Decision Notice, Forest Plan Amendment, and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

Charlie Brown Environmental Assessment

USDA Forest Service
Deschutes National Forest
Bend-Ft. Rock Ranger District
Deschutes County, OR

Location

The <u>Charlie Brown Vegetation Management project</u> is located on the Bend-Ft. Rock Ranger District, Deschutes National Forest. The project area surrounds over one-half of Crane Prairie and all of Wickiup Reservoirs and is within Deschutes County, in sections located in both Townships 21 and 22, Range 08 and 09 east. The eastern boundary of the project area is approximately 30 miles southeast of Bend, Oregon (see Figure 1 for location map).

The project area includes approximately 65,780 acres of National Forest system lands, including about 15,000 acres of water in the form of reservoirs and lakes.

Decision

I have decided to authorize the implementation of Alternative 3. This decision is made upon reviewing public comment and extensive analyses contained in the Environmental Assessment, Browns-Wickiup Watershed Analysis, Browns-Round Mountain Late-Successional Reserve Assessment, and management plans for old growth and bald eagle habitat in the area. Actions under Alternative 3 covered by this decision would reduce the wildfire risk to the public, the adjacent late-successional habitat, and would provide a measure of safety for firefighters who would be involved in future suppression. Also, by being proactive with measures to protect water quality, I can ensure campers will be able to continue to enjoy a similar recreation experience surrounding the reservoirs, while maintaining dispersed camping with few restrictions.

Issue #1 was developed to take a cautious approach to vegetation management in order to retain habitat for the Canadian lynx (Issue #1), among other dependent species. This led to the development of Alternative 3. Using the former Lynx Analysis Unit (LAU) boundaries, Alternative 3 modifies and (in some cases) eliminates unit boundaries in Alternative 2 in order to provide additional foraging habitat.

Also, Alternative 3 implements vegetation management treatments strategically located on or near Round and Lookout Mountains in order to improve wildfire detection in the surrounding basin, and to protect visitors, detection personnel, and facilities (Issue #2). These treatments include an increase in the role of prescribed fire, thinning, mechanical shrub reduction and topping or felling of approximately 30 trees surrounding the lookout.

The following is a summary of treatment actions to be implemented in Alternative 3. Please note - many treatments and acres intended for a primary action may have multiple benefits and the listing below includes overlapping vegetation treatments. Also, within the boundary of each treatment unit, are areas to be retained in an untreated condition ranging from a minimum of 15-20% (see footnote 1). These areas of "refugia" were designed to provide microclimates for many organisms. During the layout phase of project implementation, opportunities would be afforded to locate untreated areas to provide travel connectivity, snags, green tree replacements, buffers for riparian areas and overall biodiversity for aquatic and terrestrial species.

Actions in Alternative 3:

- Grow and maintain big trees through reduction of understory competition on 827 acres;
- Reduce high stand densities to reduce the risk of bark beetle attack and accelerate the development late and old characteristics (particularly in ponderosa pine stands) on 335 acres;

- Arrest the spread of dwarf mistletoe using pruning, topping, girdling, and planting of non-susceptible conifer trees on 192 acres. Of these acres as a last resort, 13 would remove severely infected ponderosa pine overstory.
- Reduce risk of wildfire using mechanical treatment of shrubs, prescribed fire, thinning on 2,880 acres;
- Salvage harvest dead and dying lodgepole pine outside of Late-Successional Reserves on 180 acres where mortality from insects and disease has already occurred;
- Thin young trees on 3,806 acres of newly-reforested areas (both natural and planted) while they are young and vigorous;
- Remove overstory seed and shelter trees in established lodgepole pine plantations to release understory trees, as well as protect the developing understory from dwarf mistletoe infection on 1,911 acres;
- Restore Browns meadow by cutting encroaching lodgepole pine seedlings/saplings; and
- In addition to vegetative actions designed to maintain functional habitat for a variety of wildlife species, the boundary of a Bald Eagle Management Area on the west side of North Twin Lake will be relocated to a more suitable area on the southeast side of the lake, an area more advantageous for eagle survival. The management area would be changed to better fit the onthe-ground conditions. A non-significant Forest Plan amendment will be implemented.

