

Myrtle Creek Commercial Thinning and Density Management

Rise and Fall Commercial Thinning Decision Document

Bureau of Land Management
South River Field Office, Roseburg District Office
EA # OR-105-05-09

Decision:

It is my decision to authorize the Rise and Fall Commercial Thinning project, partially implementing Alternative One described in the Myrtle Creek Commercial Thinning and Density Management EA (pp. 5-10). Five units totaling 141 acres in area will be treated. One additional acre will be clearcut for road right-of-way. All of the units are available for all-weather operations subject to exception for the bark slip period described below.

The units are located in Section 17, T. 28 S., R. 3 W. and Section 3, T. 29 S., R. 4 W., Willamette Meridian. The unit numbers and their corresponding designation in the EA are as follows: 1 (28-3-17A); 2 (28-3-17B); 3 (28-3-17D); 4 (29-4-3C); and 5 (29-4-3F).

Commercial thinning of 43 acres in the General Forest Management Area; and 65 acres in a Connectivity/Diversity Block will yield an estimated 1,118 thousand board feet chargeable to the Roseburg District annual sale quantity (ASQ) of 45 million board feet. Density management of 33 acres in Riparian Reserves will yield an estimated 448 thousand board feet that is not chargeable to the ASQ but which will still support local and regional manufacturers and economies.

Thinning will be accomplished utilizing cable-yarding equipment capable of maintaining a minimum of one-end log suspension to reduce soil compaction and displacement. The equipment will have a minimum of 100 feet of lateral-yarding capability to minimize the number of yarding corridors, surface area subject to soil displacement and compaction, and the number of landings required. Thinning operations on units or portions of units accessed by unsurfaced roads will be seasonally restricted to the dry season, typically between mid-May and mid-October. As described in the EA (p. 9), felling and yarding of timber, other than for clearing road rights-of-way, is seasonally restricted from April 15 to July 15 during the bark slip period.

Access will be provided by existing roads, supplemented by the construction one new permanent road, designated as Road No. 28-3-17.4, and one surfaced spur road. The new construction will total 1,070 feet (~ 0.20 miles). Roads 28-3-17.2, 28-3-17.3 and 28-4-3.1 will be renovated. Renovation will generally consist of blading and brushing. Additionally, Road 28-3-17.2 will be resurfaced. Road 28-3-17.3 will be widened from its junction with Road No. 28-3-17.0 to the property line between Sections 17 and 18. Renovation of Road 28-4-34.1 will include replacement of existing cross-drain culverts.

The EA (p. 9) stated that:

“A nesting pair of northern goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) has been documented in the Riser Creek drainage. The last known nest site is within a quarter-mile of Units 28-3-17 B, C and D. To avoid disturbance during nesting and fledging season, thinning operations would be prohibited on Units B and D, and the upper half of Unit C from March 1st through August 30th.”

Surveys over the past five years have not detected the presence of any goshawks. As a consequence the site is considered abandoned and no seasonal restrictions will be implemented.

Rationale for the Decision:

The Myrtle Creek Commercial Thinning and Density Management EA analyzed two alternatives in detail, Alternative One, the Proposed Action (EA, pp. 5-10), and Alternative Two, the alternative of No Action (EA, p. 10).

The objectives of the thinning and density management treatments are to reduce relative density of stands in order to maintain individual tree and stand vigor; provide a high level of quality wood and sustainable timber production from the General Forest Management Area; and moderately high levels of timber production from the Connectivity/Diversity Blocks; recover the commodity value of trees that would be lost to suppression mortality; and diversify the species and structural composition, and accelerate the growth of the retained trees in Riparian Reserves. Alternative One will meet the stated objectives of the project, whereas Alternative Two will not.

In Northwest Ecosystem Alliance et al. v. Rey et al. the U.S. District Court modified its order on October 11, 2006, amending paragraph three of the January 9, 2006 injunction. This order exempted the following categories of projects from compliance with the 2001 ROD (as the 2001 ROD was amended or modified as of March 21, 2004), except that this order will not apply to:

- a. Thinning projects in stands younger than 80 years old;
- b. Replacing culverts on roads that are in use and part of the road system, and removing culverts if the road is temporary or to be decommissioned;
- c. Riparian and stream improvement projects where the riparian work is riparian planting, obtaining material for placing in-stream, and road or trail decommissioning; and where the stream improvement work is the placement large wood, channel and floodplain reconstruction, or removal of channel diversions; and
- d. The portions of project involving hazardous fuel treatments where prescribed fire is applied. Any portion of a hazardous fuel treatment project involving commercial logging will remain subject to the survey and management requirements except for thinning of stands younger than 80 years old under subparagraph a. of this paragraph.”

