

Decision Memo

Grouse Creek Large Wood Replenishment Project

USDA Forest Service
Sandpoint Ranger District, Idaho Panhandle National Forests
Bonner County, Idaho

Introduction

In April of 2015, my staff proposed a stream restoration project on the Sandpoint Ranger District of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests. The project is called the Grouse Creek Large Wood Replenishment Project and is located approximately 13 miles northeast of Sandpoint, Idaho in the Grouse Creek watershed. The legal location of this area is Township 59 North, Range 1 East, Sections 16, 20, 21, 22, 23 and 30, Boise Meridian.

The project will add large woody debris (e.g. tree trunks and other woody pieces) to the creek for the purpose of improving fish habitat and stabilizing the banks and channel along the creek. The work will occur on National Forest Systems Lands. See the attached map (Figure 1) for details.

This memo serves to document my decision to implement the project. As discussed in more detail later in the memo, I have reviewed the impacts that this project will have on the environment as well as the nature of the activities that will occur and I have found that the scope of this project falls within a category of action that is exempt from the need to prepare an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

The following memo provides a description of the activities that will be implemented, a discussion of the objectives we wish to achieve, a summary of the environmental impacts that the activities will have and lastly, my rationale for concluding that the project does not require more detailed environmental analysis.

Purpose for the Project

Currently, certain segments (also known as reaches) of Grouse Creek contain little or no large pieces of woody debris. Typically, one would expect a healthy creek of this size and condition to have a considerable amount of wood within its channel. Single pieces, as well as large groups (also known as wood complexes) of woody material would be common along a healthy stream. Some of the large pieces would be incorporated into the channel bed where other pieces might only be in contact with the water in conditions of high stream flows.

The large woody debris serves as very important habitat for fish species and other aquatic and riparian organisms. The woody debris creates: 1) hiding cover for fish, 2) physical structure to trap bedload and, 3) shade to moderate stream temperatures and 4) opportunities to scour substrate to create deep pools. In addition, wood in the stream channel would have historically acted to stabilize the channel and thus prevent the stream banks from collapsing and being eroded as a result of natural disturbances such as intense rain storms, rapid snow melt events, or unusually high flows caused by large wildfires.

For almost 100 years, Grouse Creek has been manipulated. Within the watershed, there were a lot of activities that affected the channel including but not limited to road construction near the creek and its tributaries, tree harvesting next to the creek, and wildfires. Today, Grouse Creek is not functioning properly from an aquatic standpoint because there is so little wood in the channel. There is a strong need to place large pieces of wood in the creek in order to improve fishery habitat and overall health of the creek. The general purpose for this project is to fulfill that need.

By incorporating large wood into the creek my objectives are to: 1) increase the number and variety of pools that exist in the creek; 2) improve fish spawning habitat and 3) stabilize the existing gravel bars in, and adjacent to, the channel to reduce the excessive transport of sediment and bedload that is currently occurring in the creek.

The 2015 IPNF Forests Plan, which guides the overall management of the entire Idaho Panhandle National Forests, has a number of goals, desired conditions and objectives that emphasize the need to do restoration activities in situations like those described above for Grouse Creek. A thorough discussion of that Forest Plan direction and how it supports the need to improve Grouse Creek can be found in the Hydrology and Fishery Reports in the project file.

Decision

Project Activities

The following activities will occur as the project is implemented. It is anticipated that these activities will occur between July 2015 and September 2016. The project work will be phased allowing no more than two of the reaches to be treated in any one year. The monitoring activities, which are discussed in more detail later in this memo, will occur for the next several years as funds are available.

Approximately 300 trees will be felled from alongside Grouse Creek over approximately six miles of the creek. The trees will be placed into the creek as both single trees as well as groups of multiple trees clumped together. This work will occur over four different reaches of the creek and will be conducted in a way that will not block fish passage. Trees will be placed in a manner to maximize stream hydraulics in order to create scour, pools, gravel retention and cover. Skilled personnel will directionally fall the streamside trees and with one exception, will only use hand tools such as a grip hoist (specialized device similar to a hand-held “come along winch”) to move and arrange the trees in the creek. In one location of reach #8, about twelve pieces of large wood with root wads attached will be brought in from elsewhere because it is not available near the creek. Large mechanized equipment such as an excavator will move the wood from Road 280 and place it into the creek. The equipment will only use one access point to access and leave the channel. Otherwise, any use of large mechanized equipment that is necessary to help winch trees into place will stay on the existing road surface.

