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Forest Service

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Middle Fork Weiser River Landscape Restoration Project

*SUMMARY for the
DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT
Payette National Forest*



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Summary

The Payette National Forest (Forest) proposes landscape restoration treatments on approximately 24,000 acres, which would do the following:

- Apply thinning treatments to forest stands followed by prescribed burning.
- Apply regeneration treatments where vigorous, fire-resistant trees are absent by creating openings up to 10 acres in size. Forest structure for wildlife habitat would be retained in these openings. Sites would be prepared for planting or natural regeneration using prescribed burning and/or hand scalping.
- Move forest stands toward desired conditions as described in the Payette National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan¹ (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.
- Improve habitat for Family 1 wildlife species, represented by the white-headed woodpecker, by restoring forest conditions that contribute to source habitat for these species and providing appropriate Family 2 habitat, represented by the pileated woodpecker. Provide appropriate habitat for wildlife in Families 3, 5, 7, 11, 12, and 13.
- Improve water quality, enhance aquatic habitat, and restore riparian and floodplain function by reducing road-related impacts.
- Create a shaded fuelbreak to protect values at risk.
- Thin plantations and reduce fuel loading in the older stands using skidding, lop and scattering, and/or mechanical piling followed by prescribed burning.
- Remove, pile, burn and/or biomass in harvest treatments.

The Middle Fork Weiser River Landscape Restoration Project (Project) also proposes managing recreation use in the Project area, with an emphasis on identifying and hardening primary dispersed recreation areas, improving and realigning existing trails, and developing new trail opportunities.

The approximately 49,276-acre Project area is located within the Weiser River drainage on the Council Ranger District approximately 6 miles southeast of Council, Idaho, in Adams County.

This Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) discloses temporary, short- and long-term, direct, indirect, irretrievable, irreversible, and cumulative environmental effects that would result from implementing the Proposed Action and alternatives.

¹ USDA Forest Service. 2003. Payette National Forest land and resource management plan. McCall, ID: USDA Forest Service, Payette National Forest.

Background

The Forest's 800,000 acre Weiser-Little Salmon Headwaters Project (WLSH) was accepted in the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program² (CFLRP) in 2012, and the Project is within the WLSH area. The purpose of the CFLRP is to encourage the collaborative, science-based ecosystem restoration of priority forest landscapes. Planning for this Project was initiated in summer 2013 in collaboration with the Payette Forest Coalition (PFC). The PFC, formed in June 2009, is a collaborative group comprised of stakeholders from a broad range of outside interests, including the environmental community, timber industry, recreational groups, and State and County government. The goal of the PFC is to work to sustain the ecologic function of landscapes and the economic health of rural communities.

In preparation for completing this Draft EIS, the Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) completed a travel analysis for the Project area, known as a Project Travel Analysis Process (TAP), in June 2013 and updated it in November 2013. Using the TAP, the IDT identified National Forest System (NFS) roads needed for the protection, administration, and use of NFS lands and the use and development of its resources. In 2014, the IDT also completed the Middle Fork Weiser River Landscape Assessment to assess the existing conditions compared to historical conditions within the Project area. The IDT then used information from these assessments as a basis for evaluating existing versus desired conditions and formulating the Proposed Action.

The Project is needed because current conditions are departed from desired conditions, leading to habitat loss for wildlife species, such as the white-headed woodpecker; fewer large trees and higher canopy cover than desired in the warm, dry forest types; fewer early seral tree species (e.g., whitebark pine, aspen, ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, and western larch) than desired; increased stand and landscape homogeneity of size classes, species diversity, and tree distributions; greater acreage of high canopy cover class than desired in the large tree size class; conifer encroachment in aspen and non-forested habitats (e.g., shrublands, sagebrush, and grasslands); higher surface fuel loading in those areas that have missed one or more fire return intervals; impaired watershed function and integrity derived from past and current disturbances, road-related erosion and sediment, floodplain and riparian area encroachment, and aquatic habitat fragmentation; and trail and recreation facilities that do not meet current design, accessibility, or maintenance standards.

