

# Deschutes & Ochoco National Forests Crooked River National Grassland

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## Projects & Plans

### Project Documents

#### Decision Memo Lower Crooked Fuels Reduction Project

**USDA Forest Service  
Lookout Mountain Ranger District,  
Ochoco National Forest  
Crook County, Oregon  
Townships 14 and 15 South,  
Ranges 21 and 22 East, WM**

**Decision to be Implemented**



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SCHEDULE OF PROJECTS

PROJECT INFORMATION

### † By Administrative Unit

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### † Forest Health, Fire, Fuels, Vegetation Management

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PLANS, ANALYSES, ASSESSMENTS

▶ **Links**

▶ **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



I have decided to implement the use of prescribed fire on approximately 3,900 acres and noncommercial mechanical thinning treatments on approximately 990 acres within the Lower Crooked River watershed on the Lookout Mountain District, Ochoco National Forest.

- Prescribed fire treatments will be low intensity burns conducted within the next 5 years in both spring and fall burning periods. Hand line or existing features will be used to keep prescribed fire within treatment units. Prescribed burning will only be initiated when environmental factors are conducive to meeting burning and resource management objectives.
- Noncommercial thinning treatments will remove ladder fuels to a specified density depending on site conditions and resource objectives. Hand tools such as chainsaws will be used. Only trees less than 9 inches in diameter at breast height will be cut. Slash produced from the treatments will be lopped (cut into small pieces) to a slash depth of 12 inches or less and left in place.

No heavy machinery, such as grapple pilers or bulldozers, will be used to implement any of the activities. Vehicle use will be restricted to roads which are currently open. The objective of the treatments is to reduce hazardous fuel loadings and arrangement in the project area to protect ecosystems from the risk of high-intensity wildland fire. Hazardous fuels consist of combustible vegetation (live or dead), such as grass, ground litter, plants, shrubs and trees that contribute to the threat of ignition and high fire intensity and / or high rate of spread. The reduction of hazardous fuels will reduce the likelihood of ignition and / or lessen the potential to damage the ecosystem from intense wildfire and to create conditions where firefighters can safely and effectively control wildfires.

The location of the project is approximately 34 air miles east of Prineville, Oregon. More detailed location can be found on the attached map.

The activities proposed have been through a collaborative framework as described in "*A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment, 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy*". I presented the proposed activities to the Crook County Natural Resources Planning Committee on December 9, 2003. This is a community-based group consisting of approximately 27 representatives from Federal and State agencies, local governments, landowners and other local stake holders and is broadly representative of interests in the local area.

All treatments are within Condition Classes 2 or 3 and Fire Regime Groups I, II or III. Condition Class descriptions are qualitative measures describing the degree of departure from historical fire regimes, possibly resulting in alterations of key ecosystem components such as species composition, structural stage, stand age, canopy closure and fuel loading (Schmidt et al. 2002). Condition Classes 2 or 3 are described as being those vegetative conditions moderately to significantly altered from historic conditions. Fire Regime Groups I, II, or III are those groups with frequent (0-35 year) or moderately frequent (35-100 year) fire return intervals with low to mixed severity intensities. No activities are located within a

## Wildland Urban Interface.

My decision includes the implementation of mitigation measures and design elements that include:

1. Seasonal restrictions to reduce disturbance to wildlife in winter range and around active raptor nests.
2. Special treatment prescriptions within riparian habitat conservation areas.
3. Protection or avoidance of cultural sites, historic properties, and sensitive plant populations.
4. Measures to reduce the risk of noxious weed introduction and spread.
5. Measures to minimize the loss of large down woody material and large snags.
6. Monitoring of pre- and post-implementation vegetative, fuel, and ground cover conditions.

Further information on the implementation of this project can be found in the project file located at the Lookout Mountain District Office.

## Reasons for Categorically Excluding this Project

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 of the Forest Service in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15 sections 31.1b or 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.

I have concluded that this decision is appropriately categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment as it is a routine activity within a category of exclusion 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. My conclusion is based on information presented in this document and the entirety of the Record.

