

Decision Memo

Ryan Ranch Meadow/Aspen/Willow Enhancement Project

USDA Forest Service

Bend-Ft. Rock Ranger District, Deschutes National Forest

Deschutes County, Oregon

T 19 S. R 11 E. Sections 4 & 5

DECISION TO BE IMPLEMENTED

Description of Decision

I have decided to improve habitat conditions on approximately 95 acres of existing upland meadow, aspen and willow habitats in the Ryan Ranch meadow area west of the Deschutes River. Habitat improvements will be accomplished by burning approximately 80 acres of upland meadow and by cutting encroaching conifers 10 inches dbh (diameter breast height) and smaller on approximately 10 acres of existing willow habitat and 5 acres of existing aspen stand. All activities would be accomplished using hand tools; a low ground pressure, tracked vehicle (ASV) would be used to cut and remove trees in the aspen and willow units. Three areas using two types of treatment would occur:

1. To rejuvenate native grass and shrub vegetation and restore historic water table levels, approximately 80 acres of upland meadow habitat would be broadcast burned (Figure 1). Wet areas, as evidenced by sedges and other riparian vegetation, would be excluded from treatment. Ignition would be by hand. The perimeter of the burn area would be controlled using a sprinkler system and water. Firelines, if necessary, would be dug by hand and would be up to 18 inches wide and down to mineral soil. Encroaching conifers, primarily lodgepole pine, within the burn area not killed by the fire would be cut by hand after burning is completed. The resultant slash would be lopped and scattered and left on site.



Figure 1 Ryan Ranch Meadow.

2. To enhance growth and survival of willows, all lodgepole pine 10 inches dbh (diameter breast height) and smaller would be cut on approximately 10 acres of willow habitat located at the west end of the meadow (Figure 2). Trees would be felled using an ASV tracked vehicle. Trees 3 inches dbh and larger would be skidded tree length by the ASV to Forest Road 41, decked adjacent to the road, and the wood would be available for use as firewood. Slash remaining after the removal of firewood would be piled and burned. Slash remaining on site resulting from trees less than 3 inches dbh would be lopped and scattered. Slash would not be placed on individual willows or willow clumps. Selected individual willows and willow clumps would be protected from elk browsing using wire mesh and either wood or metal stakes. Where slash levels exceeded desired limits, slash may be piled and the piles burned.



Figure 2 Conifer Encroachment in Willow Habitat, Ryan Ranch Meadow. Elk have heavily browsed the clumps of willow.

3. To enhance the growth and survival of aspen, all lodgepole pine 10 inches dbh and smaller would be felled by the ASV in an approximately 5 acre aspen stand also located at the west end of the meadow. Slash treatment would be same as that prescribed in the willow enhancement area with trees 3 inches dbh and larger being skidded to Forest Road 41 by the ASV and made available for firewood and the remaining slash being lopped and scattered. Slash remaining on site would not be placed against any aspen. Slash levels in excess of desired limits may be piled and the piles burned.

My decision includes the following elements to reduce or minimize unwanted effects:

