

## 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 five (5) acres of existing aspen stand. All activities would be accomplished using hand tools; no heavy equipment would be used. Three areas using two types of treatment would take 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.

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). All slash 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.

**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 cut in an approximately 5 acre aspen stand also located at the west end of the meadow. All slash would be lopped and scattered. Slash would not be placed against any aspen.

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.
- Restore firelines by pulling soil and unburned vegetative materials across each line upon completion of burning.
- Within the meadow prescribe burn unit, all known cultural, historic, and archeological 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. 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 cultural, historic, and archeological sites. Slash, if piled, will not be piled on any known sites.
- Treatment units will be monitored by district archeological staff during and following completion of treatment activities.

- 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 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.
- 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 cultural, historic or archeological 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 1<sup>st</sup> to August 31<sup>st</sup> 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.

### **Location**

The project area is located approximately 5 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).

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* (1990) (LRMP).

### **Purpose and Need for Action**

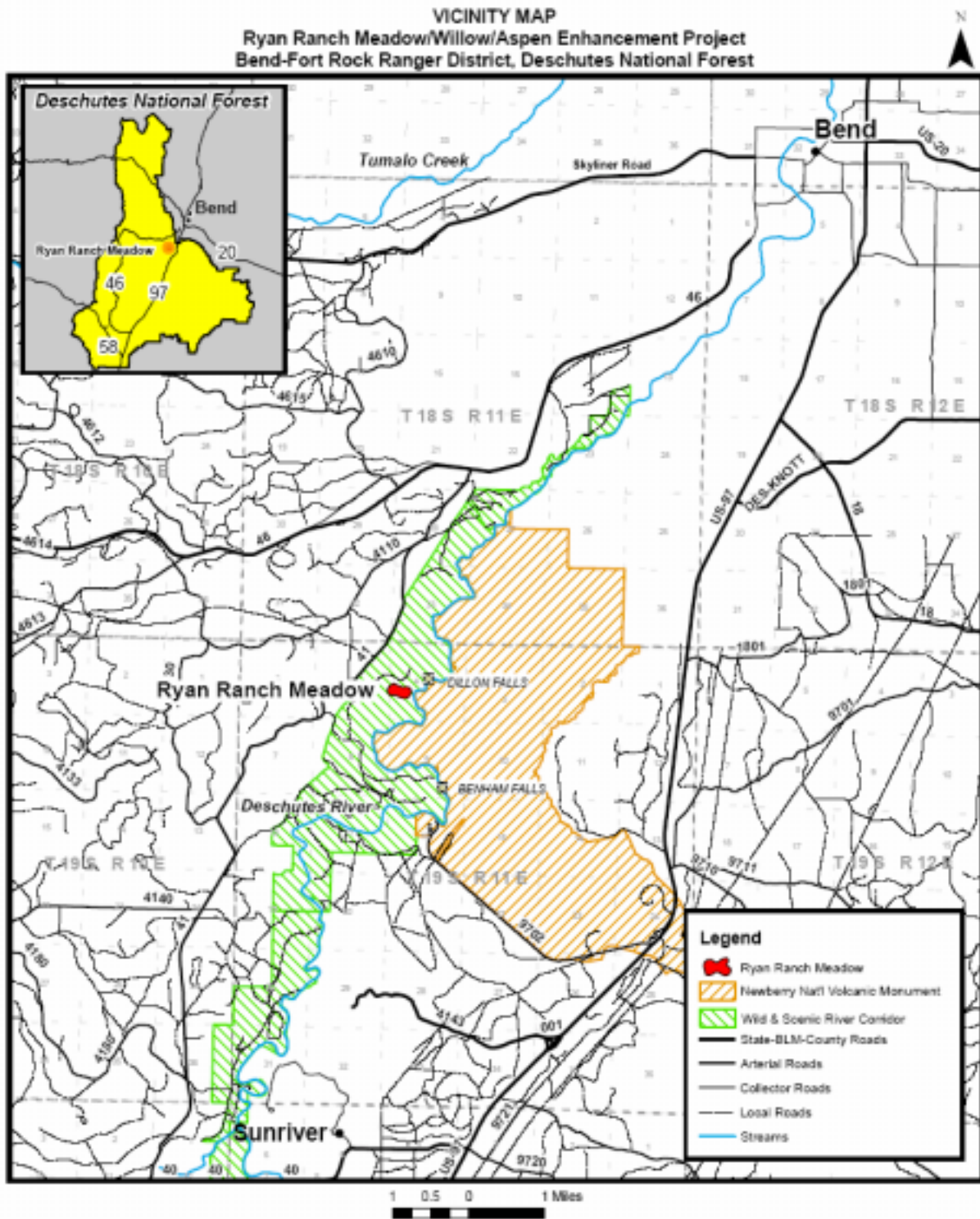
The purpose of this project is to enhance the quality and availability of habitat for species that utilize meadow, aspen, and willow habitats. The project area includes an historic wet meadow that was ditched and drained to improve grazing by cattle. The property was acquired by the Forest Service from 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 conifer trees 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.

