Decision Notice

Finding of No Significant Impact

& Finding of Non-significant Amendment

Sunflower Bacon Project

USDA Forest Service
Heppner Ranger District, Umatilla National Forest
Morrow and Grant Counties, Oregon
T 6 S, R 26 E; T 6 S, R 27 E; T 7 S, R 26 E; and T 7 S, R 27 E; Willamette Meridian

Decision and Reasons for the Decision

Background

This decision notice documents my decision and rationale for selecting a course of action to be implemented for the Sunflower Bacon Project. This project area is located in the central portion of the Heppner Ranger District about 20 air miles south of the town of Heppner, Oregon and is in the Alder/Upper Skookum subwatershed of the North Fork John Day River Subbasin.

In 1995, the Umatilla National Forest completed the Wall Ecosystem Analysis (watershed analysis). The watershed analysis compares existing resource conditions with the desired future conditions and provides recommendations for treatments to meet desired conditions. The Sunflower Bacon project falls within the central portion of this watershed analysis area.

The watershed analysis identified the Sunflower Bacon project area as a high concern for vegetation sustainability and identified a need for action to improve sustainability. Specifically, portions of the subwatershed were identified as high priority for treatment to move forest structural classes and species composition toward historical ranges. The watershed analysis also identified large acreages of juniper encroachment into ponderosa pine stands where treatment was recommended (watershed analysis, p. 84 to 86). A majority of the subwatershed was identified as moderate priority for fuel treatment and/or reintroduction of fire (watershed analysis, p. 70). As identified in the watershed analysis and in the Sunflower Bacon environmental assessment and associated analysis file, the forested areas in the project area are currently outside the historical range based on their stand densities, structural diversity, species composition and the fire regime condition class.

The purpose of the Sunflower Bacon project is to improve the health and vigor of dry and moist upland forests and reduce the potential for future fires of uncharacteristic effects in these areas.

There is a need to:

- increase the amount of old forest with a predominance of large trees in a single strata
- shift dry upland forests to a more historic species composition
- reduce stand densities
- modify current vegetative stand structures to maintain or move the landscape towards a Fire Regime Condition Class 1

The environmental assessment (EA) documents the analysis of 3 alternatives to address these needs.

Decision

Based upon my review of all alternatives, I have decided to implement Alternative 4 – modified (Selected Alternative). Modifications will occur in the harvest method of unit 74. Unit 74 will be harvested using a forwarder harvesting system rather than a skidder harvesting system. This modification will reduce the need for 0.8 miles of temporary road and eliminate the crossing of a class 4 stream. The total area receiving treatment would be 2,761 acres of commercial and noncommercial thinning and 7,563 acres of landscape burning only for a total of 10,324 acres treated. The specific actions to occur in my decision include:

- Commercial thin 1,581 acres (includes 40 acres of salvage in portions of Units 56 and 57) and variable density retention thin 476 acres; thinning a total of 2,057 acres and producing an estimated volume of 12,719 hundred cubic feet (Ccf). Whole-tree timber harvest using skidders would occur on 1,358 acres and ground-based systems using harvesters and forwarders would occur on 699 acres.
- Roads used for access and haul of forest products would include 15.7 miles of closed road to be temporarily reopened, 3.0 miles of temporary roads will be used and obliterated, 33 miles of open road maintained, and 8 miles of open road reconstructed.
- Activity fuel reduction on 273 acres would be treated either mechanically or by prescribed fire and 1,784 acres would be treated as part of the 9,347 total acres of landscape burning.
- Landscape burning would occur on 9,347 acres. Burn control lines would be constructed using mechanical equipment along 6 miles of the outer boundary of the thinning units and using hand or wet line along 5.7 miles of the boundary of individual burn blocks.
- Noncommercial thinning would occur on approximately 1,485 acres; 704 acres outside commercial thin units and 781 acres within commercial thin units.
- Closing of FS Road 2120-070 (1.1 miles).

The project design elements that were developed reflect existing direction found in the Umatilla National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan and program direction established on the Forest. The specific project design elements associated with the Sunflower Bacon Project that will be implemented are listed on pages 2-16 to 2-18 of the EA.

Activities and their effects, including the implementation of project design elements, will be monitored by the Forest Service as described on pages 2-18 thru 2-19 of the EA.

Reason For Decision

I have reviewed the Sunflower Bacon EA, the information in the analysis file, the Forest Plan, the Wall Ecosystem Analysis, public comments, and applicable laws and regulation. I have determined that there is adequate information to make a reasoned choice among the alternatives.

In making the decision, I considered how each alternative addresses the stated purpose and need and complies with applicable, laws regulations, and policies. I have also considered the public and agency comments submitted in response to the 30 day comment period.

