DEcision Notice
And
Finding of No Significant Impact

Ashland Interface Fire Hazard Reduction (HazRed) Project

USDA Forest Service
Rogue River National Forest
Ashland Ranger District
Jackson County, Oregon

Introduction

The Ashland Ranger District of the Rogue River National Forest has analyzed a proposal to implement the Ashland Interface Fire Hazard Reduction (HazRed) Project. This Decision Notice will document the decisions and findings resulting from the HazRed Project environmental analysis (including public involvement).

The HazRed Revised Environmental Assessment (EA) documents the results of an environmental analysis conducted under the National Environmental Policy Act for this project and is available for review at the Ashland Ranger District office, in Ashland, Oregon. This EA summarizes the analysis of the site-specific effects of implementing the proposed action and its alternatives.

The HazRed project is designed under the Record of Decision for Amendments to Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Planning Documents Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl (Northwest Forest Plan), as well as the Rogue River National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (RRNF LRMP).

The project is located in the eastern Siskiyous Mountains of the Klamath Geological Province, on the Ashland Ranger District of the Rogue River National Forest. The project is partially located within the Ashland Creek Watershed with a portion located within the Tolman Creek and Hamilton Creek sub-watersheds. The portion of the project area within the Ashland Creek Watershed can be divided into two categories; those lands located outside of the hydrologic boundary of the Municipal Watershed, and those located within Municipal Watershed. The legal description is: T. 39 S., R. 1 E.; in sections (or portions of sections) 17, 19, 20, 21, 27, 28, 29, 32, 33, and 34; T. 40 S., R. 1 E.; in sections (or portions of sections) 4 and 5; Willamette Meridian; surveyed Jackson County, Oregon.
The Decision

As the Responsible Official, I have decided to implement Alternative 3 as described in the HazRed Environmental Assessment with the following modifications:

I have decided to include an estimated 0.25 miles of road reconstruction to allow for helicopter landing access in the northwest quarter of section 27. As previously planned, no new (permanent or temporary) roads will be constructed.

In Unit G of Alternative 3, I have decided to designate trees for commercial removal prior to underburning, identical to the description of Unit 40, Alternative 2.

Alternative 3, as modified will implement shaded fuel break maintenance, flank treatments, density management for fuels reduction, and construction of a 13 acre (0.4 mile) section of shaded fuel break to connect two separate existing sections of fuel break on Winburn Point (Table 1). This project will also treat areas of pre-existing slash left untreated from the 1990/91 Helikopter Salvage sale as a result of concerns for the protection of the northern spotted owl (EA p. 42).

This work will be accomplished using a combination of treatment methods including underburning, mechanical treatments (hand cutting with chainsaws and piling for burning) and commercial tree removal (Table 1). Post treatment slash disposal will occur within commercially treated units, as described in the EA, Alternative 3, through handpiling and burning or underburning. Post treatment evaluations will determine the appropriate slash disposal method and the amount of acres to be treated based on the actual amount of slash generated from the tree removal operations.

Table 1. Modified Alternative 3 Summary:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment Strategies:</th>
<th>Acres</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shaded Fuel Break Maintenance</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flank Treatments</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Density Management for Fuels Reduction</td>
<td>894</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaded Fuel Break Construction</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Acres Treated</strong></td>
<td>1,472</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment Methods</th>
<th>Acres</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Underburning</td>
<td>767</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical (hand cut, pile, and burn)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical or Underburning</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Noncommercial Treatments</strong></td>
<td>1,015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helicopter</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tractor</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horse</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skyline</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Commercial Tree Removal</strong></td>
<td>457</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post treatment fuels disposal (commercial treatment units)</th>
<th>Acres</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Handpile and burn or Underburn</td>
<td>*457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(*Areas of concentrated fuels; method and acres to be determined by post harvest evaluation.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Access</th>
<th>Miles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temporary Road Construction</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road Reconstruction</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Alternatives Considered

Three alternatives were fully analyzed and documented in the EA. Under Alternative 1, the No-Action Alternative, proposed treatments would not occur. Two action Alternatives were designed under the guidance of the Bear Watershed Analysis and the Mt. Ashland Late-Successional Reserve Assessment. The design of Alternative 2 focused on maximizing fire hazard reduction treatments with consideration for economic efficiency. The design of Alternative 3 focused on meeting fire hazard reduction objectives with greater emphasis on the protection of water quality, i.e., excluding areas in hazard zone 1 from underburning activities.

