



File Code: 1950
Date: February 15, 2017

Planning Participant

Dear Planning Participant,

The Newport-Sullivan Lake Ranger Districts are soliciting comments on the Limestone/Silver Vegetation Management Project proposed action. The purpose of this letter is to offer the public an opportunity for early and meaningful participation on a proposed action prior to a decision being made by the Responsible Official. A detailed description of the proposed project is in this letter.

PROJECT LOCATION

The approximately 53,600-acre analysis area is located in both Stevens and Pend Oreille County on the Newport-Sullivan Lake and the Three Rivers Ranger Districts on the Colville National Forest. The project area is located approximately 1 mile west of Metaline Falls, Washington and approximately 28 miles northeast of Colville, Washington. Please see vicinity map at figure 1. This area is within the Flume Creek, Pewee Creek, Cedar Creek, North Fork Deep Creek subwatersheds and west of the Pend Oreille River. The analysis area includes Colville Forest Plan management areas 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 11. Table 1 shows the legal description for the project area using the Willamette Meridian.

Table with 3 columns: Township, Range, All or portions of sections. Rows include township 39 and 40 with their respective ranges and section numbers.

Table 1. Legal descriptions of the project area

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROJECT

The Limestone/Silver proposed action is based on direction found within the Colville National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan, 1988), as amended by the continuation of Interim Management Direction Establishing Riparian, Ecosystem, and Wildlife Standards for Timber Sales ("eastside screens", Lowe 1995), as well as the Pend Oreille County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP 2005). The Forest Plan directs the promotion of tree growth, reduction of insect and disease levels, and development of densities that sustain wood fiber production. For management areas 1, 5, 6, 7, and 8, the Forest Plan directs that insect and disease outbreaks be prevented or suppressed when management area values are threatened.

The current and projected future insect and disease outbreaks in this area are resulting in a general decline in the resilience and health of the forest. The general decline and the risk of increased mortality determined the need for the project proposal. The area is experiencing declining forest health based on annual forest health surveys, and is at risk of experiencing substantially increased tree mortality over the next 15 years due to insect and disease infestation based on the National Insect and Disease Risk Map that depicts designated areas under Section 602 of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA).