In order to improve or maintain the recreation experience, water quality, and restore riparian vegetation, the following actions will be implemented:

- Reconstruct boat ramps at Crane Prairie and Wickiup Reservoir to improve safety and alleviate parking in inappropriate areas;
- Maintain access (including seasonal) on 240 miles of roads within the project area;
- Reconstruct or improve ten miles of roads which have seasonal-related problems, such as standing water that causes users to create roads around the hazards;
- Close and decommission 151 miles of excess, and/or ecologically damaging roads throughout the analysis area;
- Close and rehabilitate 15 dispersed camping sites and eliminate motor vehicle access to 8 dispersed camping sites;
- Prohibit pit toilets for human waste disposal within 150' of the high water mark of both Crane Prairie and Wickiup Reservoirs;
- Close road 4290-200 and convert to a trail leading to Johnny Lake;
- A gate would be installed on the north side of the junction of roads 4260-070 and 4260-072 to replace an existing barricade to allow seasonal access to the Deschutes arm of Wickiup Reservoir during waterfowl hunting season. This would allow hunters a place to launch boats when the boat ramp at Sheep Bridge is frozen and not available; and
- Install a parking area for 3-4 vehicles at road 4600-650 and Cascade Lakes Highway to provide safety at a popular access point for angling on Crane Prairie Reservoir.

Rationale for Decision

The Browns-Wickiup Watershed Assessment identified a trend that wildfires are occurring more frequently and more destructively. Since the mid 1980's, wildfires experienced within and adjacent to the project area have claimed late-successional habitat at a rate and frequency that concerns me. Wildfires also are burning hotter and at a magnitude not normally experienced under historic conditions. The Charlie Brown project area does not have the typical characteristics of a Late-Successional Reserve under the Northwest Forest Plan. Most Late-Successional Reserves occur on the west side of the Cascades where conditions are generally wetter, and fire plays a less important role in maintaining the health of the ecosystem. East of the Cascades, fire plays a greater role and late-successional conditions in the project area have developed over long periods when fire was a frequent disturbance. It is now necessary for us to move conditions toward those where we can again allow low intensity fires to burn through the Late-Successional Reserve. However, this means we need to reduce fuel loads now.

Public use and enjoyment of the area is high and is growing. Because of the need to maintain short term habitat for species that depend upon late and old forest conditions, widescale fuels treatments were not planned. Instead, more intensive treatments in strategic areas were designed to protect the public and firefighters. Alternative 3 would implement a defensible space along road 4270 that would provide a safe space for campers, firefighters, and the traveling public to evacuate the area, if and when a wildfire occurs.

Although currently, there are no spotted owls found within the Browns (7,240 acres) and Round Mountain (220 acres) Late-Successional Reserves, it is important to maintain suitable habitat for species that depend upon late and old conditions, especially in the long term. I do not feel we can afford to let the forest in this area continue down its current path. Without effective vegetation management, the potential for extensive loss from wildfire, insects or disease will remain very high, and pose a serious risk to remaining late-successional habitat. It is expected trees will continue to die, including the large ponderosa pines, from bark beetles and root disease (which occur more commonly in stressed forest stands).

Alternative 3 treatments begin the process of moving the area back towards historic conditions. Treatments are strategically placed in order to protect and restore areas at greatest risk, while deferring treatments on the majority of the area. Using a focused approach to treatment of vegetation in the area, Alternative 3 retains approximately 43,000 acres out of 50,000 in an untreated condition. Within each unit, 15-20 percent of vegetation would be retained in an untreated condition. I believe what we will leave on the land in the Charlie Brown project area are forest stands that are more resilient to disturbances, and which can better provide important habitat for late-successional species.

