

# Deschutes & Ochoco National Forests Crooked River National Grassland

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### **Decision Memo North End Plantations Precommercial Thinning Project**

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**PLANS, ANALYSES, ASSESSMENTS**

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▶ **Evaluate Our Service**

We welcome your comments on our service and your suggestions for improvement.

Forest

**Deschutes National Forest**

1001 SW Emkay Drive  
Bend, OR 97702

(541) 383-5300

**Ochoco National Forest**

3160 N.E. 3rd Street  
Prineville, OR 97754

(541) 416-6500

**Crooked River National  
Grassland**

813 S.W. Hwy. 97  
Madras, OR 97741

(541) 475-9272



## DECISION AND RATIONALE

I have decided to precommercial thin, lop, and scatter slash in 152 plantations with a cumulative total of 3,200 acres. These plantations are located in the Trout Creek, Bear Creek, McKay Creek and Mill Creek watersheds within 20 to 50 miles north and east of the City of Prineville. The legal locations for these plantations are within Townships 12 and 13 South, Ranges 17, 18, and 19 East, Willamette Meridian. A map of the thinning units is located in the project file.

The primary objective of the treatment is to thin trees in plantations to enhance the growth and vigor of the remaining trees in the stand. The plantations included in this project were planted between 1984 and 1998. Average stocking in these plantations ranges between 400 and 1200 trees per acre. Thinning will maintain individual tree growth, promote the development of large trees, and maintain a vigorous understory of grasses, forbs, and shrubs. Felled trees would be lopped (cut into small pieces) and scattered to reduce the resulting fuel depth.

The treatment includes thinning trees up to 9 inches dbh (diameter at breast height) to an average 18-by-18 foot spacing. The trees that are selected to remain in each thinning unit will vary based on the existing trees. Most trees that would be cut are less than 3 inches dbh. There would be some variation in thinning; thickets and small unthinned (or lightly thinned) areas would be left for nesting, foraging, and hiding cover for wildlife. These plantations contain or are adjacent to Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCAs). Trees within 25 feet of stream channels will not be felled. Thinning in RHCAs would be variable to maintain or enhance riparian conditions.

This project does not including any road construction activities or the use of herbicides. To reduce the potential for spread of scotch thistle, thinning would not occur within 100 feet of the scotch thistle infestation along the 3300-170 road in Graygap Unit 17.

## CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION

Decisions may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement when they are within one of the categories identified in the Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15, Chapter 30. This proposal falls within a category of actions identified in FSH 1909.15 Chapter 30, Section 31.2(6). Category 6 describes timber stand and/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.

The categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because the analysis indicates that there are no significant effects to

extraordinary circumstances associated with this project. In determining the appropriateness of using the categorical exclusion, a determination of the potential impact to the identified resource conditions identified in FSH 1909.15 Section 30.3(2) was made. I find that no extraordinary circumstances exist with the project activities that may result in a significant individual or cumulative effect on the quality of the human environment.

### **EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES**

I considered the following resource conditions in making my determination that extraordinary circumstances related to the project action did not warrant further analysis or documentation in an environmental assessment or an environmental impact statement.

Federally listed threatened or endangered species, designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing, proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species.

Biological evaluations (BEs) were prepared for wildlife, aquatic, and botany species. This section summarizes the information and analysis contained in the biological evaluations for this precommercial thinning project. The three BEs are contained in the project file. This section has been divided into federally listed species and Forest Service sensitive species.

#### **Federally listed species**

There are three federally listed species known or suspected to occur on the Ochoco National Forest. These species are northern bald eagle, bull trout, and mid-Columbia River steelhead trout. This precommercial thinning project would have no effect on any of these species. There is no habitat for bull trout within the project area.

There would be no effect to mid-Columbia River steelhead trout because the project would not reduce stream shade and it maintains bank stability. The project would have no measurable affect on large wood, pool formations, or width/depth ratios of aquatic habitat. This project is unlikely to result in sediment entering any stream because felled trees will be lopped and scattered leaving small pieces of slash that will trap and hold sediments. (See June 6, 2005, BE for aquatic species.)