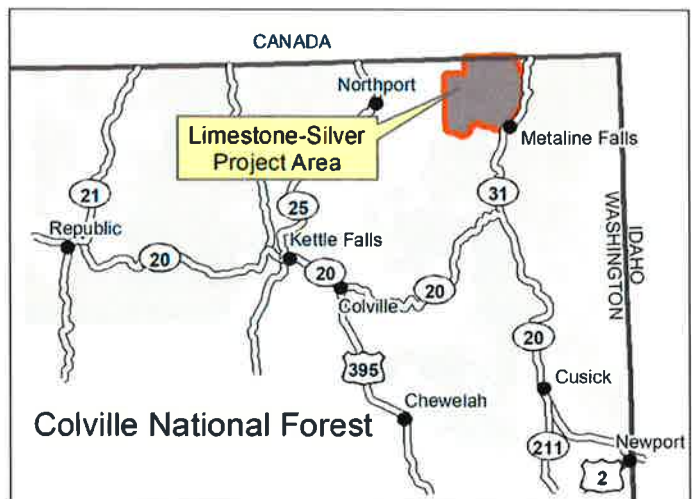
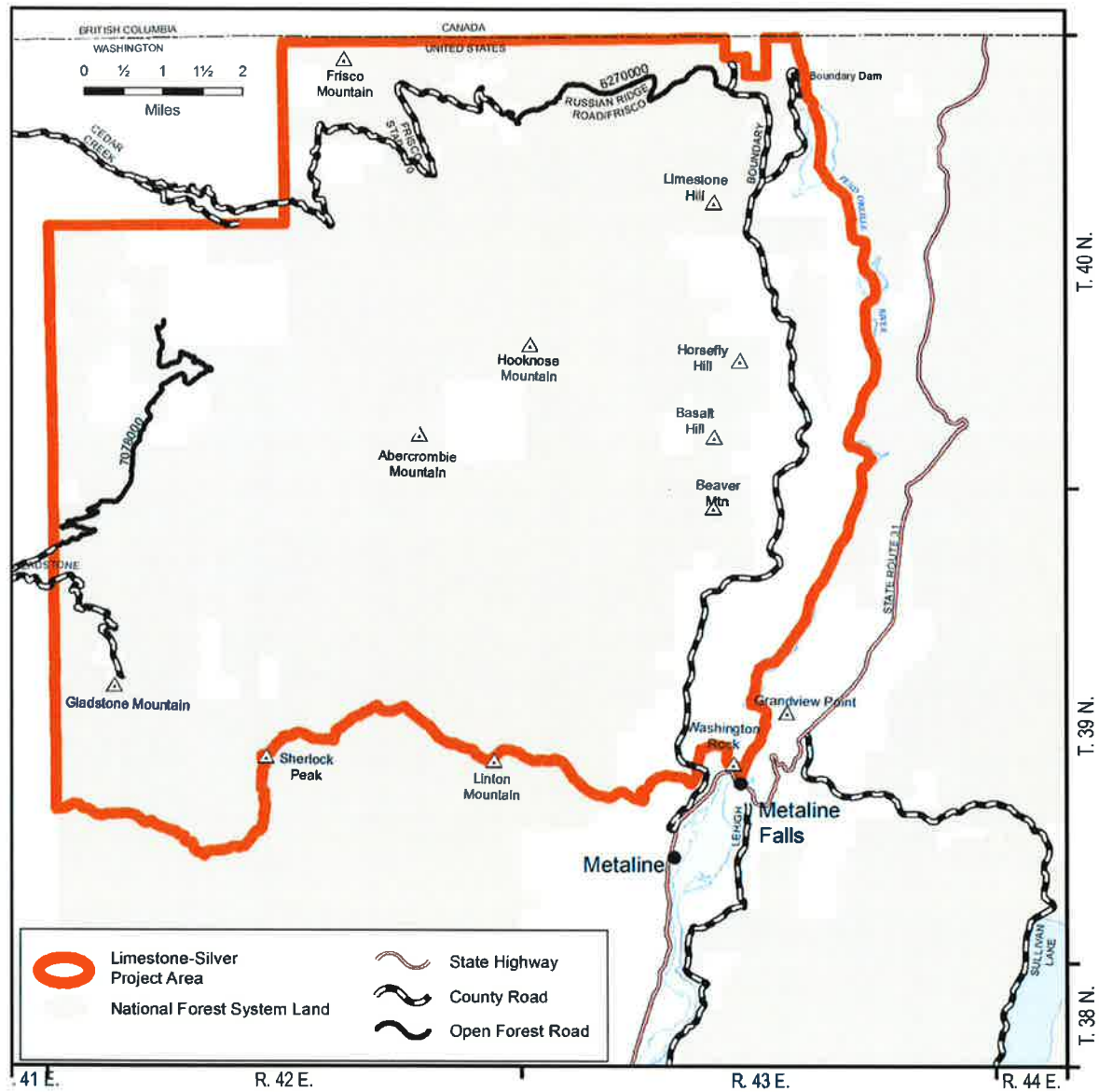


Figure 1. Vicinity map

Section 8204 of the Agriculture Act of 2014 (“Farm Bill”, Public Law 113-79) amended Title VI of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) of 2003 (16 U.S.C. 6591 et seq.). This amendment added Sections 602 and 603 which describe treatment area designation and the administrative review process. Section 603 establishes a categorical exclusion for qualifying insect and disease projects in designated areas on National Forest System lands. A categorical exclusion allows a proposed action to be excluded from further analysis and documentation in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or Environmental Assessment (EA).