Water Quality and Public Access

I have listened to the public's desire to maintain dispersed camping along the reservoirs with very few restrictions. Families of several generations love the camping and fishing experience, and while they acknowledge the area has become more and more crowded, most want very few changes. Most campers set an example and pick up the litter and practice good stewardship, while a few take inappropriate actions that negatively affect every visitor.

Alternative 3 will close and rehabilitate a total of 15 out of 242 known dispersed campsites at Crane Prairie and Wickiup Reservoirs. Eight other campsites will be converted to hike- or boat-in access only. These sites are poorly located, usually below the high waterline, and in places that directly impact riparian areas and indirectly contribute a threat to water quality. I have repeatedly visited one area off of spur 4270-200 near Crane Prairie Reservoir where campers traverse a very steep bank to access the shoreline, illegally cutting down trees to accommodate larger and larger campsites. In areas such as these, I have chosen to remove only the most damaging aspect of the site by banning vehicle travel only near the end of the spur, while retaining all the other upland and shoreline sites in the area. Well over 200 known dispersed sites in the project area would remain.

The project area has too many miles of roads. I recognize many people like to drive these roads for pleasure and to access special places to camp. However, there are approximately 390 miles of roads in the project area and the density exceeds the Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines.

Alternative 3 would close 151 miles of roads that are unneeded for public and administrative access and (in general) parallel other roads to similar destinations. Motor vehicle access to the shoreline of the reservoirs would be maintained in almost every circumstance, except in a few cases (approximately 8 sites) where it is more appropriate to use a boat or to hike in. Approximately 240 miles of open roads in the area would be maintained, and in some cases improved to reduce the frustration of trying to get to your favorite campsites while traversing wet obstacles created early in the season.

OHV use near Wickiup Butte is generally consistent with the Forest Plan. However, trails that originate from the borrow site are expanding through the adjacent Bald Eagle Management Area, and into Eaton and Wickiup Buttes. This has led to disturbance to nesting bald eagles during critical times and has caused erosion in rutted portions of trails on adjacent steep terrain. By closing OHV trails radiating out of the Wickiup Butte quarry and implementing restoration efforts to return natural hydrologic processes, we can remedy a situation that has potential for channeling soil into the reservoir. Also, by closing a few user-created trails, there is a likely benefit to eagles by limiting disturbance to historic nests.

The Deschutes River (designated as Wild and Scenic) is influenced by the activities surrounding the reservoirs. As more and more visitors enjoy recreation activities in the headwaters, the potential adverse affect to downstream water quality increases. I need to take action now by closing unneeded roads and trails, promote dispersed camping in appropriate areas, and encourage better camping techniques. "Field Rangers" will periodically be used to inform and encourage good stewardship. With this proactive approach, the Deschutes National Forest can continue to be one of the diminishing number of forests that still provide areas that are inexpensive to camp near water with relatively few restrictions.

Alternatives Considered

Two options for managing the Charlie Brown project area were analyzed. These were not selected for the following reasons:

Alternative 1 - No Action

The objective of this Alternative is to allow natural processes and habitat cycles to continue largely without intervention. Management actions that would continue include traditional fire suppression and maintenance of system roads and trails. There

would be no steps taken that would actively change vegetation (other than standard maintenance of existing tree plantations or removal of hazard trees along roads and at recreation sites) or fuel levels.

Public access and recreation around the reservoirs would continue in its current course. No measures would be taken to protect water quality in the basin. Other than a continued ban on developing dispersed sites within 1/4 mile of developed campgrounds and a prohibition of camping below the high waterline, no other camping sites around the reservoirs would be closed. Although it is almost impossible to quantify the amount of sediment contribution to Browns Creek and the reservoirs, unneeded and inappropriately located roads, trails and dispersed camps would continue to be the primary sources of pollution.

The current high density of roads have also contributed to forest fragmentation by adding edge habitat and disturbance to solitude-dependent species such as lynx, wolverine, bears and American marten.