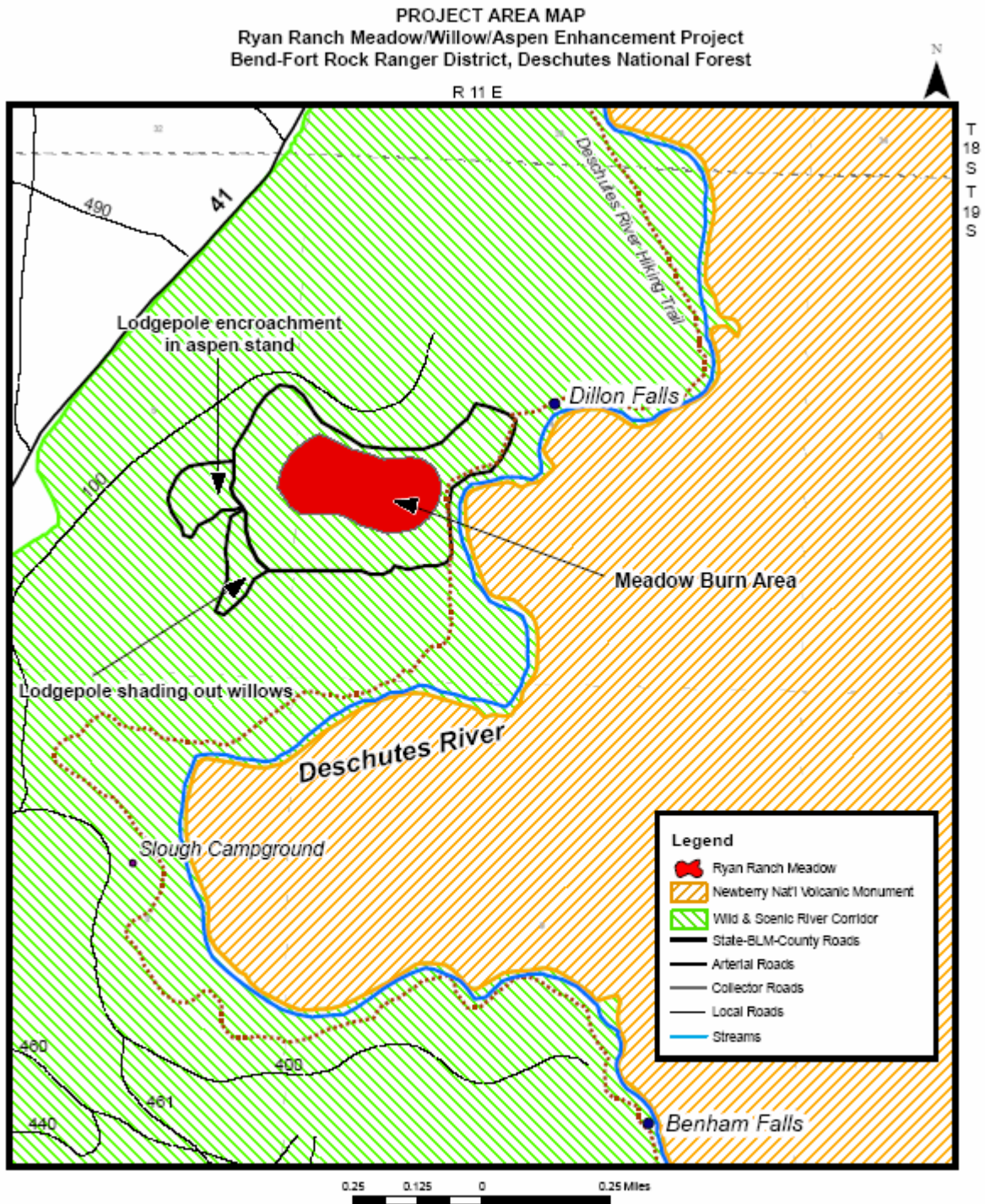
Willows also provide important habitat for a variety of wildlife species including elk, neotropical migrant birds, and beaver. Willow provides browse and calving cover for elk. Neotropical migrant birds also utilize willow and willow habitats. Encroaching conifers reduce available forage and browse common 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

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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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 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.

The redband trout is the only aquatic species listed on the Region 6 Regional Forester's Sensitive Species List with 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. 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.

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. 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 1<sup>st</sup> to August 31<sup>st</sup> seasonal restriction is applied.

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

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

A floodplain is located within and adjacent to the meadow burn unit. No adverse impacts associated with proposed treatments have been identified.

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*.

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

4. *Inventoried roadless areas* - There are no inventoried roadless areas in the project area (LRMP).
5. *Research Natural Areas* – There are no existing or proposed Research Natural Areas in 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.

#### **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 *Upper Deschutes Wild and Scenic River and State Waterway Comprehensive Management Plan*.