The decision is within FSH 1909.15 section 31.2, Category 10 that includes treatment of hazardous fuels through the use of prescribed fire and / or mechanical treatments.

## Extraordinary Circumstances

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) 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**

No federally listed threatened or endangered plant or aquatic species occur within the project area. One federally listed animal species (bald eagle) has been sighted in the past within the project area, likely from foraging activity or eagles passing through the area. There are no known eagle nests or roost sites within the project area. A determination of *'No effect'* was reached for bald eagle.

## **2. Forest Service sensitive species**

**Plant species** - Seven sensitive plant species are known to occur or have potential habitat within the project area. A determination of *'No impact'* was reached for three species and 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 the other four.

**Aquatic Species** - Two sensitive aquatic species (redband trout and Columbia spotted frog) are known or have potential habitat within the project area. 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 both species. Mid-Columbia spring chinook salmon essential fish habitat (EFH) has been identified within the project area, although salmon no longer have access to the watershed due to downstream dams on the Deschutes and Crooked Rivers. A determination of *'no adverse effect'* was reached for Mid-Columbia spring chinook salmon EFH.

**Wildlife Species** - The project area contains potential habitat for three sensitive wildlife species (California wolverine, gray flycatcher, and western sage grouse). A determination of *'No impact'* was reached for western sage grouse. 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 and gray flycatcher.

## **3. Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds**

**Floodplains:** Executive Order 11988 is to avoid adverse impacts associated with the occupancy and modification of floodplains. Floodplains are defined by this order as, ". . . the lowland and relatively flat areas adjoining inland and coastal waters including floodprone areas of offshore islands, including at a minimum, that area subject to a one percent [100-year recurrence] or greater chance of flooding in any one year."

- o Proposed activities occurring on floodplains have been designed to enhance vegetative conditions based on riparian management objectives while avoiding adverse impacts.

**Wetlands:** Executive Order 11990 is to avoid adverse impacts associated with destruction or modification of wetlands. Wetlands are defined by this order as, ". . . areas inundated by surface or

ground water with a frequency sufficient to support and under normal circumstances does or would support a prevalence of vegetative or aquatic life that requires saturated or seasonally saturated soil conditions for growth and reproduction. Wetlands generally include swamps, marshes, bogs, and similar areas such as sloughs, potholes, wet meadows, river overflows, mud flats, and natural ponds."

- o There are no wetlands identified within the project area. Small unidentified wetlands that may be encountered during implementation would be protected.

### **Municipal Watersheds**

- o There are no municipal watersheds within the project area.

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

This activity is adjacent to the Crooked River Wild and Scenic River but does not occur within the designated river corridor. Prescribed burning and precommercial thinning activities will not be seen from the river. Activities adjacent to the corridor will provide a reduction of fuels that will result in reducing the risk high fire intensity. The project is not located within a wilderness or national recreation area.

#### **5. Inventoried Roadless Areas**

There are no inventoried roadless areas (RARE II or Forest Plan) in the decision area (Plan FEIS, Appendix C).

#### **6. Research Natural Areas**

There are no existing or proposed Research Natural Areas in the decision area (Plan FEIS, p. 3-20).

#### **7. American Indian and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, or historic properties of areas**

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires federal agencies to take into account the effect of a project on any district, site, building, structure, or object that is included in, or eligible for inclusion in the National Register. Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act also requires federal agencies to afford the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation a reasonable opportunity to comment. The Archaeological Resources Protection Act covers the discovery and protection of historic properties (prehistoric and historic) that are excavated or discovered in federal lands. It affords lawful protection of archaeological resources and sites that are on public and Indian lands. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act covers the discovery and protection of Native American human remains and objects that are excavated or discovered in federal lands. It encourages avoidance of archaeological sites that contain burials or portions of sites that contain graves through "in situ" preservation, but may encompass other actions to preserve these remains and items.

- o This decision complies with the cited Acts. 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. Consultation on this finding occurred with the State Historic Preservation Office.