Alternative 1 was not selected because it did not reduce risk from wildfire to visitors and late-successional forests. Also, the potential degradation to local water quality and downstream uses remains too high.

Alternative 2

Alternative 2 was similar to Alternative 3, but it did not adequately provide habitat conditions for species and their prey that favor dense thickets of regeneration, such as the Canadian lynx. Also, it does not adequately address protection from an uncontrollable wildfire in two key areas, Round and Lookout Mountains. Alternative 3 would not improve wildfire detection at the fire lookout. Without adequate detection capability, I believe the dispersed campers and surrounding late successional habitats are at greater risk than necessary.

Public Involvement

A Forest Service letter requesting public involvement was provided to approximately 100 individuals, businesses, and organizations that have an interest in the process. Announcement of the proposed action was included in the central Oregon Schedule of Projects starting in the winter of 1998/1999. This notification reaches approximately 3,200 interested people. The Proposed Action for the Charlie Brown Project was posted on the Deschutes National Forest website starting December 1998. Areas affected by the proposed action (especially dispersed camping) within the area were posted with notices of proposed activities and Forest Service "Field Rangers" distributed informational flyers. A question and answer fact sheet as it relates to camping and road access was available on the Deschutes National Forest website starting in August 2001. The local newspaper, The Bulletin, has published various articles and public opinion relating to the Charlie Brown area and its environs (January 1999, September 1999, September 2000, August 2001). Approximately 30 people responded from this process.

In addition to the contacts listed above, there were numerous one-on-one contacts with individuals throughout the planning process.

The 30-day comment period for the Charlie Brown EA ended on December 27, 2001. The Preferred Alternative is Alternative 3. The Notice of Public Comment Period appeared in *The Bulletin* on November 27, 2001. The letter requesting comments and EA were posted on the Deschutes National Forest website and mailed to those who had expressed an interest on November 16th, 2001.

Details of the comments received and specific responses are attached to this decision notice and are part of the EA.

Finding of No Significant Impact

I have determined that implementation of Alternative 3 is not a major Federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment; therefore an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared. This determination is based on the site-specific environmental analysis documented in the Environmental Assessment and supporting documents (e.g. the biological evaluation, biological assessment and concurrence with the USFWS), which describe direct, indirect and cumulative impacts of this decision. This determination is also made with consideration of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions on National Forest land and other ownerships within potentially affected areas, which could have a cumulatively significant effect on the quality of the human environment.

I have found the context of the environmental impacts of this decision is limited to the local area and is not significant. I have also determined the severity of these impacts is not significant, considering the following factors of intensity:

- 1. Beneficial and adverse direct, indirect and cumulative environmental impacts discussed in the Environmental Assessment have been disclosed within the appropriate context and intensity. No significant effects on the human environment have been identified. There will be no significant direct, indirect or cumulative effects to soil, water, fisheries, wildlife resources, roadless areas, old growth stands or other components of the environment (EA, Environmental Consequences, starting on page 68).
- 2. There is only minor potential for adverse impacts to public safety. Proposed activities in Alternatives 2 and 3 would improve public health and safety by reducing the long-term risk of entrapment from wildfire, especially surrounding Crane Prairie Reservoir. Installation of a parking area at road 4600-650 and Cascade Lakes Highway and improvements at boat ramps would alleviate a hazardous condition by separating parking areas from the flow of traffic traveling at disproportionate speeds. In addition, reconstruction of 10 miles of seasonally wet roads would benefit public safety by eliminating hazardous and muddy depressions where vehicles can become disabled. All other proposed activities would not expose the public to an elevated risk of injury above hazards associated with routine forest practices such as tree felling and operation of mechanized equipment that are regulated by the Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Division. The hazards are short in duration and minor in context.
- 3. No unique characteristics of the geographic area, such as cultural resources (EA, page 95) or wetlands (EA, page 95), will be adversely affected. In the short term, Alternative 3 has potential for overland flow of sediments due to vegetation treatments inside and outside of the riparian buffers surrounding Twin Lakes, and Wickiup Reservoir. Increases in turbidity and fine sediments above what would occur naturally would likely be immeasurable in the streams and reservoirs (EA, page 76). In the long-term, treatments are designed to provide healthier stands within riparian buffers, which contribute to soil stability, shade, and future instream large woody material recruitment. In all riparian buffers, non-commercial thinning would slightly reduce shade in the short-term, but is not anticipated to result in measurable changes in water temperature.
- 4. The effects of implementation of this decision do not rise to the level of scientific controversy as defined by the Council of Environmental Quality. A list of documents, including specialist reports and their literary references are incorporated by reference on page 8 of the EA. Also, a list of literary references can be found in the Browns-Wickiup Watershed Analysis, and Browns-Round Mountain Late Successional reserve Assessment. During the comment period, commenters charged the Forest Service did not use the newest science and offered references. The Charlie Brown team has reviewed these literary references and determined the newest and most applicable science was used and fine-tuned for local ecological conditions.
- 5. The degree of possible effects on the human environment are not highly uncertain, nor are there unique or unknown risks involved (EA, Environmental Consequences starting on page 68). Conditions within the Charlie Brown area are similar to conditions found throughout the western forests (Interior Columbia Basin FEIS, 2000). The Deschutes National Forest has experience applying and monitoring similar actions to other areas on the forest.
- 6. The actions should not set a precedent for future actions that may have significant effects, nor do these actions represent a decision in principle about a future consideration (EA, Cumulative Effects throughout starting on page 68, Reasonably Foreseeable Actions Adjacent to the Project Area page 96).
- 7. These actions are not related to other actions that, when combined, will have significant impacts (EA, Cumulative Effects throughout starting on page 68).
- 8. The field surveys for sites, objects, etc., listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places have been completed. All known sites have been mitigated by avoidance and no activity will take place which will contribute to the loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources. Any sites found during operation of the timber sales and related activities will be protected. The Oregon State Historic Preservation Officer has concurred with our finding of no effect (EA, page 95).
- 9. As described in the Environmental Assessment (pages 71, 78, 80), Biological Evaluation, Biological Assessments, and letter of concurrence from the USFWS, activities will have no adverse impact to any threatened or endangered species of plant or animal. Alternative 3 determination for the Canadian lynx and northern spotted owl was May affect, Not likely to Adversely Affect. Surveys for Threatened, Endangered and Sensitive plants were completed and none of the plant species in this category were located during surveys (EA, page 71.
- 10. None of the actions implemented by this decision threatens a violation of the Federal, State, or local law, or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment (EA, page 96).

Forest Plan Amendment

I find that the replacement of the Bald Eagle Management Area (E#2) by adding on to Bald Eagle Management Area (E#3) to allow greater potential for eagles to utilize the BEMA, and ultimately allow conditions more advantageous for eagle survival will not significantly change the forest-wide impacts disclosed in the Deschutes National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) Environmental Impact Statement, based on the following factors:

Timing

This amendment will take place immediately and is specific to this project. The Forest Service Planning Handbook (1909.12, 5.32) indicates that a change is less likely to result in a significant plan amendment if the change is likely to take place after the plan period (the first decade). This plan amendment is occurring in the 13th year of the Forest Plan.

Location and Size

The existing BEMA (69 acres) is currently located in lands allocated to Matrix/Intensive Recreation. The new BEMA (69 acres) location would be in the same general area and placed in lands mostly allocated to Matrix/Scenic Views 4 (Partial Retention), with a minor portion in Intensive Recreation (Administratively Withdrawn). No net change in acres would occur.

Goals, Objectives, and Outputs

An action is more likely to be a significant Forest Plan amendment if it alters the long-term relationship between the levels of goods and services projected by the Forest Plan. This amendment would change management allocations where programmable timber harvest could occur. This amendment would remove 69 acres (or less than 1%) from programmed harvest or Probable Sale Quantity specified in the Northwest Forest Plan, although unprogrammed timber harvest can occur within lands classified as Administratively Withdrawn (AWA).