The South River Field Office has reexamined the objectives of the Rise and Fall Commercial Thinning project described in the Myrtle Creek Commercial Thinning and Density Management EA. As illustrated in the EA (p. 16) the project thins stands that are approximately 38 to 52 years old. For the foregoing reason, it is my determination that the Rise and Fall Commercial Thinning project meets exemption criteria “a”, described above.

On July 25, 2007, a new *Record of Decision to Remove the Survey and Manage Mitigation Measure Standards and Guidelines from Bureau of Land Management Resource Management Plans Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl* was signed by Assistant Secretary, U.S. Department of the Interior C. Stephen Allred. The effect of the decision is to eliminate the provisions of the Survey and Manage program set forth in the *Record of Decision for Amendments (ROD) to Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Planning Documents Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl*. The 2007 *Record of Decision* addresses both the deficiencies in the 2004 Record of Decision set aside by the District Court in Northwest Ecosystem Alliance et al. v. Rey et al., 380 F. Supp. 2d 1175 (W.D. Wash. 2005) and the decision of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in Klamath Siskiyou Wildlands Center et al. v. Boody et al., 468 F. 3d 549 (2006) which set aside the Annual Species Review findings for the red tree vole.

Consequently, for the aforementioned reasons the decision to eliminate Survey and Manage is effective on this project.

Public Comments

Comments from one organization received during preparation of the Myrtle Creek Commercial Thinning and Density Management EA suggested two alternatives that should be analyzed.

The first suggested alternative was helicopter yarding in lieu of any new road construction. As discussed in the EA (pp. 11-13), it was not considered a reasonable alternative because:

- Primary road access already exists to 21 of the 22 units proposed for treatment in this analysis. New construction would be minimal and simply provide access to advantageous yarding locations or allow landings to be moved off of main road systems in order to avoid impeding the regular flow of traffic; and
- Using representative appraisal criteria for a comparison of costs indicates that helicopter yarding would be more than two and a half times more expensive than traditional cable yarding methods.

The second alternative was retention of all of the best and largest trees in all the units in the Connectivity/Diversity Block land use allocation and Riparian Reserves proposed for treatment. It was also suggested that an upper diameter limit be established for trees designated for cutting. With respect to these subjects, these suggestions were not considered to be necessary reasons:

- The largest trees would already be reserved by the marking prescription which primarily targets removing trees from intermediate and suppressed canopy classes (EA, p. 13);
- It is anticipated that coarse woody debris will be adequately provided for because: contract provisions will stipulate reservation of all existing coarse woody debris in Decay Classes 3, 4 and 5; snags felled in Riparian Reserves for safety or operational reasons will be retained on site to supplement existing coarse woody debris; and tops of trees broken out during thinning operations, as well as natural events such as windthrow, snow break and suppression mortality would provide additional coarse woody debris in the near term(EA, p. 13); and

- There is no silvicultural basis for limiting the size of trees cut. To do so would be arbitrary, and could preclude achievement of the stand density objectives (pp. 6-7) and the anticipated outcome of the treatments (pp. 33-36) discussed in the EA.

Comments on the completed EA were received from three organizations. These comments did not provide any new information or identify any relevant issues the BLM should have considered in the analysis. Some comments did not pertain to the project being analyzed. A selection of these comments is addressed below.

“This project seems to be very timber-friendly, focusing on treating stands to increase future timber production while foregoing the opportunity to optimize the complexity and diversity of these stands. Large trees and snags will be felled for pure convenience.”

The objectives of the Myrtle Creek Commercial Thinning and Density Management project were clearly described in the EA (p. 3) and this decision. These are reducing relative density of stands in order to maintain individual tree and stand vigor; providing a high level of quality wood and sustainable timber production from the General Forest Management Area; and moderately high levels of timber production from the Connectivity/Diversity Blocks; recovering the commodity value of trees that would be lost to suppression mortality; and diversifying the species and structural composition, and accelerating the growth of the retained trees in Riparian Reserves.

