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Subject: Courtesy Copy: Payette National Forest - Opportunity to Comment - Scoping Period Huckleberry Landscape Restoration Project
Date: Friday, September 30, 2016 5:00:35 AM

This is a courtesy copy of an email bulletin sent by Sue Dixon.

This bulletin was sent to the following groups of people:

Subscribers of Huckleberry Landscape Restoration Project (263 recipients)

United States

500 North Mission Street, Bldg. 2

Department of

Forest Service

Payette National Forest

McCall ID 83638

Agriculture

(208) 634-0700

File Code: 1950
Date: September 26, 2016

Dear Interested Party:

The Forest Service is seeking scoping comments on the environmental analysis for the proposed Huckleberry Landscape Restoration Project on the Council Ranger District, Payette National Forest. While the project area is located on the Council Ranger District, the New Meadows Ranger District Interdisciplinary Team is conducting the analysis and preparing the NEPA documents. The document describing the proposed action can be found on the project web page at: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=50218>.

Huckleberry Landscape Restoration Project

The Huckleberry Landscape Restoration Project is located approximately 15 miles west of New Meadows, Idaho. Proposed treatments include timber harvest, thinning, prescribed fire, road treatments and road decommissioning, and recreation improvements. The Huckleberry project area is approximately 67,000 acres within the Council Ranger District on the Payette National Forest. The project is located in the Indian, Lick, and Bear Creek subwatersheds within the Brownlee Reservoir Subbasin.

Purpose and Need for Action

The **purpose** of the Huckleberry Landscape Restoration Project is to:

Move vegetation toward the desired conditions defined in the Forest Plan and the most recent science addressing restoration and management of wildlife habitat, with an emphasis on:

- Improving habitat for specific wildlife species of concern such as the Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed northern Idaho ground squirrel (NIDGS) and species dependent on dry coniferous forests (e.g. white-headed woodpecker), while maintaining habitat for other Forest sensitive and ESA-listed species;
- Maintaining and promoting large tree forest structure, early seral species composition (e.g. example aspen, western larch, ponderosa pine, and Douglas-fir) and forest resiliency;
- Reducing the risk of uncharacteristic and undesirable wildland fire, with an emphasis on restoring and maintaining desirable plant community attributes including fuel levels, fire regimes, and other ecological processes.
- Moving forest stands toward desired conditions as described in the Forest Plan by returning fire to the ecosystem; promoting the development of large tree forest structures mixed with a mosaic of size classes; and improving growth, species composition, and resiliency to insects, disease, and fire.

Support the development of fire-adapted rural communities.

- Creating conditions that provide firefighters a higher probability of successfully suppressing fire in the wildland urban interface by reducing potential fire behavior near values at risk (e.g., homes, communication towers, and power lines) and primary ingress/egress routes, essential to firefighter access and the public.
- Creating conditions where rural communities are less reliant on suppression forces.

Move all subwatersheds within the project area toward the desired conditions for soil, water, riparian, and aquatic resources (SWRA) as described in the Forest Plan and the Watershed Condition Framework (WCF) (USDA 2011) by:

Reducing overall road density, road-related accelerated sediment, and other road related impacts across the project area; restoring riparian vegetation and floodplain function.

- Restoring fish habitat connectivity across the project area, especially in streams occupied by ESA Listed bull trout, (*Salvelinus confluentus*) and in or adjacent to bull trout Critical Habitat.

Manage recreation use with an emphasis on hardening (where needed) dispersed recreation sites for resource improvement, and improving existing trail opportunities.

Contribute to the economic vitality of the communities adjacent to the Payette National Forest.

The **need** for the project is based on the difference between the existing and desired conditions. These differences include:

- Less large tree size class than desired and higher canopy cover;
- Fewer early seral species (i.e. ponderosa pine and western larch);
- Fewer fire resilient species than desired;
- Increase in ground, surface, and canopy fuels;
- Less than desired watershed function and integrity.

The desired conditions for this project are based upon the Payette National Forest Plan (USDA Forest Service 2003), and the Watershed Condition Framework (USDA Forest Service 2011).

Proposed Action

Proposed treatments include timber harvest, thinning, prescribed burning, road closures and decommissioning, road re-routing, and recreation improvements.