Management Prescription

A change is more likely to require a significant amendment if it would apply to future decisions throughout the planning area. This amendment applies to the one specific Bald Eagle Management Area (#E2 added on to #E3). It would not affect future decisions in the planning area.

Other Findings

Actions in the selected alternative are consistent with the management direction, standards, and guidelines in the Deschutes LRMP as amended by the Northwest Forest Plan and the Eastside Screens (Regional Forester's Amendment #2), and as amended with this decision regarding replacement of the Bald Eagle Management Area (E#2) by adding on to Bald Eagle Management Area (E#3) within this project area (EA, page 68).

Vegetation Management

This project complies with the general procedures of 36 CFR 219.10(f) for Forest plan Amendments. No timber will be harvested from lands not suited for timber production as defined in 36 CFR 219.14. Based on research and experience, all lands being harvested can be adequately restocked within 5 years of final harvest. All minimum specific management requirements to be met to accomplish Goals and Objectives for the National Forest system will be met, including compliance with the seven requirements for manipulation of vegetation 36 CFR 219.27 (b).

The harvest and post-harvest vegetation management activities are consistent with the strategy of prevention in accordance with the Pacific Northwest Region's Vegetation Management EIS (1988) and the mediated agreement (1989) (EA, page 72). Natural controls do not exist on these sites to reduce the amount of live and dead shrubs that comprise most of the existing fuel load. While tree crown closure would eventually decrease the amount of shrub cover, shrubs would not be eliminated from the site. Live shrubs and shrub skeletons would remain on the site causing fuel loads to remain high. Since existing shrub cover in the proposed plantation units currently exceeds the damage threshold for fuels, the following vegetation management strategies identified in the Mediated Agreement are not immediately feasible: prevention, early treatment, and maintenance. Alternative 3 uses the strategy for correction (Vegetation Management Plan, Addendum to Appendix D page 8, Silvicultural Report).

Civil Rights and Environmental Justice

A primary purpose of Alternative 3 is to provide for the health and safety of all members of the public by reducing the risk of entrapment from wildfire. Provision of these benefits does not discriminate between subsets of the general population. Known nonfee dispersed camping opportunities surrounding the reservoirs would be reduced by less than 6%, but it is likely this reduction in sites would be offset by campers creating new non-fee sites. Therefore, these potential disparate effects are minor. Alternative 3 does not pose disproportionately high or adverse effects to minority communities or to low income groups (EA, page 95).

Survey and Manage Plant Species

An appropriate survey for survey and manage plant species was completed. Prior to 2001, survey protocols for many species were

more extensive then currently required. Alternative 3 is consistent with the 2001 Record of Decision for Amendments to the Survey and Manage, Protection Buffer, and other Mitigation Measures Standards and Guidelines.

Inventoried Roadless and Unroaded Areas

Within the area planned for activities, there are no unroaded, roadless, or wilderness areas as defined by Forest Service Manual 7712.16a "Contiguous Unroaded Areas". Implementation of Alternative 3 does not affect wildlife movement or change unique ecological values associated with the adjacent inventoried roadless areas. These alternatives provide an overall beneficial effect to attributes associated with unroaded characteristics, such as a reduction of road density in the watershed and an increase in the long term development of late and old structured stands (EA, page 91).

Implementation Date

Actions resulting from this decision are scheduled for implementation beginning in the spring of 2002.

