areas will create a mosaic of crown density from open areas to closed canopy depending on the amount of mortality. Down wood would be left to meet Forest Plan standards. Approximately 380 acres of early successional stages would be developed with adequate cover to provide travel between them.

Snags would be reduced from the existing levels within the areas harvested, however, they will be retained at levels above those recommended for the ECO Screens, Forest Plan Amendment 11. No snags would be removed in uncut portions of group selection or special harvest units. Harvest would occur on 526 acres from a total of 783 unit acres.

3. Late Old Structure Forest

The analysis area provides important connective routes between Lookingglass Creek, Jubilee Lake and old forest stands found in the Walla Walla watershed. The selected alternative had units deleted and prescriptions modified to retain and develop connective corridor values. There would be 152 acres of harvest within connective corridors, 88 percent of it by group selections or special harvest. Large trees would be retained along with at least 40 percent canopy closure. The shelterwood unit also falls within a corridor. It is a lodgepole pine stand with high mortality and few large trees. The shelterwood would regenerate cover quicker than no treatment.

The Historic Range of Variability (HRV) analysis indicated that the Cold, Dry, and Cool Forests were all within or above HRV standards for late old structure (LOS). Harvest activity would occur on 206 acres of the 3,896 acres of LOS identified

in the HRV analysis, most of it, 170 acres, salvage. There will be trees over 21 inches cut with this action, less than 10 ercent of the volume. Most of them will come from salvage and sanitation units. Group selection units will also cut 21 inch ees, however the harvest will not change the stand structure. Enough trees larger than 21 inches will remain within the stands. The proposed harvest meets the ECO Screens direction of the Forest Plan and does not lead to fragmentation of LOS stands while providing for connectivity between LOS stands.

Other Alternatives Considered

Alternative A: (No Action) No new management actions would take place. The current management direction and existing activities would continue. The current biological and physical processes creating stand disturbance would be allowed to continue.

Alternative B: (Proposed Action, Fuelbreak Construction using Current Forest Plan Direction for A3) This alternative would harvest approximately 390 acres of salvage of which 18 acres are shelterwood; 26 acres of commercial thinning; and 366 acres of group selection. The total estimated volume to be removed using a cut to length logging system is 4,560 mbf. The fuelbreak would be constructed using long, narrow group selections. The stands would retain a continuous canopy closure because the group selections would be as island while with Alternative C the leave stands would be islands.

Other alternatives considered but not developed include:

- Salvage only: High stand mortality was found in the subalpine fir stands and lodgepole pine. Many of the western larch units had low harvest volume per acre, 2 to 3 mbf. Given the high stocking levels in these stands, forwarder routes would have removed more volume than salvageable material. There were other needs within the stands that would be better treated using other silvicultural methods. Stand treatments would manage for seral species, improve the health and vigor of the stands, and protect other resource values.

Restoration without commercial harvest: This alternative would use prescribed fire to reduce fuels in the fuelbreak while roposing the water quality restoration projects. Such an alternative would not meet Forest Plan standard and guidelines or goals. Fuel levels would increase in these late successional stands and place them at risk to a stand replacement wildfire. Prescribed fire would not work well because of the high fuel loads and the major forest species are not fire resistant. Prescribed fire without removal would be high intensity and kill many trees.

Funding for restoration projects of the type proposed by the action alternatives is not available, unless, it is covered by KV funding or stumpage generated by the timber sale. Restoration only would be proposed when funds are available to complete the project. The environmental analysis would be completed for the project. Several examples of restoration only projects can be found in the Umatilla National Forest Schedule of Proposed Activities (SOPA).

Public Involvement

Abla Timber Sale first appeared in the Umatilla National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions in the Summer of 1997. Scoping for this project began on January 13, 1998 with the mailing of 143 letters to individuals, organizations, businesses, and local, state, and tribal governments. Four letters where received in response to the scoping process.

The Notice and Comment Period began on Sept. 7, 1998 with a public notice in the East Oregonian and a mailing of 147 letters stating that the EA was available. Eleven copies of the EA were sent along with the letters to individuals or organizations that participated in scoping or expressed an interest in the project after scoping was completed. One organization asked for a copy of the EA and Biological Evaluations.

