

## FINAL DECISION MEMO

### FLYMON II STEWARDSHIP PROJECT

Deschutes National Forest  
Sisters Ranger District  
Jefferson County, Oregon

T 12 S, R10E sections 1, 12, 13  
T12S, R11 E, sections 6, 7, and 18

#### DECISION

I have decided to authorize the Flymon II Stewardship Project located in the Fly Creek watershed. The project will improve mule deer winter range and promote the growth of large diameter ponderosa pine. This will be accomplished on up to 300 acres by thinning conifer stands from below, mowing brush, and reintroducing prescribed fire. About 420,000 board feet (MBF) of timber will be removed through stand density reduction to promote the development of Late Old Structure (LOS) ponderosa pine forest. In addition, about 3 miles of road will be closed to restore hydrologic function to lower Fly Creek and about 10 acres of spotted knapweed, an invasive plant, will be hand pulled to reduce the risk of spread.

The project meets the requirements found at FSH 1909.15 – 31.2 Categories of Actions for Which a Project or Case File and Decision Memo are Required. Specifically, the project meets category 31.2 (6). Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction.

I have determined that there are no adverse effects to any Federally listed or endangered wildlife, fish, or botanical species or their habitats. I have concluded, based on the environmental analysis, that the project will not have a significant effect on the quality of the natural and human environment. Therefore, the project is excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment (EA) or environmental impact statement (EIS). There are no extraordinary circumstances associated with the project.

#### Background

Due to years of fire suppression the Fly Creek watershed has grown increasingly susceptible to large scale stand replacing wildfire. Fire severity has increased due to the development of ladder fuels within residual conifer stands. The risk of catastrophic fire remains high, not only jeopardizing mule deer habitat, but the long-term viability of various wildlife species and habitats that occur in the area. Deer, as well as other wildlife species, rely on structurally diverse ponderosa pine stands with shrubs of various sizes and age classes. The project will improve wildlife habitat and move the existing vegetation towards the desired future condition.

## Desired Future Condition

The desired future condition is a mosaic of open ponderosa pine dominated forest with 70%-90% of the area dominated by one or two storied stands of large trees, and with 10%-30% of the area in smaller patches of younger trees in even age clumps (1/2 acre in size). Single snags and patches of snags will be abundant. Stand density will be variable; generally with 15%-25% canopy closure. Stand basal area will be reduced from an average of 120 to range from 60 to 80 square feet per acre.

Stand structure will reflect the Historic Range of Variability (HRV) for ponderosa pine forests, including Late Old Structure, where low intensity fires can burn with low risk of a stand replacement event. Shrubs and grasses are generally young and vigorous reflecting the influence of frequent low intensity fire. Understories will be composed of native plants, and little to no non-native plants and/or invasive plants. Shrubs are present but not dominant; patches of shrubs will occur on about 5%-25% of the landscape for deer and elk browse and nesting habitat for birds. Large and small downed wood will be evident.

The desired future condition for Deer Habitat (Management Area 7) states that “Important Deer winter and transition ranges are managed to achieve a desirable arrangement of cover and forage. Cover, usually not exceeding 40 percent, is provided by stands which vary in size. These stands have intermingled openings with a variety of grasses, forbs, and shrubs available for forage. This forage is maintained by prescribed burning (Deschutes National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan 4-6).”

## Purpose and Need

The **purpose** of the project is to meet the objectives for mule deer winter range as defined for Management Area 7 in the Deschutes National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP), and move the project area towards the desired future condition. Additionally, the project will promote the development of future large trees and move the area to Late Old Structure (LOS) to meet the objectives for ponderosa pine forest as defined in Forest Plan Amendment #2, the East Side Screens. The project will also reintroduce prescribed fire.

There is a **need** to thin stands from below to reduce stand densities to promote desired stand and wildlife habitat conditions. Existing mule deer habitat is in decline. Stands are currently overstocked and will not meet the desired future condition(s) without silvicultural treatment. Treatment will reduce stand densities (canopy closure), allowing the growth of grasses and shrubs, as well as aid in the development of LOS ponderosa pine forest.

## Proposed Action

My decision will thin conifer stands from below, mow brush, and reintroduce prescribed burning on about 300 acres in the Fly Creek watershed. Special care will be taken to thin around “VIP” Old Growth trees (rare, very important, old large trees) and protect them during prescribed fire. Large snags will also be protected during prescribed fire.