The objective of the Project is to progress toward the desired conditions found in Appendices A, B, and E of the Forest Plan³. This type of restoration is recommended in the Idaho Department of Fish and Game report, *Preserving and Restoring the Old-Growth Ponderosa Pine Ecosystems in Idaho*⁴, and the *Idaho Statewide Forest Resource Strategy*⁵, which includes restoration goals recommended by a broad range of federal, State, and private partners.

² Established with the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, PL 111-11

³ USDA Forest Service. 2003. Payette National Forest land and resource management plan. McCall, ID: USDA Forest Service, Payette National Forest.

⁴ Mehl, C.A., and J.B. Haufler. 2004. Preserving and restoring the old growth ponderosa pine ecosystem in Idaho. Final Report. Boise, ID: Idaho Department of Fish and Game. WCRP Project R-1-6-0203

⁵ Kimball, S. and D. Stephenson, 2010. Draft Idaho statewide forest resource strategy for review and comments. Boise, ID: Idaho Department of Lands.

Collaboration and Public Involvement Efforts

Based on recommendations received by the PFC on August 20, 2014, the IDT developed the Proposed Action in response to Agency direction and policy and input from interested members of the public. The Forest Service then engaged the public with a scoping letter on December 19, 2014, with the initial Proposed Action, and published the Notice of Intent (NOI) in the Federal Register on December 24, 2014, and a Request for Comments in *The Idaho Statesman*, the newspaper of record, on December 23, 2014, and in the *Adams County Record* on December 24, 2014. Fourteen public comments were received during this scoping period.

The IDT held a public meeting in Council, Idaho, on January 12, 2015; members of the PFC, the general public, and an Adams County Commissioner attended this public meeting. Additionally, the Council Ranger District and the PFC conducted public field tours of the Project area on June 25, 2013; July 24, 2013; September 19, 2014; and November 6, 2015, to view potential vegetation treatments, watershed improvements, and recreation treatments.

Using the information gathered from public and internal scoping and field-related resource information, the IDT formulated different alternative themes centered on various vegetation treatments, wildlife habitat effects, watershed improvement treatments, and transportation management. Using these themes, the IDT assigned potential prescriptions to create the alternatives—Alternative 1 (No Action), Alternative 2 (Proposed Action), Alternative 3 (Watershed/Wildlife Emphasis), and Alternative 4 (Additional High-Elevation Vegetation Treatments)—and mitigation measures or project design features to address the effects of the proposed activities for each alternative. The alternatives are briefly summarized below. This Draft EIS contains the analysis for these four alternatives; the issues and alternatives are described in greater detail in Chapters 1 and 2, respectively.

Alternative 1—No Action

The No Action Alternative provides a baseline against which impacts of the various action alternatives can be measured and compared and represents the existing condition in the Project area. Under Alternative 1, none of the specific management activities proposed in this Draft EIS would be implemented to accomplish Project goals and objectives. Ongoing activities, such as recreation, public fuelwood gathering, fire suppression, ongoing road maintenance, and existing road closures, would continue at current levels.

Alternative 2—Proposed Action

Under Alternative 2, and the subsequent action alternatives, vegetation, watershed improvement and restoration treatments, transportation management activities, and recreation improvements are proposed as described below.

Vegetation Restoration Treatments

Under Alternative 2, a variety of vegetation restoration treatments, including non-commercial thinning; commercial thinning; free thinning; patch cut-modified shelterwood; conifer removal in aspen stands; shaded fuelbreak creation; restoration of burned areas and plantations; riparian conservation area (RCA) fuel reduction; and treatment in low-site quality, dry non-forested, and wet meadow areas, are proposed on 20,713 acres. Brush disposal, site preparation, and tree planting would occur as necessary following harvest activities. Timber harvested areas and areas

on currently closed road systems may be made available for public firewood use for a limited time. Prescribed fire is proposed on 24,250 acres.