Response to Purpose and Need

I find that all of the action alternatives (Alternatives 2, 3 and 4) address the project objectives but to different extents with different effects and tradeoffs. I considered the potential outcome to this area if I had selected no action. I concluded that by acting now and reducing fuel levels, thinning stands, and altering structure and species composition; future stand conditions and habitat conditions within the Sunflower Bacon area would improve compared to the potential consequences of a large, uncharacteristic wildland fire or insect outbreak. Either of these events could significantly reduce the big game winter range habitat, other wildlife habitat and all other benefits of a healthy and intact forested environment as compared to the Selected Alternative. I find that Alternative 1, the no action alternative, fell well short of addressing the purpose and need for action and it would be an irresponsible course of action to do nothing.

I find that Alternative 4-modified provides for the most balanced approach to addressing the purpose and need for action goals, while responding to the major issues. Although the Selected Alternative does not address the vegetation and fuel related purpose and need objectives to the same extent as Alternative 2, I believe it makes significant progress in moving the area toward a more historic species composition. Alternative 4-modified increases the ponderosa pine and mixed ponderosa pine dominated stands by 679 acres, increases mixed Douglas-fir stands by 268 acres and reduces mixed grand fir and Douglas-fir dominated stands by 947 acres. Although ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir forest types are still outside the historic range of variability, the Selected Alternative will increase dry forest ponderosa pine and decrease Douglas-fir in the subwatershed bringing the area closer to the historic range of variability.

The Selected Alternative will also shift 1,022 acres of stand structure from stem exclusion closed canopy to stem exclusion open canopy and shift 127 acres of old forest multi strata to old forest single strata in the Sunflower Bacon project area. This shift in structure will meet the need to increase the current and future stands of old forest with a predominance of large trees in a single stratum. Based on the analysis from Forest Vegetation Simulator growth and yield model the desired outcome of old forest structure will be reached in 10 to 60 years on stands being treated with this one thinning and underburning. I find this to be very important in moving the area closer to the historic range of variability for forest structure.

The Selected Alternative will reduce stand densities on 2,659 acres of upland forest to recommended stocking levels based on plant association. I feel it is important to increase stand health and vigor by reducing stand density resulting in an increase of light, minerals, and water to individual trees.

Through thinning of vegetation and underburning the fire regime condition class will be improved and maintained on both an individual stand and landscape level. Following project implementation, condition class 2 and 3 will be moved to condition class 1 on 2,314 acres. I believe that thinning, coupled with 9,347 acres of landscape burning, will improve and maintain the fire regime condition class on 58 percent of the Sunflower Bacon landscape and will decrease any effects to key ecosystem components on the landscape should a wildfire occur. The project will also reduce the possibility that a large scale wildfire would develop. I feel it would be irresponsible not to act now considering the vegetative conditions within the upland forest in the

Sunflower Bacon area where existing conditions are expected to support a high intensity fire resulting in the loss of key ecosystem components, including big game habitat.

Response to Issues

In making the decision to select Alternative 4-modified I also considered its response to the major issues. Compared to the other alternatives this decision will retain all satisfactory big game cover in the C3 management area, a desired habitat in the winter range, while still treating marginal cover with a variable density thinning prescription. Variable density thinning will provide patches of hiding cover to aid in reducing big game vulnerability. I feel that by treating marginal cover the result will provide for a more resilient habitat for big game in the short and long-term while reducing the impacts of stands that have developed into conditions that are not sustainable in the long-term.

The Selected Alternative maintains all existing satisfactory cover in the Monument winter range. Satisfactory cover and total cover in the winter range would continue to meet Forest Plan standards (10 % satisfactory and 30% total cover) following treatment under this alternative. By meeting Forest Plan standards for cover in the C3 management area, this alternative would maintain a high level of quality cover and maintain a habitat effectiveness index near the Forest Plan standard.

The habitat effectiveness index (HEI) model uses the amount and spatial distribution of satisfactory cover, marginal cover, forage, and the open road network in the winter range to assess cumulative impacts to elk habitat within the entire winter range area. HEI is currently 69 in the Monument Winter Range and would remain 69 after treatment under Alternative 4-modified. Although an HEI value of 69 is indicative of; good cover to forage ratio in the winter range, good spatial distribution of cover and forage habitats, and low road densities; it does not meet the Forest Plan standard of 70.

As part of my decision, the Selected Alternative amends the Forest Plan to change the habitat effectiveness index (HEI) from 70 to 69 for the Monument Winter Range for the duration of this project. The HEI for the Monument Winter Range is currently (before treatment) 69, which is below the "desirable" index described in the Forest Plan. Even after the implementation of the Selected Alternative, the Monument Winter Range would still maintain an HEI of 69. I carefully read through the analysis of this Forest Plan amendment in the specialists' reports for Sunflower Bacon and discussed its effect to wildlife habitat before coming to my decision. I also weighed the potential outcome to this area if I had selected the No-Action Alternative. I concluded that by acting now and reducing stand densities and altering stand structure and species composition, that future stand conditions and thus cover and forage conditions within the Sunflower Bacon area would improve as compared to the consequences of a wildland fire or insect outbreak. Such an event could significantly reduce the HEI for the area as compared to the Selected Alternative.