As was described in the EA (pp. 5-6), large remnant trees and snags will be reserved to the greatest extent practical. Large remnant trees are not the objective of the thinning treatment which is managing the density of the younger and numerically superior stand components. Circumstances under which these trees may be cut are extremely limited. Snags will also be reserved to the greatest degree practical, but not at the expense of worker safety or the silvicultural objectives for management of the stands.

“Given the increasing risk faced by the spotted owl the BLM should conduct all stand treatments to enhance the under-represented characteristics found in older forests, e.g., species diversity, age class diversity, large structures, large patch scale, reduced habitat fragmentation, reduced soil compaction, decadence, vertical and horizontal variability and complexity.”

These are the management objectives of the Roseburg District Resource Management Plan as pertains to Late-Successional Reserves. They are not the principal objectives for the General Forest Management Area and Connectivity/Diversity Blocks where suitable forest land is to be managed for permanent sustainable timber production in support of local and regional economies.

“The EA failed to describe the specific silvicultural prescription for the Riparian Reserves. The silvicultural prescription for the Riparian Reserves must be designed to restore the reserves to the density and species mix of the *original forest*, not the current mix of the planted forest.”

A discussion of the silvicultural objectives of density management for Riparian Reserves is contained in the EA (p, 6). It states that a variable marking prescription would be applied in Riparian Reserves outside of “no-harvest” buffers with a relative density objective of 0.25 and canopy closure of 40 to 50 percent. To maintain structural and habitat diversity, tree selection would not be solely based on the best formed trees, and would include trees with broken or deformed tops. Hardwoods and minor conifer species, reflecting the species distribution in the riparian forest, would be retained. Because there is not a concern for regeneration of shade intolerant species, canopy gaps would generally be no larger than ¼-acre. The anticipated appearance, post-treatment, is depicted in Figure 4-2 on page 34.

With respect to species mix, it should be noted that Douglas-fir is the numerically dominant species in native stands throughout the South River Resource Area and in the Myrtle Creek watershed where the project area is located. This is borne out by decades of timber cruise data where Douglas-fir regularly comprised upwards of 70 percent of total stem counts, and often accounted for more than 90 percent of the trees in a stand. In the Rise and Fall Commercial Thinning sale, Douglas-fir trees comprise over 94 percent of all of the trees designated for cutting. Where retention in Riparian Reserves of species other than Douglas-fir is consistent with relative density objectives, these other species will generally be selected for retention to enhance species diversity.

Wildlife

The units comprising this thinning project do not contain any suitable **northern spotted owl** habitat. Thinning will modify dispersal-only habitat. Spotted owls are expected to continue to use the stands because canopy cover will remain above 40 percent with mean tree diameters greater than 11 inches, figures widely accepted as a threshold for dispersal function.

No effect to spotted owls from noise disruption is expected, as thinning operations will either occur outside of the disruption threshold for known spotted owl sites or activity centers, or be seasonally restricted from March 1st to June 30th if within the disruption threshold of unsurveyed suitable spotted owl habitat. Seasonal restrictions could be waived if surveys indicate that spotted owls are not present, not nesting, or failed in nesting. These factors will ensure that noise disruption will not cause spotted owls to abandon nests or fledge prematurely.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has concurred with a determination of not likely to adversely affect listed species or critical habitat pursuant to section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (Ref. # 1-15-05-I-0511).

As described in the EA (p. 19), habitat for the **Oregon shoulderband snail** (*Helminthoglypta hertlieni*), a Bureau Sensitive species, is present throughout the project area. As also noted, suitable habitat for the **Chace sideband snail** is present throughout the project area. Surveys have been conducted and neither shoulderband or sideband snails were located.

Botany

The Rise and Fall Commercial Thinning units were surveyed for Special Status Species identified in the EA (pp. 21-22 and Appendix C). The results of these surveys were negative. Consequently, no effects to any Special Status botanical species are expected.