Estimates from stand exams indicate that the vast majority of trees (approximately 99%) which need to be removed for density management are smaller than 16" dbh. About 80% of the trees to be removed are between 8" and 12" dbh. Less than 1% of the stand is comprised of trees that are greater than 21" in diameter. No trees greater than 21 inches diameter at breast height (dbh) will be removed with this project. The decision is consistent with the Eastside Screens.

Ground-based logging systems will be used to remove felled trees. Activity fuels will be treated by prescribed burning, burning fuel concentrations, or through utilization. Activity created fuels treatment will differ depending on method of harvest. The project does not require any new road construction.

The Eyerly Fire Roads Analysis identified Forest Road 1170-900 to be closed. The road closure is supported by the transportation report prepared for this project. The road will be closed following vegetation restoration treatments of the project.

Currently, treatments for invasive plant sites are limited to hand pull only. One site was identified adjacent to vegetation restoration treatment units associated with Forest Road 1170-400; this site will be treated by hand.

One 10 acre area is a natural opening with shallow soils that is being encroached on by conifers (western juniper and ponderosa pine). In this area no commercial removal or no machine work will occur. Restoration of the opening will be accomplished by the hand felling of trees. The limbs will be lopped and scattered.

## **Design Elements**

The following project design elements incorporate comments received or noted during the public collaboration process, as well as input from the Sisters Ranger District interdisciplinary team.

### Thinning:

- Retain all "old growth" ponderosa pine that appear to have been part of the pre-settlement/pre-fire suppression forest, regardless of size. These trees have the following characteristics: yellow bark with wider plates, well developed, rounded, or flat crowns, and big, long, or droopy branches. About 1-3 pre-settlement/pre-fire suppression ponderosa pine trees occur per acre.
- Concentrate thinning in the young post-settlement (i.e., <80 years old) black bark ponderosa pine component.
- Retain all old growth western junipers in the project area.

### Densities and Spatial Arrangement:

- Residual densities will be variable resulting in a "gappy, patchy, clumpy" pattern to emulate the historical spatial arrangement of ponderosa pine forests.
- Residual basal area will be based on the inherent soil quality and the productivity of the site.
- Densities will vary from 60 sq. ft. to 80 sq. ft. of basal area; approximately 47 trees per acre.

- Unthinned clumps will be left through out the project area to provide screening cover for big game as well as providing habitat connectivity for avian species and small mammals. Unthinned clumps will provide meandering connectivity throughout thinned stands. Unthinned clumps will be retained in areas where the inherent soil quality can retain tree densities in the long-term (primarily Eco-types 2 and 3, see the Soils report). Clump size should be 1/10<sup>th</sup> to 1/4 acre in size.
- Where rocky outcrops exist providing habitat diversity, these areas should be buffered or incorporated into unthinned clumps.

#### Species Composition:

- Ponderosa pine will be the desired leave species in all cases
- Douglas-fir will be the second most desired leave species.
- Remove the majority of species other than ponderosa pine if they appear to have been established in the last 100 years.
- Some post-settlement species, other than ponderosa pine (i.e. incense cedar), may be left occasionally as scattered individuals or very small clumps.
- Where isolated occurrences of incense cedar and Douglas-fir occur in the ponderosa pine stands they will be retained for species diversity.

#### Snags and Down Wood:

- Retain all snags and down wood.
- Large down woody debris will not be disturbed during operations.
- No new snags will be created. Recruitment will come from decadent trees and/or diseased/stressed trees.

#### Fuels Treatments

- Full utilization is the preferred method of treating slash generated from thinning. If this is not possible the next option would consist of the jackpot burning slash concentrations.

#### Ten Acre Natural Opening

- Small encroaching conifers  $\leq 15''$  dbh will be lopped and scattered.

### **Findings Regarding Extraordinary Circumstances**

I have reviewed the effects analysis provided by the interdisciplinary team specialists assigned to this project. I find that the degree of potential effect to any of the resources listed as extraordinary circumstances in FSH 1909.15 (30.3(2)), shown as 1-6 below, does not preclude use of this categorical exclusion.

