United States Department of Agriculture | Forest Service | Salmon-Challis National Forest, Salmon/Cobalt Ranger District | 50 Hwy 93 S, Salmon, ID 83467, 208 756-5100

**File Code:** 1950
**Date:**

Greetings:

The Salmon-Cobalt Ranger District is working on an environmental analysis of a proposal to remove hazardous fuels and restore forested ecosystems in the Salmon Interface and Moose Creek. I am writing to provide an update on the Salmon Interface/Moose Creek Fuels Reduction Project, as well as to provide you an opportunity to comment on the proposed action.

**Background Information**

In the aftermath of the severe wildfire season in 2000, the National Fire Plan and the 10-year Comprehensive Strategy were developed. Both provide direction for prioritizing treatments in fire-prone forest environments that are at risk of severe wildland fires, especially when near communities in the wildland-urban interface and municipal watersheds. In May 2002, an Implementation Plan for the 10-year Comprehensive Strategy was completed by Federal, State, tribal and local government and non-government representatives. This Plan set forth four primary goals: 1) Improve fire prevention and suppression, 2) reduce hazardous fuels, 3) restore fire-adapted ecosystems, and 4) promote community assistance. The proposed action responds to all four goals.

In December of 2003, the President signed into law the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003. The purpose of this act as it applies to this project is to reduce wildfire risk to municipal water supplies, address threats to forest health including catastrophic wildfire across the landscape, and to improve biological diversity.

The Forest conducted a watershed assessment of the Salmon Interface and Moose Creek in 2003. These analyses developed desired future conditions (DFC) for many resources found in the watershed. Moving the area towards the DFCs generated individual projects such as the one proposed in this environmental document.

Fire suppression, starting in the early 1900s, has successfully lengthened historic fire return intervals in the aspen and dry Douglas-fir forest types in the proposed project area. The result has been a change in species composition, structure and density as forest succession advances in the absence of historic fire disturbance regimes. Hazardous surface and crown forest fuel profiles have developed as succession proceeds and drought, insect and disease activity stress overcrowded forest stands and mortality ensues. These conditions contribute to the threat of ignition, high fire intensity and high rate of spread. Current forest stand and fuel conditions are outside the natural fire regime, placing human safety, property and natural resource values at risk of loss due to wildfire. As evidenced by the Fenster and Clear Creek wildfires of 2000 and the Withington Fire of 2003, the potential for a large wildfire is high due to fuel conditions, topography, drought, nearby residential development and high recreational use because of proximity to Salmon, and traditional lightning patterns

Based on the watershed assessment and direction in the National Fire Plan and Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003, the Forest is proposing to conduct activities that would reduce fuel loads adjacent to the Jesse Creek Municipal Watershed, modify potential fire behavior northwest of Salmon, Idaho (an urban interface) and move the area towards the DFCs for forested vegetation.

**Purpose and Need For Action**

The purpose of this project is to

- Restore aspen to its historical locations and regenerate aspen to ensure resiliency and maintenance on the landscape. Aspen, a more fire resistant forest stand, adds diverse composition and structure to the uniform conifer forest environment.
- Reduce representation of pole sized lodgepole pine stands to break stand uniformity and continuity in the landscape lowering the potential for crown fire.
- Decrease conifer crown continuity and potential for crown fire allowing for safer and more effective fire suppression tactics.
- Reduce stand density and mistletoe infected stands to improve forest health, vigor and resistance to fire, insects and disease.
- Remove residual slash to increase the probability of wildfire control.
- Recover post, pole and other forest products to reduce concentrated fuel loading conditions.
- Alter forest stand structure and composition to move closer to the natural and sustainable vegetation patterns that existed prior to fire suppression.
- Maintain or enhance designated old growth forested stands to sustain large tree character and provide habitat needs for old growth associated species.
- Develop a road system that satisfies future road needs for removal of forest products, fuels reduction and fire suppression and closing roads no longer needed to reduce maintenance backlog and costs, protect and maintain other resource values, reduce user conflicts and remove unsafe travel conditions.