Aquatic Habitat, Fish, and Essential Fish Habitat

As described in the EA (p. 48), the Rise and Fall Commercial Thinning project would not affect stream substrate and sediment. “No harvest” buffers at least 20 feet in width would be established on all streams. Equipment operations would be prohibited within these buffers so that soils would not be displaced or compacted. Non-compacted forest soils in the Pacific Northwest have very high infiltration capacities and are not effective in transporting sediment by rain splash or sheet erosion. Any potential sediment resulting from thinning operations would be intercepted by the vegetated “no-harvest” buffers and precipitate out rather than reach stream channels. These buffers would also provide root strength sufficient to protect bank stability and prevent abnormal bank erosion that would contribute additional sediment to streams where it could accumulate and become embedded in streambed gravels. As further described in the EA (pp. 49-50), no effects from sediment associated with road construction, renovation, use and decommissioning would be expected either.

It is acknowledged in the EA (p. 50) that thinning would remove trees within a half site-potential tree height (80 feet) of streams which could result in a short-term reduction in available wood. This smaller diameter wood does not persist for long due to higher decay rates, however, and is more easily flushed from the system than large pieces. Current down wood will be reserved to provide for the short term, while density management will accelerate the growth of large diameter trees to provide long-term sources of large wood for in-stream habitat.

The availability of pool habitat will be unaffected by either thinning and density management, or road construction as no existing large wood will be removed from streams.

As described in the EA (p. 51), road construction and renovation, whether permanent or temporary, will not involve construction or replacement of stream crossings on any fish-bearing streams. There will be no stream crossings installed in association with the Rise and Fall Commercial Thinning project, and consequently no effect on access to aquatic habitat by fish and other aquatic fauna.

As discussed in the EA (p. 51), direct effects to fish species from the harvest and hauling of timber could result from deposition of additional fine sediment and a temporary increase in turbidity, which can hinder survival of eggs and alevin buried in gravel. As discussed above, thinning in upland stands and density management in Riparian Reserves will not result in fine sediment reaching streams as uncompacted soils and vegetation in “no-harvest” buffers will filter out sediment from run-off. The effects of sediment generated by road related activities are expected to be so small as to not be measurable at the project scale.

For the reasons described above, it is not anticipated that the Rise and Fall Commercial Thinning project will have any adverse effect on Essential Fish Habitat in the Myrtle Creek fifth-field watershed.

Water Quality

As described in the EA (p. 54), no measurable change in stream flows are expected because the thinning projects, of which Rise and Fall Louis Commercial thinning is a component, would involve only partial removal of vegetation on areas constituting two percent or less of each affected project drainage.

Harvest in the Transient Snow Zone will have little risk of increasing peak flows, the present risk of such events already being assessed as low (EA, p. 27). This is because the risk of peak flow increases is generally associated with warm rain-on-snow events primarily occurring in areas with less than 30 percent canopy closure. As described in the EA (pp. 35 and 54), post-thinning canopy closure will generally remain above 40 percent.

The risk of new road construction influencing flows is also low. As described in the EA (p. 54), new road construction and reconstruction of older roads, whether intended to be permanent or temporary, would be primarily located on ridge tops and outside Riparian Reserves. These roads would be out-sloped in lieu of the construction of ditch lines and installation of cross drains. Consequently, the roads would be entirely disconnected from the drainage network and would have no potential for affecting stream flow levels.

The effects of the Rise and Fall Commercial Thinning sale on sediment are addressed in the EA with respect to both the potential associated with thinning operations, and those associated with timber hauling. As discussed in the EA, (p. 55), “no harvest” buffers would prevent disturbance to stream channels and stream banks and would intercept surface run-off allowing for deposition of any sediment transported by overland flow before it reached active waterways.

With respect to road construction, new roads would not be connected to the drainage network. Since road segments must be connected directly to stream channels in order to deliver sediment-laden water, these roads would have no effect on stream sediment. The 900 feet of new road construction authorized in the Buck Fork drainage is situated on a broad and stable bench just off the ridge top, and does not cross any streams. The construction will have a nearly imperceptible effect on present road density in the drainage, increasing it from 5.0 miles per square mile to 5.03 miles per square mile. Construction of a 100-foot spur in the Riser Creek drainage, located on a ridge, would have no perceptible effect on the present road density of 4.82 miles per square mile.

