

**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT**

Twin Falls District
Shoshone Field Office
400 West F Street
Shoshone, Idaho 83352

Scoping Information Document

**West Camas Forest Restoration and Timber Sale
ID-230-2009-EA-3913**

This information document summarizes a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposal to apply vegetation treatments in the form of dwarf mistletoe reduction, hand planting seedlings, and commercial thinning to meet forest health and productivity objectives identified by the Sun Valley Management Framework Plan (MFP, 1981) as amended by the Fire Management Direction Amendment (FMDA, 2008). Federal actions must be analyzed in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations to determine potential environmental consequences.

The purpose of this report is to inform interested and affected parties of the proposal and to solicit comments to assist with the NEPA review of the proposal. Analysis of the proposal is ongoing, and will be documented in an Environmental Assessment with an estimated completion date of July 1, 2010. Comments received in response to this solicitation will be used to identify potential environmental issues related to the proposed action and to identify alternatives to the proposed action that meet the purpose of and need for the project.

Purpose and Need for Action

The Sun Valley MFP identifies areas within the West Camas project boundaries (see Figure 1) to be intensively managed in order to shift stands from being overstocked and diseased to stands that are healthy, vigorous, and can provide for multiple resource uses. As part of intensive management, areas that are capable of producing timber products will be actively managed to protect resources from damaging agents and for production of forest resources. The FMDA also outlines management goals for vegetation within these areas; these goals look to increase the amount of early and mid seral forest structure to more closely match historical conditions. The objectives for the proposed treatments would lead to meeting the goals of the Sun Valley MFP as amended by the FMDA.

The health of forest communities within the West Camas project area are at risk because of changes in historical disturbance intervals, a shift in species composition, and an increase in susceptibility to insects and disease (e.g. bark beetles and Douglas-fir dwarf mistletoe). Historically, these forest communities experienced wildfire at regular intervals that influenced their structure, species composition, and function. Wildfires provided a disturbance that maintained a mix of seral structures and reduced tree densities in Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii* var. *glauca*) and ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) communities. Additionally, these regular disturbances also provided a means to remove trees infected with Douglas-fir dwarf mistletoe (Hessburg, et al., 2008). Historically, these wildfire events would remove the majority of the heavily infected areas and naturally initiate new stands with mixed species. Fire suppression efforts have limited the opportunity for these types of events to occur and areas have become diseased to the

point that Douglas-fir will not be able to persist or effectively regenerate without removal of the diseased trees. Today, high tree densities, dominance of a single species (Douglas-fir), and high amounts of disease put these forest communities at risk of having uncharacteristic disturbances e.g. high mortality from insects or disease and/or large stand replacing fires.

The overall purpose of treatments under this project is to improve the current and future health of forest communities and provide them with characteristics that will allow them to be resilient when faced with disturbances such as wildfire, insect outbreaks, and endemic diseases. A combination of silvicultural treatments prescribed to specific locations would remove diseased trees, promote resistance to insects, reduce threat from uncharacteristic wildfires, establish new regeneration, increase forest production, and increase structural diversity.

Existing Condition

The West Camas project area is located in sections 35 and 34 of Township 2 North, Range 12 East of the Boise Meridian. This area is bordered by lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service to the north and the Idaho Department of Lands to the south and east. The project area is approximately 900 acres with only about 300 acres identified for treatment; this area includes portions of the Ear Creek Drainage and the South Fork of Lime Creek Drainage. Current land and resources uses within the area include but are not limited to wildlife habitat, recreation, forest products, and grazing. Presently, there is an ongoing forest inventory of the area and adjacent areas that will provide further information to aid in the refinement of the proposed action, development of alternative actions, and any decisions that will be made at the conclusion of the EA.

Forest communities within this area are composed of primarily Douglas-fir with areas of aspen (*Populus tremuloides*), ponderosa pine, lodge-pole pine (*Pinus contorta*), sub-alpine fir (*Abies lasiocarpa*), Engelmann spruce (*Picea engelmannii*) and sagebrush (*Artimesia* spp.)- grass associations. Forest structures range from dense mature stands to areas with young second growth; however, there are limited amounts of mature-open conifer and young aspen stands that historically occupied the area. A major influence of current stand structure and site productivity on approximately 200 acres is Douglas-fir dwarf mistletoe. The primary and essentially the only host of Douglas-fir dwarf mistletoe is Douglas-fir and the disease will proliferate where Douglas-fir is the dominant species, i.e. the West Camas project area. The main symptom of infection is large systemic growths referred to as “witches brooms” and are the result of induced prolific bud and branch stimulation. The trees growth and energy is concentrated into these areas limiting nutrients and water to other areas in the tree. As a result, growth rates and defense capabilities are reduced relative to the amount of the infection. Because the stands within the project area are dominated by Douglas-fir the disease has been essentially spread across the entire project area with 100% infection in some areas. Within heavily infected areas, overstory trees are top killed with heavy witches brooms on lower branches and understory trees are stunted and exhibit a shrub like structure. Under these circumstances the severely infected stands will not produce viable future generations making long term management under these conditions unsustainable. Also heavily infected mistletoe areas increase the potential of uncharacteristic wildfires and insect outbreaks not only within the heavily infected areas, but throughout the project area.