Wood structures will be anchored, using ballast trees and/or bracing them against existing upright trees/boulders in order to limit their movement by the stream flow. Smaller diameter or shorter length woody material will be added upstream of woody debris clumps to initiate future natural accumulation (or “racking”) of additional debris. Large diameter tree trunks that span the entire channel will be used to prevent movement of the wood beyond specific locations.

Because they are relatively scarce along the creek, western red cedar and white pine trees will generally not be selected for use. Specific locations will be identified for these activities based on finding suitable trees and sites that are conducive to rigging, directional felling and winching into the stream with minimal disturbance to the riparian zone. Trees immediately adjacent to the stream will generally not be chosen for felling in order to avoid destabilizing the stream bank. Most of the trees selected for felling will be at least five feet back from the channel bank.

As indicated above, in one site in Reach #8, large woody debris will have to be imported (likely from a recent blowdown event and salvage sale on IDFG land at Sunnyside) from elsewhere and put into the stream. At this site, trees will be placed into the channel using an excavator with a thumb. The excavator will cross the channel perpendicular to the flow, and will cross back and forth a maximum of six times to access the area. In strategic locations, in reach 8, large wood will be partially buried in the alluvial bars to accelerate vegetative recovery of these sterile alluvial deposits.

Design Features

The following design features are included in my decision and will serve to eliminate or minimize the potential impacts that the project activities could otherwise have upon the environment. The features are organized by resource topic below. Detailed resource reports that are contained in the project file have include information on how effective these features are at reducing or eliminating impacts.

- Operators will use chainsaws to fell carefully selected trees from within 100 feet of the stream's edge.
- Unless there is a safety concern, no trees will be cut that are located within 5 feet of the channel.
- Logs should not come in contact with loose or unconsolidated stream bank material while moving them from their fallen location to the stream. The leading ends of logs should be partially suspended when moving logs over stream banks and dragging logs resulting in scarification of floodplain soils should be minimized/corrected whenever possible.
- In all instances, wetlands will not be disturbed by moving logs. No logs will be dragged through marshy wet areas adjacent to the stream.
- In all instances, the project would meet the IPNF Forest Plan (2015) including the Inland Native Fish Strategy.

Aquatic Species (including Threatened and Endangered Species)

- The instream work window for Grouse Creek would be **July 15 – August 31**. Scheduling of work shall be done in a manner to minimize adverse environmental effects to listed bull trout or their habitat from sediment delivery. The work schedule shall be revised when conditions are such that significant pollution, such as construction related sediment, could result from the scheduled activities. The Fisheries Biologist must be consulted in the event there is a need to work in the stream outside of the approved work window.
- A preconstruction conference with the contractor will be held to ensure all items contained in the proposed action section of the BA are understood. All requirements and stipulations for sediment control listed on any State and/or Federal fill and removal permit will be discussed and adhered to as well.
- If redds or mature and possibly migratory bull trout are found at any time within any of the reaches, work must stop immediately and the District Fisheries Biologist must be notified. A review of the area may be required to determine if and how work may continue. Work may only resume after approval by the Fisheries Biologist.
- No machinery will enter the stream channel in Reach 5 where bull trout spawn and rear.
- A refueling plan for any machinery must be provided by the contractor prior to project initiation and must include plans for refueling chainsaws if they remain above, or near the stream or its floodplain. Refueling sites within a RHCA must be approved by the Forest Service and have an approved spill containment plan. Machinery will be fueled or lubricated at a distance of no less than 200 feet from live-water. Refueling of machinery is allowed on the road so long as no contaminants can reach a stream or ditch.
- Machinery will be fueled over a surface that will facilitate spill remediation. Machinery shall be maintained in a petroleum leak-free condition to reduce levels of groundwater contamination.
- Prohibit storage of fuels and other toxicants within RHCAs.
- Transportation of fuel will occur only during daylight hours and non-inclement weather to reduce the risk of accidents from operating in poor visibility. Fuel transporter, equipment operator, and field crew will follow all applicable Federal, state, and local regulations related to hazardous material spills, transport, transfer, and storage.
- If a spill of chemical pollutants such as fuel or hydraulic fluid should occur, the contractor shall immediately attempt to contain the spilled material. A petroleum spill kit will be stored on-site and within vehicles for immediate response if a spill should occur.
 - The following procedure will be followed:
 - 1) For spillage on land, construct earthen berms or use other suitable barricade material of sufficient size to contain the spill and keep it from spreading.