With respect to timber hauling in wet weather, sediment effects would be short term and limited to the immediate vicinity of stream crossings. The road resurfacing described on page 1 of this decision will reduce road-surface erosion and the amount of sediment that may potentially enter the road drainage system. Also, prior to log hauling, sediment-control devices such as silt fences and hay bales may be placed in ditch lines and at cross drain outlets to trap sediment locally and prevent migration into streams.

With respect to the potential for affecting stream temperatures, vegetation that provides primary shading for stream channels would be protected by “no harvest” buffers. Consequently, stream shading would not likely be affected by thinning and density management and it is not expected that stream temperatures would be affected.

Aquatic Conservation Strategy

Riparian Reserves have been designated on all perennial and intermittent streams in the Rise and Fall Commercial Thinning sale. Applicable management direction is being applied, including: avoiding location of new roads and landings in Riparian Reserves; minimizing disruption of natural hydrologic flow paths, including diversion of stream flow and interception of surface and subsurface flow; minimizing sediment delivery from roads; and maintaining fish passage at all road crossings.

The Rise and Fall Commercial Thinning sale is not located in a **Key Watershed**, so there is no additional management direction that applies.

As addressed in the Myrtle Creek Commercial Thinning and Density Management EA (pp. 1, 23, 30, 39, 45 and 58) recommendations and information from **Watershed Analysis** was considered and incorporated into the analysis of effects. Additional information from Aquatic Habitat Inventory surveys conducted by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife was used, in conjunction with site-specific evaluations, in describing aquatic conditions throughout the watershed.

As described in the EA (p. 3), density management would be conducted in 33 acres of Riparian Reserves to retain hardwoods as stand components, diversify the species and structural composition, and accelerate the growth of the retained trees, making this project a **Watershed Restoration** action.

In consideration of these facts, and the analysis contained in the Myrtle Creek Commercial Thinning and Density Management EA, it is my conclusion that the Rise and Fall Commercial Thinning sale is consistent with the intent and direction for the Aquatic Conservation Strategy set forth in the 1994 *Record of Decision for Amendments (ROD) to Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Planning Documents Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl*, and the 1995 Roseburg District *Record of Decision and Resource Management Plan*.

Cultural/Historical Resources

Section 106 responsibilities under the National Historic Preservation Act have been completed by the BLM in accordance with the 1998 Oregon State Historic Preservation Office protocols. A pedestrian survey of the units comprising this sale did not identify any extant cultural or historical resources that would be affected.

Noxious Weeds

All logging equipment, excluding log trucks and crew transport, will be pressure washed or steam cleaned prior to mobilization in and out of the project area to minimize the risk of introducing soil from outside the project area that may be contaminated with noxious weed seed or other propagative materials. Any equipment removed during the life of the contract must be cleaned before being returned to the project area.

Monitoring:

Monitoring of the effects of the proposed action, if implemented, would be done in accordance with provisions contained in the ROD/RMP, Appendix I (p. 84, 190, 193, & 195-199), and would focus on the following resources: Riparian Reserves; Matrix; Water and Soils; Wildlife Habitat; Fish Habitat; and Special Status Special Attention Species Habitat.

Protest Procedures:

As outlined in 43 CFR § 5003 – Administrative Remedies at § 5003.3 (a) and (b), protests may be filed within 15 days of the publication date of the timber sale notice. Publication of such notice on August 21, 2007, in *The News-Review*, Roseburg, Oregon, constitutes the decision date from which such protests may be filed. Protests shall be filed with the authorized officer and contain a written statement of reasons for protesting the decision.

43 CFR 5003.3 subsection (b) states that: “Protests shall be filed with the authorized officer and shall contain a written statement of reasons for protesting the decision.” This precludes the acceptance of electronic mail or facsimile protests. Only written and signed hard copies of protests that are delivered to the Roseburg District Office will be accepted.