**Soil Impacts** – There are no identified detrimental soil impacts associated with this project. No ground disturbing equipment would be used. Activities meet LRMP and regional standards and guidelines for soil productivity.

**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. The reed canary grass is located within the boundaries of the proposed burn unit. Neither of the noxious weeds is 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 pull 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.

There are wetlands adjacent to the project area. According to INFISH, management activities within RHCA's are intended to achieve Riparian Management Objectives (RMOs) that are described by habitat features that indicated "good" watershed health and inland native fish habitat. Habitat features appropriate to this project area include pool frequency, water temperature, large woody debris, and width/depth ratio. Fire and fuels treatments are allowed if they are designed to either not prevent or contribute to the attainment of RMOs (standard and guidelines FM-1 and FM-4). Treatment units are not located in any areas that would affect any habitat features; therefore proposed actions would not prevent attainment of RMOs.

RHCA's have been identified adjacent to the Deschutes River (Category 1 site) and Category 3 and 4 sites are located within and adjacent to proposed treatment units. Prescribed treatments within RHCA areas associated with the Deschutes River has been determined to have either a neutral or beneficial effect and, with mitigation measures, design criteria, and standards and guidelines, do not retard or prevent the



attainment of riparian management objectives. Only burning is proposed in the RHCA adjacent to the river to restore and enhance native vegetation. No trees would be cut or burned. There would be no reduction in shade or recruitment of large woody debris. No increases in stream temperatures would occur. Treatments are limited on a watershed scale, and not likely to result in measurable benefits to these RMOs.

Cutting of encroaching conifers and the use of prescribe fire within RHCAs associated with Category 3 and 4 areas within treatment unit boundaries have been determined to not retard or prevent the attainment of riparian management objectives. Riparian areas as evidenced by riparian vegetation would not be burned. Cutting of encroaching conifers in riparian areas would be permitted; slash materials would remain on site but would be lopped and scattered to reduce fuel loadings.

**River Plan** - The River Plan designates the following river values as being Outstandingly Remarkable for the project area:

- Geological;
- Fishery;
- Vegetation;
- Cultural;
- Wildlife;
- Scenery; and
- Recreation.

Additionally it identifies the hydrologic values as being significant.

The project with the proposed mitigation and design elements would maintain the values identified in the River Plan. 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; and
- 3) maintaining water quality by avoiding soil disturbance and locating treatments away from the river.

## **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.

## **5PUBLIC 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.

## **FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS**

This decision is consistent with the Deschutes National Forest *Land and Resource Management Plan* (LRMP) (1990) and its accompanying Final Environmental Impact Statement as amended 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 *Upper Deschutes Wild and Scenic River and State Scenic Waterway Comprehensive Management Plan* (River Plan) (1995). 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 River 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 including those relevant to segment 4C.

#### **IMPLEMENTATION DATE**

This project may be implemented following notice, comment and appeal periods.

#### **PUBLIC COMMENT AND ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW**

This decision is subject to public notice, comment, and appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.5. Written, Facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments concerning this action will be accepted for 30 calendar days following publication of a notice in *The Bulletin* newspaper of Bend, Oregon. The publication date of the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period for this proposal. Those wishing to comment should not rely on dates or timeframe information provided by another source.

Written comments should be provided to: Phil Cruz, District Ranger, Bend-Fort Rock Ranger District, 1230 NE 3<sup>rd</sup> St. Suite A1-262, Bend, OR 97701. Office business hours for submitting hand-delivered comments are: 7:45 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday excluding holidays. Oral comments, either over the telephone at (541)383-4000 or in person must be provided at the Bend-Fort Rock Ranger District office during normal business hours. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an e-mail message, plan text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc) to [comments-pacificnorthwest-deschutes-bendftrock@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-pacificnorthwest-deschutes-bendftrock@fs.fed.us). In cases where no identifiable name is attached to a comment, a verification of identify will be required for appeal eligibility. If using an electronic message, a scanned signature is one way to provide verification. Electronic comments must be submitted as part of the actual e-mail message or as an attachment. E-mails submitted to e-mail addresses other than the one listed above, in other formats other than those listed, or containing viruses will be rejected.

It is the responsibility of persons providing comments to submit them by the close of the comment period. It is the responsibility of persons providing comments by electronic means to ensure that their comments have been received. Individuals and organizations wishing to be eligible to appeal must meet the information requirements of 36 CFR 215.6.

#### **IMPLEMENTATION**

Following the 30-day comment period and consideration of the comments received, a final Decision Memo will be issued. The final Decision Memo will then be subject to a 45-day appeal period. Instructions for filing an appeal will be provided in the final Decision Memo. If no appeal is filed, implementation may begin on, but not before, five business days from the close of the appeal filing period.

#### **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](mailto: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](mailto:jrdavis@fs.fed.us). Questions can also be mailed to either individual at the Bend-Fort Rock Ranger District, 1230 NE Third Street, Suite A-262, Bend, OR 97701.

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PHIL CRUZ

District Ranger

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DATE

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