- 2) For spillage on water, attempt to isolate and contain the spilled material. Commercial booms or other suitable material shall be kept close to the active work area to contain fuel oil spills on water;
- 2) Immediately call the Forest Service at 208-265-1513 to report the situation.
- 3) Call the appropriate office of Idaho Department of Environmental Quality. **Contact Hazardous Waste Science Officer at 208-373-0198.**
- When conducting management activities, equipment (e.g. boots, waders, boats, surveying equipment, machinery) used in water should be treated by acceptable methods, such as freezing, drying or chemical treatments in order to prevent the introduction of aquatic invasive species and aquatic borne diseases. (IPNF Forests Plan 2015 Guideline for Aquatic Species: FW-GDL-AQS-02).
- Sanitary facilities, if used, such as chemical toilets or septic tanks shall not be placed adjacent to live water including streams, wetlands, wells, or springs. They shall be located no less than 200 feet from these areas to prevent contamination of any water sources. At the completion of construction work, these facilities shall be removed and taken to an off-site location.

Soil and Water Resources

- All project related activities would occur in accordance with the Soil and Water Conservation Handbook (USDA Forest Service 1988; FSH 2509.22).
- No construction will take place during times of saturated soil moisture or when runoff from disturbances may reach the stream.
- Where soils are exposed during project implementation, the exposed soils will be seeded and mulched. Only native grass seed that is certified weed free will be applied. The sites will be mulched with one of the following: brush from the area, certified weed free straw or wood strand straw.

Wildlife Habitat (including Threatened and Endangered Species):

- Food and Garbage Storage - The Grizzly Bear Management and Protection Plan (see Attachment A) would be implemented.
- Grizzly Bear - No project activities would occur from April 1 through June 15 to limit the potential disturbance to grizzly bears during the expected season of use of the proposed action area.
- Harlequin Duck - To limit the potential for disturbance to harlequin ducks from project activities on Grouse Creek, at a minimum, no project activities would occur in Reach 5 from May 1 through July 31, and for additional protection as late in August as possible. If harlequin ducks are observed within any stream reach with proposed activities before or during project implementation, ample time should be given to allow the ducks to move from the area before the felling of trees. Reach 5 will be the only reach of the project with Harlequin Duck protections. Work is authorized in Reach 5 only between August 1 and August 31st.
- Gray Wolf – If an active gray wolf den is located in close proximity to proposed activities, qualified wildlife personnel will evaluate the location of the den with respect to its distance from existing disturbance (e.g. open roads), distance from proposed activities, topography and the ambient noise levels (e.g. stream noise) to determine if project activities would need to be suspended during the denning season to limit disturbance. If it is determined that timing restrictions are warranted, project activities would be suspended from April 1 through June 30.
- Northern Goshawk - If an active goshawk nest is located in close proximity to proposed activities, qualified wildlife personnel will evaluate the location of the nest tree with respect to its distance from existing disturbance (i.e. open roads), distance from proposed activities, topography and the ambient

noise levels (e.g. stream noise) to determine if project activities would need to be suspended until outside the nesting season to limit disturbance to a nesting goshawk pair. If it is determined that timing restrictions are warranted, project activities would be suspended from April 15 through August 15 to promote nesting success.

- If any threatened, endangered or sensitive species were located during implementation of the proposed action, management activities would be altered, if necessary, so that proper protection measures could be taken.

Monitoring

All project monitoring is contingent upon future funding. Monitoring will be done collaboratively between the USFWS and the USFS. Monitoring will include documentation through photographs and documentation with field surveys to document fish use of the improved reaches.

- Photographic Monitoring: The goal of the photographic monitoring is to document wood movement and channel response. Monitoring will include before and after photos taken either from eye level or with a helicopter.
- Field surveys: Within the project reaches, bull trout redd surveys will document any improvements in the number of bull trout redds and snorkel surveys will document fish presence/distribution.

Decision Rationale

Collaborative Input, Interdisciplinary Project Development and/or Scoping

During the early planning work for this project, the USFS, USFWS and the PCFC worked collaboratively to submit grants and develop a vision for the project. After reviewing the 2009 GCWRAP, the collaborators walked the targeted stream segments and confirmed the highest priority reaches for wood enhancement. Together the collaborators developed an initial proposal and shared with an IDT from the Forest Service. The Forest Service IDT consisted of resource professionals in the following fields-hydrology, fisheries, wildlife, botany, forestry and archaeology. After meeting with the IDT and discussing internal scoping concerns, the collaborative group developed a more refined, integrated proposal. Once the proposal was refined, a formal notice was sent out to the general public to solicit input. The following groups and individuals were sent scoping notices: the standard North Zone of the Idaho Panhandle mailing list, the Sandpoint mailing list and private landowners with property near the project.