The Selected Alternative will address elk vulnerability by closing approximately 1.1 miles of seasonally open road. Units 17 and 92, in the eastern portion of the analysis area would be left untreated to maintain cover habitat quality in large patch sizes for big game animals. The Selected Alternative will allow silvicultural treatment of overstocked stands while creating a mosaic of open forage areas and dense patches of cover across the landscape. The patchiness of these stands will minimize increased vulnerability by reducing sight distances in treated stands,

and breaking up the outline of elk. Forage would be interspersed with cover patches, creating foraging habitat for elk.

The biggest difference between action alternatives is the thinning treatment within the C3 Big Game Winter Range management area. Alternative 2 thins 390 more acres of overstocked stands, converts 226 more acres of stem exclusion closed canopy to open canopy, and shifts the dominate species composition toward ponderosa pine and mixed ponderosa pine on 118 more acres than Alternative 4-modified. The result of these differences on big game habitat is that under Alternative 2 satisfactory cover within the C3 management area would be reduced to the forest plan minimum standard of 10 percent. Alternative 4-modified retains all existing satisfactory cover within the C3 management area.

Alternative 3 focuses on maintaining existing cover within the C3 management area but it does not treat as many acres to address the purpose and need as the Selected Alternative. Alternative 3 thins 476 less acres of overstocked stands, converts 299 less acres of stem exclusion closed canopy to open canopy, and shifts the dominate species composition toward ponderosa pine and mixed ponderosa pine on 120 less acres than Alternative 4. The results of these differences on big game habitat is that under Alternative 3 marginal cover in the C3 management area would not be treated and in the long term the risk of losing big game habitat is high should a large-scale wildfire or insect outbreak occur.

The Selected Alternative is not the alternative that best meets the purpose and need nor is it the alternative that would have the least potential affect to big game. I selected this alternative because it treats much of the area identified where vegetative treatment will be effective at altering stand density, composition and structure while still providing important winter habitat and reducing impacts on big game and their habitat.

Response to Comments and Resources

In addition to how the Selected Alternative met the purpose and need and addressed the major issues, I considered how the alternatives respond to resources and comments received during the scoping and the 30 day comment period.

Comments received questioned whether an upper size limit (8" to 10" dbh) can be placed on the trees removed from the thinned areas. I feel that the prescriptions and proposed activities can not place upper limits on tree diameters to be thinned without losing the ability to address the purpose and need objectives of reducing stand densities to healthy levels or altering stand structure and species composition toward historical ranges.

Comments received included concerns of how fire hazard and behavior would change after the project was implemented. Specific concerns included an increase in fire hazard by opening stands and altering microclimates to dry surface fuels and increase wind speeds at ground level. I considered these effects and believe that by removing ladder fuels and reducing canopy densities the increase in fire hazard and/or fire behavior would be offset by reducing fire severity should a wildfire occur. Historically it is believed that this is the role fire played in the dry upland forests in the Sunflower Bacon project area and throughout the Blue Mountains.

Other comments expressed concern that harvest activities and associated road work would affect water quality and fish habitat. The protection of water quality and fish habitat during timber harvest operations is always a concern in the development of a project and in my decision. My decision incorporates project design elements (EA p. 2-16 thru 2-18) and best management practices (EA, Appendix A) for water quality to specifically address this concern. In addition my decision of modifying Alternative 4 changes the harvest system on unit 74 eliminating the need for 0.8 miles of temporary road and the associated crossing of a class 4 stream. Although this is not the most economically efficient method to thin this stand I feel that this is an efficient way to receive the benefits of thinning while considering the possible effects to water quality and fish habitat. By eliminating this temporary road and associated crossing, the thinning treatment of the Selected Alternative has the same expected effect to fish and fish habitat as Alternative 3.

On April 6, 2006 a field visit was made with members of the Sunflower Bacon interdisciplinary team and representatives from National Marine Fisheries Service to discuss effects of prescribed fire and riparian habitat conservation areas and streams. On May 9, 2006 the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) issued a letter of concurrence pursuant to section 7 (a)(2) of the Endangered Species Act concluding the actions of the Sunflower Bacon project are, not likely to adversely affect Middle Columbia steelhead and its designated critical habitat and pursuant to section 305(b) of the Magnuson-Steven Fishery Conservation and Management Act concludes that the action, is not likely to adversely affect essential fish habitat designated for Chinook salmon.