This action is needed to reduce the potential threat and risk of stand replacing wildfire in an area adjacent to the Salmon City municipal watershed and the City of Salmon. Proposed treatments would further enhance existing fuel breaks adjacent to roads created by past harvest treatments and provide additional safe areas where fire suppression resources could safely and effectively deploy in an attempt to prevent fire from entering the municipal watershed or from burning onto private land in the Salmon River Valley. Annual road maintenance needs continue to outpace road maintenance budgets adding to a backlog of un-maintained roads that pose a cumulative threat to the condition of other resource values and motorized recreational users.

This action responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the Salmon National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (1989), and helps move the project area towards desired conditions described in that plan.

- Maintain adequate structural diversity of vegetation to provide representations of the various ecological stages of endemic plant communities (LRMP page IV-1).
- Provide a cost effective level of fire protection to minimize the combined costs of protection and damages and prevent loss of human life.

- Use prescribed fire to treat hazardous fuel conditions and create diversified forest condition (LRMP page IV-3).
- Manage aspen for perpetuation wherever it occurs (LRMP page IV-18).
- Maintain soil productivity, minimize man-caused soil erosion and maintain the integrity of associated ecosystems (LRMP page IV-57).
- Modify activity fuels to permit fire suppression forces to meet fire protection objectives for the area (LRMP page IV-71).
- Maintain watershed conditions and water quality such that downstream beneficial uses are protected and compliance with State water quality standards are achieved (LRMP page IV-90).
- Management emphasis in Management Area 5b is on a medium level of commercial sawtimber production while maintaining habitat for target or viable populations of all native vertebrate species of fish and wildlife (LRMP page IV-116).

Watershed Assessments for Salmon Interface (2003) and Moose Creek (2003) identified the following desired future conditions for forested vegetation to increase forest health and resiliency.

- Old forest multi-structured stands composed of Douglas-fir could be converted to old forest single structures or stand initiation.
- Lodgepole understory reinitiation could be converted to old forest single or stand initiation.
- Aspen understory reinitiation could be converted to old forest single or stand initiation.

This proposal complies with The Forest Service Road Policy, effective January 2001, requiring national forests to complete science-based roads analysis with local public and other agencies involvement. Project level roads analysis must be completed before road management decisions are implemented. The road management decisions are included in the action alternative.

**Proposed Action**

Lodgepole Pine Treatments

- Mechanically remove 80% of the lodgepole pine trees within approximately 1041 acres. Remaining trees will be left in groups and be insect and disease free.
- Cut tops of harvested trees at three inches dbh and leave tops and limbs in the unit. All trees less than three inches will be cut and left in the unit.
- The logging method would be tractor skidding.
- Jackpot burn logging slash if accumulations are greater than 15 tons per acre.
- Naturally regenerate these units to lodgepole pine following harvest.
- All snags and Douglas-fir will remain in the unit unless they pose a hazard to the logging operation.

**Douglas-fir Treatments**

- Mechanically remove all trees with dwarf mistletoe rating of two or greater within approximately 39 acres.
- The logging method would be tractor skidding.
- Logging slash would be removed by broadcast burning and handpiling, leaving four to fifteen tons per acre of large diameter material.

- Plant this unit with a mixture of Douglas-fir and ponderosa pine following harvest.
- Leave four, large diameter green trees, preferably Douglas-fir or Englemann spruce in the unit as snag replacements. These trees should be free of insects and disease.
- Maintain all snags in the units unless they pose a hazard to the logging operation.
- Treatment specific to unit 53S. Mechanically remove all trees with dwarf mistletoe in the overstory of regenerated areas. Thin the regenerated Douglas-fir to a spacing of 16 feet. Remaining trees should be mistletoe free.

