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**Forest
Service**

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Decision Notice

Siuslaw Thinning and Underplanting for Diversity Study—Phase II

**Hebo and Central Coast Ranger Districts
Siuslaw National Forest
Lane, Tillamook, and Lincoln Counties, Oregon**

Lead Agency: USDA Forest Service

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Project Background, Area, and Needs

The Siuslaw Thinning and Underplanting Diversity Study (Phase II) (the Study) includes actions designed to learn more about increasing structural diversity (managing overstory trees; understory trees, shrubs, and forbs; and dead wood) in young, dense, even-age Douglas-fir stands of high site index in the Oregon Coast Range; and characterizing the effects of structural manipulation on stand development, biodiversity, and productivity. Knowledge gained from the Study is expected to help in the ongoing efforts to accelerate the development of late-successional forest habitat and enhance water quality and stream function on National Forest System (NFS) lands.

The Cataract study site is located in Lane County—Township 17 South, Range 10 West, section 18; the Wildcat site is in Tillamook County—Township 3 South, Range 9 West, sections 9 and 10; and the Yachats site is in Lincoln County—Township 15 South, Range 11 West, section 1. Lands affected by the study are allocated by the Northwest Forest Plan as late-successional reserve, riparian reserve, and matrix (Wildcat site only).

The need to continue learning about how to achieve late-successional forest habitat by implementing the Study was identified in chapter 1 of the Study environmental assessment (EA). The information from the Study would add to what was learned under Phase 1.

The decision to be made is whether to implement actions designed to continue the Study by selecting Alternative 2, or to postpone these actions by selecting the no-action alternative (Alternative 1).

My Decision

I have decided to implement all the actions described under Alternative 2 of the Study EA. In making this decision, I have reviewed the Study EA, its appendices, and other project-file documents, including the REO letter, dated November 6, 2006. No comments were received during the combined scoping and the 30-day public comment period.

The following actions under Alternative 2 will be implemented to learn more about developing late-successional habitat in late-successional and riparian reserves, including overstory and understory responses to additional treatment and managing for dead wood.

Plantation treatments and associated actions

- Implement the design for the Study Plan (EA, appendix B);
- Commercially thin about 51 total acres in three plantations on the Forest—the trees per acre on 20.4 acres would be reduced from 60 to about 17; the trees per acre on 30.7 acres would be reduced from 100 to about 40 (EA, maps 2, 3, and 4, and appendices A and B);
- Implement routine road maintenance, including roadside brushing and surface grading, to prepare the roads for log hauling. No new road building will be done (EA, appendix B);

- Create 4 snags per acre at each site in the Phase II treatment areas. Snags will be created by topping or girdling. (EA, appendices A and B);
- Create down wood from the overstory cohort at each site in the Phase II treatment areas, with quantities approximating 2 percent cover; and
- Barricade the entrance of the 500-foot spur that enters the 30 trees-per-acre area of the Cataract site.

Commercial thinning activities will be completed in 2 years, with ongoing monitoring beginning as early as FY 2007.

Project design criteria, including mitigation and monitoring requirements (EA, appendices A and B), will be incorporated to ensure protection of natural resources.

Reasons for the Decision

Alternative 2 was selected because it best meets the need to learn more about managing for late-successional habitat as described in chapter 1 of the Study EA.

Project actions under Alternative 2 are designed to protect affected resources in the short term and maintain or enhance the quality and productivity of these resources in the long term.

The need for continuing the Study

Phase I of the Diversity Study was undertaken in 1992 to form the scientific basis needed to demonstrate that stands can be partially harvested and managed to create important elements of habitat for old-growth or late-successional dependent wildlife species. To date, the Study has monitored the effects of a single thinning entry and understory planting over a fourteen-year period. Phase I of the Study was accomplished through the Cataract Thin (USDA 1990), the Wildcat Thin (USDA 1993), and the Yachats Thinning—Unit 3 (USDA 1993) Projects (table 1). The initial treatment application has resulted in stands having various levels of structure and understory composition.

Within the context of the long-term objectives, the purpose of the Study is to further evaluate the outcomes of the Phase I treatments that was undertaken in 1992, to prescribe and implement follow-up density management treatments in the areas with 60 and 100 trees per acre, and to evaluate methods for creating dead wood (snags and down wood). Density management treatments include reducing the areas with 60 trees per acre to about 17 trees per acre (relative density of 8), and reducing the areas with 100 trees per acre to about 40 trees per acre (relative density of 16) (EA, table 2). Thinning and yarding impacts to understory components and decay rates of dead wood will also be measured.

I believe these actions, as described in Alternative 2, would serve to provide additional information on how to develop or maintain structural complexity and are necessary to learn more about developing healthy late-successional forest habitat.