Another comment received during the 30 day comment period focused on areas without roads. The effects to undeveloped land determined that areas without roads are small and irregular in shape and isolation is limited to no more than one-half mile from a system road. No special features were identified within the project area. The effects to water, air, soil, plant and animal diversity, habitat, and listed species would be limited because all areas would remain fully stocked after treatment. The recreation opportunity would not change and would remain roaded natural and roaded modified as identified in the Forest Plan. The impacts of this project will not exclude this area or any other areas from consideration for wilderness potential during Forest Plan revision because all areas have received harvest activities in the past, all areas will remain fully stocked after thinning and burning, and no new system roads will be developed.

Some of the comments I received expressed a concern that ground-based logging disturbs and compacts the soil. Forest plan standards, project layout and project design elements are developed for areas of concern (EA, p. 2-16 thru 2-17); these include designation, timing, and methods of equipment operation. Additionally, monitoring will determine if operations need to be altered to meet objectives. The short and long term effects to soil resource are expected to be negligible and fully consistent with the Forest Plan.

Some of the comments I received expressed a concern that increased road density and road use would lead to detrimental environmental effects. Overall road density will be reduced after project implementation. The intent of closing forest road 2120-070 is to reduce big game vulnerability in an area that was of concern to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The intent of eliminating the proposed temporary road associated with unit 74 is to eliminate possible effects to water quality. Under the Selected Alternative all temporary roads would be located outside of RHCA and either in areas where old road templates exist or where vegetation

is currently minimal. Temporary roads are located only in areas where rehabilitation and closures will be effective based on soil type and topography. Old road templates used as temporary roads will be rehabilitated to a condition beyond the current state. I base this on experience from recent projects in the area and changes from past operating procedures.

Other roads used during project implementation would have little effect on water and soil resources due to project design elements (EA pages 2-16 to 2-18) and best management practices for water quality (EA, Appendix A).

Other comments received indicated concerns over habitat changes for many species dependant on snags. Any felling of snags would be incidental to green tree harvest (restricted to danger trees and 40 acres identified as salvage harvest). The Selected Alternative is assumed to have less impact on snags than Alternative 2 and a greater impact on snags than Alternative 3 based only on the number of acres treated. At the watershed scale, no overall change would be expected in snag densities in the dry upland or moist upland potential vegetation groups under the Selected Alternative. In the short-term, habitat for primary cavity excavators is expected to be reduced slightly due to hazard tree felling within treatment units and along roads used for haul; conversely, burning could recruit snags through direct mortality. Further snag recruitment will occur within the mosaic of open and high density forest patches created through variable density thinning. Patches of dense forest will allow for locally high populations of insects and disease, which will encourage snag recruitment. These patches will provide sources of clumped snags that will provide nesting and foraging habitat for a number of primary cavity excavator species. Forest Plan standards for snag densities are currently being met within the analysis area, and will continue to be met throughout project implementation and following treatment activities of thinning and burning.

In consideration of how well the alternatives respond to the purpose and need, issues, and concerns; I have concluded that Alternative 4-modified provides the most balanced approach for management within the Sunflower Bacon project area at this time.

Public Involvement

A proposal to commercially thin dry site stands to reduce tree competition and improve stand health and vigor and non-commercially thin young conifer stands to reduce stocking in the understory has been listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions since October 2004. The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping on March 13, 2005. In addition, as part of the public involvement process, upon the request of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife the agencies visited the project area to discuss issues and project development. These scoping efforts resulted in responses from two organizations and one state agency. Documentation of the scoping process may be viewed in the project record, on file at the Heppner Ranger District.

Using the comments from the public, other agencies, and organizations, the interdisciplinary team identified several issues regarding the effects of the proposed action. Main issues of concern included amending the Forest Plan habitat effectiveness index standard in order to treat vegetation within the Monument Winter Range and the effects on quantity and quality of cover habitat that may result in increased vulnerability for big game (elk) during the hunting seasons

(EA, pages 1-13). To address these concerns, the Forest Service created the alternatives described below.

Alternatives Considered

In addition to the Selected Alternative (Alternative 4-modified), I considered four alternatives in detail and five alternatives were considered and dropped from detailed study for various reasons (EA, pages 2-1 through 2-15). The three action alternatives considered in the EA examine varying combinations and degrees of vegetative treatments and were developed to address the major issues and the purpose and need. For additional details on these alternatives, see the EA (Chapter 2, Alternatives 2 through 4).

Alternatives Considered in Detail

Alternative 1

No Action

Under the No Action Alternative, current management plans would continue to guide management of the project area.