An insect and disease project that may be categorically excluded under this authority is a project that treats 3000 acres or less, is designed to reduce the risk or extent of, or increase the resilience to, insect or disease infestation in the areas, maximizes the retention of old-growth and large trees to the extent that the trees promote stands resilient to insects and disease and constructs no new permanent roads. (HFRA, Sections 602(d) and 603(a)). Preliminary data collection and analysis in the project area supports the use of the 2014 Farm Bill Insect and Disease Categorical Exclusion (CE) authority to collaboratively develop treatments in the Limestone-Silver project area.

Based on observed existing conditions, as well as other supporting information (such as annual insect and disease aerial detection surveys, national insect and disease risk maps, community wildfire protection plan, discussions with and input from local community members, Stevens County Commissioner, Kalispel Tribe representatives and the North East Washington Forestry coalition), there is a there is a need to:

- Reduce the risk or extent of, or increase resilience to, insect and/or disease infestation;
- Reduce wildfire risk to the local communities and surrounding federal lands;
- Maximize the retention of old-growth and large trees to the extent that the trees promote stands resilient to insects and disease ; and
- Maximize the available treatable acres (as close to 3,000 acres as possible).

The Limestone/Silver project area currently has acres of vegetation that are overstocked and susceptible to uncharacteristically high levels of insects and disease. Overstocking creates more inter-tree competition which in turn increases stress on individual trees. An estimated 15,929 acres in the Limestone/Silver project area has been affected by root rot, spruce budworm, Douglas-fir beetle, mountain pine beetle, and other agents over the past five years, according to annual Forest Health and Protection aerial surveys. This is approximately 30 percent of the total project area of 53,600 acres. Existing stand composition and structure put the project area at risk to these disturbance agents over the foreseeable future.

PROPOSED ACTION

The 2014 Farm Bill defines declining forest health as a forest that is experiencing substantially increased tree mortality or die back due to infestation or defoliation by insect or disease. Locations for these projects must be within the wildland-urban interface (WUI) or if outside the WUI, in condition classes 2

Condition Class is one way of determining a stand's potential risk from wildfire.

Condition Class 1- Fire Regimes are within an historical range and the risk of losing key ecosystem components is low;

Condition Class 2- fire frequencies have departed from historical frequencies by one or more return intervals. The risk of losing key ecosystem components is moderate.

Condition Class 3- Fire frequencies have departed from historical frequencies by multiple return intervals. The risk of losing key ecosystem components is high.

Fire Regime I- high frequency, low severity fires (e.g., large ponderosa pine stands);

Fire Regime II- high severity fires

Fire Regime III- mixed severity fires (e.g., mixed Douglas-fir, western

or 3 in Fire Regime Groups I, II, or III. All proposed treatment units are located in the WUI and total proposed treatment acres do not exceed 3,000 acres. The fire regime condition class (FRCC) in the proposed treatment units is predominantly rated as a 2 with small amounts of 1 and 3. This range in FRCC is representative throughout the analysis area. The Limestone project also lies within the State of Washington designated watershed, as defined by Sec. 602(b).

The project area includes 20,510 acres of Designated Roadless Area and lands that may be considered for inclusion in the national wilderness preservation system (LRMP, 1988), and the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail also traverses the project area from west to east. No treatments are proposed within the designated roadless area or that would affect the character of the lands that may be considered for inclusion in the national wilderness preservation system.

Proposed Vegetation Treatments

Vegetation treatment would emphasize forest health and the reduction of hazardous fuels while maximizing the retention of old-growth and large trees to the extent that the trees promote stands resilient to insects and disease. Forest stands within the project boundary have departed from historic conditions, and are more densely forested now than in the past. Since fire has been excluded from this landscape for so long, forest canopy is much more contiguous than a resilient forest would be, with fewer openings and overly dense understory vegetation which can also diminish the health and resiliency of large and/or old trees in the project area.

To attain healthy forest objectives, the proposed action includes commercial and non-commercial treatments as the primary activities. Commercial treatments would be accomplished primarily by shelterwood harvests and commercial thinning (table 2). However, a combination of treatments including group selection and overstory removal may be used with shelterwood and thinnings to address pockets of unsuitable trees, disease or insect infestations, or mistletoe infection. Noncommercial treatments include, but are not limited to: grapple piling, pile burning, jackpot burning, underburning, and felling small damaged trees. These treatments would be applied within proposed units following timber harvest to reduce fuel hazard, increase growing space for residual trees, and remove small damaged trees following harvest. Please see the draft proposed action map located at figure 3.