Mitigation Measures

The mitigation measures that were developed reflect the existing direction found in the Umatilla National Forest land and Resource Management Plan, program direction, and responses to site specific needs determined by the Interdisciplinary Team. Alternative specific mitigation is found on page 15 of the EA and Management Requirements Common to Alternates 3 and C are on pages 16 and 17.

Monitoring

Activities and their effects, including effectiveness measures, would be monitored. In addition to the Forest level monitoring, the specific monitoring activities that would be performed for the Abla Timber Sale and Fuels Reduction Project are listed on page 18 of the EA.

NFMA Consistency

Any Project proposed for implementation must 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 alternative documented in this Decision Notice is consistent with the Umatilla National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan and Record of Decision dated June 11, 1990, including amendments 8, PACFISH, and 11, Revised Screens, and is in compliance with the requirements of 36 CFR 219.27.

Finding of No Significant Impact

Based on the analysis documented in the Environmental Assessment, I have determined that the action to be taken under this Decision is not a major Federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment. An Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not needed. The beneficial and adverse direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts discussed in the Environmental Assessment have been disclosed within the appropriate context. These impacts are expected to be low intensity with no significant irreversible or irretrievable commitments of resources.

1. The decision does not have adverse or beneficial effects which are significant. I have considered the following factors in this determination:

a. This decision irretrievably removes trees from the site, however, the mitigation for the effects of this removal adequately reduces the affects and meets Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines.

b. The harvest removal will have a short term, irretrievable, reduction of crown cover however the action is not irreversible. The areas receiving treatments for sanitation, salvage or shelterwood harvests have had canopy reductions through mortality. These stands would regenerated faster by stand treatment. The special harvest removals will modify the mosaic of surface and aerial fuels within the fuelbreak. The strip thinning leaves islands of unharvested areas and creates stringers of thinned areas having about a third of the trees removed. Crown closure in special harvest units would be above 40 percent. Shade tolerant species are expected to regenerate under the thinned canopy and a closed canopy would redevelop.

c. The canopy reduction and small created opening should have little affect on pine marten or lynx habitat. Outside of the openings created by stand mortality, the openings created by group selections will be narrow enough to allow pine marten to cross and the remaining canopy closure would provide enough cover for pine marten and lynx to utilize the area. Down wood will be left at or above Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines and the unharvested areas within units will not have standing dead or down dead trees removed. Big game total cover would be reduced to a forage to cover ratio of 40 acres of forage to 60 acres of cover from and existing ratio of 30:70. The action is still within Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines. Salvage harvest areas represent 80 percent of the 426 acres of cover becoming areas of forage. The narrow, less than two acre created openings, will have little impact to the overall cover values but will create micro forage habitat for big game as well as lynx and pine marten.

d. The amount of area harvested is small compared to the size of the analysis area or even the total unit acres. Out of a 4,340 acre analysis area, 783 acres will be included in units while only 526 acres would be harvested. Acres harvested represents approximately 67 percent of the unit acres or 12 percent of the analysis area.

e. The logging system and unit locations along with mitigation and no harvest entries within Riparian Habitat Conservation (RHCA) areas reduces the risk of sediment reaching streams. The cut to length logging system using a forwarder has been shown to have low levels of exposed soil, less than 4 percent, and low levels of compaction, less than 1.7 percent. Disturbed sites will be small and scattered over the harvest areas. Hydrologic functions will be little impacted by this action. Down stream Beneficial Uses will not be degraded and the action would not add to existing problems in the Walla Walla or Grande Ronde Subbasins. The after harvest ECA will become 11.3 (10.7 existing) percent for the Loohingglass Watershed and 2.6 (2.3 existing) percent for the Walla Walla Watershed. These ECA levels are below the National Marine Fisheries Service's level of concern, which is 15 percent.

f. There would be no harvest within PACFISH buffers, RHCAs. Shade will be retained along the Class II, III, and IV streams within the analysis area. There are no Class I streams. Only the Class IV streams will have harvest adjacent to RHCAs. Protection of RHCAs will retain shade and increase the filtering of sediment movement across the slope. In addition the harvest areas are on or near ridgetops in the upper reaches of the watersheds. Impacts to water quality are expected to be unmeasureable either in the Grande Ronde or Walla Walla subbasins.