Alternative 2

- Commercial thin 2,456 acres (includes 40 acres of salvage in portions of Units 56 and 57) producing an estimated volume of 14,890 hundred cubic feet (Ccf). Whole-tree timber harvest using skidders would occur on 1,747 acres and ground-based systems using harvesters and forwarders would occur on 709 acres.
- Roads used for access and haul of forest products would include 15.7 miles of closed road to be temporarily reopened, 4.0 miles of temporary road used and obliterated, 33 miles of open road maintained, and 8 miles of open road reconstructed.
- Activity fuel reduction on 234 acres would be treated either mechanically or by prescribed fire and 2,222 acres would be treated as part of the 10,196 total acres of landscape burning.
- Landscape burning would occur on 10,196 acres. Burn control lines would be constructed using mechanical equipment along 5.5 miles of the outer boundary of the thinning units and using hand or wet line along 4.4 miles of the boundary of individual burn blocks.
- Noncommercial thinning would occur on approximately 1,646 acres; 704 acres outside commercial thin units and 942 acres within commercial thin units.
- The total area receiving treatment would be 3,160 acres of commercial and noncommercial thinning and 7,974 acres of landscape burning only for a total of 11,134 acres treated.

Alternative 3

- Commercial thin 1,604 acres (includes 40 acres of salvage in portions of Units 56 and 57) and producing an estimated volume of 9,488 hundred cubic feet (Ccf). Whole-tree timber harvest using skidders would occur on 1,013 acres and ground-based systems using harvesters and forwarders would occur on 591 acres.

- Roads used for access and haul of forest products would include 15.7 miles of closed road to be temporarily reopened, 2.4 miles of temporary road used and obliterated, 32 miles of open road maintained, and 8 miles of open road reconstructed.
- Activity fuel reduction on 243 acres would be treated either mechanically or by prescribed fire and 1,361 acres would be treated as part of the 8,617 total acres of landscape burning.
- Landscape burning would occur on 8,617 acres. Burn control lines would be constructed using mechanical equipment along 7 miles of the outer boundary of the thinning units and using hand or wet line along 6.5 miles of the boundary of individual burn blocks.
- Noncommercial thinning would occur on approximately 1,362 acres; 681 acres outside commercial thin units and 681 acres within commercial thin units.
- Close FS Road 2120-070 (1.1 miles).
- The total area receiving treatment would be 2,285 acres of commercial and noncommercial thinning and 7,256 acres of landscape burning only for a total of 9,541 acres treated.

Alternative 4

- Commercial thin 1,581 acres (includes 40 acres of salvage in portions of Units 56 and 57) and variable density retention thin 476 acres; thinning a total of 2,057 acres and producing an estimated volume of 12,719 hundred cubic feet (Ccf). Whole-tree timber harvest using skidders would occur on 1,410 acres and ground-based systems using harvesters and forwarders would occur on 647 acres.
- Roads used for access and haul of forest products would include 15.7 miles of closed road to be temporarily reopened, 3.8 miles of temporary road used and obliterated, 33 miles of open road maintained, and 8 miles of open road reconstructed.
- Activity fuel reduction on 273 acres would be treated either mechanically or by prescribed fire and 1,784 acres would be treated as part of the 9,347 total acres of landscape burning.
- Landscape burning would occur on 9,347 acres. Burn control lines would be constructed using mechanical equipment along 6 miles of the outer boundary of the thinning units and using hand or wet line along 5.7 miles of the boundary of individual burn blocks.
- Noncommercial thinning would occur on approximately 1,485 acres; 704 acres outside commercial thin units and 781 acres within commercial thin units.
- Close FS Road 2120-070 (1.1 miles).
- The total area receiving treatment would be 2,761 acres of commercial and noncommercial thinning and 7,563 acres of landscape burning only for a total of 10,324 acres treated.

Alternatives Considered but eliminated from Detailed Study

Five alternatives were considered and dropped from detailed study for various reasons. Details may be found in the EA on pages 2-13 through 2-15). These five alternatives are:

Diameter Breast Height Size Limitation

No New or Temporary Roads

Use of Fire as a Thinning Tool

No Treatment within the C3 – Big Game Winter Range

Increase Habitat Effectiveness Index

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. This determination is based on the site-specific environmental analysis documented in the Environmental Assessment and supporting documents which describe direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts of this decision. I have found that the context of the environmental impacts of this decision is limited to the local area and is not significant. I have also determined the severity of these impacts is not significant.

Context

The actions included in the Selected Alternative are described in Chapter 2 of the EA. The disclosure of effects may differ by the resource and by the scale of analysis. Therefore, multiple scales and levels of analysis were used to determine the significance of the actions' effects on the human environment. The overall project area for the Sunflower Bacon project area included about 19,798 acres. The Selected Alternative included vegetation modification activities on 2,761 acres, about 14 percent of the project area and fuel treatments on an additional 7,563 acres, about 38 percent of the project area. Activities were designed to improve ecosystem function and resilience to natural disturbance by moving stocking levels, species composition, forest structure, and fuel loads toward their historic ranges. Water qualities and flows would not be measurably impacted. The management activities applied would improve the ability to suppress wildfires and reduce any environmental effects should a wildfire occur. Wildlife and its habitat, soil stability and productivity, and the regional economy would also be affected. The impacts of the Selected Alternative on each of these are disclosed in the EA (Chapter 3). The analyses also found that the activity may affect but not likely to adversely effect Middle Columbia steelhead or its habitat. Therefore, in context, this project is local in scope.