Reasons for the Decision

I have reviewed the EA and related material and I have based my decision upon that review. In making this decision, it was necessary to weigh the relative merits and consequences of each alternative as well as to consider public comments. No single factor determined the decision; rather all factors were considered and balanced in reaching the decision.

A. Response to the Purpose and Need

The objective of this project proposal is to maintain and increase the effectiveness of the existing shaded fuel break system. Currently, an estimated 9.5 miles of shaded fuel breaks are established in the Ashland Watershed. With the implementation of this project, the effectiveness of the existing shaded fuel breaks would be maintained and improved. The locations of the treatments included in Modified Alternative 3 have been coordinated with the City of Ashland and private land owners to further increase the effectiveness of fire hazard reduction activities across the landscape.

The implementation of Modified Alternative 3 will manage the structural characteristics of vegetation to:

* reduce surface fuel conditions and limit the surface fireline intensity,
* reduce fuel ladders that can initiate crown fires and crown fuels that can contribute to the spread of crown fire, and
* maintain fuel breaks for control points for underburning,
* allow for the penetration of fire retardant,
* maintain fuel breaks for safe areas for fire fighter deployment and evacuation,
* maintain and improve stand conditions to emphasize the maintenance and regeneration of fire tolerant conifer tree species which includes sugar pine, ponderosa pine, and Douglas-fir.
B. Response to Key Issues

Issues associated with this project proposal were identified by an interdisciplinary team (IDT) through a scoping process. Three issues were identified as being key to designing alternative methodologies of implementing the proposed fire hazard reduction project. The following is a discussion of how my decision to implement Alternative 3 with modification responds to each of these key issues.

**ISSUE 1.** Concern for the potential for adverse effects to water quality as a result of the implementation of fire hazard reduction activities.

Overall watershed condition can be affected by increasing the road density represented by road miles per square mile of land base and increasing the amount of acres of vegetation less than 30 years old within a watershed. Alternative 3 as modified would contribute to the miles of road per square mile by only 0.05 in the East Fork sub-watershed and 0.09 mile in the Hamilton sub-watershed. This is a very minor contribution to the road density of these sub-watersheds. Road reconstruction will occur on an existing road bed, and the road would be closed immediately following the completion of activities. There will be no new road construction. This decision would not increase the proportion of land in vegetative age classes less than 30 years old.

Although there is a potential for short-term adverse impacts to water quality from as a result of increased sediment delivery to stream channels and Reeder Reservoir, the long-term watershed conditions are improved as ground disturbance from this project stabilizes (5 to 10 years) and fire hazard is reduced. Mitigation measures are incorporated into the project design to minimize the potential for adverse impacts to water quality. (EA p. 34-35, 57)

**ISSUE 2.** Concern for the potential for adverse impacts to Late-Successional Habitat and Late-Successional Reserve conditions as a result of fire hazard reduction activities.

The implementation of Alternative 3 would treat 189 acres (1.3 percent) of late-successional habitat with commercial tree removal within the Mt. Ashland Late-Successional Reserve. Another 307 acres (2 percent) of late-successional habitat would be treated with underburning. By treating a smaller area of late-successional habitat, over 14,000 acres of late-successional habitat are protected from a large-scale loss to fire and remain as untreated habitat for late-successional associated species.

A frequently raised concern during the public comment periods was the removal of large old-growth trees that have survived historic fire events and contribute to spiritual and aesthetic values of the area (specifically trees greater than 20 inches). An effective fuelbreak and flank design requires the removal of specific trees, determined by crown spacing and current condition (degree of disease and defect). Trees were identified for removal based on these criteria and not on diameter or commercial value. To use diameters as a criterion would result in not meeting the stated Purpose and Need for the project.
ISSUE 3. Concern for the ability to implement fire hazard reduction treatments in an economically feasible manner.

My decision to implement Alternative 3 with modification incorporates some of Alternative 2 design; capturing the savings associated with reconstructing a section of existing road to reduce tree removal costs for units 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 21. (EA p. 62).

Commercial value received for the trees removed will help augment allocated funds for conduction fire hazard reduction treatments.

C. Response to Other Factors

Response to Cooperative Agreement For the Purpose of Conserving and Protecting the Water Supply of the City of Ashland, Oregon of 1929, and the most recently updated Memorandum of Understanding (1996).