g. The HRV analysis shows that all forest types are above or within historical ranges of variability. Twenty-one inch trees can be cut, however the types of harvest and the objectives of the fuelbreak would retain or develop large trees. Large tree removal would make up less than 10 percent of the sale volume. Snags and down wood will be left at rates above that required by Forest Plan Amendment 11. Most of the larger trees will come from the sanitation/salvage prescriptions with additional trees coming from the group selections. This harvest will not change the LOS character of the stands except in the areas of highest mortality.

h. Recreation use and behaviors will be altered and will likely impact individuals who use the current Jubilee Lake overflow campground. Users will be further from the lake but will be located in an area that would have lower impacts to water quality than the existing site and provide sanitation facilities. It will provide a feel of greater isolation because it will be away from the heavily used Forest Road 6400. Other benefits to water quality will come from the surface hardening of Forest Road 6403, currently a native surfaced road, and from 1.75 miles of road obliteration.

2. The proposed Forest Plan amendment will not significantly affect public health or safety.

3. Past stand management and salvage activities have caused the analysis area to be above the Forest Plan Standard and Guidelines for created openings within A3 and A4. This action will cause another 71 acres of created openings within the viewsheds, 86 percent of the acres would be in A4. The salvage harvest will generate approximately 43 acres of openings while the group selections will generate 28 acres. The group selections will be less than 2 acres in size and will not be viewed from Forest Roads 6400 or 6403. The negative effect of additional created openings and thinning of the crowns is offset by improvements in forest health and the increased efficiency of controlling wildfires. The affects of this action, when combined with the existing actions, will not adversely affect the desired visual quality of the viewshed.

4. Additional, large scale blowdown is not expected under normal storm conditions and patterns. Historically, large scale blowdown occurred from storms with winds above 60 miles per hour or along the edge of large created openings where eddies formed. The small opening size and the thinning, leaving dominate canopy trees that are most root firm, should not increase blowdown above normal conditions. The canopy should not be opened enough to let the winds drop into the stands and increase the stress on the roots and boles. Shelterwood trees from past harvest have remained standing.

5. The fuelbreak proposed in this action is temporary in nature until changes occur in the arrangement of late successional stages across the landscape and more of the area is in a state of low fire intensity. The amount of late successional stages with high fuel loads place the area at high risk to stand replacement fires. This alternative reduces the risk greater than the other alternatives because it provides greater modification of the canopy and reduces the risk of fire being carried through the crowns. There will be lower risk for a continuous fire front and fire would most likely spread by spotting. Suppression forces would be needed to supplement the fuelbreak.

6. No activities will affect the quality of the human environment, outside of those made public in the Forest Plan FEIS. No highly controversial effects have been identified.

7. The decision does not set a precedent for future actions with significant effects and does not represent a decision in principle about future consideration, nor is it related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulative significant impacts.

8. The proposal will cause no loss, destruction, or adversely affect known cultural or historic sites or other objects listed in or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. Any resources discovered will be protected by contract provision.

9. No inventoried or dedicated old growth will be affected by this alternative.

10. The action will have no adverse effects on endangered or threatened species or critical habitat under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. The biologist preparing the Biological Evaluations for Aquatic, Terrestrial, and plant species evaluated this project and made the determination of no impact or no effect on listed species.

11. Adoption of the Selected Alternative would not significantly affect the following elements of the human environment, which are specified in statute, regulation, or executive order: Air Quality, Area of Critical Environmental Concern, Cultural Resources, Farm Lands (prime or unique), Flood Plains, Native American Religious Concerns, Threatened or Endangered Species, Hazardous or Solid Waste, Water Quality, Wild and Scenic Rivers or Wilderness.

Administrative Appeal Rights

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to Forest Service regulations at 36 CFR 215.7. Any written appeal must be postmarked or received by the Appeal Deciding Officer, Robert W. Williams, Regional Forester, ATTN: 1570 APPEALS, P.O. BOX 3623 Portland, OR 97208-3623 within 45 days of the date of publication of the legal notice announcing this decision in the East Oregonian Newspaper. Appeal must meet the content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14.

For further information, contact Thomas Reilly, District Ranger, at the Walla Walla Ranger District, 1415 West Rose Street, Walla Walla, WA 99362 or call 509-522-6290.

