



File Code: 1950

Date: December 18, 2014

Dear Interested Party:

The Council Ranger District of the Payette National Forest is conducting an environmental analysis for the proposed Middle Fork Weiser River Landscape Restoration Project. This project encompasses approximately 50,000 acres on the Council Ranger District of the Payette National Forest in Adams County, Idaho, and is located approximately six miles southeast of Council, Idaho, primarily in the Middle Fork Weiser River watershed.

Purpose and Need

The **purpose** of the Project is to:

- 1) Move vegetation toward the desired conditions (e.g., canopy closure in large tree class, species composition, and size class distribution) defined in the Payette National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan 2003 (Forest Plan) and consistent with the current science for restoration of ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, grand fir, subalpine fir and lodgepole habitat types, with an emphasis on:
 - a) Improving habitat for specific wildlife species of concern, such as the species dependent on dry coniferous forests, while maintaining habitat for federally-listed and sensitive species;
 - b) Maintaining and promoting large tree forest structure, early seral species composition (for example aspen, western larch, ponderosa pine, and Douglas-fir) and forest resiliency to fire, insect/disease and climate change;
 - c) Reducing the risk of uncharacteristic wildland fire, with an emphasis on restoring and maintaining desirable plant community attributes including fuel levels, fire regimes, and other ecological processes; and
 - d) Maintaining and promoting large trees where retention is consistent with the above objectives.
- 2) Maintaining and promoting legacy¹ ponderosa pine and western larch and legacy-like Douglas fir;
- 3) Restore heterogeneous fine and landscape scale mosaic patterns by establishing varying patch sizes consistent with spatial patterns that promote forest resilience to disturbance;
- 4) Within dry non-forested habitats, maintain and promote native grasses and restore desired conditions for age and canopy class structure on sagebrush and bitterbrush;
- 5) Decrease the conifer encroachment into aspen and non-forested habitats;

¹ Legacy trees are ponderosa pine and western larch that survived the previous stand initiating fire in lethal fire regimes, or survived numerous low to moderate intensity fires in other fire regimes. Old live and dead ponderosa pine and western larch trees are an important legacy of the historical condition in many areas. They are generally resistant to nonlethal/mixed fire; provide food and habitat for wildlife, and genetic material reflective of the local site conditions (Huckaby et al. 2003), particularly when present in plantations.



- 6) In order of priority, move the Granite Creek subwatershed from a Watershed Condition Framework (WCF) rating of Class 3 (Impaired) to a Class 2 (Functioning at Risk), and move Mica Creek, Jungle Creek, and Little Fall Creek subwatersheds within the Project area toward the desired condition for soil, water, riparian, and aquatic resources;
- 7) Manage recreation use in the Project with an emphasis on hardening primary dispersed recreation areas, improving existing trails and providing new trail opportunities including an OHV loop and a non-motorized trail;
- 8) Contribute to the economic vitality of the communities adjacent to the Payette National Forest; and
- 9) Improve firefighter and public safety by establishing strategically placed defensible fuel breaks within the Project area.

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

- 1) Loss of habitat for Family 1 wildlife species, such as the white-headed woodpecker, compared to historical conditions;
- 2) Fewer large tree size classes than desired in the drier forest types (Potential Vegetation Groups 2 and 5), and higher canopy cover;
- 3) Fewer early seral tree species (i.e. aspen, ponderosa pine and western larch) than desired;
- 4) Increased stand and landscape homogeneity of size classes, species diversity, tree distributions (e.g., currently in some vegetation types the tree spacing is uniform in nature) and canopy closure;
- 5) Increased high canopy closer in the large size classes in some vegetation types;
- 6) Increased conifer encroachment into aspen and non-forested habitats;
- 7) Fewer fire resistant tree species (i.e., ponderosa pine and Western larch) and higher densities of non-fire resistant tree species;
- 8) Higher surface fuel loading in those areas that have missed one or more fire return intervals;
- 9) Less than desired watershed function and integrity, including increased sedimentation, hydrologic risk from flooding, disturbance (mainly road-related) in Riparian Conservation Areas (RCAs), habitat fragmentation, lack of large woody debris in some streams, and lack of coarse woody debris in areas of past timber harvest; and
- 10) Trail and recreation facilities that do not meet current design and accessibility standards.

