



Haskell Forest Health Project

Purpose and Need

The USDA Forest Service, Plumas National Forest (PNF), Beckwourth Ranger District (BKR) is proposing management activities on approximately 3,000 acres within the Haskell Forest Health Project (hereafter, Haskell Project) area that aim to promote healthy, diverse, fire-resilient forests, reduce conifer encroachment within meadows, and improve water quality. Road reconstruction, decommissioning and obliteration, and temporary road construction are also proposed as necessary to meet project access needs and reduce transportation system effects.

Project Location

The Haskell Project is located approximately 4 to 6 miles south of Graeagle, California, and approximately 10 miles southwest of Portola, California on the Beckwourth Ranger District of the Plumas National Forest, in Plumas and Sierra Counties, California. The project area includes approximately 9,102 acres of National Forest System lands with approximately 3,000 acres proposed for treatment. Additional landmarks surrounding the project area are as follows: the project area is north of Haskell Peak, east of Mills Peak, south of Clio, and west of Calpine. The project area would encompass all or portions of Township 21 North, Range 12 East, Sections 1 – 3, 10 -15, and 24; Township 21 North, Range 13 East, Sections 7, 8, 13—23, and 26—28, Mount Diablo Base Meridian (MDBM). Figure 1 shows the project area and general vicinity.

Proposed Activities

The proposed action is under development. Proposed activities may include: mechanical thinning, hand thinning/hand piling, mastication, grapple piling, pile burning, underburning, decommissioning of non-system roads and road maintenance.

Need for the Proposal

This project has three purposes:

1. Improve forest health and forest resiliency;
2. Improve meadow systems;
3. Improve water quality by reducing transportation system effects on watershed resources.

Each of these needs are described in detail below.