The following discussions present the rationale for my finding for each extraordinary circumstance (Specialists Reports are located in the Flymon II Stewardship Project record located at the Sisters Ranger District, Sisters, Oregon).

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

There are no threatened or endangered (T&E) species, species proposed for Federal listing, designated critical habitat, or proposed critical habitat for plants, aquatic or wildlife within the project area. There will be “No Effect” to any botanical, aquatic or wildlife species associated with this project.

Suitable habitat for two Forest Service sensitive plant species, Peck’s penstemon (*Penstemon peckii*), and Tall Agoseris (*Agoseris elata*), exists in or near the project area. Neither species was located during surveys completed in May 2007. Project design criteria will minimize or avoid impacts to the habitat of these species. Given the presence of species habitat the project “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.”

Fourteen Region 6 Sensitive wildlife species are documented or suspected on the Sisters Ranger District; the bald eagle is the only species in the vicinity of the project area. The project does not occur within ¼ mile non-line of site or within ½ mile line of site of any known eagle nests. The project does not occur within 400 meters of any known winter roost site. The project will have “No Impact” to the Bald Eagle or its habitat.

There are no Forest Service sensitive aquatic species documented or suspected in the project area. Redband trout populations are known to occur in upper Fly Creek. The project will not occur within or near Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCA’s) associated with the Fly Creek watershed. There will be “No Impact” to the redband trout population or their habitat.

There is no designated “Essential Fish Habitat” within the project area.

The project is east of the range of the Northern Spotted Owl; standards and guidelines in the Northwest Forest Plan do not apply.

## **2) Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal**

There are no flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds in the project area.

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

There are no congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, or national recreation areas in the project area.

## **4) Inventoried Roadless Areas**

There are no Inventoried Roadless Areas in the project area.

## **5) Research Natural Areas**

There are no research natural areas in the project area.

## **6) American Indian and Alaskan Native religious or cultural sites. Archeological sites or historic properties or areas.**

Surveys were conducted for Native American religious or cultural sites, archeological sites, and historic properties or areas that may be affected by this decision. No sites were located in the project area. A **No Historic Properties Affected** determination was made for the project. Any sites found during project implementation will be avoided to ensure there are no impacts to Heritage resource sites. Known sites were excluded from project areas associated with mechanical harvest.

## **Other Resources**

### **Wildlife**

The proposed action is in compliance with the standards and guidelines for wildlife under the Deschutes National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP), as amended. For more detailed see the Wildlife Report located in the project record.

The proposed action is in compliance with the biological objectives identified in the Landbird Conservation Strategy for the East-slope of the Cascade Mountains and associated focal species.

No existing snags are targeted to be cut or removed unless they pose a hazard to mechanical operations under OSHA regulations (Deschutes National Forest LRMP WL-38). No coarse woody debris will be intentionally removed or lost with the exception of what may occur through prescribed fire; however project design will minimize the potential for snag loss. (Deschutes National Forest LRMP, WL-72).

Seasonal restrictions and habitat protection measures have been identified to protect raptor nests and nesting habitat where and if active nest sites are identified (Deschutes National Forest LRMP WL-17, WL-25, WL-31, and Eastside Screens).

It is recommended for project implementation to occur outside the time period of March 15 – June 30 to limit disturbance to nesting land birds.

### **Invasive Plants and Soils**

There are invasive plants located adjacent to and within the project area. The project has an invasive plant ranking of High.

Mitigation measures include: clean equipment before entering the project area, avoid staging equipment in the meadow south of the project area, avoid areas where cheat grass is concentrated, and replant with native seed in disturbed areas. Areas with identified population of Peck's Penstemon will be excluded from mechanized harvest.

Effects to soils were an issue brought up during the collaboration process. Criteria for identifying soils that are sensitive to management are described in the Deschutes National Forest LRMP, as

amended (Appendix 14, Objective 5). Based on these criteria none of the soils within the project area were identified as sensitive soil types.

Mitigation to minimize soil impacts are: Use specialized equipment that lowers ground pressures such as harvester forwarder machinery or an all season vehicle. Operations should occur over snow, frozen, or dry ground.

## **Aquatics and Hydrology**

The proposed action is in compliance with standards and guidelines for aquatics and hydrology under the Deschutes National Forest LRMP, as amended as well as INFISH standards and guidelines.