There would be no effect to bald eagles because there are no known nest sites, roost sites, or foraging areas within the project area. The project area does not contain any Bald Eagle Management Areas or identified essential habitats. (See July 13, 2005, BE for wildlife species).

## Forest Service Sensitive Species

There are 8 wildlife, 5 aquatic, and 28 botanical sensitive species known or suspected to occur on the Ochoco National Forest. This precommercial thinning project would have no impact on 6 terrestrial, 3 aquatic, and 14 botanical species because there is no suitable habitat in the project area (see wildlife, aquatic, or botany BEs for more information).

**Wildlife Species:** The project area contains potential habitat for two sensitive wildlife species (California wolverine and peregrine falcon). A determination of “may impact individuals or habitat, but will not likely contribute to a trend towards federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species” was reached for California wolverine because there is a slight chance that dispersing juveniles could be affected. The project area does not contain any denning habitat for wolverines and wolverines moving through the area would be able to avoid activities. A determination of “no impact” was reached for peregrine falcon because they are not known to occupy the project area, individuals would be able to avoid project activities, and the activities are outside known nesting areas.

**Aquatic Species:** The project area contains potential habitat for two sensitive aquatic species (redband trout and Columbia spotted frog). A determination of “no impact” was reached for redband trout because key habitat features will not be affected by project activities (see discussion above related to steelhead trout).

A determination of “may impact individual or habitat, but will not likely contribute to a trend towards federal list or loss of viability to the population or species” was reached for Columbia spotted frogs. Felling small diameter trees would not affect breeding and rearing activities. However, during migrations between wet areas and upland habitat, there is a potential of loss or injury to spotted frogs when trees are being felled.

Mid-Columbia spring chinook salmon essential fish habitat (EFH) has been identified within the project area, although dams have blocked access by chinook salmon. A determination of “no impact” was reached for Mid-Columbia spring chinook salmon EFH because the project will not affect key aquatic habitat features.

**Plant species:** Three sensitive plant species, Peck’s mariposa lily (*Calochortus longebarbatus* var. *peckii*), Henderson’s ricegrass (*Achnatherum hendersonii*), and Wallowa ricegrass (*Achnatherum wallowaensis*), have been documented in the project area. The project area also contains potential habitat for 11 sensitive plants. These species are: ascending moonwort (*Botrychium ascendens*), crenulate moonwort (*Botrychium crenulatum*), Mingan’s moonwort (*Botrychium minganense*), mountain moonwort (*Botrychium montanum*), twin-spike moonwort (*Botrychium paradoxum*), pinnate moonwort (*Botrychium pinnatum*), Back’s sedge (*Carex backii*),

interior sedge (*Carex interior*), yellow lady's slipper orchid (*Cypripedium parviflorum*), silverskin lichen (*Dermatocarpon luridum*), and margined streamside moss (*Scouleria marginata*). A determination of "may impact individuals or habitat, but will not likely contribute to a trend towards federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species" was reached for all 14 species. Project activities may affect potential habitat by covering small areas with slash, but project activities are not ground-disturbing and would not affect the viability of these species. (See February 2, 2005, Botany Report for more specific information).

### **Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds**

There are no anticipated effects to wetlands or floodplains. Thinning treatments within Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCAs) have been designed to maintain bank stability. No trees will be cut within 25 feet of stream channels. The project would not result in any measurable effects to overland flow, soil erosion, infiltration rates, shade, bank stability, or streamflow. (See May 2, 2005, Hydrology Report.)

This project would not affect municipal watersheds because there are no municipal watersheds within any of the 152 plantations where thinning will occur.

### **Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas.**

There are no congressionally designated areas within any of the 152 plantations where thinning will occur.

### **Inventoried roadless areas**

There are no inventoried roadless areas (RARE II or Forest Plan) within any of the 152 plantations where thinning will occur.