Alternative 3 with modification, effectively addresses the fire hazard conditions existing within the Ashland Watershed. Through the use of the Forest Geologist in unit design, layout, tree removal marking, and underburn prescriptions, land stability issues associated with erosion and sedimentation into water sources are fully considered and responsibly mitigated (EA p. 34-35, 57). With the Implementation of this Decision, the shaded fuel break system and its associated treatments will anchor the National Forest hazard reduction work with the City’s system for an overall coordinated landscape level fire protection strategy across ownerships. The City has been actively involved in the design and revision of the HazRed project. Project suggestions from the Mayor on behalf of the City Council, dated July 10, 1997, were incorporated into this Decision.

Public Involvement

Issues associated with this fire hazard reduction proposal were identified by an interdisciplinary team (IDT) through a scoping process. This process included review and evaluation of information gathered through specialist input and public correspondence received. Letters requesting comments on the proposed action were sent to adjacent land owners, neighboring agencies, and to individuals and organizations who expressed an interest in projects of this nature or projects in this particular area. An invitation to comment on the proposed action was published in Medford’s Mail Tribune and Ashland’s Daily Tidings, legal notices section on July 5, 1996 and July 6, 1996 respectively. A public information meeting was held September 16, 1996 to share information concerning the purpose and need for the project as well as locations for project activity areas and anticipated treatment methods. An estimated 30 to 40 people attended this meeting.

An invitation to comment on the proposed Ashland Interface Fire Hazard Reduction (HazRed) project Environmental Assessment was sent February 24, 1997 to interested citizens and organizations. A Legal Notice published in Medford’s Mail Tribune newspaper on February 25, 1997, established a 30 day comment period under 36 CFR 215. The comment period began on
February 26 and ended March 27, 1997. Copies of the Environmental Assessment and Analysis File were mailed to many organizations and individuals who requested a copy. Copies were also made available at the Ashland Ranger District Office for any individual or organization who wished to personally pick up a copy. A public meeting was held on March 17, 1997 to discuss the project proposal and the environmental analysis process; about 40 to 50 persons attended. Due to a large response of interested citizens requesting a field review of the project prior to commenting; multiple field trips were scheduled and conducted in March and April of 1997. Also, for those who wished to review the project area outside of the scheduled field trips, keys and permits to enter the Restricted Watershed Area were issued. Due to road safety concerns from flood damage, permits and keys were only issued after 8:00 in the morning and were required to be returned by 4:00 the same day. At the request of interested citizens for more time to prepare comments following the field reviews, a second non-traditional comment period was established with legal ads published in Medford’s Mail Tribune and Ashland’s Daily Tidings newspapers on March 28, 1997. The second comment period ran from March 29, 1997 through April 28, 1997.

Comments and interest concerning the proposal were received throughout this process, including dialog through the years time between the release of the EA and this decision date. I have given careful consideration to all comments received in making my decision.

**Changes to the EA**

During scoping and the EA comment periods, many additional issues and points of clarification and concern were identified. During the fall and winter of 1997-98, detailed review of the comments received and the analysis of the alternatives considered was conducted. All public and agency input was given careful reconsideration and suggested that the initial EA should be revised to make some factual corrections and to improve or modify the way the analysis was documented.

Only minor changes in the scope of the alternatives considered has been conducted; this amounts to a slight decrease in the number of units, amount of area affected, and refinements to previously estimated data that would normally be expected with the later stages of planning and early field validation.

The issues and concerns identified during the comment periods did not lead to development of a new or different alternative that had not been previously given consideration. Therefore, I decided to issue a revised EA and Analysis File. There will not be an additional comment period since the alternatives considered and the scope of their potential effects has essentially remained the same. The Revised EA contains a complete Response to Comments section, prepared under section 215.3, 215.5, & 215.6.

The Revised Environmental Assessment (EA) and its Analysis File is a complete revision of the previous EA. Reviewers are cautioned to avoid comparison between this and the previous EA. This revised package will serve as the only Environmental Assessment documentation prepared
under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) for the Ashland Interface Fire Hazard Reduction (HazRed) Project.

**Consistency Findings**

The Rogue River National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (RRNF Forest Plan) was amended with the adoption, May 20, 1994, of the Record of Decision (ROD) and attached Standards and Guidelines (S&G’s) for Management of Habitat for Late-Successional and Old-Growth Forest Related Species within the Range of the northern Spotted Owl.