**Aspen Treatments**

- Remove all conifers from within the aspen stands and within a 150-foot perimeter of the aspen on 596 acres.
- Logging methods would be tractor skidding, jammer or tong tossers.
- Remove logging slash leaving four to fifteen tons per acre of large diameter material by broadcast burning or jackpot burning.
- Protect all aspen regeneration from ungulate grazing until they are greater than six feet tall. Full regeneration of aspen would not occur if units couldn't be protected from ungulate browsing. Protection measures would include:
    1. Monitor aspen suckers in spring, summer and fall to determine which ungulates are browsing aspen, cattle or wild ungulates.
    2. Install fence along Forest Road 020 (Ridge Road) to prevent drift of cattle from Moose Creek to Diamond Creek.
    3. Install gathering pasture in Moose Meadows adjacent to and including units 52 and 53-M to facilitate fall gathering and trailing of large groups of cattle off the allotment. Cattle will not be trailed off of the allotment along Forest Road 023 (Stormy Peak).
    4. Include an aspen grazing standard developed for the Forest in the annual operating plan.
    5. Treat one or two aspen units at a time so allotment riders do not have to monitor additional areas.
- Leave 20 percent of live aspen in units 50-S, 51-S, 53-M, 53-S, 56-S, 60-S, 61-S, 62-S and 63-S when doing regeneration cuts. It would benefit snag recruitment if a portion of the remaining aspen showed signs of disease, or other damage. If monitoring shows that the remaining live aspen overstory is still inhibiting a regeneration response, completely girdle 50 to 75 percent of the residual live aspen trees.
- Leave four, large diameter green conifers per acre, preferably Douglas-fir or Englemann spruce as snag replacements.
- Maintain all snags in the units unless they pose a hazard to logging activities.
- Harvest and stand improvement activities shall take place outside the nesting season (after July 31) to avoid destroying active nests with eggs and/or dependent young.

**Road Closures**

Decommission approximately 23 miles of road. Closure methods are as follows.

- Abandon road and monitor for use.
- Place a gate at an effective location and issue a closure order.
- Re-establish former drainage patterns, stabilize slopes and restore vegetation

- Block road entrance, outslope and/or install waterbars. Entrance could be blocked by earthen berms, recontouring or hidden with brush or woody debris.
- Remove culverts, re-establish drainage, remove unstable fills, pull back road shoulders and scatter slash on the roadbed.
- Eliminate the roadbed by restoring natural contours and slopes. Seed with native, weed-free seed mix as necessary.
- On roads where vegetation growth will require removal to allow access, minimize ground disturbance by hand felling conifer regeneration and shrubs and allowing high blading.
- On decommissioned roads and closed roads disturbed during harvest activities, scarify with harrow and seed with native or noninvasive seed mix.

**Elements Common to all Treatments**

- All skid trails will be designated within cutting units.
- All constructed skid trails will be reclaimed, put back on the contour to mitigate soil disturbance, weed introduction and spread and to minimize access when the sale is complete.
- Maintain effectiveness of current road closures (gates, earthen berms) following vegetation manipulation. The harvest will change vegetation composition, potentially allowing motorized access around gates, etc. Ensure road closure effectiveness when vegetation treatments are complete.
- Twenty to fifty percent of duff and organic matter remains following treatments.
- Avoid ground disturbing activities (tractor skidding, machine piling slash, etc.) on wet soils (when soil moisture is near field capacity) to minimize detrimental soil compaction and puddling.
- To minimize adverse effects to soils, broadcast burn when soil moisture is approximately 20 percent.
- Winter logging will occur when ground is frozen to a depth that will ensure no soil displacement, rutting or removal of ground vegetation, litter or duff material within treatment units, landings and along haul routes.
- Power-wash all equipment undercarriages entering area to prevent introduction and spread of noxious weeds.
- Treat existing and new weed infestations to prevent spread.
- Slash will not be piled adjacent to dispersed campsites.
- Maintain 10 percent of forested area in old growth forested stands.
- Retain all ponderosa pine within treatment units.
- Leave two piles per acre unburned.
- Maintain at least 30 percent of Lynx Analysis Units (LAU) in suitable habitat.
- Within a LAU, maintain at least 10 percent of lynx habitat in denning habitat.
- Maintain habitat connectivity within and between LAUs.
- Management actions shall not change more than 15 percent of lynx habitat within a LAU to an unsuitable condition within a 10-year period.
- No treatments within ½ mile of an active great grey owl or accipter nest nest. No treatments within 1/8 mile of all other raptor nests except kestrel.
- Beneficial uses of 303(d) water quality limited streams will be protected.
- Exclude filter strips as defined in the Forest Plan (page IV-58) from all treatments except occasional backing fire.

