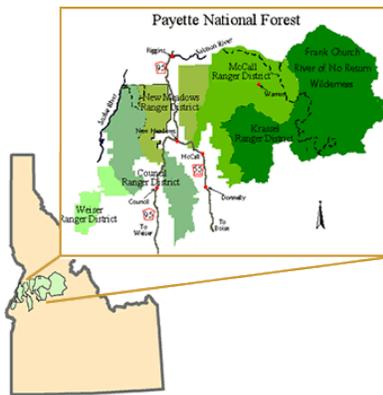


New Meadows Landscape Restoration Project

Introduction



WHY COME TO THE NEW MEADOWS RANGER DISTRICT?



The New Meadows Ranger District covers 282,408 acres with 142,910 acres on the west side of the Payette National Forest and 139,498 acres on the east side. The elevation of the District ranges from a low of 2,995 feet at the northern boundary to a high of 8,841 feet on Patrick Butte, with diverse geology. The 45th parallel line crosses the District. An estimated 87 percent of the lands are forested; common tree species include ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, grand fir, western larch, quaking aspen, lodgepole pine, subalpine fir, Engelmann spruce, and whitebark pine. This area contains the greatest extent of continuous blocks of low to mid elevation ponderosa pine forests and provides habitat for nearly 300 terrestrial species of mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians. The lower elevations are composed of dry montane

forest characterized by stands of ponderosa pine either alone or in combination with Douglas-fir and western larch.

Use of these forests for timber, grazing, and road-building since European settlement, the spread of invasive weeds, as well as fire suppression over the past 100 years, have altered and degraded forest structure and function. An estimated 89 to 95 percent of the low-elevation forests in this area have been altered by past human activities. Although dry montane forest is a fire-maintained ecosystem that historically was sculpted by low- and mixed-severity burns, the history of management actions has made these forests more susceptible to stand-replacing wildfires. Changing climatic conditions are also increasing the frequency and severity of fire throughout the West and further increasing the vulnerability of dry montane forests to stand-replacing fires.

WHAT ARE THE NEEDS FOR RESTORATION?



Northern Idaho Ground Squirrel: The northern Idaho ground squirrel (NIDGS) is a rare, endemic mammal that occurs at ~60 sites in Adams and Valley counties in west-central Idaho. It was listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act in April 2000, with a Recovery Plan published in 2003 (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2003). Decline of NIDGS through the 1980s and 1990s was attributed primarily to changes in habitat that isolated populations. Fire suppression has allowed forests to encroach into meadows, reducing the amount of habitat available to ground squirrels and closing off dispersal corridors. Fire suppression and land conversions also resulted in poorer quality food plants that lacked the nutritional value squirrels need to

sustain prolonged hibernation. The focused landscape restoration area provides an additional mechanism for the Northern Idaho ground squirrel recovery plan to be implemented through habitat restoration actions.



Ponderosa Pine Task Force: Ponderosa pine ecosystems provide crucial habitat for a variety of wildlife species native to the American West. Today, the Rocky Mountain dry montane forest is considered a threatened ecosystem, and Idaho Partners-in-Flight identified late-seral ponderosa pine as one of two “highest priority” habitats for restoration in Idaho. Loss and degradation of this habitat type has resulted in decreased range and population sizes for several species and has contributed to some species being listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act. The Ponderosa Pine Task Force Report assessed pine ecosystems throughout Idaho, and concluded that this area contained clusters of potential habitat that could be restored in less than 10 years if actions were taken immediately. This

landscape is one of two ponderosa pine ecosystem clusters “that appeared to be exceptionally important at the state level.” **There are an estimated 52,534 acres of low elevation Ponderosa Pine within the focused landscape restoration area.**

Wildlife Conservation Strategy /Aquatic Conservation Strategy: Implementation of the WCS and ACS is the foundation for the landscape restoration proposal, with listed Threatened or Endangered species such as Chinook salmon, steelhead, bull trout and sensitive species of white-headed woodpeckers, northern goshawk and flammulated owls found within the project landscape. This area has also been identified as important to the sustainability of nesting and foraging habitat for migratory birds and habitat for wide-ranging mammals such as elk, bighorn sheep, wolverine, bear and mountain lion. The focused landscape restoration assessment area concentrates on those areas of highest restoration needs for white-headed woodpecker. Seventeen sightings of white-headed woodpeckers have been documented in the area. Additionally, two of the highest priority watersheds for Bull Trout Restoration are located in the focused area.



