



DRAFT DECISION MEMO

High Ridge Management Area Amendment

USDA Forest Service
Umatilla National Forest, Walla Walla Ranger District,
Oregon

Township 3 North, Range 38 East, Sections 30, 31, and 32. Umatilla County
Township 2 North, Range 38 East, Sections 5 and 6. Union County
Willamette Meridian surveyed.

BACKGROUND

Management area F3 High Ridge Evaluation Area (approximately 900 acres) is located approximately 15 miles northwest of Elgin, OR, just west of Andes Prairie Sno Park (Figure 1). The area is contiguous with management area B1 Wilderness to the north; management area E2 Timber and Big Game to the southwest and northeast; and management area A4 Viewshed 2 along Forest Road 31 to the southeast. Additional information is available on the Umatilla National Forest's project webpage at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=56486>.

The High Ridge evaluation area was one of 50 study areas in a national USDA Forest Service 'Barometer Watershed Program' that was launched in the 1960s. This major watershed research effort attempted to determine the effects of timber harvest on water yield and other hydrologic values. Hydrologic data was collected from 1966 through 1996, with timber harvesting occurred in 1976 and 1984. It was recommended data collection be discontinued during a review published in 1996 (Helvey and Fowler, 1996.)

Forest Planning on the Umatilla National Forest began in the mid-1980s culminating in 1990 with an approved Land and Resource Management plan (Forest Plan). The 1990 Forest Plan decision created management area F3 High Ridge Evaluation Area (Figure 1) specifically as a forest plan administrative boundary for the ongoing watershed research (Forest Plan, pages 4-189-190). The watershed study was expected to continue through the 10-year planning period and changes in land allocation would be reviewed during Forest Plan revision (10-15 years).

Given the watershed study ended in 1996, management area F3 is no longer serving the purpose for which it was created. The 1990 Forest Plan anticipated possible changes in land allocation after the study ended. Therefore, the purpose of this action is to change the Forest Plan land allocation from F3 High Ridge Evaluation Area to another management area. This action is needed to provide flexibility in managing the 900 acres consistent with adjacent management area allocations and management emphasis.

DECISION

After careful consideration of public comments and the project record, I have decided to amend the Umatilla National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). This amendment decision deletes management area F3, deletes Forest Plan pages 4-189-190; and deletes F3 from the Forest Plan management area map. This amendment decision allocates approximately 900 acres of management area E2 Timber and Big Game (Figure 2) to replace the deleted F3 management area (Figure 1). This amendment decision permanently changes the Forest Plan until revised or amended again.

Decision Rationale

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environmental assessment (EA). The applicable category of action is identified in agency regulations as 36 CFR 220.6(e)(16) – *Land management plans, plan amendments, and plan revisions developed in accordance with 36 CFR 219 et seq. that provide broad guidance and information for project and activity decisionmaking in a NFS unit.*

This category of action is applicable because this decision amends the Forest Plan by changing management area allocation and associated management direction and does not approve site-specific project activities. This amendment does not change existing laws, regulations, and programmatic Forest Plan management direction except as described in this decision. This amendment also does not approve or guarantee any future action, including timber harvest. All other forest-wide and management area direction are unchanged. All future projects proposed within the High Ridge area would be consistent with eastside screens, PACFISH, and other relevant management direction.

The need for a dedicated administrative study area (management area F3) in support of the barometer watershed research ended 23 years ago in 1996. This fact strongly influenced my decision to adjust the management area emphasis.

Table 1 compares a summary of management area standards and guidelines for management areas F3 and E2 by resource area. The greatest restriction within F3 was the prohibition of timber harvest within the control watershed. The control watershed is approximately 132 acres of the almost 900 acre F3 management area. Allocating the area to E2 provides future flexibility and continuity of desired condition and future management with adjacent E2 areas to the southwest and northeast.

The entire area will now be subject to the cover and HEI requirements of E2: HEI of 45 or greater, minimum 10 % Satisfactory cover >10% and 15-20% desired, total cover >30%. Previously, there were no cover or HEI requirements in the almost 800 acres where timber harvest has been permitted.

Extraordinary Circumstances

Based on the project record and the following narrative I find there are no extraordinary circumstances that would warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS. I took into account resource conditions identified in agency procedures that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances might exist.

This amendment does not authorize site-specific project actions and therefore there are no site-specific project effects to resources. Future site-specific project effects and whether or not an extraordinary circumstance exists for those actions would be disclosed in subsequent project level NEPA analysis.

The difference in potential programmatic effects on future projects between F3 and E2 is expected to be minimal. Therefore, the programmatic effects of changing the standards and guidelines from F3 to E2 are few and minor in scope, and do not represent or create an extraordinary circumstance for the resources listed in management area E2 and as listed in FSH 1909.15, 31.2.

Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for federal listing, or Forest Service sensitive species.

The amendment decision does not change existing programmatic Forest Plan management direction concerning federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for federal listing, or Forest Service sensitive species. All future projects proposed within the High Ridge area would be designed consistent with the Endangered Species Act and the Forest Plan as amended (including PACFISH). Consultation would occur as appropriate for future projects.

Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds.

The amendment decision does not change existing programmatic Forest Plan management direction concerning floodplains, wetlands, and municipal watersheds. Future site-specific projects will be consistent with Executive Order (EO) 11988, Executive Order 11990.

Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas.

The amendment decision does not change existing Forest Plan management direction to protect congressionally designated wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas. The North Fork Umatilla Wilderness Area is contiguous with the High Ridge amendment area (Figure 1 and 2), as is the existing E2 management areas to the northeast and southwest.

Inventoried roadless areas

The amendment area is almost entirely developed as evidenced by past timber harvest and roads. There are no inventoried roadless areas within or adjacent to the amendment area and this amendment does not change existing 36 CFR 294 prohibitions or programmatic Forest Plan management direction concerning inventoried roadless areas.

Research natural areas

There are no research natural areas within or adjacent to the amendment area and this amendment does not change existing programmatic Forest Plan management direction concerning research nature areas.

American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites

This amendment does not change existing laws, regulations, or programmatic Forest Plan management direction concerning American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites. The amendment area falls within American Indian's ceded lands. Consultation with appropriate tribes has occurred. No religious or cultural sites will be affected by the amendment and any future site-specific project effects would be disclosed in subsequent project level NEPA analysis and consultation.

Archeological sites, or historic properties or areas

The amendment decision does not propose ground disturbing activities and does not change existing laws, regulations, or programmatic Forest Plan management direction concerning archeological sites



or historic properties or areas. Any future site-specific project effects would be disclosed in subsequent project level NEPA analysis and consultation.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

The decision is in compliance with the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended, Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) of 2000, Clean Water Act, Safe Drinking Water Act, Clean Air Act, Executive Order 11988, and Executive Order 11990 (project record).

There is no prime farmland, rangeland, or forestland within the project area. Implementation of this decision is not expected to have any disproportional effects on consumers, civil rights, minority groups, women, or low income people because there will be no change in the long-term use of the area for these populations (Executive Order 12898). The decision will not have unusual energy requirements and will not change public health and safety.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

This proposal was listed in the Umatilla National Forest's Schedule of Proposed Actions, and scoping letters announcing a combined scoping and comment period were mailed in on or before July 30, 2019 to approximately 375 interested individuals, organizations, tribes, state, and federal agencies. A legal notice requesting review and comment appeared in the East Oregonian (newspaper of record) on August 6th, 2019. Two comment letters were received. I reviewed the comments and considered them before making my decision.

One comment, from an individual, was generally supportive but requested that data collected and results of the study be maintained and publically accessible. The study data has been archived with the national study, and the study results will remain in Forest hydrological files and as part of this project record.

The second comment, submitted by Oregon Wild, stated the belief that any new management area allocations should emphasize carbon storage over timber production. A specific alternative was not suggested. I have considered this comment and found that this amendment is not likely to affect carbon storage because it does not approve or guarantee any future action, including timber harvest. This area is also still subject to the standards and guidelines of the current Forest Plan, as amended, which limits the removal of large trees in most circumstances. Additionally, I do not believe an allocation that emphasizes carbon storage meets the purpose and need to provide flexibility in managing the entire 900 acres consistent with adjacent management area allocations and management emphasis.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW

This decision was subject to objection pursuant to 36 CFR 219 Subparts A and B. Notice of objection was posted in the East Oregonian (the newspaper of record) on October 15, 2019, and notification mailed to commenters, interested parties, and tribes. No objections were received within the 45 day comment period.



IMPLEMENTATION

This amendment to the Forest Plan will be approved the date this decision memo is signed. Changes to the Forest Plan will occur immediately afterwards. Any future site-specific project decisions shall follow NEPA and agency regulations and be consistent with the Umatilla's Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) as amended. I will notify interested or affected parties of the availability of this Decision Memo as soon as practical after signing.

CONTACT PERSON

For further information contact: Katherine Richardson, Project Leader at katherine.richardson@usda.gov or 541-278-3869.