- Avoid and/or pre-treat significant historic properties. Prior to implementation, Forest archaeologists through consultation with other management personnel will establish a site-specific mitigation plan.
- If unanticipated heritage resources are discovered during implementation, all work in that area will cease and the Forest Archaeologist will be notified within 24 hours. Depending on the nature of the find, activity may continue as determined by the Forest Archaeologist in consultation with the Idaho SHPO. If significant heritage resources are discovered, their preservation in place of the resource will be the preferred alternative, but data recovery may be required if the site cannot be avoided. The FS in consultation with the Idaho SHPO will develop avoidance, mitigation, or data recovery plans. If the property has potential religious or cultural significance for the Nez Perce or Shoshone-Bannock Tribes, the appropriate tribal parties will be notified and consulted.
- Riparian habitat conservation areas (RHCAs) will be delineated along all fish bearing streams.
- Pool frequency will be maintained or improved within Wallace, Dump and Moose Creeks.
- No measurable increase in water temperature within Wallace, Dump and Moose Creeks.
- Trees providing shade along Wallace Creek will not be removed.
- Large woody debris will not be removed from Wallace, Dump and Moose Creeks.
- Bank stability will be maintained or improved within Wallace, Dump and Moose Creeks.
- Stream width/depth ratios will be maintained or improved within Wallace, Dump and Moose Creeks.
- Broadcast burns within RHCAs will minimize ground disturbance to riparian ground cover, vegetation and will not change pool frequency, water temperature, large woody debris, bank stability and stream width/depth ratios.
- Fuel and other toxicants will not be stored in RHCAs.
- Winter recreation enthusiasts will be informed of dates, times and places of winter logging. Snowmobile ingress and egress will be provided on plowed roads.

A no action alternative will be analyzed along with the proposed action. The proposed action and no action alternatives respond to issues and concerns I received during scoping in May 2003. Our analysis is considering effects to vegetation including old growth, noxious weeds, soils, hydrology, fuels, wildlife, fisheries, unroaded areas and cultural resources as well as cumulative impacts from past disturbances (logging, mining, wildfires, insects and disease infestations), special uses in the project area and road construction, closure and maintenance. A roadless analysis will not be completed because the project area is outside a roadless area.

I have included a map of the proposed action and project area, a map of the proposed road management actions and two tables offering specifics about treatment units and roads.

**Opportunity to Comment**

Comments submitted previously are being considered and utilized in the current analysis. This letter provides an additional opportunity to comment regarding the proposed action. A draft environmental document will **not** be sent to you for additional review and comments.

This analysis is being completed under revised 36 CFR 215 appeal regulations, which became effective June 4, 2003. Please be aware that there are many changes in the appeal regulations that are important to understand:

(1) Your comments must be substantive. This means that comments must be within the scope of, are specific to, and have a direct relationship to the proposed action. They must include a supporting reason that I should consider in making a decision.

*(2)* Your comments must be timely. This means that comments must be submitted within 30 days of when this notice appears in the *Recorder Herald.* The comment time will not be extended.

(3) You must comment on this proposed action to be able to appeal any future decision. If you submit comments, you must either sign the comments or otherwise verify identity in order to be able to appeal.

(4) Your comments can be submitted in either written format to our mailing address, delivered to our office, sent via e-mail or facsimile, or presented orally in person at our office.

Please direct comments on the proposed action to:

Terry Hershey, District Ranger
C/o IDT Leader Liz Davy
Salmon-Cobalt Ranger District
50 Hwy 93 South
Salmon, ID 83467
Telephone: (208) 756-5100
Facsimile: (208) 756-5225
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Your comments will continue to help refine the proposed action, any alternatives, as well as the environmental analysis. Pursuant to 36 CFR 215.3(a), this proposal is subject to legal notice and opportunity to comment. Comments on the proposed action will be accepted for 30-days following publication of a legal notice (36 CFR 215.5(b)(1)(iv)). You may submit comments by letter, telephone, facsimile, electronically (in Word or .rtf format) or office visit (during the hours of 8 AM to 4:30 PM). In order to be eligible for appeal, comments must be substantive and timely. Pursuant to 36 CFR 215.2, substantive comments are within the scope of the proposed action and would include supporting reasons for the Responsible Official to consider.

For additional information on the project, contact IDT Leader Liz Davy at (208) 756-5222 or (208) 865-2709.

Sincerely,

/s/ *Terry Hershey*

TERRY HERSHEY
District Ranger
Enclosures (4)