As a result of the public scoping efforts, I received letters and/or phone calls. In general, the comments consisted of comments from the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, one private citizen associated with an environmental group and the North Idaho Whitewater Boating group. The IDFG supported the project. The IDEQ had concerns about the effects of the project on stream temperature and sediment. The IDEQ issues were addressed in this DM and by phasing the project over the course of two years. The private citizen was concerned that we might be harvesting old growth timber. The project is not located in any old growth stands. The targeted trees average 80 to 90 years of age. The whitewater recreationalists expressed concern about safety and navigability of the creek after the project completion. The team lead followed up the concern with a phone call and a field review for July 2015. The recreational group was primarily concerned about whether or not the USFS would be adding wood to the Grouse Falls canyon area where a few whitewater enthusiasts enjoy using the creek during high flows. The team leader assured the group that no wood is planned for placement immediately above, nor within the canyon-like section of Grouse Creek in Reach 7, near Grouse Falls, where the kayakers enjoy whitewater.

Category of Action

Considerable attention was given to both the internal and external comments/concerns. In light of the concerns by the recreationalists, no wood will be added in the area immediately adjacent to Grouse Falls. Because of the concerns with potentially harvesting old growth, foresters reviewed stand data and concluded that all project work was not within any old growth stands and the age of the trees and the stand characteristics (within the project area) did not approach the IPNF Old Growth Standards. Additionally, in light of wildlife and fisheries concerns, the project will be timed to avoid conflict with bull trout and Harlequin ducks. Finally, the concern regarding adding all the wood in one year was addressed by agreeing to phase the project over the course of two years and completing no more than two of the reaches in any one year.

After careful review of the activities that are proposed in this project, I conclude that they are of a nature and scope that they fit into the following category of action that is excluded from further analysis (36 CFR 220.6 (e)(7)): *Modification or maintenance of stream or lake aquatic habitat improvement structures using native materials or normal practices.*

Finding of No Extraordinary Circumstances

I have considered whether or not any of the extraordinary circumstances are present, and if so, whether they could be impacted by this project. Of the seven extraordinary circumstances (listed below), only two are present in the area that could potentially be impacted by the project. For those two circumstances, I have found that the negative impacts (direct, indirect and cumulative) that this project could have on the extraordinary circumstances are so minor that the mere presence of them does not warrant further analysis in an EA or EIS. Information that supports that conclusion is presented below.

- (1) Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species;
- (2) Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds;
- (3) Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas;
- (4) Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas;
- (5) Research natural areas;
- (6) American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites¹, and
- (7) Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas.

The circumstances above that are numbered 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 do not occur within the area that could be impacted by this project. Therefore, no further discussion is warranted for those circumstances.

However, circumstances #1 and #2 are present. Detailed specialist reports documenting the effects are available in the wildlife, fishery, rare plant and hydrology reports in the project file. A brief summary of the impacts and analysis that was conducted for those resources/circumstances is as follows:

1) Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species. One of the primary purposes of the Grouse Creek Large Wood Replenishment Project was to enhance habitat for bull trout (a Threatened and Endangered Species). A comprehensive design

¹ The project Archaeologist consulted with the tribes and there were no “expressed” concerns. Pursuant to the law, Government to Government Consultation will be ongoing for the life of the project.

criteria/mitigation was included in this project to minimize any potential adverse impacts to bull trout. The Biological Opinion for bull trout determined that the project is likely to adversely affect bull trout and is not likely to adversely affect bull trout critical habitat and grizzly bear. The USFWS concluded that this project is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of bull trout. In so far as sensitive species, specific design criteria are included to avoid adverse impacts.

2). Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds. Within the hydrologist report, there is a detailed description about how the Grouse Creek project would enhance flood plain function. Improving channel structure and reducing the mobility of the bedload will ultimately stabilize the floodplains. The implementation of this project will improve flood plain form and function.

Required Findings Related to Laws and Regulations

Numerous laws, regulations, and agency directives require that my decision be consistent with their provisions. I have concluded that this project is consistent with that direction. Including the 2015 Forest Plan. The activities and impacts associated with this project are consistent with the Forest Plan, including all the goals, desired conditions, objectives and guidelines and standards. The specialists resource reports in the project file contain more information on this topic.