Ralph Thomas
Field Manager
South River Field Office

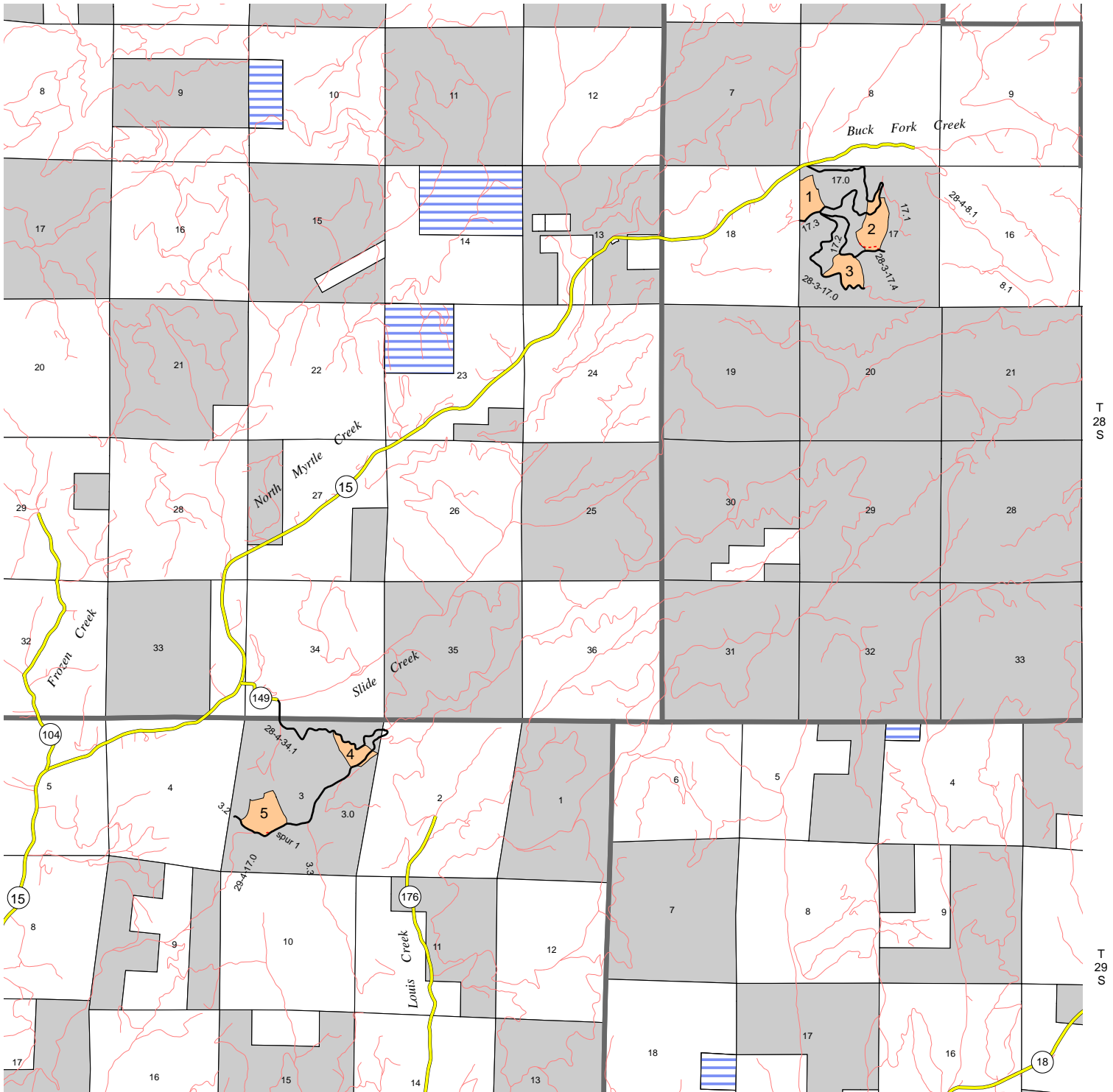
Date

RISE AND FALL

Commercial Thinning

R4W

R3W



T 28 S

T 29 S



T28,29S, R3,4W

Willamette Meridian, Douglas Co., OR.