Transportation Network: The landscape assessment would work towards implementation of the Forest’s travel management plan within the project area, including the recreation trails documented in the travel plan. As restoration projects are discussed with the coalition group, updates to the Travel Management Plan would be discussed and would work with the philosophy of no net gain of roads in the project area. The assessment would work toward an increase in roads for system efficiency or watershed restoration benefits only when the road increase will be offset by road decommissioning.

WHERE FIRST?

The New Meadows Ranger District Interdisciplinary team worked together to examine high priority areas for restoration including:

- WCS high priority watersheds,
- ACS high priority watersheds, bull trout
- Northern Idaho Ground Squirrel occupied and potential habitat
- Northern Idaho Ground Squirrel Recovery plan
- Plantation data and opportunities for biomass production
- Vegetation data for production of sawtimber and biomass
- Ponderosa Pine Task force stand data for achieving restoration in the near future
- Low elevation ponderosa pine vegetation data
- Fire regime condition class
- White-headed woodpecker sighting data,
- Watershed condition class
- road densities as related to LRMP
- Payette Forest Collation

POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN THIS AREA

Bioenergy: Restoration for white-headed woodpecker and Northern Idaho Ground Squirrel habitat has the potential to provide: **75 MMBF of sawtimber** as a byproduct and **200,000 tons of biomass** as a byproduct.

Plantations: Within the potential landscape assessment boundary there are approximately 3285 acres of plantations that could be thinned with a potential for **20,000 tons** of biomass produced

Ponderosa Pine Habitats: Within the focused analysis area there are approximately 52,534 acres of low elevation ponderosa pine. This would move the landscape towards the goal of restoring a significant portion of ponderosa pine dominated forests to historic stand structure and function.

Jobs: The Council and New Meadows Ranger Districts are in Adams and Valley Counties, which have the highest unemployment rates in Idaho (January 2011). One of the key opportunities associated with this assessment is increasing economic activity in Valley and Adams counties through biomass utilization, forestry and natural resource jobs.



Prescribed Fire: There are many opportunities to look at stands where prescribed fire is the best tool for restoration. The majority of these stands currently have an open stand structure and composition ideal for prescribed fire and/or are located in Inventoried Roadless Areas where prescribed fire is the appropriate, easiest and cost-effective tool for restoration. Currently, NEPA has been completed within the area to allow for 10,600 acres to be treated in Patrick Butte and close to 40,000 acres in the Rapid River drainage. Many other opportunities to use prescribed fire restore a more natural fire return rate on the landscape are available within the focused area.

Fish, Wildlife, or Threatened & Endangered species improvements: White-headed woodpecker and NIDGS habitats are associated with open stands dominated by large diameter ponderosa pine. Canopy cover is generally low and frequent underburns by low intensity fire encourage a healthy layer of grasses, low shrubs, and herbs. Restoration will benefit key seral tree species like ponderosa pine and western larch that are important to forest biodiversity and are currently at risk of loss due to a dense understory of shade-tolerant trees and uncharacteristic fire risks. Treatments will also be focused to include native fish species listed under the ESA such as Bull Trout.

Management of invasive and exotic species: Invasive weed populations in the landscape area average 6% of the ponderosa pine habitat. Invasive and exotic plants can establish rapidly following high-intensity fire. All treatments proposed will include detection and timely treatment.

Livestock Grazing habitat improvement: Within the proposed area, there are several cattle and horse and sheep and goat allotments. Through collaboration with the permittees, treatments can be designed to best restore and improve rangeland vegetation and livestock grazing conditions.

Recreation: Planning will be coordinated closely with the collaborative group and the plan for the decommissioning of roads will be in accordance with opportunities identified in the travel management plan. Opportunities for trail establishment and improvement will be evaluated and developed through collaborative efforts to enhance the recreational experience.