A number of activities associated with implementing these vegetation restoration treatments are necessary, including road maintenance on 137.5 miles of road; road resurfacing on 8.8 miles of road; and spot gravelling at crossings, dips, and soft spots. Up to 9.7 miles of planned new and 34.8 miles of existing unauthorized routes would be used as temporary roads and obliterated after use.

Watershed Improvement and Restoration Treatments

Proposed watershed activities would improve watershed function and resiliency by minimizing the effect of the road and trail network throughout the Middle Fork Weiser River subwatersheds and restoring vegetation and soil productivity in riparian areas. Treatments include road and trail decommissioning, improvements, and re-routes; dispersed recreation site improvements 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.

Approximately 17.8 miles of roads would be placed in long-term closure. Approximately 80.7 miles of road would be decommissioned, including 16.1 miles of NFS roads and 64.6 miles of unauthorized routes. A total of 24.6 miles of routes proposed for decommissioning are located within RCAs.

Two culverts that restrict proper hydrologic function and passage of fish and other aquatic organisms would be replaced. Temporary culverts or bridges would be installed where planned temporary roads cross intermittent or perennial streams or on closed NFS roads where culverts have been removed. Aquatic organism passage would be provided where needed.

Transportation Management

Road reconstruction, any activity that improves or realigns an existing NFS road, would occur on 11.0 miles (includes road surfacing and realignment).

To reduce sediment and other road effects on water quality and riparian habitat, 3.0 miles of existing NFS road would be realigned away from RCAs; 2.2 miles of road would be reconstructed in the realignment for a net decrease of 0.8 miles of road.

Other Road Actions

Approximately 5.5 miles of NFS road designated as Operational Maintenance Level (OML) 1 would have best management practices (BMPs) implemented. BMPs would be designed to ensure the road can be stored, with minimal maintenance, for up to 30 years. Approximately 14.2 miles of NFS road currently designated as OML 1 would be converted to OML 2. These are roads that currently have easements for access by Potlatch Corporation. Converting the roads to OML 2 would allow for maintenance while providing private access. If needed, closed NFS roads would be improved to ensure effective closure through the use of gates (OML 2 roads only) or barriers or by obliterating the first portion of the road (generally the line of sight distance from the start of the road to where it turns out of view; this improvement would apply to OML 1 roads only). Ensuring effective closures may also be implemented in ongoing road maintenance activities.

Recreation

The recreation improvements described below are identical in all action alternatives except for the proposed approximate 3.0 miles of OHV trail open to vehicles up to 70 inches wide (2.5 miles would be on existing closed NFS road and 0.5 would be new trail), which is proposed only under Alternatives 2 and 4 and not under Alternative 3.

Developed and Dispersed Recreation Improvements

Cabin Creek Campground would be improved through various activities, including the installing a single vault toilet to replace the existing one; adding new site markers to individual campsites; replacing an existing fee tube and information kiosk; installing accessible tables; building an accessible pathway to the water system; and gravelling and widening the main campground loop road. The Horse Cabin Flat dispersed site would be improved through various activities, including designating up to 5 camping sites and adding a single vault toilet. The crossing of the Middle Fork Weiser River at the dispersed camping area near the confluence with Jungle Creek would be hardened for stock use and to minimize resource damage and direct motorized access to the existing bridge approximately 300 feet from this crossing, in addition to other general improvements.

Roads identified for decommissioning located at the intersection with NFS open or seasonally open roads would be evaluated for site-specific dispersed recreational opportunities within 300 feet of the NFS road junction if resource concerns are not identified. If necessary for resource protection, sites would be improved by surfacing or other hardening and evaluated for barriers, where stream impacts are found.

Trail Improvements

Numerous trail improvements would occur throughout the Project area, including 6.4 miles of trail re-route to provide legal access from a Forest Service trailhead and two new trailhead establishments, 2.0 miles of trail converted from non-motorized to two-wheel motorized, 28 miles of trail maintenance, approximately 3.0 miles of OHV trail open to vehicles up to 70 inches wide, 0.8 miles of new non-motorized trail, and 3.4 miles of NFS road converted to a trail open to all vehicles.