Table 2. Approximate area by silvicultural method to reduce mortality loss from insect and disease

Activity	Treatments (acres)
Shelterwood (HSH)	2,096
Commercial Thinning (HTH)	899

Shelterwood: It is estimated that the shelterwood silviculture method would be used on 2,096 acres within the project area. This harvest method is designed to retain a component of overstory trees while removing trees within all canopy classes to provide growing conditions for a new cohort (age class) of trees in the understory.

Commercial thinning: Approximately 899 acres would be commercially thinned; this is an intermediate treatment designed to increase diameter growth of residual trees and provide larger trees in a shorter period of time than would occur under competition for resources. Thinning treatments typically target suppressed or intermediate trees for removal, but some dominant and co-dominant trees may be removed to decrease overall stand density or to favor healthier trees.

Combination of silviculture treatment methods: A combination of silviculture methods including, but not limited to: thinning, shelterwood, group selection, and overstory removal would occur where applicable. Many stands are not uniform and vary in species composition, size, density, and spatial pattern, so different silviculture methods may be needed to achieve desired conditions.

Table 3. Proposed treatment acres by logging system

Logging System	Approximate Acres	Percent
Ground based	2,379	79%
Skyline	616	21%

Other Proposed Treatments and Activities

Soil decompaction activities using mechanical equipment would occur on an estimated 25 acres within two treatment units (units 2 and 13). Decompaction is proposed due to the existing highly compacted soils in these two units and would promote tree growth and development, leading to healthier and more resilient trees in the event of future insect and disease outbreaks.

No new roads would be constructed under this proposed action. However, three temporary road locations have been identified to access units that do not currently have road access. The total length in temporary road miles is estimated to be 0.5 miles.

MANAGEMENT AREA AND DIRECTION

The project area includes lands in management areas 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 11. Forest Plan direction for each of these management areas is to either suppress or to prevent and suppress insect and disease outbreaks which threaten the respective resource. Additionally, management area 7, which emphasizes wood and forage directs that insect and disease reduction will be considered when making silvicultural prescriptions.

DECISION NEEDED

The Responsible Official for this proposed action will be the district ranger for the Newport-Sullivan Lake Ranger Districts. Based on the information received during the collaboration meetings, this comment period and the analysis of resources, we expect to make a decision in 2017. The decision will direct how to best move forward in meeting the objectives, while meeting management direction as stated in the Forest Plan. Pursuant to 36 CFR 218, if the project is found to have no extraordinary circumstances that warrant further analysis and documentation in an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement, a Decision Memo will be signed. The decision will not be subject to pre-decisional objection.

HOW TO COMMENT AND TIMEFRAME

Please notify us if you would like to stay on the mailing list for this project or if you have any comments or questions regarding this project. You may provide responses to this project by letter, fax, phone call, or email:

by letter to 315 North Warren Newport, WA 99156;
 by fax at 509-447-7301;
 by phone at 509-447-7300;
 by email to comments-pacificnorthwest-colville-newport@fs.fed.us

The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are 9:00 am to 3:00 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays.

It is the responsibility of persons providing comments to submit them by the close of the comment period. It is the responsibility of the sender of electronic comments to verify that submitted comments were received. If an auto reply from the electronic mail system is not received one should assume that the comment has not received. Any comments provided will become a part of the public record and should include the name and address of the provider, and well as the title of the document (Limestone/ Silver

project). Also, comments should include specific items, along with supporting reasons that you believe the Responsible Official should consider in reaching a decision.

For additional information, please contact Michelle Paduani, Project Leader at (509) 447-7361 or michellepaduani@fs.fed.us, or review all documents online at http://data.ecosystem-management.org/nepaweb/nepa_project_exp.php?project=49502.