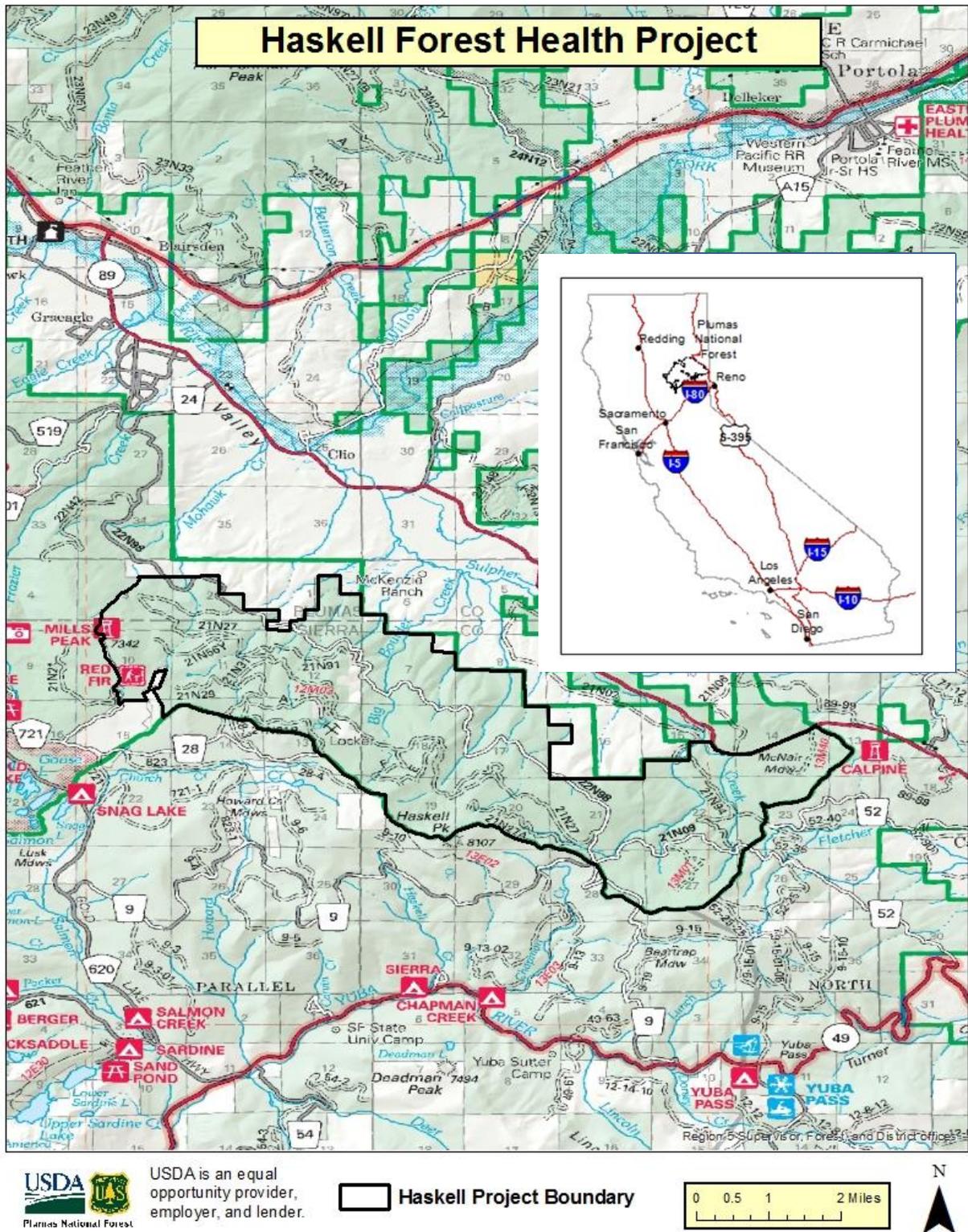


Figure 1. Map showing Haskell Forest Health Project boundary.

Purpose and Need 1: Improve forest health and forest resiliency.

Objective: Improve forest health and promote resilience to drought, wildfire, and insects by:

- Reducing forest stand densities to improve resistance to insects and disease, fire and drought (SNFPA ROD, pp. 41, 48, 49);
- Actively restoring fire-adapted ecosystems by moving acres out of unnaturally dense conditions (SNFPA ROD, p. 34).
- Promoting the growth and development of stands with larger diameter trees (SNFPA ROD, pp. 31, 41, 49);
- Promoting shade-intolerant pines (sugar and Ponderosa) and hardwoods (SNFPA ROD, p. 52);

Need for Action:

Stand exams have been conducted throughout the project area and demonstrate high stand densities. The absence of a natural fire regime and past management practices within the project area have changed both vertical and horizontal structure and age class distribution relative to historical forest structure. Increased tree density also means there is more competition for limited resources (water, sunlight, growing space and nutrients). Conifers with limited resources and a high degree of competition often have decreased vigor and growth, especially during drought conditions, and may become more susceptible to insect attack. Many stands within the project area have experienced varying levels of mortality associated with high stand densities, drought, insects and diseases. This typically results in higher levels of insect-caused mortality. Trees that succumb to bark beetle attacks are typically predisposed by other factors that compromise their health and vigor. There is therefore a need for ecological restoration towards conditions consistent within the natural range of variation.

Danny Cluck, Forest Health Protection (FHP) Entomologist also conducted field evaluations of the Haskell Forest Health Project area to evaluate current stand conditions, determine the impacts of forest insects and diseases on management objectives, and discuss proposed treatments. Key findings include:

- Overstocking of trees is putting many stands at risk to high levels of bark beetle-caused tree mortality during periods of drought;
- Mixed conifer stands have generally become overstocked with a high percentage of white fir that is inhibiting the regeneration of shade-intolerant pine species;
- High levels of recent white fir mortality associated with drought, disease and fir engraver beetle are common throughout the project area;
- White pine blister rust is infecting sugar and western white pine, increasing the susceptibility of mature trees to bark beetle attack and negatively impacting regeneration;

- Several red fir stands are declining due to a combination of root disease, dwarf mistletoe, and *Cytospora* canker;

Based on these findings, thinning and prescribed fire are highly recommended throughout the project area to reduce tree density as well as surface and ladder fuels. Reducing stand densities would lead to improved forest health and resiliency.

Desired Conditions:

The desired conditions for forest health and resiliency are:

- Forest structure and function generally resemble pre-settlement conditions;
- High levels of horizontal and vertical diversity exist within 10,000 acre landscapes;
- Stands composed of roughly even-aged vegetation groups, varying in size, species composition, and structure;
- Multi-tiered canopies, particularly in older forests, provide vertical heterogeneity;
- Dead trees, both standing and fallen, meet the habitat needs of old-forest-associated species;
- Where possible, areas treated for fuels also provide for the successful establishment of early seral stage vegetation. (SNFPA ROD, p. 41, 48).

Purpose and Need 2: Improve meadow systems

Objective: Improve meadow systems by removing conifers that have encroached within meadows.

Need for Action:

Both wet and dry meadows located in the Project area are experiencing varying levels of conifer encroachment. Woody plant invasion may be a response to warming temperatures, reduced snow pack, and fire suppression (Gross et. al. 2013) in addition to human-caused changes to the local hydrological regime (e.g. roads). Field evaluation indicates that, regardless of the relative contribution of these various factors, conifer encroachment is a contributing factor in the spatial decline of meadows within the project area.