Proposed Actions within Inventoried Roadless

Within the Poison Creek Inventoried Roadless Area (IRA), there would be 1.0 miles of unauthorized route obliteration. Within the Council Mountain IRA, the following trail improvement activities are proposed: 3.8 miles of trail re-route, 2.0 miles of trail converted from non-motorized to two-wheel motorized, and 15 miles of trail maintenance. These miles are included in those described in previous sections and not additional proposals.

Alternative 3—Watershed/Wildlife Emphasis

Alternative 3 addresses internal and external comments requesting a more effective watershed restoration effort and proposals to address wildlife security. This alternative would treat Potential Vegetation Groups (PVGs) 2, 5, and 6 but not PVGs 7–11 and would emphasize watershed restoration treatments in the Granite Creek subwatershed.

Vegetation Restoration Treatments

Under Alternative 3, vegetation restoration treatments would occur on 18,031 acres and are identical to those under Alternative 2 except for the following:

- Treatments would not occur in PVGs 7–11
- The 15-acre Fuel Reduction within an RCA treatment would not occur
- Shaded fuelbreaks would not be created.

Prescribed fire would be proposed on 16,600 acres, or 7,650 fewer acres compared to Alternative 2.

The same associated actions proposed with the vegetation restoration treatments for Alternative 2 are proposed under Alternative 3, with slight differences in proposed temporary road and road maintenance miles. Approximately 8.1 miles of new planned temporary road would be constructed, and 27.5 miles of existing unauthorized routes would be used as temporary roads and fully recontoured following use. Approximately 129.7 miles of roads would be maintained.

Watershed Improvement and Restoration Treatments

Proposed watershed improvement restoration treatments would be the same as those proposed under Alternative 2 with additions and changes as noted below.

Approximately 15.0 miles of roads would be placed in long-term closure. The reduced long-term closure miles, compared to Alternative 2, would be decommissioned instead. Approximately 87.9 miles of roads would be decommissioned, including 23.3 miles of NFS road and 64.6 miles of unauthorized routes. Three culverts that restrict proper hydrologic function and passage of fish and other aquatic organisms would be replaced.

Transportation Management

Road reconstruction would occur on 8.8 miles. No road realignment is proposed under this alternative.

Other Road Actions

The types of treatment and miles are identical to those described under Alternative 2.

Recreation

All recreation and trail improvements proposed under Alternative 3 are identical to those proposed under Alternative 2 with one exception: the 3.0 miles of OHV trail open to vehicles up to 70 inches wide is not proposed under Alternative 3.

Proposed Actions within Inventoried Roadless

Within the Council Mountain and Poison Creek IRAs, recreation improvements and other treatments proposed under Alternative 3 are identical to those described for Alternative 2.

Alternative 4—Additional High-Elevation Vegetation Treatments

Alternative 4 was developed to address internal and external comments concerning additional restoration in higher elevation stands that contain a viable seral tree component. This alternative would treat stands in PVGs 7–11 that have a viable seral species component in addition to those stands proposed for treatment under Alternative 2. This treatment plan is supported by direction

in the 2013 *Canada Lynx Conservation Assessment and Strategy*⁶, which provides flexibility for forest management in “Secondary Areas” that do not support core populations of lynx. Alternative 4 would require a site-specific non-significant amendment of the Forest Plan to Forest-wide standard TEST15 to allow for more than 30% of lynx habitat to be made unsuitable with Project activities within the Middle Fork Weiser River Lynx Analysis Unit.

Vegetation Restoration Treatments

The description and intent of the 23,393 acres of vegetation restoration treatments proposed in Alternative 4 are identical to those proposed in Alternative 2, and include additional areas proposed for treatment. Alternative 4 increases PVGs 7–11 and whitebark pine treatments. Prescribed fire treatments would occur on 27,400 acres, or 3,150 more acres compared to Alternative 2.