Documentation review

In my review of the Study EA, its appendices, and other project-file documents, I believe the information provided to me is adequate for a reasoned choice of action. I am fully aware that the selected alternative will have some unavoidable adverse environmental effects such as disturbance to wildlife (EA, page 39), irreversible resource commitments such as continued use of existing roads (EA, page 39), and irretrievable commitment of resources such as loss of harvesting wood fiber for forest-product use due to dead wood creation (EA, page 39). I have determined, however, that these risks will be outweighed by the likely benefits.

In making this selection, I have also reviewed information in the administrative record, including but not limited to the Siuslaw Forest Plan (1990), as amended by the Northwest Forest Plan (1994); the North Fork of the Siuslaw River Watershed Analysis (USDA 1994b), the Nestucca Watershed Analysis (1994a), and the Yachats-Blodgett Watershed Analysis (1997); the Late-Successional Reserve Assessment, Oregon Coast Province Southern Portion (1997); the Late-Successional Reserve Assessment for Oregon's Northern Coast Range Adaptive Management Area (1998); consultation files and records involving the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA-Fisheries); public and other agency comments; and applicable laws and regulations.

Alternatives Considered

Before selecting Alternative 2, I considered Alternative 1 (no action), and other alternatives that were eliminated from detailed study in the Study EA.

Alternative 1, no action—Alternative 1 is fully described in chapter 2 of the Study EA, page 8. The analysis of the effects of Alternative 1 is disclosed in chapter 3 of the Study EA. The no-action alternative forms the basis for a comparison between meeting the Study needs and not meeting the Study needs. This alternative provides baseline information for understanding changes associated with Alternative 2 and expected environmental responses as a result of past management actions.

Reasons for Not Selecting the Other Alternatives

Alternative 1 (no-action) does not create obvious negative effects, but it also does not continue the learning process associated with the Study (EA, pages 2 to 5). Discontinuing the Study forgoes any new information that would help managers make better decisions about treating plantations on the Siuslaw National Forest. Thus, this alternative was not selected.

Alternatives considered but eliminated from detailed study

I considered the following alternative, but for reasons described, this alternative was eliminated from detailed study.

No incorporation of snags and down wood into the Study

To maintain consistency with Phase I of the Study, it was initially determined that Phase II would include the same parameters as Phase I. Since deadwood (snags and down wood) could be added to the Study, without compromising the ongoing Study objectives, researchers agreed to include it as an additional component to be monitored under Phase II. Dead wood is a valuable habitat component for wildlife and its creation is common to all plantation treatments on the Siuslaw National Forest. The study will provide an opportunity to learn more about its function in plantations over time and may influence future deadwood prescriptions.

Help from the Public and Other Agencies

After considering the identified problems to be addressed with this study and developing a proposal to correct the problems, letters describing the actions considered in the proposed Siuslaw Thinning and Underplanting Diversity Study (Phase II) were mailed to about 200 individuals, agencies, and organizations identified as potentially interested in the proposed study and analysis. A legal notice was published in the Gazette-Times on May 5, 2006. Comments were requested by June 5, 2006. The legal notice and letters indicated the beginning and end of the 30-day comment period, described the comment process, and identified a Forest Service contact person. Copies of the preliminary analysis were also made available at the Siuslaw National Forest Headquarters in Corvallis, and the District offices in Waldport and Florence. No persons responded to this request.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) concurs with the District wildlife biologist's determinations of effects for the Study (FWS reference number 13420-2007-I-0077).

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

After considering the environmental effects described in the Siuslaw Thinning and Underplanting Diversity Study Environmental Assessment, I have determined that the activities will not constitute a major Federal action and will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27):

Context

This action is small, compared to most commercial-thinning projects implemented on the Siuslaw. The activities have been viewed and approved in a Regional context through the Siuslaw National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (USDA 1990), as amended by the Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement on Management of Habitat for Late-Successional and Old-Growth Forest Related Species within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl (USDA, USDI 1994). This action only affects a small portion of the Forest, which in turn, is a very small portion of the Region.

The site-specific activities that are authorized and guided by this decision are limited in scope and duration. Some minor adverse effects are expected. However, given the renewable nature of the

resources and the high growth rates of coastal vegetation, these effects are expected to be short-term. No long-term adverse effects are expected.

Intensity

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.

Discussion: Actions associated with the Study will have both beneficial and adverse effects. Preparing roads for log hauling or commercial thinning may be considered adverse effects. However, I have considered the benefits that the ecosystem will receive from implementing the Study actions and find that the overall beneficial effects to the ecosystem outweigh any short-term adverse effects. Further, I find that when considered alone, the adverse effects associated with the Study are not significant (EA, chapter 3).