Intensity

The environmental effects of the following actions are documented in Chapter 3 of the Environmental Assessment: commercial and noncommercial harvest of trees; reduction of fuels by prescribed fire and mastication, temporary road construction and decommissioning, and temporary use of roads designated closed in the Access and Travel Management Plan. The beneficial and adverse direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts discussed in the EA have been disclosed within the appropriate context, and effects are expected to be low in intensity because of project design including management requirements developed to protect or reduce impacts to resources. Significant effects to the human environment are not expected. The rationale for the determination of significance is based on the environmental assessment. I base my finding on the following:

1. My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action. The interdisciplinary team analyzed and disclosed the direct, indirect and

cumulative effects of the actions on forest vegetation (EA pages 3-2 to 3-17), fire severity and fuels (pages 3-17 to 3-28), wildlife and wildlife habitat (pages 3-28 to 3-99), soils (pages 3-99 to 3-109), water (pages 3-109 to 3-118), fish populations and aquatic habitat (pages 3-118 to 3-144), non-forest vegetation including: range, botanical plants, and noxious weeds (pages 3-144 to 3-153), recreation (pages 3-153 to 3-155), cultural resources (pages 3-155 to 3-157), air quality (pages 3-157 to 3-159), visual quality (pages 3-159 to 3-163), areas without roads (pages 3-163 to 3-167), and economics (pages 3-168 to 3-171). The direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of the Selected Alternative included the following:

- improved stand health
- short-term and long-term development of single-layer old forest stands
- species composition more representative of historic conditions
- reduced stand density
- improved fire regime condition class based on vegetative component
- decrease in ladder fuel continuity and crown fire potential
- short-term increase in fuel loads
- improved habitat for species dependant on dry forest habitat
- increase in forage habitat
- decrease in hiding cover and dense canopy
- shift of some marginal cover to forage
- compaction and mobilization of soil from mechanized harvest and temporary road construction
- short-term increase in exposed soil
- increased probability of noxious weed establishment and spread
- smoke emissions from prescribed burning

2. There will be no significant effects on public health and safety, because water quality would not measurably change (EA, pages 3-109 to 3-144 and 3-172 to 3-173) and is consistent with the Forest Plan and the Clean Water Act. Prescribed burning would ensure compliance with air quality standards (EA, pages 3-157 to 3-159 and 3-173). Prescribed burning operations would comply with the State of Oregon's Smoke Management Implementation Plan in order to reduce the effects of smoke on public health (EA, pages 3-157 to 3-159 and 3-173). Additional mitigation measures are designed to protect public health and safety by requiring safe road standards and road signing.

3. There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area, because there are no: prime farmland, forestland, rangeland (EA, page 3-179) , wilderness, or wild and scenic rivers (EA, pages 3-171). There would be no effect to floodplains or wetlands (EA, page 3-174) or inventoried roadless areas (EA, page 3-171). There are no parklands or ecologically critical areas that could be affected by this action.

4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial because there is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the project. There are differing opinions in the community on the management actions necessary to improve forest health and reduce fire intensity in Blue Mountain forest ecosystems. The level of controversy or interest in what course of action to take

regarding forest management is not the focus of this criterion, rather the degree of scientific controversy over the effects disclosed in the analysis. No significant disagreements have been identified with the disclosure of effects in Chapter 3 of the EA. While some comments differed with my conclusion that the proposed action would affirmatively respond to the purpose and need, the reasons for this difference are based on opinions, not with the disclosure of effects. The Umatilla National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) permits thinning, salvage, and prescribed fire in this area, and these activities have historically been conducted in this area. The EA effectively addressed and analyzed all major issues associated with the project. During scoping, 30-day public review of the EA, and effects analysis, no scientific controversy over unacceptable effects was identified.

5. We have considerable experience with the types of activities to be implemented. The effects analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk (EA, Chapter 3). The best available scientific information provided the foundation for designing the Sunflower Bacon project. Thinning, salvage, road work and prescribed fire have been implemented successfully on the Heppner Ranger District. These past activities have been monitored (Analysis File) and the monitoring results provide a good baseline for predicting future outcomes. Recent monitoring has found that Best Management Practices for the protection of soil and water resources are effective in keeping detrimental impacts to within Forest Plan standards. I am satisfied that the project, as designed, and the effects disclosed in the EA present no highly uncertain or unknown risks.