This proposed project has been analyzed and designed under the Northwest Forest Plan and the RRNF LRMP, as applicable. I find that the proposed project is consistent with the RRNF LRMP as merged with the Northwest Forest Plan and other laws, regulations and agreements applicable to the management of National Forest System lands and resources:

- As required by the Northwest Forest Plan, a Late-Successional Reserve Assessment (LSRA) was completed prior to planning for habitat manipulation activities within the Mt. Ashland Late-Successional Reserve. Regional Ecosystem Office (REO) review of the LSRA was completed and documented in a September 30, 1996 memo (Appendices). In addition, the REO conducted an onsite review of the project on May 1, 1997. The REO found the project to be consistent with the types of activities they expected to occur when they exempted the proposed fire hazard reduction activities from further project level review (EA p. 4). By treating smaller areas of late-successional habitat this project will provide a balanced approach for reducing fire hazard to protect larger areas of fire-prone late-successional forest by compartmentalizing landscape units to allow for safe and effective fire suppression (EA p. 60).

- Riparian Reserves will be applied to all fish-bearing and nonfish-bearing streams, unstable and potentially unstable land, and wetlands (EA p. 79).

- A small portion of Riparian Reserves of nonfish-bearing streams intermittent streams will be entered with underburning, mechanical and commercial tree removal treatments. This work was Recommended by the Bear Watershed Analysis; identified for reducing fire hazard. A small corner of unit 23 is located within a fish-bearing Riparian Reserve. This unit is an existing shaded fuel break. Continuing to maintain this existing shaded fuel break would have no effect on shade to the creek or future supply of coarse wood. Therefore, continued maintenance of this shaded fuel break would not prevent the attainment of the Aquatic Conservation Strategy Objectives (EA p. 79).

- This project will provide for the protection of Municipal Watershed values consistent with RRNF LRMP Standards and Guidelines for Watershed Protection (RRNF LRMP, Restricted Watershed, p. 4-273, 4-274) (EA p. 5, 27, 34, 35, 57).
Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

The Revised Environmental Assessment indicates that Alternative 3 as modified, will have:

1. **No known significant irreversible resource commitments or irretrievable losses of vegetation, wildlife habitats, soil productivity, or water quality.**

   There will be no significant resource commitments nor any significant irretrievable losses of vegetation, soils, water, or wildlife and fish habitats. There will be no significant direct or indirect impacts from implementation of this action. (EA, Chapter IV. Environmental Consequences). Except for the potential for a slight short-term increase in sedimentation produced to the Ashland, Tolman, Hamilton, and Reeder Reservoir, the physical and biological effects are limited to the project area and immediately adjacent areas.

   The project design incorporates as mitigation measures also referred to as Best Management Practices to achieve consistency with Standards and Guidelines for Riparian Reserves and Aquatic Conservation Strategy Objectives (EA p. 34-35, 57).

2. **There are no significant effects on public health and safety.**


3. **There are no unique characteristics of the geographical area that will be significantly affected by the selected action.**

   (EA Chapter III. Affected Environment and Chapter IV. Environmental Consequences)

4. **The effects of this action on the human environment are not highly controversial.**

   Although a considerable amount of public comment was received during scoping and the comment periods, the substance of these comments centered on previously identified issues that had been considered and analyzed. The extent of this interest to this date appears to lie in the immediate community; this action has not generated significant regional or national interest.

5. **The environmental analysis revealed no effects on the human environment that are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.**
6. **This action is not precedent-setting.**

It does not establish a precedent for future actions which may have a significant effect on the environment. It does not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. This is not a major action within the context of the RRNF LRMP, nor is it a change from the historic levels of management activity for the project area.

Vegetation management will occur on about 1,472 acres, which is approximately 7 percent of the north zone of the Mt. Ashland LSR located on the Ashland Ranger District. Activities such as this project were expected to occur within Late-Successional Reserves within the Klamath Mountain Province (Northwest Forest Plan p. B7-B8). Also refer to Consistency Findings in this Decision Notice.

The Forest Service has been involved with management of the Watershed for the quality and quantity of water since the early 1900s. This has included vegetation management through administrative timber sales for the construction of the existing shaded fuel breaks and the 1990/91 Helikopter Salvage sale to conduct fire hazard reduction work. In addition, underburning has been conducted in the Ashland Watershed since 1983. This project is similar in nature to historic activities that have occurred in Ashland Creek Watershed.

7. **There are no known significant cumulative effects between this and other actions ongoing or proposed in the affected watershed.**

All known connected actions which are likely to occur in the reasonably foreseeable future were analyzed with respect to this action, including their direct, indirect, and cumulative effects. All known connected actions associated with the selected activities or other currently implemented or planned activities which are likely to occur in the reasonably foreseeable future have been identified and in the EA and the direct, indirect, and cumulative effects disclosed (EA Chapter III. Affected Environment and Chapter IV. Environmental Consequences).