0 1 Miles



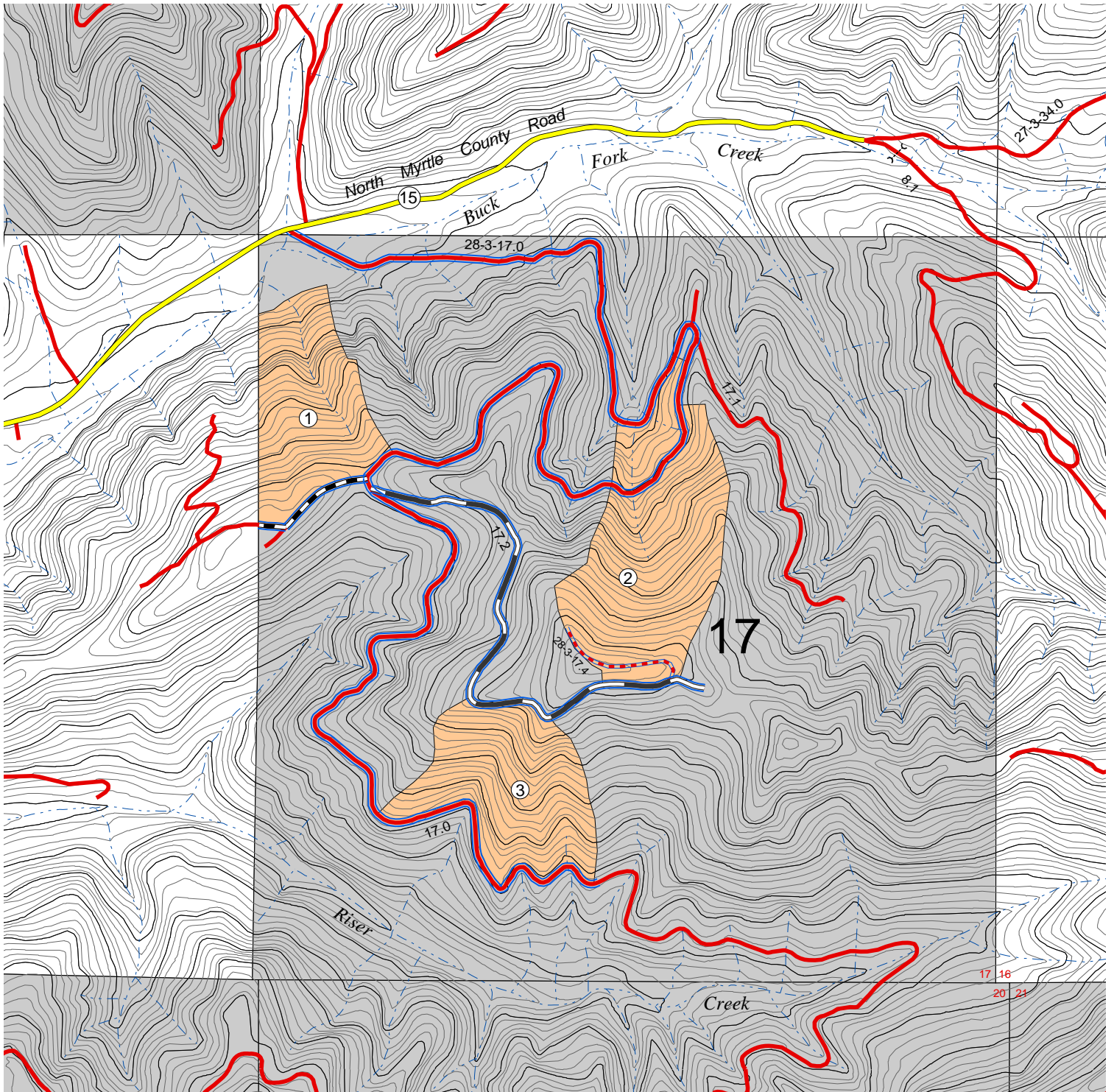
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- County Road
- Existing Road
- Haul Route
- Road to be Constructed
- Thinning Area
- BLM (O&C) Land
- BLM (PD) Land
- Non-BLM Land

RISE AND FALL

Commercial Thinning



T28S, R3W

Willamette Meridian, Douglas Co., OR.