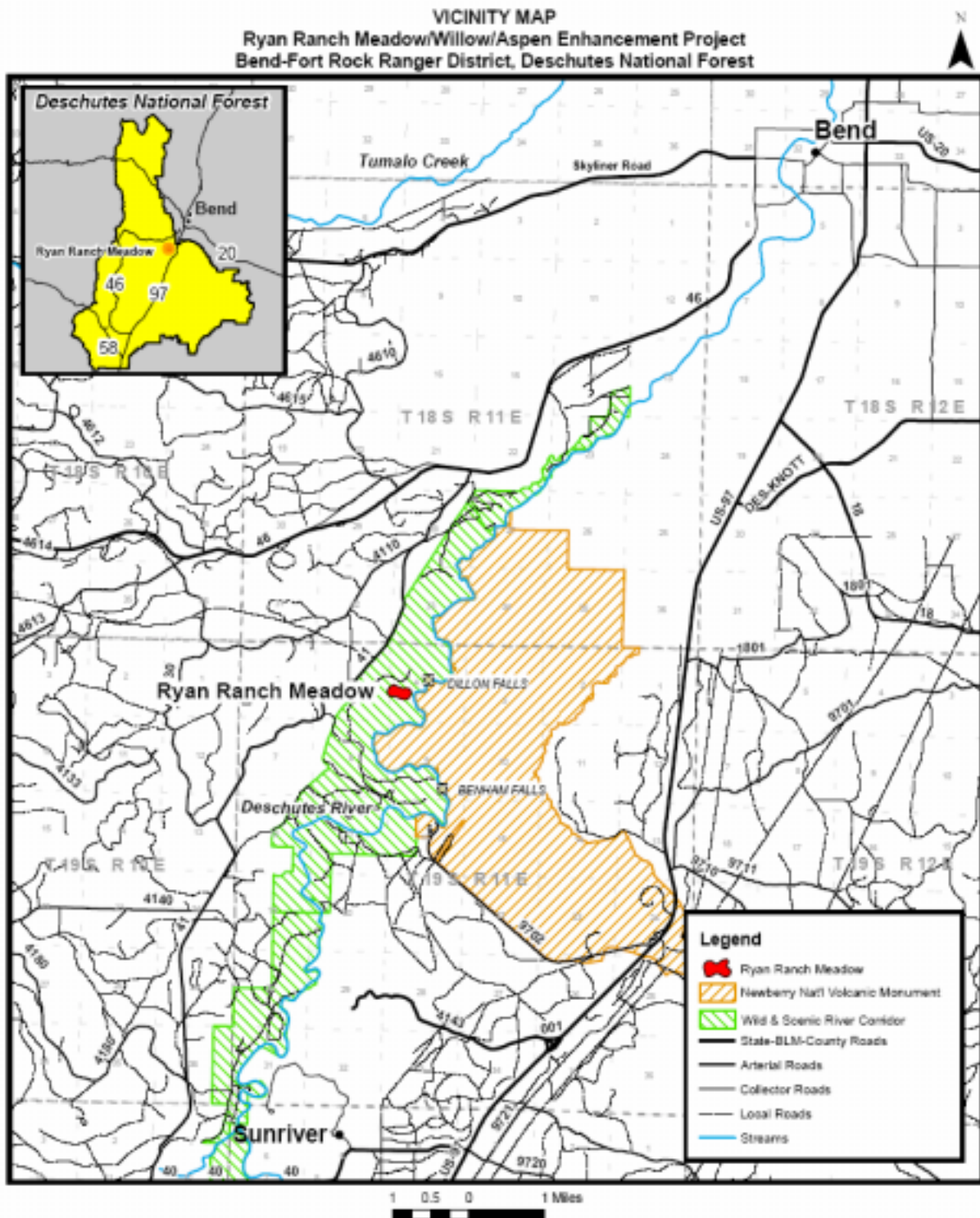
- Burn meadow unit only after post-burn control measures are in place to control the reed canary grass.
- Fire will be allowed to creep from the meadow area into the ponderosa pine stand along the northern edge of the meadow. There will be no ignition within the boundaries of the ponderosa pine stand. The area permitted to burn will not extend north of the fence line.