The same associated actions proposed with the vegetation restoration treatments for Alternative 2 are proposed under Alternative 4, with slight differences in proposed temporary road and road maintenance miles. Approximately 8.3 miles of new planned temporary road would be constructed, and 39.8 miles of existing unauthorized routes would be utilized as temporary roads and fully recontoured following use. Approximately 137.5 miles of roads would be maintained.

Watershed Improvement and Restoration Treatments

Proposed watershed improvement restoration treatments would be the same as those proposed under Alternative 2 with additions and changes as noted below.

Approximately 17.8 miles of roads would be placed in long-term closure. Approximately 76.7 miles of roads would be decommissioned, including 16.1 miles of NFS road and 60.6 miles of unauthorized routes.

Transportation Management

Approximately 4.0 miles of unauthorized roads would be added to the Payette National Forest Road Atlas. Once used for treatment, the roads would be put into OML 2 closure. Alternative 4 is the only alternative that proposes Add to System roads. Road reconstruction would occur on 17.3 miles.

Alternative 4 proposes road realignments described under Alternative 2 and proposes additional miles of road realignment. These additional miles of realignment are in conjunction with the Add to System roads described above. Approximately 8.7 miles of existing NFS road and unauthorized routes would be realigned and 4.5 miles of road would be reconstructed during realignment for a net decrease of 4.2 miles of roads and unauthorized routes.

Other Road Actions

The types of treatment and miles are identical to those described in Alternative 2.

Recreation

All recreation proposals under Alternative 4 are identical to those proposed under Alternative 2.

⁶ Interagency Lynx Biology Team. 2013. *Canada lynx conservation assessment and strategy*. 3rd edition. Missoula, MT: USDA Forest Service, USDI Fish and Wildlife Service, USDI Bureau of Land Management, and USDI National Park Service. Forest Service Publication R1-13-19.

Proposed Actions within Inventoried Roadless

Within the Council Mountain and Poison Creek IRAs, recreation improvements and other treatments proposed under Alternative 4 are identical to those described for Alternative 2.

Major Conclusions

Major conclusions related to proposed activities include the following:

- All of the action alternatives are designed to maintain large tree size class stands by managing densities to enhance the resiliency and resistance of the stands to disturbance events such as wildfire and insects. These alternatives would also promote the development of medium tree size class stands by promoting the growth of desired trees to accelerate development of the large tree size class with desired tree species compositions. Alternative 4 would treat the most acres to both maintain and promote the large tree size class; whereas, Alternative 3 would treat the fewest acres.
- Under Alternative 1 (No Action), fire regimes would continue to depart from historical conditions and risks to the public, private property, fire suppression crews, and other values within and adjacent to the Project area would continue to increase. Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 would significantly improve and maintain fire regime conditions across approximately 24,236 acres; 16,618 acres; and 27,435 acres, respectively, where vegetation and fuels treatments and prescribed burning are proposed, and would alter predicted fire types from conditional and active crown fires to primarily surface fires with passive crown fires, improving fire fighter and public safety.
- Alternative 1 would have no effect on the following species: white-headed woodpecker, flammulated owl, three-toed woodpecker, black-backed woodpecker, boreal owl, fisher, great gray owl, northern goshawk, mountain quail, and northern Idaho ground squirrel. Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 would provide beneficial effects to white-headed woodpeckers and mountain quail. Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 may impact individuals or habitat, but would not likely contribute to a trend towards federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species for the following species: flammulated owl, three-toed woodpecker, black-backed woodpecker, boreal owl, fisher, great gray owl, and northern goshawk. Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 may effect, but are not likely to adversely affect the northern Idaho ground squirrel and Canada lynx.
- Although in the short term, Alternative 4 would result in more than 30% of unsuitable lynx habitat, in the long term, Alternative 4 would provide the best support of lynx source habitat, while producing a mosaic of habitats that would provide lynx foraging, traveling, and denning habitat.
- Alternative 1 would not contribute to the cumulative amount of sediment reaching the Weiser River, nor to a change in peak or base flows, or implement any watershed restoration activities. Under Alternatives 2, 3, and 4, hydrologic function at the subwatershed or watershed scale could be affected by a temporary increase in road density as temporary roads are constructed to facilitate vegetation treatments. These roads would contribute to already high road densities on private lands interspersed with NFS lands throughout the Project area. Over the long term, however, road density would be reduced on NFS lands and the cumulative road density over the entire watershed would be reduced, with approximately one-third of this reduction occurring in RCAs on NFS