8. **There are no significant effects on heritage resources.**

A heritage resource survey was conducted; this action will not adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structure or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National register of Historic Places. It will not cause loss or destruction of significant cultural, or historical resources (EA p. 81-82).

9. **This action will not adversely affect any threatened or endangered species or critical habitat outside of the scope of the current recovery efforts.**

Surveys to locate all threatened, endangered, sensitive species in compliance with the Endangered Species Act have been accomplished. Surveys for Survey and Manage and other special species under direction from the Northwest Forest Plan have been completed.
Appropriate mitigation measures have been designed and other compliance mechanisms will be employed during project implementation (EA p. 34-37).

Impacts of prescribed burning on habitat were discussed in the FY97-FY05 Biological Assessment for southwest Oregon, and the reciprocal Biological Opinion by United States Department of the Interior Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). Since the project occurs within the Mt. Ashland Late-Successional Reserve, consultation was reinitiated with the FWS. They responded with the Biological Opinion on December 10, 1996; the fire hazard reduction project proposal would not be expected to jeopardize the continued existence of the northern spotted owl. On April 9, 1997, FWS Biologists Joe Burns (FWS consultation biologist) and Brendan White (FWS Northwest Forest Plan validation biologist) conducted a field review of the proposal. On December 11, 1997, FWS Biologists Joe Burns, Brendan White, and Eileen Stone re-visited the project to review in the field the adjustments made in the trees marked for removal. These field visits are documented in memos dated May 16, 1997 and March 10, 1998 contained in the Appendices.

Consultation was completed for this project with United States Department of Commerce National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration National Marine Fisheries Service for the potential effects on Southern Oregon/Northern California coho salmon and Klamath Mountains Province steelhead. The August 11, 1997 Biological Opinion (Appendices) concurred this project was a “may affect, but Not Likely to Adversely Affect this species”.

10. This action does not threaten a violation of Federal, State, or local laws or other legal requirements imposed for protection of the environment.

Consideration of both context and intensity were used to determine significance of the effects of this action, as described in 40 CFR 1508.27. Sufficient information is available to make a reasoned choice among alternatives based on analysis information in the Environmental Assessment and past actions of similar context and intensity in this area. The relationship of individually insignificant actions that have cumulatively significant impacts (1508.27[b][7]) was part of the analysis for the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the Rogue River National Forest’s Land and Resource Management Plan.

Based on this information, I have determined this is not a major Federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment; therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared.

Implementation of Decision

The implementation of the Ashland Interface Fire Hazard Reduction Project may take place 50 days following the publication of the legal notice announcing this decision in Medford’s Mail Tribune Newspaper. This decision is expected to be implemented beginning in late spring to summer of 1998.
Right to Administrative Review (Appeal)

This decision is subject to administrative review (appeal) pursuant to 36 CFR 215. A written Notice of Appeal must be filed with the Appeal Deciding Officer: Regional Forester, Attn: 1570 Appeals, P.O. Box 3623, Portland, OR 97208-3623. FAX (503) 808-2255.

The written Notice of Appeal must be filed within 45 days of publication of the decision in Medford’s Mail Tribune newspaper. An Appeal pursuant the 36 CFR 215.11 may be filed by any person or group that has provided comment or otherwise expressed interest in a particular proposed action by the close of the Comment Period specified in 36 CFR 215.6.C

In accordance with 36 CFR 215.14, it is the appellant’s responsibility to provide the Appeal Deciding Officer sufficient evidence and rationale to show why the Responsible Official’s decision should be remanded or reversed. The Notice of Appeal must include:

1. A statement that the document is an appeal filed pursuant to 36 CFR part 215.

2. The name and address of the appellant and, if possible, a telephone number.

3. Identification of the decision document being appealed, including the title and subject of the document, the date of the decision, and the name and title of the Responsible Official.

4. The specific change(s) to the decision that the appellant seeks or portion of the decision to which the appellant objects.

5. Why the Responsible Official’s decision fails to consider comments previously provided, either before or during the comment period, and how the appellant believes the decision violates law, regulation, or policy.

Linda Duffy
District Ranger, Responsible Official
Ashland Ranger District
645 Washington Street
Ashland, OR 97520

March 27, 1998
Date

For further information contact:
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