JEFF D. BLACKWOOD
Forest Supervisor

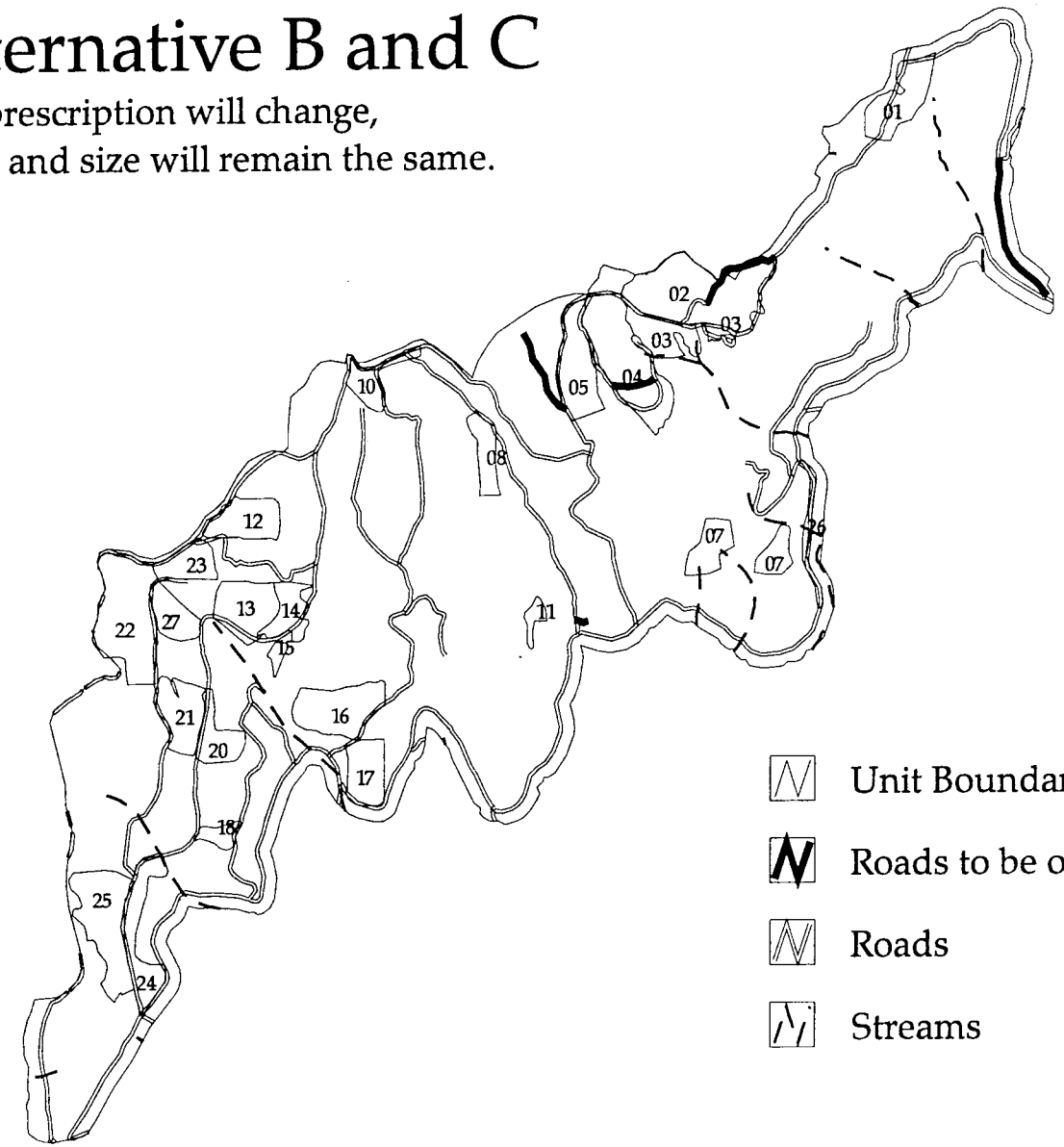
11/5/98
Date

Enclosures (1)

Project Area Map
Noxious Weed Mitigation

Alternative B and C

Unit prescription will change,
shape and size will remain the same.



Additional Management Requirements

for the Control of Noxious Weeds

Abla Timber Sale and Fuel Reduction Project

The following measures are in addition to the those already listed as Management Requirements Common to Alternatives B and C on pages 16 and 17 of the EA.

Project or contract maps will show currently inventoried high priority noxious weed infestations as a means of aiding in avoidance or monitoring.