Administrative Review Opportunities and Implementation

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to CFR 215.8 (a)(4). Implementation of the decision may be immediately. I have been delegated the authority and I am the Responsible Official for this decision.

Additional Information and Contact

If you have questions about this project, please contact the project leader, Jill Cobb, at the Priest Lake Ranger Station at 208-443-6835 or email at jcobb@fs.fed.us.

ERICK WALKER
District Ranger
Sandpoint Ranger District
Idaho Panhandle National Forests

Date

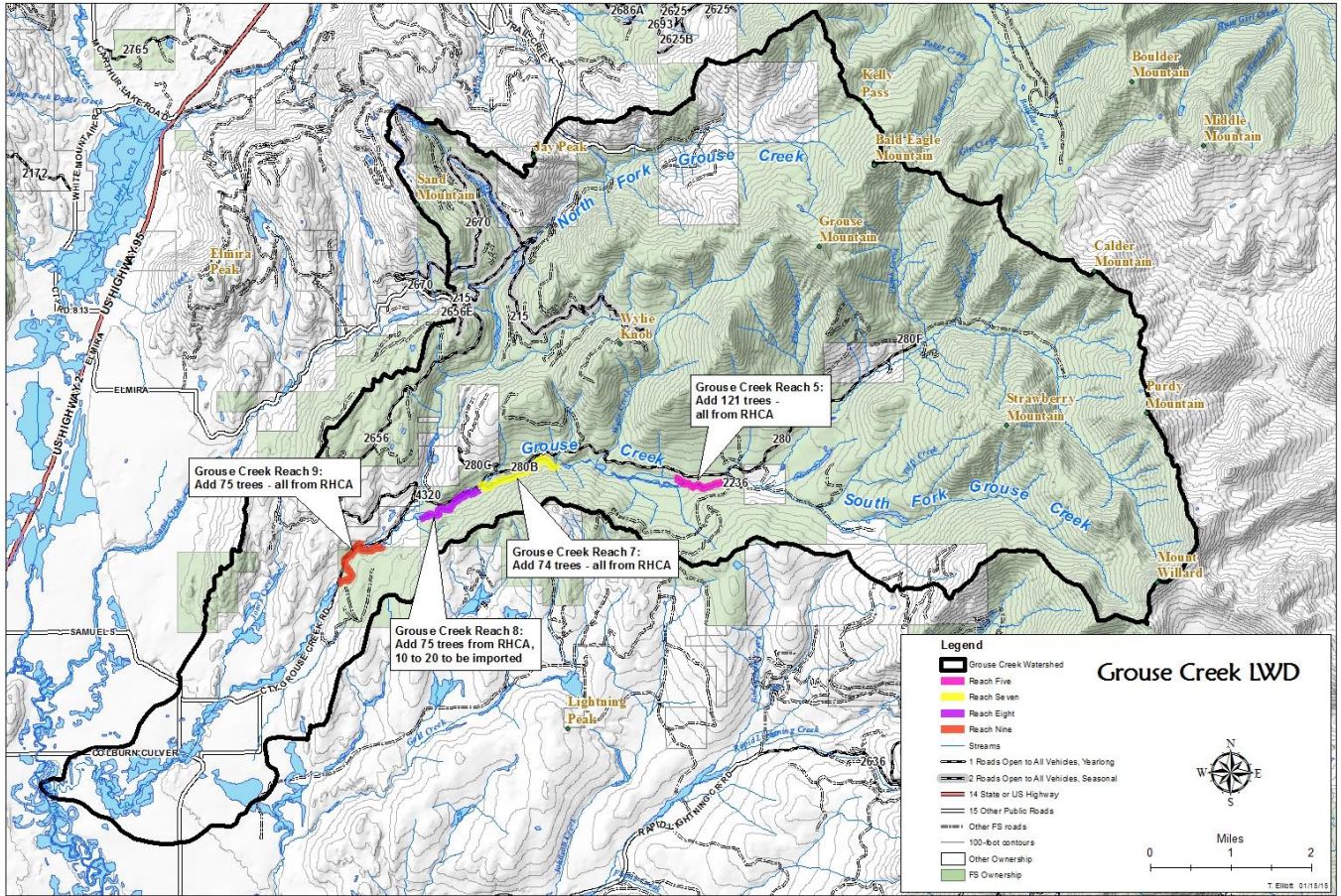


Figure 1: Location of the reaches proposed for treatment in Grouse Creek.