- Restore firelines by pulling soil and unburned vegetative materials across each line upon completion of burning.
- Archeological staff will be on-site during layout and implementation. They will monitor treatment units during and following completion of activities.
- Within the meadow prescribe burn unit, all known cultural, historic, and archeological (heritage) sites would be avoided during project layout and implementation. Unknown sites, discovered during layout and/or implementation activities, would be protected by halting activities in and adjacent to the site and notifying the district archeologist. Firelines, if determined to be necessary, will be located in coordination with the district archeologist. Activities would not be resumed until the site had been evaluated and a determination made by the district archeologist.
- Cutting of encroaching conifers in the aspen stand and willow habitat may occur through known and unknown heritage sites. Slash, if piled, will not be piled on any known sites. Wherever possible, piles will be located on existing disturbed sites such as existing skid roads or closed roads. Piling activities will be coordinated with the district archeologist.
- To reduce the risk of introducing or transporting noxious weeds or other invasive species, all equipment used in conducting operations will be washed prior to moving onto and after leaving the site. Parking and staging of vehicles will be limited to recognized sites to prevent encountering and spreading bull thistle or spotted knapweed into either the meadow or upland areas.
- To reduce the risk of detrimental soil impacts and to protect heritage sites, use of mechanized equipment such as the ASV would be restricted to existing roads, skid roads and other already disturbed sites. Where such disturbed sites do not exist, use of the ASV or other similar equipment would be restricted to a maximum of two passes over any portion of the ground. There would be no restrictions on the use of this equipment if used when the site is covered with snow and/or soils are frozen. Use at these times will be coordinated with the district soils scientist.
- Created slash will not be placed on or adjacent to aspen trees or willows. If piling is necessary to reduce fuel loadings and/or to maintain or improve wildlife movement, piles will not be located adjacent to or on aspen trees, individual willow or willow clumps, or heritage sites.
- Prior to initiation of management activities, the area would be surveyed for the presence of active bald eagle nests. If active nests are found within ¼ mile of any treatment unit, a January 1st to August 31st seasonal restriction would be imposed. Seasonal restrictions may also be imposed if other active raptor nests are found prior to or during project activities.
- The Deschutes River Trail, Trail 2.1, running along the river and the east side of the meadow burn unit, would be signed and closed to use when the meadow is burned. Information would be made available to forest visitors at the trailhead.

Location

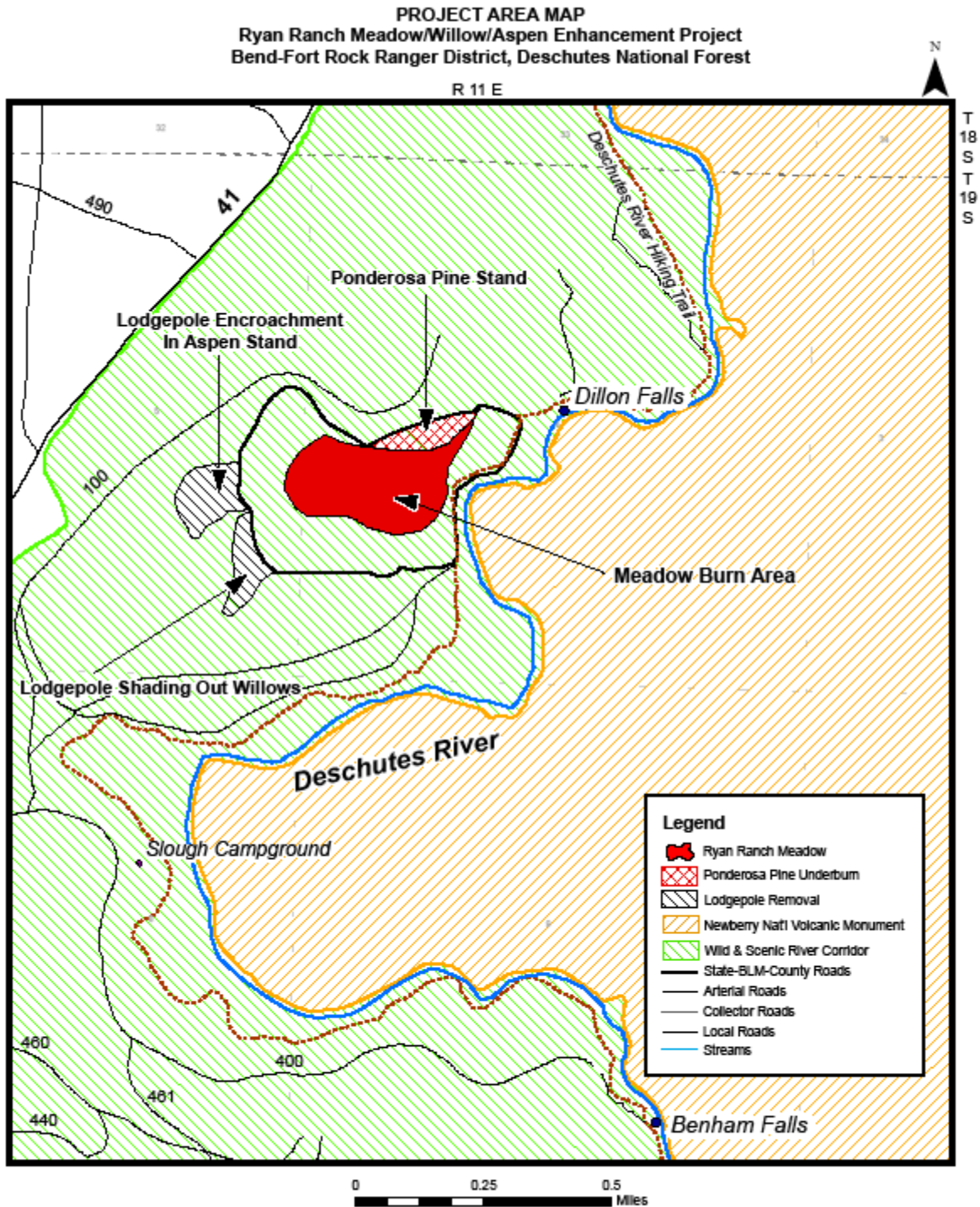
The project area is located approximately 6 air miles southwest of the city of Bend, OR. It is located on the west side of the Deschutes River and immediately west of the Newberry National Volcanic Monument (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3 Vicinity Map - Ryan Ranch Meadow/Aspen/Willow Enhancement Project, Bend-Fort Rock Ranger District, Deschutes National Forest.