6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because harvest is not a new activity within this analysis area and the proposed prescribed burning of natural and activity fuels has occurred in numerous parts of the Umatilla National Forest. Harvest, thinning, and prescribed burning are allowed in this area by the Forest Plan. The EA effectively addressed and analyzed all major issues associated with the project. While sustaining dry forest stands at or near historic conditions would require increased use of prescribed fire in the future, this would also reduce fuel loads and continuity so that wildfires would have lower risk of catastrophic effects. The Forest Plan amendment applies only to the Sunflower Bacon project, only within the Monument Winter Range, for the duration of the project (EA, page 2-11). Based on this information, implementing the Sunflower Bacon decision will not set precedent for future actions with significant effects.

7. The cumulative impacts are not significant (see EA Chapter 3). The Environmental Assessment discloses the projected cumulative effects of implementing the Sunflower Bacon project. The list of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future activities in the area that were considered for the cumulative effects analysis for each resource topic is in Appendix F of the EA. I recognize some cumulative effects will occur; however, these cumulative effects are not considered to be significant at the scale and time frame addressed by this analysis and decision. Regarding the Forest Plan amendment in the Monument winter range, the EA analyzed the cumulative effects of the amendment on big game habitat within the winter range (HEI analysis). The Habitat Effectiveness Index calculated under the Sunflower Bacon project is a cumulative measure of elk habitat quality because it incorporates the effects of past managament activities and natural

events in the winter range. HEI in the winter range would not change from the existing value of 69 following treatment. The proposed Forest Plan amendment would only apply to the Monument winter range; there would be no impacts on adjacent winter ranges. The amendment will only apply for that time required to complete this project. Other projects within the Monument winter range also required a Forest Plan amendment maintaning an HEI below forest plan standards. There is no cumulative effect of these amendments because each amendment applies to a specific project for a specific period of time in portions of the winter range that are spatially distinct from one another. The projects that have occurred in the winter range (and their associated amendments) have maintained the existing HEI in the winter range. While there are cumulative effects, I am satisfied that the effects as disclosed in the EA are not significant.

8. The action will have no significant effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, because the project area has been inventoried for such properties and no properties were located within the proposed treatment units (EA, page 3-155 to 3-157). The action will also not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources, because the project area has been inventoried for these resources and no such properties were located within the proposed treatment units (EA, pages 3-155 to 3-157). Any cultural or historic resources discovered during the project will be avoided. The Forest has complied with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act for the Sunflower Bacon Project EA (EA, pages 3-171).

9. The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species act of 1973, because there are no unique or isolated populations of wildlife or plants (EA pages 3-51 and 3-144 and Biological Evaluations for aquatic, terrestrial wildlife and botanical species in the analysis file. Road work within riparian areas may affect, [but are] not likely to adversely affect the threatened Middle Columbia Steelhead and its habitat (EA, page 3-144). The National Marine Fisheries Service concurred with this not likely to adversely affect finding in consultation required by Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (Analysis File). Road work within riparian areas may impact individual interior redband trout or its habitat but would not contribute to a trend towards federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species (EA, page 3-143). Landscape burning may impact individual gray flycatchers or their habitat but would not contribute to a trend towards federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species (EA, page 3-51). Thinning, salvage, fuels treatments, and road work would have no impact on any other threatened, endangered or sensitive species expected to occur on the Umatilla National Forest (EA, pages 3-41 to 3-51, 3-136 to 3-144). The area would continue to provide a diversity of plant and animal communities which meet overall multiple-use objectives. Although use patterns may change due to these activities, sufficient habitat remains to ensure viability of all species in the area (EA, pages 3-28 to 3-99 and 3-118 to 3-144).

10. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA (EA, pages 3-171 to 3-179). The action is consistent with the Umatilla National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (EA, pages 3-175 to 3-178).

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This decision to commercially thin 1,581 acres of upland forest (including salvage harvest of 40 acres) variable density thin an additional 476 acres, noncommercial thin an additional 704 acres, and landscape burn a total of 9,347 acres and the connected actions to these activities are consistent with the intent of the Forest Plan's long term goals and objectives listed on pages 4-1 to 4-3 and 4-15 to 4-46. The project was designed in conformance with land and resource management plan standards and incorporates appropriate land and resource management plan guidelines (Land and Resource Management Plan, pages 4-47 to 4-93).

The Forest Service Land Management Planning Handbook (Forest Service Handbook 1909.12) lists four factors to be used when determining whether a proposed change to a Forest Plan is significant or not significant: timing; location and size; goals, objectives and outputs; and management prescriptions.

Timing: The timing factor examines at what point over the course of the Forest Plan period the Plan is amended. Both the age of the underlying document and the duration of the amendment are relevant considerations. The handbook indicates that the later in the time period, the less significant the change is likely to be. As noted in the EA the action is limited in time in that it would only apply for the duration of the Sunflower Bacon Project. The Record of Decision for the Umatilla Forest Plan was signed June 11, 1990 and the revision process has begun for the *Land and Resource Management Plan, Umatilla National Forest*.