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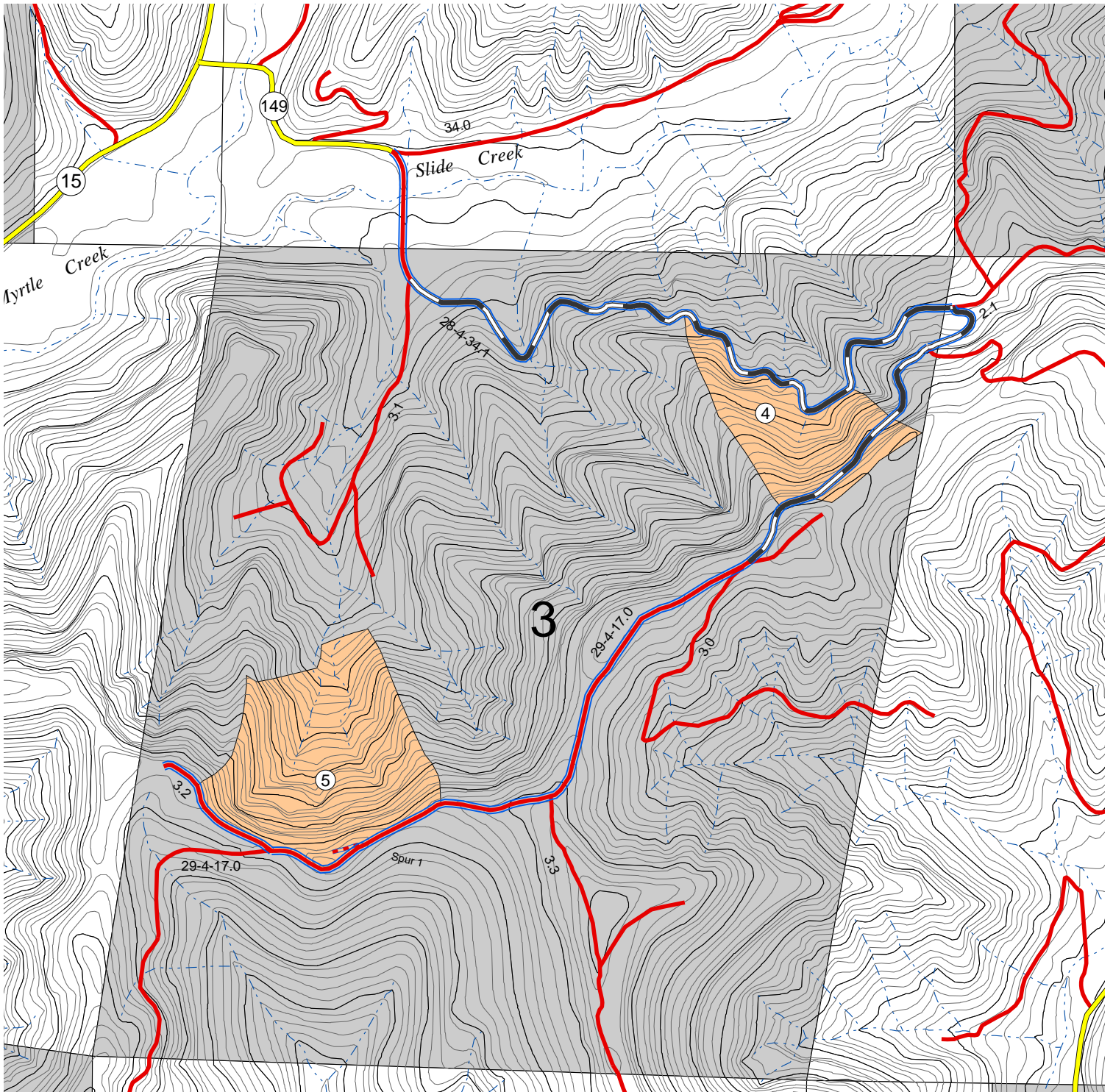


- County Road
- Existing Road
- Access/Haul Route
- Road To Be Renovated
- Renovate, Permanent Rock
- Construct, Permanent Rock
- Stream
- 100' Contour
- 20' Contour

- Thinning Area
- BLM (O&C) Land
- Non-BLM Land

RISE AND FALL

Commercial Thinning



T29S, R4W

Willamette Meridian, Douglas Co., OR.



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- Paved County Road
- Existing Road
- Access/Haul Route
- Road To Be Renovated
- Construct, Permanent Rock
- Stream
- 100' Contour
- 20' Contour

- Thinning Area
- BLM (O&C) Land
- Non-BLM Land