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Figure 4 Treatment Unit Map - Ryan Ranch Meadow/Aspen/Willow Enhancement Project.



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The entire project area is located in Segment 4C of the Upper Deschutes River Wild and Scenic River and State Scenic Waterway corridor. It is also located within the boundaries of the Ryan Ranch Key Elk area as described in the Deschutes National Forest *Land and Resource Management Plan* (LRMP) (1990).

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of this project is to enhance the quality and availability of habitat for species that utilize meadow, aspen, and willow habitats. The project area includes an historic wet meadow that was ditched and drained to improve grazing by cattle. The property was acquired by the Forest Service from Shevlin-Hixson Lumber in 1946. Grazing was terminated in 1996. Portions of the meadow currently support wet meadow habitats; the remainder consists of upland vegetation habitat types.

There is a need to restore native plant communities, particularly those associated with dry meadows, willow, and aspen, that are experiencing encroachment by conifer tree species, specifically lodgepole pine. Fire suppression has resulted in the gradual, increasing encroachment of dry upland vegetation, primarily lodgepole pine (Figure 2). Due to increasing competition for light, water, nutrients, and space, subsequent declines in both the quality and distribution of grass and shrub communities have occurred.

Aspen habitats are declining across the western U.S. and are relatively rare on the Deschutes National Forest. These habitats provide important calving habitat for elk, support a rich diversity of bird species, and provide food for beaver. Encroaching conifers reduce aspen regeneration and survival thereby resulting in the gradual conversion of those sites to conifer forest and the subsequent loss of valuable habitats.

Willows also provide important habitat for a variety of wildlife species including elk, neotropical migrant birds, and beaver. Willow provides browse and calving cover for elk. Neotropical migrant birds also utilize willow and willow habitats. Encroaching conifers reduce available forage and browse common to upland meadow sites resulting in increasing browse pressure on existing willow (Figure 5). Increased browsing also results in reduced habitat quality and distribution for the other species that also utilize willow. Willow health and vigor is further compromised by the lowering of the water table associated with increasing conifer encroachment.

Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Decision

Decisions may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment when they are within one of the categories identified by the Chief or the Forest Service in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.31.2, and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative effect on the quality of the human environment.

Category of Exclusion

The appropriate category of exclusion is found in the Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 Section 31.2 Category 6. This category allows timber stand improvement or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction.

