

preliminary Decision Memo

Wickiup Acres Hazardous Fuels Reduction

**USDA Forest Service
Crescent Ranger District, Deschutes National Forest
Deschutes County, Oregon
T. 22 S., R. 8 E., Section 36, T., 22 S., R 9 E., Section 31**

I have decided to authorize Wickiup Acres WUI Fuels Reduction Project. Project objectives will be accomplished with a variety of activities that will reduce fuels on approximately 519 acres of National Forest Land southwest of La Pine, Oregon. The project area is located along the northern boundary of the Crescent Ranger District just south of the southeast tip of Wickiup Reservoir (see Figure 1). The area is in Deschutes County, in the Upper Deschutes Watershed and is entirely within the Deschutes National Forest. The focus of the project is in areas that are adjacent to or near private property, particularly where homes are present.

The entire project is within the wildland urban interface (WUI) as identified in the Greater La Pine Community Wildfire Protection Plan. The project area surrounds the subdivision of Wickiup Acres, which is ranked as the third highest treatment priority in the Greater La Pine Community Wildfire Protection Plan. Activities are located within the following management areas (MA) as described in the Deschutes National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP): General Forest (MA 8) and Scenic Views (MA 9). The Scenic Views allocation is a very small portion on the southeast tip of unit 7 along the District and Private timberland boundary.

Fuels treatments will be used to reduce the risk of problem fire in the wildland urban interface. From a fire perspective, vegetation can be described in terms of “fuels.” Ground fuels can include grasses, litter, plants, shrubs, and trees, and contribute to the rate of spread of a wildfire. Ladder fuels are vegetative structures that allow a ground fire to move into the crowns of trees; these can include immature trees growing beneath and near larger, more mature trees, low canopy base heights, and dense foliage. The current condition of ground and ladder fuels in the Wickiup Acres Hazardous Fuels Reduction project area is such that risk of high rates of wildfire spread and crown fire initiation exists, which presents a risk to the safety of forest visitors and fire suppression personnel, the loss of structures, and the loss of forest resources. Fuels reduction will reduce the fuel loads, create conditions where wildfire would burn at lower intensities and slower rates of spread, thereby reducing the risk of wildfire in close proximity to homes within the Wickiup Acres subdivision and privately owned timber lands (Olympic Resource Management LLC).

Project Activities

Project activities include thinning trees up to 8” diameter at breast height, pruning limbs on larger trees (leaving at least 50% of the live crown), hand piling thinned material and activity-generated slash, utilization of thinned material where possible (utilization may include post and pole, firewood or biomass), hand pile burning when necessary, mowing, prescribed underburning, and enhancement or restoration of meadows. Prescribed underburning and pile burning will occur only when environmental factors are conducive and after private citizens have been notified. No roads will be constructed with this project.

Table 1 summarizes units by acres, treatment type, and LRMP management area.

Table 1. Wickiup Acres Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project treatment units and descriptions.

Unit Number	Acres	Treatment Type	Land Use Allocation
1	43	Small-diameter thin, mow, prune, hand pile, hand pile burn, utilization.	General Forest
2	32	Small-diameter thin, prune, hand pile, hand pile burn, utilization, prescribed underburn.	General Forest
3	49	Small-diameter thin, hand pile, hand pile burn, firewood, post and pole, utilization, prescribed underburn.	General Forest
5	74	Small-diameter thin, hand pile, hand pile burn, prune, firewood, post and pole, utilization, mow N. 1/3 of unit for egress.	General Forest
6	58	Small-diameter thin (variable spacing determined with wildlife biologist), hand pile, hand pile burn, firewood, post and pole, utilization, enhance/restore meadows.	General Forest
7	186	Small-diameter thin (variable spacing determined with wildlife biologist), hand pile, hand pile burn, firewood, post and pole, utilization, enhance/restore meadows, prune 75' along egress road.	General Forest and Scenic Views
8	77	Small-diameter thin, hand pile, hand pile burn, firewood, post and pole, utilization, prune along roads 50', mowing 100' along roads.	General Forest
	519	TOTAL ACRES	

Conditions Related to Implementation

The following conditions are incorporated into the decision:

1. **Area closure to motorized use.** To mitigate the potential effects of this project related to the ability of motorized vehicles to access riparian habitat, motorized access off of National Forest System roads within the project area (Figure 2) will be prohibited by Forest Order.
2. **Seasonal restrictions:**
 - Unit 2 - fuels reduction activities will not take place March 1-August 31 within 0.25 miles of an active osprey nest unless no nesting is documented by May 15.
 - Units 6, 7, and 8 - fuels reduction activities will not take place between May 1 and June 30 to avoid impacts to calving and fawning big game.
3. A Crescent Ranger District wildlife biologist and hydrologist will assist with the layout and spacing of small-diameter thinning and leave areas in units 6, 7, and 8.
4. Large woody debris and snags will be left untouched as long as there is no threat to occupational safety.
5. To protect soils in unit 1, the mowing machine will pass only once over the same area/ground and will make no sharp turns.
6. To protect soils in units 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7, access trails for post and pole or firewood will be a minimum of 100' apart.
7. If cultural resources are discovered in activity units, the sites will be protected by avoidance and the Crescent Ranger District archaeologist will be notified.

8. To reduce risk of invasive plant introduction or spread, vehicles will not be driven or parked in weed infested areas, and will be free of soil and plant parts before entering activity units.

Public Involvement

The Wickiup Acres Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) Fuels Reduction Project scoping letter was mailed July 12, 2007. Two comments were received in response to the scoping letter. The first was generally in favor of fuels reduction projects such as this one, but expressed concern about fuels reduction activities (especially mowing and burning) taking place during the nesting and fledgling periods for native and neotropical migratory birds. The second was also supportive of this type of project within high-priority, high-use wildland-urban interface.

The project was also presented at the Greater La Pine Community Wildfire Protection Plan meetings and at a meeting on June 3, 2006, with homeowners within the Wickiup Acres subdivision. The homeowners at the meeting were in favor of the project.

Relationship to Extraordinary Circumstances and Findings

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. Evaluations are on file at the Crescent Ranger District. The following is the list of the resource conditions and descriptions of potential effects, if any, would result from project activities.

1. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated habitat or species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat

No threatened or endangered wildlife, fish or plant species are known to occupy or have critical habitat within the project area.

2. Forest Service sensitive species

Plant species – No sensitive plants, as listed on the April 2007 R6 Regional Forester's Sensitive Plant List, were found in the project activity units.

Aquatic Species – There are redband trout present in Wickiup Reservoir, which is adjacent to the project area. The project has been determined to have **No Impact** on redband trout.

Wildlife Species – The following R6 special status animal species have habitat or are known or suspected to occur in the project area:

- Northern Bald Eagle, **No Effect** (status changed from Threatened to R6 Sensitive Species on 8/08/07)
- Oregon Spotted Frog, **No Impact**
- Bufflehead Duck, **No Impact**
- Horned Grebe, **No Impact**
- Red Necked Grebe, **No Impact**
- Yellow Rail, **No Impact**
- Pacific Fisher, **May Impact Individuals or Habitat, but will Not Likely Contribute to a Trend towards Federal Listing or Loss of Viability to the Population or Species.** The level of disturbance and open nature of the project area limit habitat use potential. Units 6, 7, and 8 are currently dense enough to provide habitat use; however, the amount of human activity in the area

likely precludes fisher use for anything other than incidental foraging or movement across the landscape. Project implementation will reduce the density of stands in these units. Modified prescriptions and leave patches will be identified by a wildlife biologist. The leave areas and denser stands will allow fisher to move through the area; however, the more open nature of the stands will be cumulative with the human activity to limit use of the project area.

3. Flood plains, wetlands, municipal watersheds

Project activity units are located adjacent to Wickiup Reservoir and wetland/riparian areas. Project design features would minimize or prevent effects to the wet areas. The project is not in a municipal watershed.

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

The project area is not located within or adjacent to a wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, or a national recreation area. The closest wilderness area is 14 miles from the project area; the closest wild and scenic river corridor is four miles from the project area.

5. Inventoried Roadless Areas

There are no inventoried roadless areas in the project area. The project would not construct any permanent or temporary roads.