The desired conditions for this project are based upon the Forest Plan, the Watershed Condition Framework (USDA Forest Service 2011) and the most recent science concerning management of wildlife habitats including the Draft Payette National Forest Wildlife Conservation Strategy Report (Egnew, 2011).

Proposed Action

The Proposed Action includes: up to 13,002 acres of commercial harvests (a combination of Free Thin, Free Thin–Patch Cut-Selection Harvest, Aspen Restoration, and Mature Plantation Harvest). Combined commercial and non-commercial vegetation treatments include up to 5,280 acres of Meadow Restoration and 1,267 acres of Restoration of Low Density Timber Stands. Non-commercial treatments include thinning up to 4,309 acres. These acreages include treatments designed for and within Riparian Conservation Areas (RCAs) and total approximately 3,428 acres. Prescribed burning would be conducted on up to 37,000 acres and approximately 13 miles of shaded fuelbreak would be created.

Currently closed roads used for timber harvest would be evaluated for firewood retrieval, and could include firewood decks made available for public use.

Watershed improvements proposed would improve watershed function and resiliency through minimizing the impact of the road and trail network throughout Middle Fork Weiser River watershed, and restoring vegetation and soil productivity in riparian areas. Treatments include road and trail decommissioning, improvements and reroutes, improvement to dispersed recreation sites within the Middle Fork Weiser River RCA, and vegetation treatments designed to restore or enhance native riparian vegetation through mechanical or hand treatment, prescribed fire, and planting and seeding.

Forest Service System road treatments proposed throughout the project area include maintenance and/or improvement of Forest Service System Roads. This could include graveling, reshaping, upgrading and replacing culverts, and stabilizing cut and fill slopes. Approximately 16.6 miles of system road would be placed in long-term closure status. Long-term closure treatments include stabilizing the road surface and cut and fill slopes, removing or bypassing culverts, and blocking the entrance. Approximately 16.1 miles of system roads and 62.1 miles of unauthorized routes would be decommissioned. Decommissioning treatments proposed range from full recontour to spot treating isolated areas such as stream crossings on roads that have little to no defined prism and have recovered.

Culverts that restrict proper hydrologic function and passage of fish and other aquatic organisms would be replaced. These are: 1) FS System Road 50186 at the Middle Fork Weiser River near the junction with FS System Road 50245 and 2) FS System Road 50186 at Big Creek.

Developed and dispersed recreation improvements include: 1) Cabin Creek Campground - Install and relocate one single vault toilet to replace the old existing one, add new site markers to individual campsites, replace an existing fee tube and information kiosk, install accessible tables, and build an accessible pathway to the water system, gravel the main campground loop road, and widen the road and turn at the campground access to accommodate full size recreational vehicles; 2) Make improvements to the Horse Cabin Flat dispersed site including installation of up to four hitch rails, designation of camping sites using boulders, graveling and site signs to mark the allowed camping locations, add a single vault toilet; 3) Harden the crossing of the Middle Fork Weiser River at the dispersed camping area for stock use and to minimize resource damage and focus motorized access to the existing bridge approximately 300 feet from this crossing. Make improvements to the site in general (hardening, providing physical barriers to direct use) in order to minimize impacts to the adjacent Middle Fork Weiser River; and 4) Roads identified for decommissioning would be evaluated for site-specific dispersed recreation opportunities, at the intersection with FS System

open, or seasonally open roads, if no resource concerns are identified.

