Project Location
The Wenatchee River Ranger District of the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest is proposing to conduct forest and aquatic restoration work in the Lower Chiwawa, Big Meadow, Lake Wenatchee, Beaver Creek-Wenatchee River sub-watersheds. The purpose of this document is to inform you of our proposal to do vegetation and aquatic restoration work, and gather any additional information, ideas or concerns you may have. Any input you may have will assist my interdisciplinary team and I as we move forward with the analysis process for this project.

The Upper Wenatchee Pilot Project area is 75,000 acres in size and located north of the town of Leavenworth in Chelan County, Washington.

Purpose and Need

Purpose
The Wenatchee River Ranger District, Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest, has developed proposals for the Upper Wenatchee Pilot Project, to support the purpose of the project and that are consistent with the Wenatchee National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP), as amended by the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP).

The primary purpose of this project is to create a more resilient terrestrial and aquatic landscape to:

1. Address conditions that have departed from the historical range of variability to reduce the risk of wildfire and other disturbances to protect lives, communities, and ecological values.
2. Promote better outcomes for a broad spectrum of ecological, social, and community resources and values in a manner that recognizes and responds to the important role of natural fire and helps mitigate risk in the wildland urban interface while providing for sustainable user access.
3. Protect and restore watershed conditions that maintain uplands, late-successional habitat and large and old trees, riparian and instream habitat, and water quality and quantity for the benefit of communities and native fish and wildlife.
4. Design and implement treatments to support the recovery of threatened, endangered, and sensitive species.

Need
The Forest Restoration Strategy (USDA Forest Service 2012), as detailed specifically in the Upper Wenatchee Landscape Evaluation (Forest Service 2017), provides for the basis for most of the needs being addressed through the NEPA EA. Guidance is also provided in the LRMP, as amended, and the Restoration Strategy (including large and old tree policy), and the OWNF Fire Management Plan, as well as guidance provided in Late Successional Reserve Assessments and Watershed Assessments. The landscape evaluation indicated past practices and increased fire suppression have altered the size, composition, and connectivity of forest stands. Many stands have grown into dense, multi-layered forest canopies where there is a lack of large and old trees, areas of poor forest health, high risk of wildfire, and high risk of insect and disease infestations. Thus, there is a need to:

- Create and maintain successional pathways that provide the amount and spatial arrangement of forest conditions that increase resilience to natural disturbance and sustainability.

- Improve habitat conditions within Late-Successional Reserves while reducing risk to stand replacing fires.
- Maintain, enhance, or accelerate the development of large and old trees and increase proportion of old forest structure.
- Conserve the existing spotted owl and old forest habitat, and identify and implement vegetation treatments to develop additional habitat in the most sustainable landscape location.
- Support biodiversity by restoring, enhancing, and/or maintaining unique habitats including aspen, white bark pine, meadows, and huckleberry fields.
- Reduce impacts from fire and return fire as a natural element of the landscape.
- Reduce risk of fire on National Forest System lands in the Wildland Urban Interface.

Aquatic and riparian conditions and management objectives are established in the LRMP, as amended by the Aquatic Conservation Strategy. The landscape evaluation was used to identify restoration opportunities that could move watershed conditions towards aquatic objectives and contribute towards recovery of listed fish species and critical habitat. It identified numerous catchments where the road system is affecting stream habitat. Thus, there is a need to:

- Improve habitat connectivity for Chinook Salmon, Bull Trout, and Steelhead by removing barriers to fish passage.
- Improve aquatic habitat, including instream, riparian, banks, and floodplains
- Reduce road related impacts to improve terrestrial and aquatic habitat quality (connectivity, disturbance, sediment).

Proposed Action
The proposal is based on information from the landscape evaluation, field reconnaissance, and local knowledge of the resource conditions. The Upper Wenatchee Pilot Project area includes approximately 60,000 acres of National Forest lands with the Lower Chiwawa, Big Meadow, Lake Wenatchee, and Beaver Creek-Wenatchee River sub-watersheds. The project is being designed to address how landscapes and watersheds have changed from historical conditions, as well as identifying activities that would make landscapes and watersheds more resilient to disturbances while considering climatic changes.