Where existing inventories or pre-project inventories indicate that an infestation occurs on or near a ground disturbing project, the project will be designed, in coordination with the District noxious weed coordinator, to plan for the long term management and monitoring of the infestation and to prevent the spread of the infestation off site.

1. For the spotted knapweed site on Forest Road 6400 near the intersection with 6400150 the weeds will be pulled after germination and prior to flowering in the year harvest of Units 16 and 18 will occur. This would be in late June or early July. This site is at a watersource and represents a high risk to spreading this weed to other locations. The continual management of this site would be funded as mitigation.

2. For the spotted knapweed and St. John's wort site on Forest Road 6400230, from the intersection with road 6400231 to the gate, manual treatment methods will be used. Forest Road 6400231 will become the access to the new overflow site. The weed infestation at the intersection with 6400230 increases the risk of weeds spreading along 6400231 and onto the recreation site.

All skidding equipment, and road construction equipment including water trunks and fire equipment will be cleaned prior to moving onto the Forest. This requirement does not apply to passenger vehicles or other equipment used exclusively on roads. Cleaning will be inspected and approved by the Forest Officer in charge of the specific project.

Educate the contractor and sale administrator about the identification of noxious weeds. Provide them a map showing the location of known sites.

Educate recreational users about the importance of reducing the spread of noxious weeds. The kiosk at Forest entry points, campgrounds, and a sign at the overflow campground should be used for this and telling how and where weed free hay and straw can be obtained for forest use.

Monitoring for Noxious Weeds

The following will also be added to the Monitoring Plan for this project and funded as required mitigation for KV financing.

The following monitoring will occur for five years after the project:

1. Sites that have been treated by manual methods will be surveyed yearly for noxious weeds as well as the roads that could be infested by the harvest activity or recreation use, Forest Roads 6400150, 6400230, and 6400231. At the end of five years the monitoring would be adjusted according to the results of the surveys.

2. Harvest units would be surveyed the first year after harvest and slash treatment, the third year, and the fifth year to determine the presence of noxious weeds and if the post harvest crown closure has effective in reducing the risk to spread of weeds in combination with the reduced exposed soil from the logging system. These exams can be done in conjunction with stand and stocking surveys.

3. Survey Forest Road 6403 for noxious weeds the first and third year after harvest. If site appear after the third year additional monitoring would be needed.

4. Any new sites would be treated by manual methods, additional analysis will be needed for additional treatment.

Abla Timber Sale and Fuel Reduction Project
Responses from the Notice and Comment Period

Appendix C

On September 7, 1998, 147 letters where sent to interested individuals and organizations on our mailing list. At the same time Public Notice EO-5287 appeared in the East Oregonian, the Umaitlla National Forest's principal newspaper for publishing notices. This began the 30 day Notice and Comment Period. The comment period produced 5 responses; one individual and 4 from organizations. General comments and statements of support of an alternative will not be responded to. Those comments that have been raised by several respondents will be addressed together. The following comments where received:

How will the fuelbreak function and be maintained? "What would happen to the edge of it considering windshear effects? What would be the impacts of ORV and Snowmobile use along this new corridor?" Opening the stand will cause erratic fire behavior because of increased winds to the forest floor and hotter and drier fuels within the break.

Fire spreads by two different mechanisms: a continuous flaming front and spotting. The former is a function of available fuels, which when laid end to end carry a fire across an area. In the case of a crown fire, tree foliage intermingles above the forest floor, a ready conduit for fire spread. If enough surface fuel exists, fire intensities become high enough to combust tree foliage, and the fire begins to spread both vertically and horizontally. When fire spreads through the forest crowns, the effectiveness of suppression forces are limited, even with the aid of aircraft and heavy equipment.

With the aid of a fuelbreak, fire can be brought back down to the surface where ground crews can readily attack them. If surface fuels are treated, that is, removed so they don't present a fire hazard, the fuel available to a wildfire is limited, and subsequent fire intensities are lowered. The combination of separated crowns and treated surface fuels greatly increases the ability of fire crews to control a wildfire.

Spotting is still expected to be a problem. There is no way of eliminating spotting potential, but by isolating pockets which would loft spots, their number can be reduced, and the ability of fire crews to contain any one of them is improved. The fuelbreak proposed in Alternative C is a mosaic of thinned and overstocked stand conditions between existing plantations. It is an attempt to use earlier successional stages of the cool and cold forest to help control wildfire. These earlier stages have low fire intensity and tend to creep and be highly localized. Low surface fuels is characteristic of the stage.