Relationship to Extraordinary Circumstances

In determining the appropriateness of using the categorical exclusion, a determination of the potential impact to the resource conditions identified in FSH 1909.15 Section 30.3(2) must be made. The following is the list of the potential effects to the resource conditions from the project activities.

1. *Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated habitat or species proposed for federal listing or proposed critical habitat and Forest Service Sensitive Species.*

No federally listed threatened or endangered or Forest Service sensitive plant species or habitats are located within or adjacent to the proposed treatment units (Botany BE).

No federally listed threatened or endangered wildlife species or habitats are located within or adjacent to the proposed treatment units. There is potential habitat for the northern bald eagle, a Region 6 sensitive species and Deschutes National Forest Management Indicator Species (MIS), and the Oregon spotted frog, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service candidate species and a Region 6 sensitive species, within the project area (page 3, Wildlife BE).

The project as proposed, with appropriate design criteria and mitigation measures, would have no measurable direct, indirect, or cumulative effects on any Forest Service sensitive or LRMP management indicator species or their habitats (page 15, Wildlife Report and page 4, Wildlife BE). There would be No Impact to bald eagles if project activities are implemented outside of the winter roosting season. Additionally, no impacts would be expected if surveys identify active roost sites and the January 1st to August 31st seasonal restriction is applied. No measurable direct, indirect or cumulative effects were identified on the Oregon spotted frog or its habitat.

The Wildlife Report, Wildlife Biological Evaluation, and project file, contains an analysis of the proposed actions on sensitive and management indicator wildlife species and their habitats.

There is no Essential Fish Habitat or critical habitat for any fish species within or near the project area. The nearest listed fish species population is bull trout located over 50 miles downriver near Lake Billy Chinook. This project would have no effect on either Essential Fish Habitat or critical habitat (page 2, Aquatic BE).

The redband trout is the only aquatic species listed on the Region 6 Regional Forester's Sensitive Species List within the project area. Historically, redband inhabited the entire Upper Deschutes River system. Habitat for this species exists within or adjacent to the project area. This project would have no effect on this species or its habitat as water quality and associated fish habitat is maintained (page 7, Aquatic BE). No trees would be cut adjacent to the Deschutes River and would therefore have no effect on shade levels and therefore no effect on water temperature. Proposed treatments would not result in an increase in turbidity and sedimentation (pages 6-9, Aquatic BE).

2. *Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds*

The project is consistent with Executive Orders 11988 (floodplains) and 11990 (wetlands) (pages 7-8, Aquatic BE). A floodplain is located within and adjacent to the meadow burn unit. No adverse impacts associated with proposed treatments have been identified.

The project with the proposed mitigation and design elements would maintain the values identified in the River Plan and is consistent with that plan (page 7, Aquatic BE). It would do so by:

- 1) maintaining rare but key communities (upland meadow, aspen, and willow) by improving community health and vigor by reducing encroaching conifers and non-native vegetation;
- 2) restoring native vegetation by burning and removing encroaching conifers that in turn maintain or enhance the diversity of wildlife populations and particularly of birds (page 4 Wildlife BE, page 20 Wildlife Report); and
- 3) maintaining water quality by avoiding soil disturbance and locating treatments away from the river.

Municipal Watersheds – There are no municipal watersheds within or adjacent to the project area

3. *Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, and national recreation areas.*

All proposed treatment areas are located within the boundaries of the Upper Deschutes Wild and Scenic River corridor. Proposed actions, including design criteria and mitigation measures, are in compliance with the standards and guidelines of both the Deschutes National Forest LRMP and the *Upper Deschutes Wild and Scenic River and State Waterway Comprehensive Management Plan* (WSR Plan)(page 7, Aquatic BE;).

The project area is not located within or adjacent to any wilderness or national recreation areas.