Vegetative Treatments:

The Forest Service proposes approximately 42,600 acres of vegetative treatments in the project area to improve wildlife habitat for Northern Idaho Ground Squirrels (NIDGS) and species that rely on habitat similar to the white-headed woodpecker, and to move vegetation toward the desired conditions specified in the Forest Plan. Approximately 9,000 acres are in areas designed to mitigate fire risk to values at risk.

Commercial Vegetative Treatments

- Free Thin, Free Thin–Patch Cut-Selection Harvest, Aspen Restoration, and Mature Plantation Harvest - 23,800 acres.
- Meadow restoration through commercial and non-commercial vegetation treatments - 11,800 acres
- Restoration of Low Density Timber Stands - 1,500 acres
- Whitebark pine restoration – 600 acres

Non-Commercial Treatments

- Non-commercial thinning - 42,500 acres. Non-commercial thinning would be completed in areas of commercial harvest as well as outside of commercial harvest. This would consist of trees generally less than ten inches DBH and include plantations. Non-commercial thinning would be completed to improve wildlife habitat, increase growth rates and tree vigor, improve stand resiliency to natural disturbance, reduce density-related competition, reduce potential fire behavior and fire effects given a wildland fire.

Prescribed Fire Treatments

- Prescribed burning - 67,000 acres over the next 20 years

Community Wildfire Mitigation Treatments

Both fuel loading and fuel continuity would be altered to reduce surface fire potential as well as crown fire potential among the community wildfire mitigation treatment areas (see Prescribed Fire Treatments and Community Wildfire Mitigation Map). This would provide suppression forces a higher probability of successfully attacking a wildland fire within intermix or rural condition while creating a safer working environment.

A combination of non-commercial thinning, commercial thinning, limbing to reduce ladder fuels, piling dead and downed material, pile burning, and/or prescribed burning would facilitate the desired condition. More specifically, activities would result in the following:

- Increased canopy base heights to reduce potential for spotting, torching, and crown fire;
- Reduced canopy densities to reduce the potential for crown fire spread;
- Reduced species that are not fire-resilient to promote fire-resilient stands;
- Reduced ground and surface fuels. Recurrent application of the necessary treatments (primarily prescribed fire) every 5-15 years would maintain the desired condition, which is lower fuel loadings and reduced horizontal fuel continuity.

Watershed Improvement and Restoration Treatments

The proposal includes changes to the Forest System Road network to reduce road-related impacts to water quality and fish habitat, as well as to reduce overall road density. Specific actions include:

- 57.7 miles of system roads decommissioning
- Restoration of at least 70 miles of unauthorized roads

The project includes 13 opportunities that have been identified to improve fish passage and improve hydrologic connectivity. In the Bear Creek subwatershed, two trail bridges are proposed on FS Trail 228 where the trail crosses Mickey Creek and Wesley Creek. Both of these streams are Bull Trout Critical Habitat.

Recreation Improvements

The recreation proposal focuses on improving existing developed and dispersed recreation opportunities and facilities, trail maintenance and relocation to improve watershed conditions and the recreational user's experience. Work includes improving potable water well, coordinating dispersed camping along roads open to motorized travel 300 feet off the road to protect NIDGS, installing trail signs, hardening dispersed camping sites, decommissioning and replacing existing restroom facility with single vault restroom at the Bear trailhead, along with three fire rings and two metal stock hitch rails.

Trail work will include bringing the 33 miles of trails consisting of two-wheel motorized and non-motorized trail up to defined trail class standard for each trail. This includes signing at all trail junctions, new signing at trailheads lacking proper signs, and trail reestablishment and potential relocation where the trail is undefinable.

Payette National Forest Supervisor Keith Lannom will be the Responsible Official for this project.

Scoping Process

The detailed document describing the proposed action can be found on the project web page at: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=50218>. A hard copy of the proposed action document is available upon request by email to Kim Pierson, New Meadows District Ranger, kpierson@fs.fed.us or by telephone at 208-347-0300.