ERIC WATRUD
Forest Supervisor

12-9-19

Date

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Figure 1 High Ridge Evaluation Area Map. Shows existing management areas including control stand

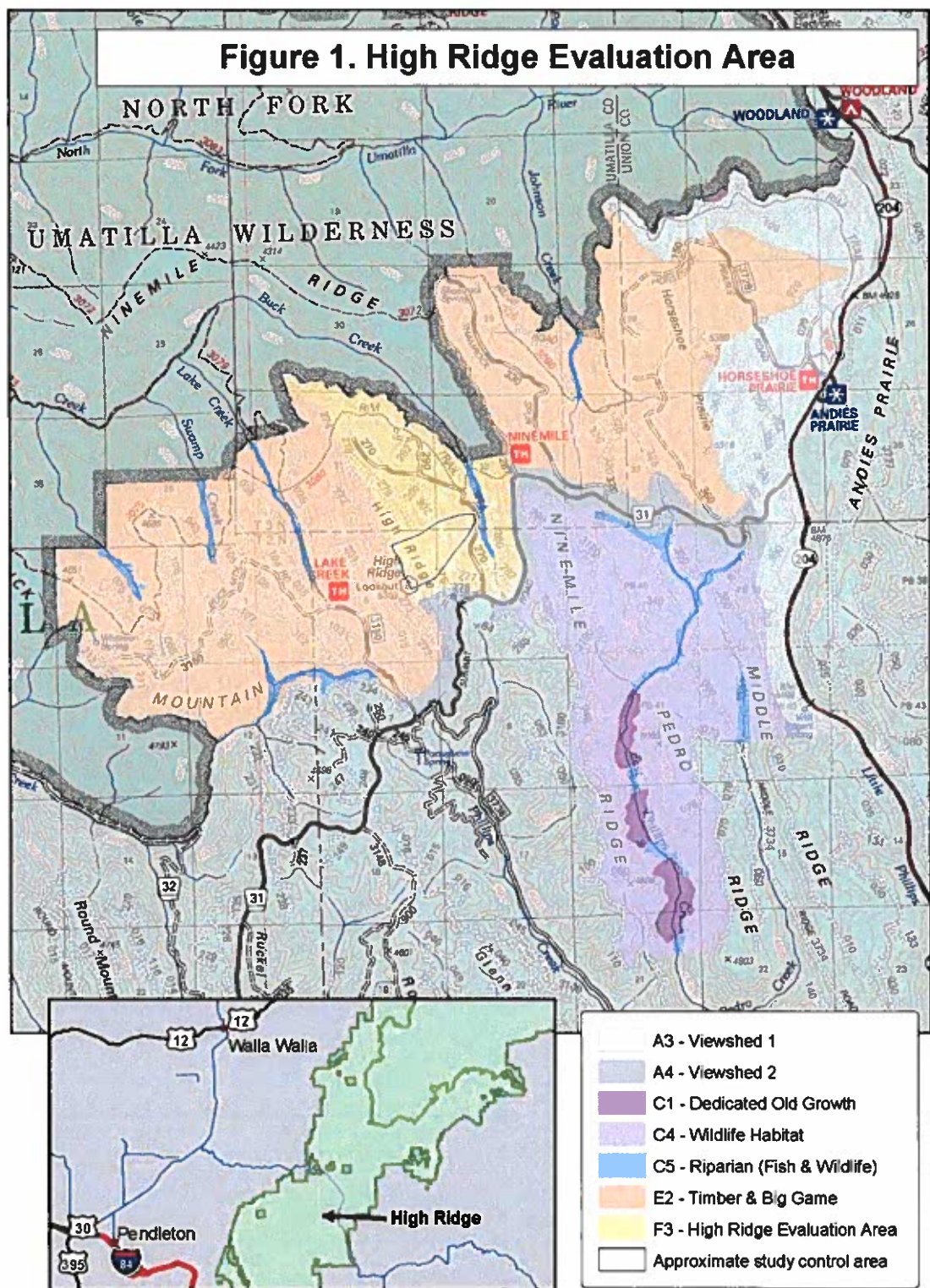


Figure 2 High Ridge Management Area Amendment. Displays management areas after decision.