To meet the purpose and need and move the landscape toward a more resilient condition, the Forest Service proposes the following vegetation treatments.

- Thinning, combined with surface and ladder fuel treatments, to modify forest structure, improve forest health, reduce risk of crown fire, and accelerate development of large trees.
- Regeneration harvests to address plantations planted with off-site stock, manage root disease, and break up large patches of dense, fire prone forest.
- Planting and natural regeneration to improve species composition.
- Reducing risk to late-successional forests within Late Successional Reserves by reducing overall stocking densities, changing species composition, and reducing fuel loading and connectivity to make stands more resilient to disturbance.
- Establishing strategically located fuelbreaks and treatments to modify fire flow through the landscape.

- Reducing conifer encroachment into meadows, fens, huckleberry fields, and whitebark and aspen stands.
- Shifting forest structure, species composition, and distribution across the landscape with Fuel Reduction treatments.

The Forest Service is also proposing the following treatments to meet the purpose and need and protect and restore aquatic habitat and natural processes. These proposed actions could also benefit terrestrial species in the watershed.

- Removing migration barriers and improve habitat to support fish populations, such as spring Chinook salmon, bull trout, and steelhead by
  - Removing, replacing, or modifying culverts and water crossings in Alder Creek, Big Meadow Creek, Brush Creek, Clear Creek, Deep Creek, Elder Creek, Fall Creek, Gate Creek, Goose Creek, Grouse Creek, Beaver Creek, and Twin Creek
  - Reconnecting off-channel floodplain habitats and creating side channel habitat
  - Enhance in-water habitat and stabilize banks by planting riparian vegetation, constructing habitat structures, reducing erosion and sediment delivery.
- Decommissioning existing roads
- Reconstructing and relocating existing roads
- Decommission unauthorized trails
- Reducing road densities and improve existing roads

Forest Plan Amendments
Forest plan amendments are intended to be an adaptive management tool to keep forest plans current, effective, and relevant between forest plan revisions. The 2012 Planning Rule (Title 36 CFR, Part 219 – Planning states:

> *A plan may be amended at any time. Plan amendments may be broad or narrow depending on the need for change, and should be used to keep plans current and help units adapt to new information or changing conditions. The responsible official has the discretion to determine whether and how to amend the plan. A plan amendment is required to add, modify, or remove one or more plan components or to change how of where one or more plan components apply to all or part of the planning area (including management area or geographic areas).*

The proposed action is expected to include a project-specific amendment that would allow the project to meet habitat restoration and risk-reduction objectives. Specifically, the project would amend the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) silviculture standard that prohibits harvest of trees in stands over 80 years old in late-successional reserves (NWFP ROD, C-12). The amendment would allow treatment in stands that are over 80 years old to restore ponderosa pine forests for wildlife species associated with old-forest open-canopy habitat conditions. The current condition of these stands are a result of past timber harvest that removed many of the largest trees and 70-80 years of fire exclusion that has allowed a dense understory to develop. These stands do not currently provide spotted owl habitat or habitat for late-successional and old forest associated species.

When proposing a Forest Plan amendment, the 2012 planning rule (36 CFR 219), as amended, requires the responsible official to provide in the initial notice "which substantive requirements of §§219. 8 through 219.11 are likely to be directly related to the amendment (§ 219.13(b)(5))…" Whether a rule provision is likely to be directly related to an amendment is determined by the purpose for the amendment, the beneficial effects of the amendment, and the substantive adverse effects of the amendment, as informed by the best available scientific information, scoping, effects analysis, monitoring data or other rationale.

Based on the proposed amendment and requirement of the planning rule, the following substantive requirements of the 36 CFR 219 planning regulations would likely be directly related to the proposed amendment: 219.8(a)(1)(ii) Contributions of the plan area to ecological conditions within the broader landscape influenced by the plan area, 219.8 (a)(1)(v) Wildland fire and opportunities to restore fire adapted ecosystems, 219.8(a)(1)(vi) Opportunities for landscape scale restoration, 219.9(a)(2)(i) Key Characteristics associated with terrestrial and aquatic ecosystem types, and 219.11(c) Timber harvest for purposes other than timber production.