Mitigation to minimize impacts include: Any haul of equipment and wood products on Forest Road 1170-400 shall occur during the dry season after the intermittent channel has stopped flowing. No crossings or machinery allowed within 50 feet of the intermittent channel that runs through the northern part of the project area. The only designated crossing is at the Forest Road 1170-400 ford. Where possible, use existing roads and old skid trails within the project area for thinning operations. Ensure non-system road and skid trails are sufficiently closed after the project to not encourage off-road motorized use. Closure of Forest Road 1170-900 will include water barring and associated restoration to correct erosion problems including the intermittent stream channel that parallels the Forest Road 1170-900 road to the north.

## **Transportation**

The proposed action will not construct any new roads within the project area. All roads used for log haul will receive some form of road maintenance before, during, and after associated vegetation removal activities. Road maintenance may include logging out, blading, brushing, dust control, and drainage improvements. Forest Road 1170-900 which is currently open to the public will be closed following project activities. Any roads within the project area that are currently closed may be opened up for project use, but will be re-closed following project activities.

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

The project has a long history of public involvement. In 2006 the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF) approached the Sisters Ranger District with interest in a watershed level wildlife habitat enhancement project for the Fly Creek watershed. Due to the history of wildfire in the area and the recent number of landscape scale stand replacing wildfires across the ranger district, there was concern with the long term viability of wildlife habitat within the Fly Creek watershed area. Because of the lack of funding, and availability of time to complete an environmental assessment for a large landscape scale project, a much smaller project was undertaken. Since a stewardship project was being planned in deer winter range on the neighboring Crooked River National Grassland (CRNG), it was determined that Flymon project could serve in a similar stewardship role, and the management objectives for the Metolius Mule Deer Winter Range could be furthered at the landscape level. Subsequently, the CRNG

Stewardship agreement was amended to include the Sisters Ranger District. This resulted in the Flymon Stewardship Demonstration Project.

In 2007 the Flymon Stewardship Demonstration Project was developed to demonstrate what could be accomplished through the stewardship process. Due to the success of the demonstration a 5 year stewardship agreement was signed with the National Wild Turkey Federation. A collaborative working group was subsequently developed to discuss and plan a second year stewardship project for 2008 which would continue the enhancement of wildlife habitat within the Metolius Mule Deer Winter Range. Given these factors the Flymon 2 Stewardship Project was developed.

During 2008 a group of interested parties was formed to collaborate on the proposal for this project. The members were generally supportive of thinning ponderosa pine to improve wildlife habitat in the area. The members included the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs off-Reservation Biologist, Portland General Electric Wildlife Biologist, National Wild Turkey Federation Wildlife Biologists, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, interested members of the public, and several private contractors. Collaboration up to this point has been very successful, with success being measured by productivity, consensus, and support of the collaborative working group.

During the three month collaboration process about 300 letters were mailed to the District wildlife mailing list about the Flymon II Stewardship Project. In addition, after every collaborative working group meeting, meeting notes were mailed out to the same mailing list with an invitation to attend the next meeting.

As a result of the extensive collaborative work that took place prior to public scoping, the scoping period was limited to 15 days. The same mailing list mentioned above was used for public scoping. The scoping letter was mailed on May 13, 2008. Three replies were received.

Issues that surfaced during collaboration and public scoping include improvement and protection of mule deer winter range, impacts to soils from timber harvest, the size of trees to be removed, invasive plants, increased road density, and illegal off-road vehicle travel. These issues and concerns are addressed in this decision through project design.

## **FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS**

This project is consistent with the Deschutes National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended.

## **ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES**

This final decision memo is subject to the appeal process outlined at 36 CFR 215. A legal notice providing the opportunity to comment on the preliminary decision memo was published in The Bulletin, the newspaper of record, on August 5, 2008 initiating a 30-day comment period. No substantive written or oral comments were received during the comment period. This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12(e) (1).



## **IMPLEMENTATION DATE**

The project may be implemented five business days after the signing of this decision.

## **CONTACT PERSON**

Further information concerning this Final Decision Memo or any other questions regarding the project please contact Monty Gregg, Wildlife Biologist, Sisters Ranger District, (541) 549-7700.

/s/William Anthony  
**William Anthony**  
**District Ranger**

9/24/08  
**Date**

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