6. Research Natural Areas

There are no existing or proposed Research Natural Areas in the project area. The closest Research Natural Area is six miles from the project area.

7. 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. The project is in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act under the terms of the 2003 Programmatic Agreement among the Forest Service, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the Oregon State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) by meeting Stipulation III(B)2 (“Undertaking meets the criteria in the PA for a No Historic Properties Affected determination”).

Consideration of Other Relevant Resource Conditions

Invasive species – Bull thistle was found in the burned portion of the project area (unit 2) but does not seem to be spreading. Project design features as described under “Conditions Related to Implementation” will prevent the spread of weed infestations within the project area.

Neotropical Migratory Birds - The project area contains seasonal riparian habitat in Unit 7; the combination of forest cover and open water creates habitat for waterfowl and migratory birds for a period of time in the early spring. Migratory birds may nest in the conifer stands or in shrub communities in small openings. Mowing activities will reduce total shrub cover and thus reduce nesting potential on portions of the project area. Project impacts will be minimal and limited to individual birds and/or nests within activity units in the project area. Seasonal restriction of activities in Unit 7 will reduce the

potential of disturbance to birds during the nesting season. The motorized vehicle closure will reduce disturbance of nesting birds following project implementation.

Amphibians - Unit 7 provides potential amphibian habitat during the wet season each year. Fuels reduction activities will take place during the dry season. Modified prescriptions in Unit 6, 7, and 8 will help to retain shaded micro climates adjacent to the seasonally wet area. The motorized vehicle closure will reduce the likelihood of individual amphibians being harassed or killed by motor vehicles. The project area is not critical refugia, so project impacts will be minimal and limited to local populations.

Consistency

This decision is consistent with the Deschutes National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan as amended by the Inland Native Fish Strategy, which provides standards and guidelines for protection of watersheds and riparian habitat conservation areas. The project was designed in conformance with Forest Plan standards and incorporates appropriate guidelines for General Forest and Scenic Views Management allocations. The prescribed burning will be done in conformance with the Oregon Smoke Management System to meet smoke management objectives. Safety measures such as warning signs and or traffic control will be employed when burning and smoke affects the safety of motorists. Adjacent landowners will be notified when burning operations are soon to commence.

Conclusion

I have reviewed the physical and biological conditions of the project with resource specialists. My conclusion is that there are no extraordinary circumstances associated with this project that may result in a significant individual or cumulative effect on the quality of the human environment.

Reasons for Categorical Exclusion and Findings

This decision is categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement in accordance with 40 CFR 1508.4 and Forest Service Environmental Policy and Procedure Handbook 1909.15. This action falls within Category 31.2(6) of the Forest Service Environmental Policy and Procedures Handbook 1909.15, established by the Chief of the Forest Service.

I have concluded that the proposed activities are consistent with the intent of reducing fuels and reducing risk to human life and are in accordance with the Deschutes National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan as amended by the Northwest Forest Plan. I conclude that no extraordinary circumstances exist which indicate this action could have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment.

Public Comment

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*. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period for this proposal. Those wishing to comment should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. The regulations prohibit extending the length of the comment period.

Written comments must be submitted to: Christine Frisbee, Crescent Ranger District, PO Box 208, Crescent, OR, 97733. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 7:45 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Oral comments must be provided at the Responsible Official's office during normal business hours via telephone (541) 433-3200 or in person.

Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc) to comments-pacificnorthwest-deschutes-crescent@fs.fed.us. In cases where no identifiable name is attached to a comment, a verification of identity will be required for appeal eligibility. If using an electronic message, a scanned signature is one way to provide verification. E-mails submitted to e-mail addresses other than the one listed above, in other formats 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 and 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

For further information contact Tami Kerr, Project Leader, Crescent Ranger District, PO Box 208, Crescent, OR, 97733, or by phone at (541) 433-3200.

/s/ C. Christine Frisbee

C. Christine Frisbee
District Ranger

March 12, 2008
Date

Figure 1. Wickiup Acres Hazardous Fuels Reduction activity units.



Figure 2. Wickiup Reservoir Overflow Motorized Vehicle Closure Area.