lands. This reduction in road density, coupled with removing culverts on NFS roads proposed for long-term storage, would result in a reduced impact and risk to hydrologic function at the subwatershed and watershed scale for all action alternatives.

- Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 may affect, but are not likely to adversely affect, bull trout and their critical habitat in the East Fork Weiser River. In the Middle Fork Weiser River watershed, the Project would have no effect to bull trout or their critical habitat because bull trout are not present within or downstream from the Project area.
- All alternatives meet the Forest Plan standards for detrimental disturbance, total soil resource commitment, and coarse woody debris.
- The action alternatives may impact individuals of swamp onion, Tolmie's onion, bank monkeyflower, whitebark pine, and giant helleborine orchid, but are not likely to contribute to a trend toward federal listing.
- Proposed developed and dispersed recreation improvements and trail improvements would improve recreational opportunities and help mitigate soil and other resource conditions caused by existing recreational use of these areas.
- Approximately 3.0 miles of OHV trail would be created under Alternatives 2 and 4, which would mitigate the 1.4 miles of open road access lost through Project road decommissioning, as the trail would be open to all vehicles up to 70 inches wide. Approximately 100 miles of open road would continue to be available for hunting, scenic driving, berry picking, and fuelwood gathering; 27 of these miles are currently closed seasonally, which does affect the hunting seasons for some animal species.
- None of the proposed recreation trail-related changes would affect the potential to manage the Council Mountain or Poison Creek IRAs for wilderness consideration. If the areas were to be designated by Congress as wilderness, all trails would remain and designated use would be changed to non-motorized.
- Alternatives 2 and 3 propose decommissioning 29 and 34 roads, respectively, which would decrease the currently accessible suited timberland. Alternative 4 would add 13 existing roads to the system and decommission the same 29 roads as under Alternative 2, which has the least decrease in the amount of accessible suited timber land.
- Alternative 1 would not increase employment. Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 would increase employment per year over the 10-year life of the project by 42, 39, and 49 jobs and produce 83,080 ccf, 76,656 ccf, and 90,016 ccf of timber, respectively.
- Effects of implementing the action alternatives would not have any major adverse effects on the rangeland resource. The actions would improve rangeland conditions overall, whether it be by decommissioning roads in riparian areas, or harvesting timber and opening up areas for foraging and livestock movement.

Decision

The Responsible Official for this project is the Forest Supervisor. Based on the analysis presented in this document, the Forest Supervisor will make the following decisions and document them in a Record of Decision accompanying or following the Final EIS.

- Should the Forest Service implement this project, including commercial and non-commercial vegetation treatments, fuels reduction, road management, watershed and fish habitat restoration, and recreation improvements at this time? If so:
 - What and how many acres should be treated and by what means?
 - What action should be taken on recreation facilities, trails, and dispersed recreation sites?
 - What watershed restoration and fish habitat improvements should be implemented?
 - What road management actions should be implemented?
 - Which project design features or mitigation measures are necessary to ensure compliance with the Forest Plan?
 - Which monitoring requirements are appropriate to evaluate project implementation and effectiveness?
 - Should a site-specific non-significant amendment of the Forest Plan be prepared to allow for creating more than 30% unsuitable Canada lynx habitat within the Middle Fork Weiser River Lynx Analysis Unit only?