Trail improvements include: 1) Establish trailheads with parking and hitch rails for the #205 (northeast) and the #198 (southwest) trails. Both trailheads would require securing easements from Potlatch Corporation, the private landowner; 2) To accommodate continued two-wheel motorized access on the entire #198 trail, change the designation of a short section (two miles) of the trail from non-motorized to two-wheel motorized use; 3) Perform trail maintenance (including proper signing) on 24 miles of existing open designed trail within the Project area; 4) Construct and formally designate for seasonal use, a motorized OHV loop Trail (Trail open to vehicles 70 inches and less in width) using closed road 50166 and closed road 50485, to provide a motorized trail approximately three miles in length. This would require ½ mile of new trail construction to complete and close the loop; 5) Sign and formally designate the former #202 trail as open for non-motorized use. Complete needed switchback construction to mediate the steep sections; 6) Relocate the trailhead for the #209 ATV trail onto National Forest Lands. Change the designation of the trail from “open year round” to “seasonal”; 7) Re-route portions of the #198 trail near the base of Council Mountain to reduce resource impacts and improve sustainability. Reduce congestion of multiple trail junctions in this sensitive upper elevation trail network; and 8) Close and rehabilitate approximately four miles of unauthorized OHV trails throughout the project area.

Proposed actions in the Council Mountain and Poison Creek Inventoried Roadless Areas include 1) Prescribed burning and preparation for prescribed burning including associated handline and 2) Trail improvement and designation changes. There is no treatment proposed in the Council Mountain Research Natural Area.

A more detailed project description and maps are available on the Internet at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/payette/landmanagement/projects> or can be obtained by contacting Stephen Penny, Project Team Leader, 208-253-0164, or by email at spenny@fs.fed.us.

Scoping Process

As directed by the National Environmental Policy Act (1969), the Payette National Forest is now seeking comments from individuals, organizations, local and state governments, and other federal agencies that may be interested in or affected by the Proposed Action. Comments may pertain to the nature and scope of the environmental, social, and economic issues, and possible alternatives to the Proposed Action.

Comments will help the Payette National Forest assess the Proposed Action, develop alternatives and prepare a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and will be most helpful if they identify the specific changes to the proposed action you believe are needed, why those changes should be made, and how such a change would better meet your interests. Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be part of the public record for this proposed action and will be available for public inspection and released if requested under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered, however.

To aid understanding and review of the proposed action, the public is invited to a public meeting on Tuesday, January 13, 2015, from 6:00 - 8:00 pm at the Council Ranger District Office at 2092 Highway 95, Council, Idaho. Ranger District staff will be available to discuss the project and answer your questions.

This proposed project will be subject to the objection process pursuant to 36 CFR 218 Subpart A and B.

Eligibility to File Objections: Objections will be accepted only from those who have previously submitted specific written comments regarding the proposed project either during scoping or other designated opportunity for public comment in accordance with § 218.5(a). Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted timely, specific written comments regarding the proposed project unless based on new information arising after designated opportunities.

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. If an objection is submitted on behalf of a number of individuals or organizations, each individual or organization listed must meet the eligibility requirement of having previously submitted comments on the project (§ 218.7). Names and addresses of objectors will become part of the public record.

Payette National Forest Supervisor Keith Lannom will be the Responsible Official for this project. Interested parties are encouraged to provide site-specific comments by writing, phone, email or fax. Your written comments and concerns should be sent or hand-delivered (8 am to 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays) to: Keith Lannom, Forest Supervisor, Payette National Forest, 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. Comments can be phoned to (208) 253-0100. E-mail comments must be in an e-mail message, or attached as a MS Word (.doc or .docx) document or in rich text format (.rtf), only.

In order to be most helpful the Forest Service requests your comments be sent to us by no later than 30 days from the date of publication of the Notice of Intent in the Federal Register expected on Tuesday, December 23, 2014, or shortly thereafter. All those who comment will remain on our mailing list and receive any future updates on this proposal. Please let us know if you would like to be removed from the project mailing list by returning the enclosed postcard, sending an email to spenny@fs.fed.us, or by phoning the Council Ranger District office at 208-253-0100.

Sincerely,



KEITH B. LANNOM
Forest Supervisor

Enclosure