Desired Conditions:

The desired conditions for meadow systems are:

- Meadows are hydrologically functional. Sites of accelerated erosion, such as gullies or headcuts are stabilized or recovering (USDA 2004, p. 43).
- Species composition and structural diversity of plant and animal communities in riparian areas, wetlands, and meadows provide desired habitat condition and ecological functions.

Purpose and Need 3: Improve water quality by reducing transportation system effects on watershed resources.

Objective: Protect water quality and riparian habitat by ensuring that existing roads meet Best Management Practices for drainage during rainfall and snowmelt runoff events. Identify roads that degrade water quality and implement corrective actions.

Need for Action:

Roads play a vital role in providing access for resource management, wildland fire suppression, and public access for recreation use. However, unneeded and poorly located roads can impact water quality, disrupt the flow of water and fragment forest habitats. During the travel management planning process (USDA 2010), the routes not added to the National Forest System (NFS) transportation network were not physically closed. These non-system routes are not maintained. Several of them are adversely impacting watershed conditions and thus should be closed or obliterated. The interdisciplinary process for identifying road system needs and roads with resource damage includes a roads analysis consistent with legal requirements (36 CFR 212 Subpart A – Administration of the Forest Transportation System, 16 U.S.C. 551, 23, U.S.C. 205) and with standards and guidelines in the SNFPA ROD (SNFPA ROD, S&G #116, p. 65).

Desired Conditions:

The desired conditions for improving water quality by reducing transportation system effects on watershed are:

- Access provided for wildland fire suppression, public visitation, and resource management by Forest Service personnel.
- Decreased number of roads that are causing resource damage.
- All NFS system roads and trails comply with the appropriate Best Management Practices.

Laws, Regulations, and Policy

Forest Plan Direction

The 1988 Plumas National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (PNF LRMP, also called the Forest Plan), as amended by the 2004 Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment Final Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision (SNFPA FEIS and ROD), guide the proposed action. The 2004 SNFPA Record of Decision (page 49-56) displays the standards and guidelines added to the 1988 Forest Plan.

The Haskell Project is comprised of land allocations directed by both the 1988 PNF LRMP and the 2004 SNFPA ROD. Each land allocation is comprised of appropriate standards and guidelines that meet a particular need (such as special habitat protection, recreation quality enhancement, or timber

production) while allowing other compatible activities. Table 1 lists the management prescriptions from the Forest Plan that apply to the project.

Table 1. Management Prescriptions within the Haskell Project Area based on the Plumas Forest Plan.

Management Prescription	Acres in Proposed Treatment Units	% of Proposed Treatment Acres	Forest Plan
Rx – 14 Visual Partial Retention Prescription	2,575	86	Employ all silvicultural systems and harvest methods as appropriate provided landscape management principles and techniques are applied to achieve VQO (Visual Quality Objective) of Partial Retention (Standard and Guideline, p. 4-105)
Rx – 15 Timber Emphasis Prescription	425	14	This prescription provides for maximum production of sawtimber and other wood products on an even-flow, long-term, sustained yield basis, while meeting environmental constraints (Description, p. 4-106)

Land allocations in the 2004 SNFPA that apply to this proposal include: Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) Defense Zones and Threat Zones, California spotted owl (CSO) and northern goshawk (NOGO) Protected Activity Centers (PACs), California spotted owl Home Range Core Areas (HRCAs), Critical Aquatic Refuges (CARs), general forest, and Riparian Conservation Areas (RCAs). There is also suitable habitat and Critical Habitat for Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frogs within the project area.

Project Schedule

The responsible official expects to make a decision on this project in the winter of 2018. Implementation may begin as early as spring of 2019.

Public Collaboration

Notice of pending action first appeared in the Plumas National Forest quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) as the “Haskell Project” in September of 2018. The Beckwourth Ranger District will host a public field trip to the project area on September 24, 2018 to discuss the development of the Proposed Action. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) invited include: Feather River Stewardship Coalition and Plumas County Fire Safe Council.

Scoping was initiated with publication of a legal notice in the *Portola Reporter* on September 5, 2018 and in the *Sierra Booster* on September 6, 2018. The purpose of the scoping process was to inform the public about the Purpose and Need and Proposed Action to seek different points of view and to evaluate issues to be addressed during the analysis. A scoping packet was mailed to Native American entities including federally recognized tribal governments, and Native American organizations/non-profit groups. Over 200 scoping packets were sent to various individuals, organizations and government agencies via mail and electronic mail. Instructions on how to comment are included in the legal notices and in the cover letter included with the scoping packet.