### **Research natural areas**

There are no existing or proposed Research Natural Areas within any of the 152 plantations where thinning will occur (Plan FEIS, p. 3-20).

American Indian and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas

Surveys were conducted for Native American religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, and historic properties or areas that may be affected by this project. The project was designed to avoid all

known heritage sites. Based on known cultural sites and proposed trees to cut, this project has no effect on heritage sites and the qualities that make them eligible to the National Register of Historic Places.

## **SCOPING AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

This precommercial thinning project was listed in the Schedule of Projects for the Deschutes and Ochoco National Forests since the January 2005 issue. On February 7, 2005, the proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping. Twenty-eight individuals, organizations, and agencies were contacted (see project file for list of contacts).

Two letters were received in response to public involvement efforts. Copies of the scoping responses are contained in the project file. Several questions were raised about the project. These questions, with a brief response, follow:

1. Will precommercial thinning be accomplished by hand or mechanized equipment? The precommercial thinning will be accomplished using chainsaws or other hand tools.
2. What is the species composition of the stands and what species will be thinned? Species composition includes ponderosa pine, western larch, lodgepole pine, Douglas-fir, and grand fir. The preference for species retention in order is western larch, ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, grand fir, and lodgepole pine. Variances would be made to select the best tree depending on the site, relative vigor, size of trees, and pattern of species dominance.
3. Will lop and scatter treatments increase fuel loading? Yes, lop and scatter treatments will cause a small increase in fuel loadings. Currently, the fuel loading is very low and small increases will only slightly increase the fire hazard until the thinning slash is compressed by winter snows and the needles fall off.
4. What level of treatment is proposed within RHCAs? Will this project affect water quality? This project includes 312 acres of precommercial thinning within RHCAs. This project does not thin trees within 25 feet of streams. This project will not cause any measurable effects to water quality.
5. Will thinning occur during elk and deer calving seasons? No. Some units occur in areas identified as important elk calving habitat. Thinning in these plantations would not occur between May 15 and June 30.
6. Will any old or closed roads be re-opened and used for this



project? No.

7. Will thinning result in variable density? Yes, thinned stands will be variable. Small unthinned areas or lightly thinned thickets will be retained. Thinning activities within RHCAs will promote riparian management objectives and will differ from areas outside RHCAs. Also, some plantations currently contain small openings.

8. Do your objectives include controlling the spread of invasive weeds? Precommercial thinning activities have a low risk of spreading weeds because it does not include any ground-disturbing activities. The project does not construct roads or include the use of heavy machinery. To reduce the potential spread of noxious weeds, no thinning will occur within 100 feet of the only known infestation of scotch thistle within the project area.

9. Do your objectives reduce fine fuel loads in areas with disproportionally high ignition sources (along roads, trails, and ridges)? The current fuel loadings are low. Lop and scatter treatments will cause a small increase in fine fuel loadings, but this increase will be short lived. To reduce potential for ignitions, slash will be pulled away from major roads and trails.

#### **FINDINGS REQUIRED BY LAW**

This decision is consistent with the Ochoco National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended, (LRMP) as required by the National Forest Management Act. This precommercial thinning project was designed in conformance with LRMP standards and guidelines. The trees occur within the General Forest management allocation of the Ochoco National Forest LRMP. The objective of General Forest is to produce timber and forage while meeting the Forest-wide standards and guidelines for all resources. The project was designed to meet these objectives.

Riparian areas and wetlands in the project area are subject to the interim direction provided by the INFISH which amended the LRMP. Project activities would not retard attainment of Riparian Management Objectives.

#### **IMPLEMENTATION**

This decision may be implemented immediately.

#### **ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES**

This action falls within a category of actions that is not subject to appeal (36 CFR 215.8).

## CONTACT PERSON

For further information contact Barb Fontaine, at the Lookout Mountain Ranger District, 3160 NE Third Street, Prineville, Oregon, 97754 or at (541) 416-6500.

/s/ Arthur J. Currier 8/15/05

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ARTHUR J. CURRIER Date  
District Ranger

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