4. *Inventoried roadless areas* - There are no inventoried roadless areas in or adjacent to the project area.
5. *Research Natural Areas* – There are no existing or proposed Research Natural Areas in or adjacent to the project area.
6. *American Indian and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, or historic properties of areas* - Surveys were conducted for Native American religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, and historic properties or areas that may be affected by this decision. A ‘*no properties affected*’ determination was made based on the implementation of design criteria and mitigation measures to avoid or prevent damage to known and unknown sites and post-treatment monitoring. Consultation has occurred under the Programmatic Agreement with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO).

OTHER FINDINGS REQUIRED BY LAW OR REGULATION

Water Quality - The Deschutes River is listed by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) as a water quality impaired or 303(d) listed river. Within the project area, the river parameters for which the Deschutes is listed include the following:

- ⇒ “Chlorophyll a” in summer;
- ⇒ temperature year-round (non-spawning);
- ⇒ dissolved oxygen year-round;
- ⇒ turbidity spring and summer; and
- ⇒ sedimentation (undefined season).

Current management direction is that management activities will not result in further degradation of these parameters. The project as proposed would not result in further degradation in any of the listed parameters and is in compliance with the Clean Water Act (pages 6-7, Aquatic BE).

Forest Plan Compliance

Proposed actions, including design criteria and mitigation measures, are in compliance with standards and guidelines in both the Deschutes National Forest LRMP and the WSR Plan (pages 6-8, Aquatic BE).

Soil Impacts – There are no identified detrimental soil impacts associated with this project. Mechanized equipment use would be restricted to existing roads and skid roads, limited to a maximum of two passes over any piece of ground in areas without existing roads and skid roads, or be restricted to operating over snow or frozen ground. Activities meet LRMP and regional standards and guidelines for soil productivity (Soils Report).

Invasive species – The proposed action, including design criteria and mitigation measures, complies with current forest and regional direction regarding the introduction, control, and spread of invasive species, including noxious weeds (Noxious Weed Report).

There are three identified invasive species located within or adjacent to the project area: reed canary grass (an invasive) and two noxious weeds (spotted knapweed and bull thistle). Reed canary grass is located

within the boundaries of the proposed burn unit. Neither of the noxious weeds are located in any of the three treatment areas.

Burning of the meadow unit would be coordinated with post-burning control of the reed canary grass. This would eliminate the potential for this species to expand into new areas.

Limiting vehicle parking to designated sites and pulling the bull thistle and knapweed prior to other operations would limit the risk of spreading those species into new sites or the project area. Washing vehicles and equipment prior entering the site and after leaving but before going to new sites/projects would also reduce the risk of introducing and spreading these species to new sites.

Visual Quality - Proposed treatments within the Deschutes Wild and Scenic River Corridor will meet the River Plan objective of retention. Proposed treatments are intended to maintain and enhance existing native vegetation.

Wildlife – The proposed action is in compliance with the Deschutes National Forest LRMP standards and guidelines for wildlife.

No existing snags would be cut or removed (WL-38). No coarse woody debris would be removed or lost (WL-72).

Seasonal restrictions and habitat protection measures have been identified to protect raptor nests and nesting habitat where and if active nest sites are identified (WL-17, WL-25, WL-31, and Eastside Screens).

The small size of the units proposed for the removal of encroaching conifers would result in no measurable change in existing levels of hiding or thermal cover. Some temporary reduction in hiding cover levels are expected but recovery would be rapid due to increasing growth of residual stems and existing seedling and sapling aspen and willows.

Eastside Screens – The proposed project is compatible with Eastside Screens. No commercial harvest is proposed. No late and old structure forest would be treated. The maximum diameter of trees to be cut is 10 inches dbh.

INFISH – Proposed actions have been determined to not retard or prevent the attainment of Riparian Management Objectives. Water temperature and large woody debris would not be affected. The small scale of the project would have no effect on pool frequency or width/depth ratios (pages 7-8, Aquatic BE). The project would not affect water temperature as described previously. Large woody debris is not affected as thinning would occur well away from the river. Pool frequency and width/depth ratios are influenced by the altered flow regime of the river and this small-scale project would have no effects on these objectives.