The Payette National Forest is contacting interested persons, groups, and agencies to make them aware of the project and to gather pertinent feedback. A Notice of Intent to Prepare an Environmental Impact Statement is expected to be published in the Federal Register on September 30, 2016. To be most helpful please submit your scoping comments within 45 days of the publication of the Notice of Intent, and make your comments as specific as possible. Comments may pertain to the nature and scope of the environmental, social, and economic issues, and possible alternatives to the proposed action. Your comments will help us refine the proposal and identify preliminary issues, interested and affected persons, and possible alternatives. Comments received in response to this request will be available for public inspection on the "Public Comment/Objection Reading Room" on the project web site: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=50218>. A legal notice regarding the scoping process is also expected to be published in the Idaho Statesman (newspaper of record) on September 30, 2016, however, the Notice of Intent in the Federal Register initiates the timeframe for the opportunity to comment. Copies of both the Notice of Intent and the Idaho Statesman legal notice will be posted to the project web page.

How to comment

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, and electronic comments concerning this project will be accepted. Send written comments to Keith Lannom, Forest Supervisor, 500 N. Mission Street, Building 2, McCall, Idaho 83638. Comments may also be sent via e-mail to comments-intermtn-payette@fs.fed.us, or via facsimile to 208-634-0744. Email comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), Adobe Acrobat (.pdf) and Microsoft Word (.doc or .docx). Please put "Huckleberry Landscape Restoration Project" in the subject line of the email comments. Comments must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic comments. The office hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Oral comments may also be provided at the New Meadows Ranger District Office during normal business hours via telephone 208-347-0300 or in person.

Comments may also be submitted through the Huckleberry Landscape Restoration Project web page at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=50218>. To submit comments using the web form select "Comment on Project" under "Get Connected" on the right panel of the project's web page.

Establishing Eligibility to Object

The project implements land management plans and is not authorized under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act and is subject to 36 CFR 218.7 parts (a) and (b). In order to be eligible to file an objection, specific written comments related to the project must be submitted during scoping, by the comment period on the draft EIS in accordance with procedures in 40 CFR 1506.10, or during any other periods public comment is specifically requested on this EIS (36 CFR 218.5). Individual members of organizations must have submitted their own comments to meet the requirements of eligibility as an individual. Objections received on behalf of an organization are considered as those of the organization only. Names and addresses of those who comment and/or file objections will become part of the public record.

For more information on how the objection process works for projects and activities implementing land and resource management plans and the requirements, contact Sue Dixon, email sdixon@fs.fed.us, by phone 208-634-0796, or you may read the regulations under 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and B on the National Forest Service web site at <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2013-03-27/pdf/2013-06857.pdf>

Public Meeting

To aid understanding and review of the proposed action, the public is invited to a public meeting on Tuesday October 18, 2016, from 4 to 6 pm at the Council Ranger District Office, 2092 Highway 95, Council, Idaho, 208-253-0100. Ranger District Staff will be available to discuss the project and answer your questions. Specific written comments on this project will be accepted at this meeting.

Stay Connected to this Project via the Web

To assist the Forest Service in meeting its goal of reducing our carbon footprint and to achieve a sustainable operation, we are transitioning to a web-based electronic comment system that allows all interested parties to receive project material (scoping documents, updates, draft and final NEPA documents, and decisions) by email. This system gives you direct control over which mailing lists you are subscribed to and immediate electronic access to project documents as they are posted online. It's easy, it's good for the environment, and it gives "on-demand" access to projects.

To subscribe to this new system, go online to the Huckleberry Landscape Restoration Project web page at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=50218>. On the project website you will see a box titled "Get Connected" on the right hand side of the page. Click on "Subscribe to Email Updates". When you click on that item, you will be prompted to provide your email address and select a password. When you have logged in, you will be able to manage your account by subscribing to projects by Forest, District, project type, or project purpose. You will also be able to change your email address and password. If you no longer wish to follow the project(s), simply delete your subscription. Once you are subscribed, you will receive all project information via email, unless you request hard copies.

The environmental analysis will be mailed out to those who respond to this scoping letter, to those who have requested the document, or are eligible to file an objection in accordance with Sec. 218.5(a).

For further information on the Huckleberry Landscape Restoration Project, please contact Kim Pierson, New Meadows District Ranger, by email kpierson@fs.fed.us or by telephone at 208-347-0300.

Sincerely,

/s/ Keith B. Lannom

KEITH B. LANNOM
Forest Supervisor

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