Administrative Review

This decision is subject to administrative appeal. Organizations or members of the general public may appeal this decision according to Title 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 215. This appeal must be filed within 45 days of the date that legal notification of this decision is published in the Bend Bulletin (January 23, 2002), the official newspaper of record. The Notice of Appeal must be filed with:

Regional Forester Attn: Appeals USDA Forest Service P.O. Box 3623 Portland, OR 97208-3623

It is the responsibility of those who appeal a decision to provide the Regional Forester sufficient written evidence and rationale to show why the decision by the Forest Supervisor should be changed or reversed. The written notice of appeal must:

- 1. State that the document is a Notice of Appeal filed pursuant to 36 CFR part 215;
- 2. List the name, address, and if possible, the telephone number of the appellant;
- 3. Identify the decision document by title and subject, date of decision, and the name and title of the Responsible Official;
- 4. Identify the specific change(s) in the decision that the appellant seeks or portion of the decision to which the appellant objects;
- 5. State how the responsible Official's decision fails to consider comments previously provided, either before or during the comment period, and, if applicable, how the appellant believes the decision violates law, regulation, or policy.

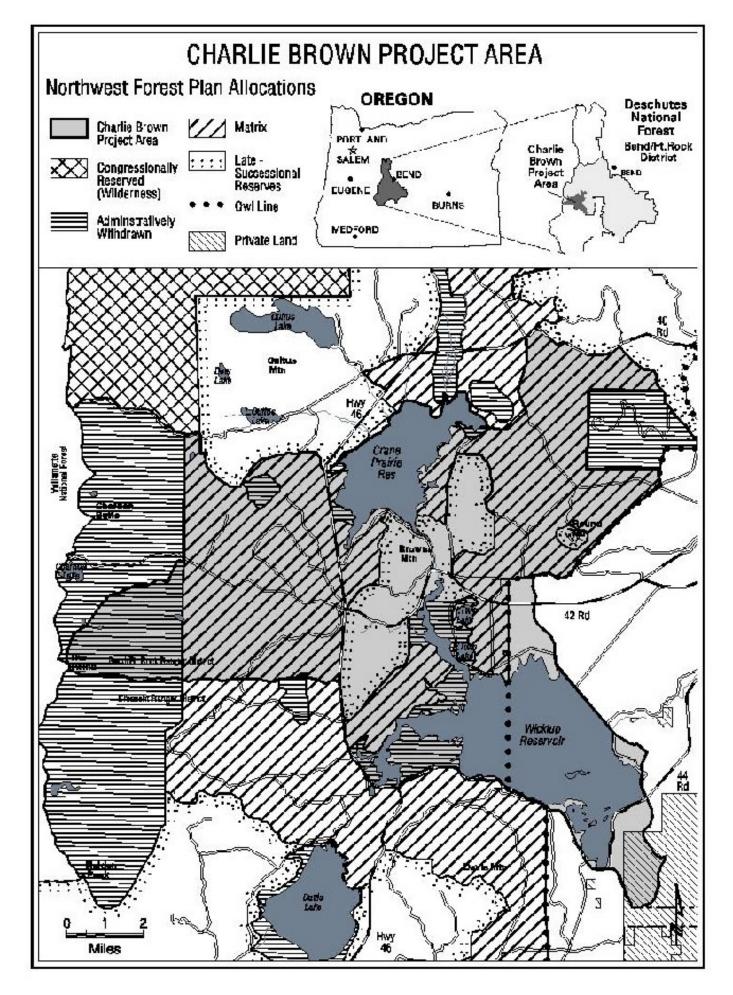
Contact Person

For information contact Chris Mickle, Bend-Ft. Rock Ranger District, 1230 NE 3rd, Suite A-262, Bend, OR 97701, phone (541) 383-4769

/s/David Summer for	<u>January 7, 2002</u>
LESLIE A.C. WELDON	Date
Forest Supervisor	

FOOTNOTES

1. These levels meet or exceed Standards and Guidelines contained in the Northwest Forest Plan and the Eastside Screens



Link to Q & A's

Link to the Environmental Assessment

Deschutes and Ochoco National Forests Website

http://www.fs.fed.us/centraloregon/manageinfo/nepa/documents/bendfort/charliebrown/cbdn.html Last Update: 1/29/02 R.A. Jensen