2. The degree to which the proposed actions affect public health or safety.

Discussion: No significant adverse effects to public health or safety have been identified (EA, page 40).

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area, such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers or ecologically critical areas.

Discussion: The characteristics of the geographic area do not make it uniquely sensitive to the effects of project actions. Past actions of similar or greater intensity in similar areas have not indicated any significant adverse effects (EA, chapter 3).

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

Discussion: The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial, because there is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the project (EA, pages 1 through 6).

5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

Discussion: The Study's environmental effects are not uncertain or unknown. Planned actions are similar to those already accomplished on similar lands on the Forest and several scientific studies have been conducted that support the Study's treatment strategies for plantations (EA, pages 2 through 5; EA, chapter 3).

6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

Discussion: Actions that will be implemented by the Study do not set a precedent for future actions, because similar actions have been implemented in the past (EA, page 7; EA, chapter 3, including page 41).

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulatively significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by breaking it down into small component parts.

Discussion: The Siuslaw Thinning and Underplanting Diversity Study (Phase II) Environmental Assessment has disclosed direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to soil, water, aquatic and terrestrial species, and other components of the human environment. There are no significant direct, indirect, or cumulative effects anticipated from implementing study actions. Study actions will speed the development of late-successional habitat in late-successional and riparian reserves and improve watershed function. The analysis of cumulative effects considered past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions on National Forest lands as well as for other ownerships in the affected watershed (EA, chapter 3).

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources.

Discussion: Based on the pre-project survey and record search of the Study area, actions associated with the Study will have “no effect” (as defined in 36 CFR 800.5 [b]) on any listed or eligible heritage (cultural) resources. If a heritage site is discovered during project implementation, work will be stopped until the site is evaluated or the Study has been altered to avoid the site (EA, pages 32 and 33; EA, appendix A, page 3).

9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

Discussion: Based on the wildlife biological assessment, specialists’ reports, and biological evaluations prepared for the Study, the effects on endangered or threatened species or their critical habitats, and other terrestrial, aquatic, and plant species and habitats are not found to be significant (EA, chapter 3; EA, appendix A).

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

Discussion: Actions implemented by the Study will not violate Federal, State, and local laws, or requirements designed for the protection of the environment. The Study will meet or exceed State water and air quality standards and is consistent with the Oregon Coastal Management Program, as required by the Coastal Zone Management Act (EA, pages 40 and 41; EA, appendix A, page 3). The Study is consistent with the Siuslaw Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended by the Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement on Management of Habitat for Late-Successional and Old-Growth Forest Related Species within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl (USDA, USDI 1994).

Other Disclosures

All measures contained in the Study EA and appendix A will be incorporated to comply with the Record of Decision (October 2005) for the Pacific Northwest Region Invasive Plant Program, Preventing and Managing Invasive Plants Final Environmental Impact Statement. Actions will be designed to prevent the spread of invasive plants, including noxious and undesirable weeds (EA, page 25; EA, appendix A). Cleaning of off-road equipment pursuant to Executive Order 13112, dated February 3, 1999, will be required. (EA, appendix A, pages 7 and 8).

The Study will have no significant adverse effects on wetlands, floodplains, farm land, range land, park land, wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, or inventoried roadless areas; minority groups, civil rights, women, or consumers; Indian social, economic, subsistence rights, and sacred sites; and heritage resources (EA, pages 32, 33 and 40). Actions will be consistent with the scenic quality objectives for the planning area (EA, pages 33 and 34).

Findings Required By Other Laws

Based on the analysis in the Siuslaw Thinning and Underplanting Diversity Study (Phase II) Environmental Assessment, I find the selected alternative to be consistent with the Siuslaw National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (USDA 1990), as amended by the Northwest Forest Plan (USDA, USDI 1994) (EA, pages 2 to 5). The Study is designed to meet or exceed the objectives of the Aquatic Conservation Strategy as set forth in the Northwest Forest Plan (EA, page 38). The selected alternative is consistent with the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) 1976.

Implementation Date

Implementation of this project may take place immediately after the publication date of the notice of decision in the newspaper of record (36 CFR 215.9 (c) (1)).

Administrative Review and Appeal

No interest was expressed in the Study's proposed action prior to the end of the combined scoping/30-day public comment period, and the Responsible Official's decision does not modify the proposed action. Thus, the decision to implement the Study is not subject to appeal (36 CFR 215.12 (e)).

Contact Person

For further information regarding this project, contact Stu Johnston at (541) 902-6958, Florence Office, 4480 Hwy. 101, Bldg. G, Florence, OR 97439; or Bruce Buckley at (541) 563-8412, Waldport Office, 1049 SW Pacific Coast Hwy, Waldport, OR 97394; Central Coast Ranger District.

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May 18, 2007

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