Location and Size: The key to location and size is context, or "the relationship of the affected area to the overall planning area. . . [T]he smaller the area affected, the less likely the change is to be a significant change in the forest plan." The planning area for the Umatilla National Forest is about 1.4 million acres (Forest Plan, page 1-4). The Monument Winter Range, within which the amendment would be effective is 58,600 acres out of 277,677 acres of winter range on the forest (21 percent). The amendment would only apply to the Sunflower Bacon Project within the Monument Winter Range. The Sunflower Bacon Project would classify marginal cover as forage (the amount of marginal cover and spatial distribution being several of the determinants of habitat effectiveness index) on 476 acres of the Monument Winter Range (0.8 percent). It is the effect to cover on these 476 acres that triggers the need for the Forest Plan amendment.

Thus, the size of the area projected to be affected during the project's time period is very small when compared to the total size of the Monument Winter Range.

Goals, Objectives, and Outputs: The goals, objectives, and outputs factor involves the determination of "whether the change alters the long-term relationship between the level of goods and services in the overall planning area" (Forest Service Handbook 1909.12, section 5.32(c)). This criterion concerns analysis of the overall Forest Plan and the various multiple-use resources that may be affected. In this criterion, time remaining in the planning period to move toward goals and achieve objectives and outputs are relevant considerations. The anticipated changes brought about by this amendment in the levels of resource activities and outputs projected in the plan (Forest Plan, page 4-16) are expected to be minimal. For example: the project will maintain all satisfactory cover, a high level of potential habitat effectiveness, high quality forage , and the habitat effectiveness index will not change from the existing level for big

game within the Monument Winter Range. Implementation of the Sunflower Bacon project will not alter the big game management objectives the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife has for this area.

Management Prescriptions: The management prescriptions factor involves the determination of (1), "whether the change in a management prescription is only for a specific situation or whether it would apply to future decisions throughout the planning area" and (2), "whether or not the change alters the desired future condition of the land and resources or the anticipated goods and services to be produced" (Forest Service Handbook 1909.12, section 5.32(d)). In this criterion, time remaining in the planning period and changes in desired future conditions or the anticipated goods and services to be produced are relevant considerations.

The proposed change in habitat effectiveness index applies to the Monument Winter Range only for the Sunflower Bacon project (EA, page 2-11). The existing habitat effectiveness index in the Monument Winter Range is 69 and future projects in the Monument Winter Range would also require an amendment if those projects affect habitat effectiveness index. The change in management prescription is only for a specific situation and the effects are short-term and do not affect future decisions throughout the planning area.

The desired future conditions and land allocation as specified in the Forest Plan would not change. As discussed above in "goals, objectives, and outputs", the long-term levels of goods and services projected in current plans are not measurably changed by the Forest Plan amendment. This information supports the determination that the proposed changes do not constitute a significant amendment of the Forest Plan.

Finding: On the basis of the information and analysis contained in the EA and all other information available as summarized above, it is my determination that adoption of the management direction reflected in my decision does not result in a significant amendment to the Forest Plan.

Implementation Date

If no appeals are filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of the decision may occur on, but not before, 5 business days from the close of the appeal filing period. When appeals are filed, implementation may occur on, but not before, the 15th business day following the date of the last appeal disposition.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to administrative review (appeal) pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215.
The appeal must be filed (regular mail, fax, email, hand-delivery, or express delivery) with the Appeal Deciding Officer: Linda Goodman, Regional Forester, USDA Forest Service, ATTN: Appeals Office, PO Box 3623, Portland, Oregon 97208-3623

The location for hand-delivery: 333 SW 1st Ave, Portland, OR. Send faxes to: 503-808-2255. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered appeals are: 7:45 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic appeals must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc) to appeals-

pacificnorthwest-regional-office@fs.fed.us. In cases where no identifiable name is attached to an electronic message, a verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature is one way to provide verification.

Appeals, including attachments, must be filed within 45 days from the publication date of the notice of decision in the *East Oregonian*, the newspaper of record. Attachments received after the 45 day appeal period will not be considered. The publication date in the *East Oregonian*, newspaper of record, is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Individuals or organizations who provided comment or otherwise expressed interest in this project by the close of the comment period specified at 215.6 may appeal this decision. The notice of appeal must meet the appeal content requirements at 36 CFR 215.14.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Dave Herr, Environmental Coordinator, Umatilla National Forest, 2517 SW Hailey Ave., Pendleton, OR and (541) 278-3869.

Kevin Martin 2-23-06

KEVIN MARTIN Date
Forest Supervisor
Umatilla National Forest