## Conclusion

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 individual or cumulative effect on the quality of the human environment.

## Other relevant resource conditions considered

**Grazing** - Pastures would be used as burn units to the extent feasible. This would allow the discretion to rest a pasture if prescribed fire effects are undesirable for grazing. Also, broad scale burning within a pasture will better distribute livestock after burning has been completed. In addition, the North Fork Allotment permittee does not plan to graze during the 2004 and 2005 seasons, and grazing within the Donnelly Pasture will be delayed to the end of the 2004 season.

**303d Streams** - Fox Canyon Creek and the North Fork of the Crooked River are listed as temperature impaired by the Oregon State Department of Environmental Quality. The project contains design elements for both prescribed burning and thinning to ensure that the project would not result in a reduction in shade. No measurable increase in water temperature is expected to result from this project.

**Invasive species** - Known populations of invasive plant species occur within the project area. Unit boundaries have been designed to avoid populations, design elements have been developed to avoid the spread of invasive species, and post-implementation monitoring will be conducted to evaluate the effects of the activities on invasive species.

## Public Involvement

The proposal to treat hazardous fuels has been listed in the Schedule of Projects since Fall, 2001. I presented the proposed action to the Crook County Natural Resources Planning Committee on December 9, 2003. The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping on February 27, 2004. Twenty-five scoping letters were mailed to individuals, organizations, and agencies

The following tribal governments have been contacted with phone calls and letters: Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs



Reservation, Burns Paiute tribe, and Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

## Comments Received

Three letters and one phone call were received in response to scoping. While all were generally supportive of the proposal, the following concerns were raised:

**Uninventoried Roadless Areas** - One commenter was concerned on the effect the proposed activities would have on areas identified as "uninventoried roadless" by the Oregon Natural Resources Council. The commenter went on to state that prescribed fire and noncommercial thinning usually don't negatively effect roadless values so long as they do not involve road building or the use of heavy machinery. Neither road building or heavy machinery use is proposed, and no adverse effect to the roadless values of these areas is anticipated.

**Adverse Effects of Prescribed Fire** - One commenter was concerned that prescribed fire has the potential to kill trees, especially old "flat topped" trees, eventually creating additional fuel hazard as the dead trees fall to the ground. The commenter suggested that dead and dying trees be removed prior to burning to avoid this effect. The commenter also asked if grass seeding would occur after burning and suggested that harrowing be used as a way to increase seeding success. The project contains design elements such as burning under moister conditions to reduce the potential for large tree mortality. No grass seeding is proposed. The project is designed to limit the amount of ground duff consumption and exposure of bare soil. Pre- and post implementation monitoring will be conducted to measure the success in achieving these objectives and to help tailor ongoing and future burning activities.

**Adverse Effects of Thinning** - One commenter was concerned that leaving thinning slash on the ground would increase fire risk, reduce forage for wildlife, and make the forest impassable. The commenter suggested that all thinning slash be piled and burned. Slash from thinning is to be lopped to a depth of 12 inches or less and left on site. The volume of material produced, and its arrangement on the forest floor are not expected to increase overall fire hazard, especially after 3 to 5 years as the small diameter material and needles begin to decompose.

## Findings Required by Other Laws

This decision is consistent with the Ochoco National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) as required by the National Forest Management Act. The Plan is amended by 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, General Forest Winter Range, and Winter Range. The prescribing burning will be done in conformance with the Oregon Smoke Management System to meet smoke management objectives. Vegetative treatments within and

adjacent to Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas will enhance Resource Management Objectives for stream conditions, use Best Management Practices to reduce or eliminate impacts and meet Clean Water Act requirements.

### **Implementation Date**

This project may be implemented immediately.

### **Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities**

This decision is not subject to administrative appeal.

### **Contact Persons**

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Rob Rawlings (Project Leader) or Gery Ferguson (Environmental Coordinator) at Lookout Mountain Ranger District, 3160 NE Third Street, Prineville, OR 97754 or via telephone at 541-416-6500.

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Arthur J. Currier  
District Ranger

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April 6, 2004

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