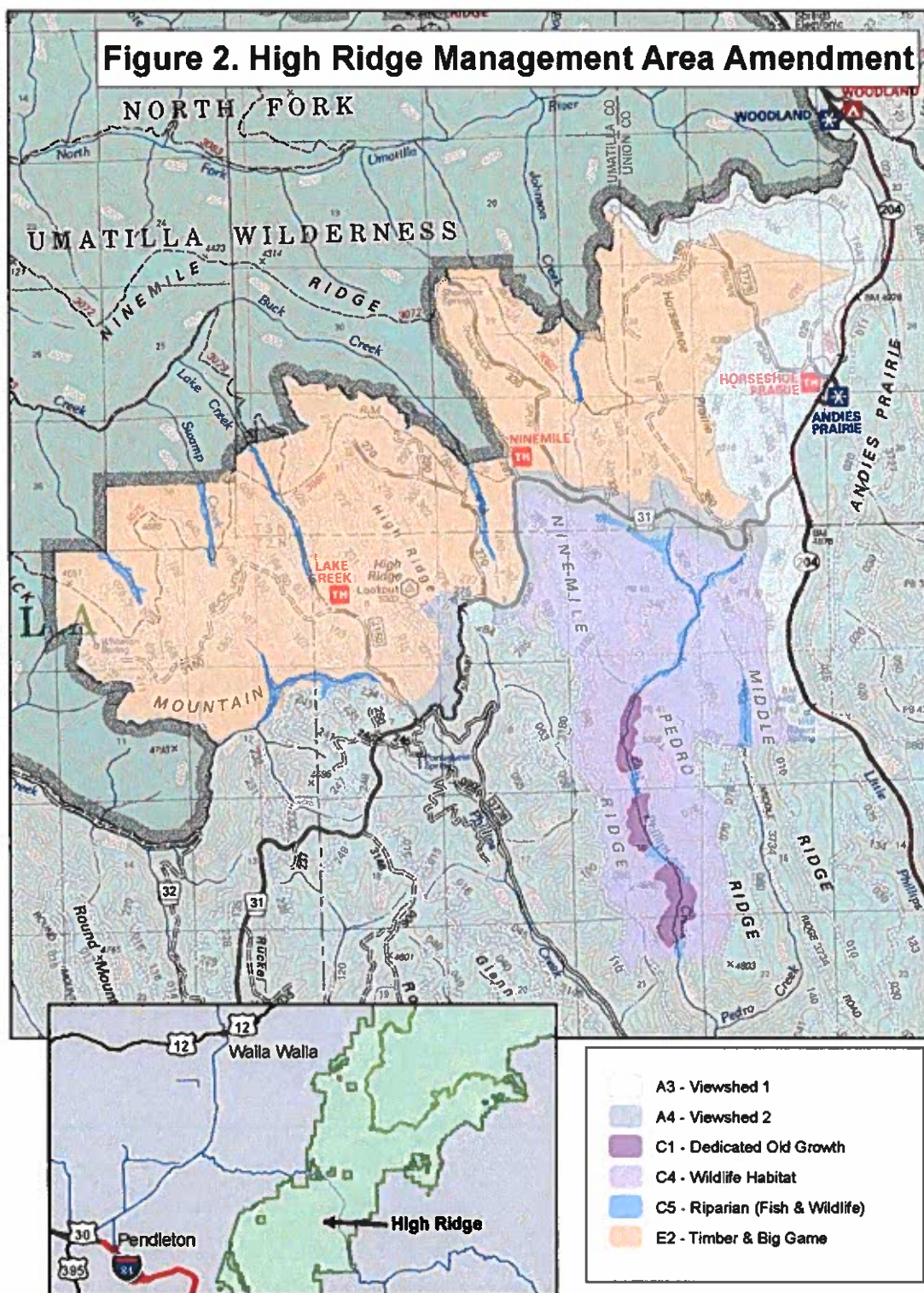


Table 1 Compares a summary of management area standards and guidelines for F3 and E2 by resource area

Resource	F3	E2
Recreation	Dispersed recreation uses are permitted. Developed recreation not permitted.	Roaded modified ROS. Dispersed recreation permitted. Recreation site modification and facility development permitted. Provide road oriented, walk-in, and horseback activities. Trail and facilities construction, reconstruction, and maintenance are permitted.
Visual	Maximum modification VQO permitted.	Modification VQO permitted.
Cultural	Meet Forest-Wide S&Gs.	Same.
Wildlife	Forest-Wide S&Gs. No restriction on HEI and Cover.	HEI of 45 or greater. 10 % Satisfactory cover >10% and 15-20% desired. Total cover >30%.
Fish	Meet Forest-Wide S&Gs and PACFISH.	Meet Forest-Wide S&Gs and PACFISH.
Timber	Maintain control watershed in a natural or unharvested condition. The full range of timber management practices and intensities are available. Harvest based on outcome of study.	Timber managed on a scheduled basis. The full range of timber management practices and intensities are permitted.
Water	Monitor water quality and quantity for barometer study.	Meet Forest-Wide S&Gs
Soil	Meet Forest-Wide S&Gs	Same.
Transportation	Maintain existing road system. Keep existing roads open. New construction permitted.	Meet Forest-Wide S&Gs
Fire	High priority for protection from wildfire. Emphasize control strategies.	All suppression strategies may be used.
Fuels	Prescribed fire from planned ignitions permitted. Unplanned ignitions will not be used.	Same except unplanned ignitions may be used. Fuels should not exceed 9 tons/acre in the 0-3 inches size. All methods of fuel treatments are appropriate.