Comments need to be received no later than March 17, 2017.

Thank you for your participation in this project.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Gayne S.", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

GAYNE SEARS
District Ranger

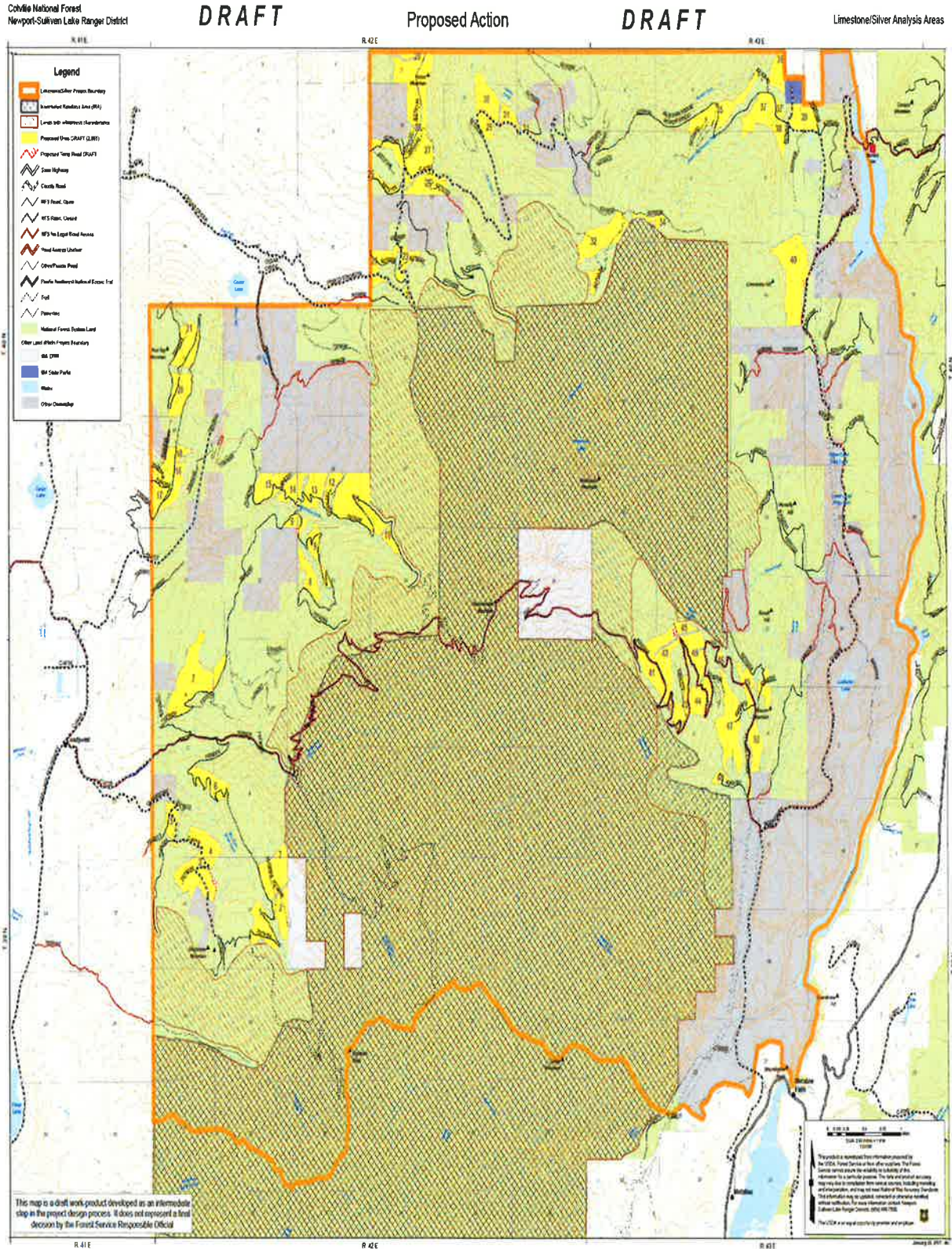


Figure 2. Proposed action map