The fuelbreak design recognizes the importance of Late Old Structure in providing habitat with high ground fuel levels as important subnivean habitat for pine marten and canopy closure for the movement of wildlife species. This need and the need to maintain visual quality along Forest Road 6403 helped to shape the fuelbreak design in the stands that did not have high mortality.

The fuelbreak will be constructed using modified silvicultural prescriptions. To reduce the risk of fire spreading through the forest crown, a network of one hundred foot wide strips will be thinned throughout the stand. These strips will intersect in one acre group selections. The group selections will total 20% of the stand and the openings will be long and narrow. They would not be a barrier for the movement of pine marten and would regenerate to western larch, a fire tolerant species.

Within the strips, the center 35 feet would have crowns separated by a distance of 20 to 30 feet. On each side of the center the trees would be thinned to 20 foot spacing providing a total width of 100 feet. Unharvested islands, 3 to 5 acres in size would remain within the stand. The intent is to remove the continuity of fuel necessary for a running crown fire. Treatment of surface fuels after harvest would further reduce the potential fire hazard. After treatment, low growing shrubs and forbs typical of cool/cold moist ecosystems, would provide a barrier to moisture loss, plus the shading available from retained trees and the adjacent, unharvested islands. Through time, tree regeneration would provide additional shading, and further increase surface moisture levels and lower the intensity of a wildfire while providing a more diverse understory and herbaceous vegetation. With a mosaic of fuelbeds, age and structure classes, the potential for a continuous running crown fire will be minimized. As this mosaic develops across the landscape, the need for a fuelbreak will no longer exist.

The fuelbreak is not intended to control fire spread by itself. Even fireline constructed for the explicit purpose of stopping fire spread will not achieve that objective without the aid of human efforts. The purpose of the fuelbreak is simply to reduce fire intensity to levels where suppression efforts will be effective.

Wind shear is not expected to be a problem within the fuelbreak under normal conditions. Dominate trees would be left that are the most root firm. Experience with shelterwood harvests along the ridgetop shows that these trees remain standing after the understory is removed. The fuelbreak would not create this open of a stand so the trees should still be able to work together to withstand winds. Catastrophic winds of 60 miles per hour or higher can affect any stand, whether harvest has occurred in them or not. Even wilderness areas can receive large amounts of blowdown.

Forest Road 6403 and 6400050 are part of the snowmobile trail system. Both of these are groomed trails. Impacts to wildlife caused by snowmobile use of the thinned strips would be reduce by harvest techniques and forwarder route locations. Logging would be away from Forest Road 6403. Very few landings are proposed along the road so entry into the stands would be minimal and would be by narrow, swerving routes that would be hidden by the trees adjacent to them. Logging of Units 22 and 27 pose the greatest threat to having a new tie route from Forest Road 6403 to 6400050. This can be reduced by not creating forwarder routes that tie through, however the salvage harvest proposed in Unit 27 may make that hard to hide. This area could be used in the future as an alternate route to allow the section of road 6400050 obliterated to revegetate and rest from use.

Additional information about the fuelbreak can be found Within the EA. Pages 13 and 14 describe the construction of the fuelbreak and lists the units that are included in the fulebreak. Both salvage harvest and special harvest will be used along Forest Road 6403 to construct the fuelbreak. Pages 23 to 25 and 35 to 37 talk about the effectiveness of the fuelbreak while page 42 talks about the issue as raised in scoping.

"We cannot support the logging of trees that are 21 inches dbh or greater, dead or green. Old mistletoed larch should always be retained for wildlife and potential snag value. Logging in Late Old Structure stands greater than 100 acres, is a Forest Plan amendment required?" "We oppose all logging of Late Old Structure habitat, large diameter trees (greater than 21 inches dbh) and too much removal of canopy."

Changes to the proposed action due to the Historic Range of Variability (HRV) analysis are discussed on page 8 of the EA. The analysis totaled 15,116 acres in three subwatersheds of the Lookingglass Watershed. All three biophysical environments, Cold, Moist, and Warm Forests, were within or above HRV. This analysis area falls under the guidelines of Scenario B of the Wildlife Standard. Harvest of trees larger than 21 inches would be allowed under Scenario B. Due to the nature of the stands, the placement of group selections, and the amount of salvage, it is estimated that less than 10 percent of the volume would come from trees larger than 21 inches. This would be less than 5 percent of the total trees removed from the proposed sale.