CONCLUSION

My conclusion is based on a review of the record that shows a thorough review of the relevant scientific information, a consideration of responsible opposing views, and the acknowledgement of incomplete or unavailable information, scientific uncertainty, and risk. Based on the conclusions regarding the effect to the resource conditions listed above, I have found that no extraordinary circumstances exist with the proposed project activities that may result in a significant direct, indirect, or cumulative effect on the quality of the human environment.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The proposed action was developed in coordination with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

An initial scoping letter with a proposed action for the Ryan Ranch Meadow/Aspen/Willow Enhancement Project CE was mailed to 92 individuals, groups and agencies and notification of this proposal e-mailed to an additional 13 individuals, groups, and agencies on September 6, 2007. Two responses were received, one supporting the project and one objecting.

The legal notice announcing the 30-day comment period for this project was published in *The Bulletin* of Bend, Oregon on Friday October 26, 2007. The comment period ended on Monday, November 26, 2007. One individual commented by telephone and did not object to the project.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

This decision is consistent with the Deschutes National Forest LRMP and accompanying Final Environmental Impact Statement as amended by the *Revised Continuation of Interim Management Direction Establishing Riparian, Ecosystem, and Wildlife Standards for Timber Sales* (Eastside Screens). This decision is also consistent with the WSR Plan. The LRMP has also been amended by the Inland Native Fish Strategy (INFISH), which provides standards and guidelines for protection of watersheds and riparian habitat conservation areas (RHCAs). RHCAs within and adjacent to treatment units have been identified with appropriate measures to protect riparian resources. Proposed actions have been determined to have either no adverse or to have positive effects on riparian management objectives and resources. The project was designed in conformance with both LRMP and WSR Plan standards and guidelines. It incorporates appropriate forest-wide standards and guidelines relevant to Key Elk Management Areas from the LRMP. It also incorporates appropriate standards and guidelines from the River Plan relevant to segment 4C.

IMPLEMENTATION, ADMINISTRATIVE APPEAL AND REVIEW

The 30 day notice and comment period ended on November 26, 2007. This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215. Any written notice of appeal of the decision must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 215.11(a) that states “an appeal may be filed by any person who, or any non-federal organization or entity that has provided comment or otherwise expressed interest in a particular proposed action by the close of the comment period specified in sec. 215.6”. The notice of appeal must be filed hard copy with the Regional Forester, ATTN: 1570 APPEALS, 333 S.W. First Avenue, P.O. Box 3623, Portland, Oregon, 97208-3623, faxed to (503) 808-2255, sent electronically to appeals-pacificnorthwest-regional-office@fs.fed.us, or hand delivered to the above address between 7:45AM and 4:30PM, Monday through Friday except legal holidays. The appeal must be postmarked or delivered within 45 days of the date the legal notice for this decision appears in **The Bulletin**. The publication date of the legal notice in **The Bulletin** is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal and those wishing to appeal should not rely on dates or timeframes provided by any other source. Electronic appeals must be submitted as part of the actual e-mail message, or as an attachment in Microsoft Word, rich text format or portable document format only. E-mails submitted to e-mail addresses other than the one listed above or in other formats than those listed or containing viruses will be rejected. It is the responsibility of all individuals and organizations to ensure their appeals are received in a timely manner. For electronically mailed appeals, the sender should normally receive an automated electronic acknowledgement from the agency as confirmation of receipt. If the sender does not receive an automated acknowledgement of the receipt of the appeal, it is the sender’s responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other means.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

If no appeals are received during the appeal period, the project may be implemented no sooner than five days after the end of the appeal period. If appealed, the project may not be implemented until 15 days after the decision on the appeal.

CONTACT PERSONS

For additional information concerning this decision, contact either James Lowrie (Project Leader) by telephone at 541-383-4713 or by e-mail at jlowrie@fs.fed.us or John R. Davis, writer/editor by phone at 541-383-4714 or by e-mail at jrdavis@fs.fed.us.

/s/ Rolando Mendez

March 25, 2008

ROLANDO MENDEZ

DATE

Deputy District Ranger

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