The proposed action was modified for units within Late Old Structure (LOS) stands greater than 100 acres. Where silvicultural prescriptions were not compatible with the fragmentation guidelines they were deleted or modified so that regeneration harvest did not occur in the interior of greater than 100 acre blocks of LOS. Units with low salvageable volumes were reduced in size to avoid damage to the stand from the construction of forwarder routes and where the risk of loss due to mortality was low. Many large diameter mistletoe larch will be left. Unit 8, shelterwood; and Units 4, 5 and 7, sanitation - salvage, fall within LOS stands greater than 100 acres. These units have high levels of mortality. The loss of cover in these units is caused by the mortality of lodgepole pine in unit 8 and subalpine fir in units 4, 5, and 7.

Unit 10 is also within LOS over 100 acres. The unit is within a 20 acre finger of a 300 LOS stand separated from the core by Forest Road 6403. This unit is within the fuelbreak and will be thinned parallel to Forest Road 6403. The thinning will have little change on LOS character. A hundred foot wide strip would be thinned, overall the stand would retain a crown closure of over 50 percent and remain LOS.

Harvest proposed in LOS stands less than 100 acres are in stands that are greater than a quarter mile from larger blocks and their harvest prescriptions would be non-fragmenting in that they would be thinned, salvaged, or small group selections, less than one acre. Many of the LOS stands less than 100 acres are within connective corridors to larger LOS stands. The proposed harvest would help to protect LOS stands from catastrophic wildfire develop diversity in forest floor cover.

Recent down spruce are important to remove from the stands. These tree can become infestation sources from spruce bark beetles. Spruce bark beetles will attack large diameter spruce within stands. There has been mortality caused by the beetle within the area and removal of recent down trees reduce the risk for an epidemic attack.

Down woody material will meet or exceed the ECO Screens standards.

Impacts to LOS are discussed on pages 27 to 30 of the EA.

What would be the impacts to soils and soil productivity.

Pages 34 and 35 of the EA discusses soil impacts. Soil productivity is not expected to be impacted by implementing Alternative C. Based on the research of soil impacts of forwarders the it is expected that detrimental compaction would occur on approximately 9 acres with 5 of the acres on soils with a high risk to puddling. Exposed soil is likewise expected to occur on approximately 21 acres. When these impacts are spread over 526 acres of harvest, the impacts are not expected to have a measurable impact on soil productivity. Mitigation found in the Timber Sale Contract for resource protection will further reduce impacts. Field investigation with the Forest's Soil Scientist indicated that the risk for mass movement to be low in units 20, 21, and 22. There has no sign of soil movement within the units nor adjacent to the units where plantations were developed using clearcuts with firelines.

Socioeconomic impacts should be considered. How does this maximize net public benefits from the Forest?

This is beyond the scope of this site specific analysis. The Forest Plan considered these impacts in determining Management Areas and objectives for providing multiple social values provided by the Umatilla National Forest. This project supports multiple goals of the Forest Plan such as restoring visual quality along Forest Road 6403; providing wood fiber to the local economy, though not at Forest Plan levels because of conservation measures from Forest Plan Amendment 11, ECO Screens; and reducing fuel levels where the existing condition exceeds Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines. Public benefits from the Forest are analyzed at the Forest Planning level. This project level analysis is tiered to the Umatilla National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan and its goals and objectives.

The EA also has an insufficient range of alternatives.

Page 7 of the EA discusses alternatives considered but eliminated from detailed study. The alternatives discussed remove lower volumes than the modified proposed action described in alternative B. Other alternatives that were not discussed but considered had higher volume removals but when the ECO-Screens of Forest Plan Amendment 11 were applied the available area and prescriptions reduced the volume.

... the ecosystem service values of standing or otherwise intact forest ecosystems, especially native forests, ... providing amenity values are systematically undervalued or not valued at all.

This is outside the scope of this site specific analysis and is not needed to make an informed decision.

We specifically request that the adverse external economic costs of logging in the Abla Analysis Area, as well as ecosystem service values of standing or otherwise intact forests be estimated in the final E.A. for the Albla Timber Sale and Fuel Reduction Project using the latest quantitative techniques.

The analysis you suggest is not required to reach an informed decision among the alternatives for this site specific project.