Although dwarf mistletoe is a big influence on productivity and health, it is not the only influence; where dwarf mistletoe is not the primary management concern high tree densities are. The project area exhibits high tree densities within mature stands as well in areas of second growth and encroachment, with some areas approaching 400 trees per acre. In mature areas with high tree densities individual trees are competing with each other for light, nutrients, and water. Competition within these areas are currently slowing individual tree growth and in some instances resulting in tree mortality. In younger second

growth stands the competition between younger individuals is not currently having a large impact on growth and mortality, but will if these stands mature with their current densities. In general competition primarily limits growth and the production of wood fiber, but once high levels of competition are reached, as are exhibited in mature areas within the project boundaries, the ability of individuals to survive periods of drought, insect attacks, and other diseases are also reduced (Hadfield, et al., 2000).

Proposed Action

In order to meet the goals of the Sun Valley MFP as amended by the FMDA, the BLM is proposing a combination of thinning and regeneration/sanitation harvests on approximately 300 acres. These silvicultural treatments will be employed with specific criteria to meet the different needs of each of the stands within the project area. Thinning prescriptions are designed to capture mortality, reduce tree densities, and redistribute site productivity to the remaining trees within the stand. Thinning transfers available nutrients, water, and sun light to already established trees, whereas regeneration/sanitation harvests are intended to free up these resources to allow the establishment of a new generation of trees along with reducing diseases. Regeneration/sanitation harvests will be prescribed in areas as a way to restore forests where there are currently high amounts of disease or there has been a large shift in species composition (i.e. aspen to conifer). As part of the proposed treatments the BLM also identifies harvest methods and supporting actions such as improving existing roads, construction of new roads, and removal of activity fuels (i.e. prescribed burning).

Vegetation Treatment Actions

The proposed action will include approximately 185 acres of thinning and 115 acres of mixed regeneration/sanitation harvest treatments. The 185 acres of thinning area would be additionally split up into two different types of thinning; some areas would be prescribed a traditional intermediate/crown thinning the other areas would be prescribed a modified selection thinning. Intermediate/crown thinning would be accomplished by removing intermediate and co-dominant trees. Priorities for removal would be given to trees infested with disease, trees that contribute to ladder fuels, trees that have a live crown ratio less than 30% and then any additional trees needed to create canopy openings. Following these priorities trees would be removed until an average basal area of 40-60 square feet per acre is reached. The modified selection thinning that we propose would remove trees that 1) reduce the incidence of dwarf mistletoe, 2) reduce tree density, 3) release second growth trees, and 4) increase and/or maintain species diversity. These thinning objectives would be accomplished by setting priorities for tree removal to trees infested with disease; trees with crooks, forks or sweeps; remnant seed trees; and then intermediate Douglas-fir. Conversely, priorities for retention will be ponderosa pine, lodge pole, and scattered aspen. These priorities would be followed until an average basal area of 20 to 40 square feet per acre is reached. Regeneration/sanitation harvests prescriptions, like thinning prescriptions, will also have specific goals and criteria for tree selection depending on the condition of individual stands. Regeneration/sanitation harvests are prescribed to areas severely diseased and would follow a guideline to remove all heavily diseased Douglas-fir and then any subsequent Douglas-fir that are not needed to produce regeneration. The areas identified for regeneration/sanitation harvest would leave five to ten large overstory trees per acre to serve as a seed source. These trees would be the most disease free trees within the unit, would be picked to maintain species diversity, and would have desirable characteristics to produce regeneration. If necessary, after regeneration is established, natural and/or artificial, the seed trees would be girdled to reduce mistletoe infection of new seedlings. Figure 2 shows the spatial distribution of the areas proposed for thinning and regeneration treatments.

Supporting Actions and harvest methods

Currently there are 3.75 miles of existing road within the project area; approximately 3 miles will need to be improved and 2 culverts installed to bring the road back to the original specifications it was originally

built. Additionally, to fully implement the above treatments an estimated 1.5 miles of temporary road must also be built and an additional 2 stream crossings will need to be improved. On both improved and new road areas, cut and fill slopes will need to be shaped or reshaped and the road graded to have a minimum of a 12-14 foot running surface and less than a 10% slope. Rolling water-bars will also be added and where out sloping is not desired a ditch and release culvert will be installed, if needed. After the initial road construction and improvement, cut and fill slopes will be seeded with a mixture of grasses that will serve to stabilize soils and reduce the introduction of weeds. The routes constructed and improved will be maintained for use by logging trucks until the project is completed (approximately 3-4 years after initial construction/improvement). After the project is completed culverts will be removed and the roadways will be re-vegetated with perennial vegetation and maintained to allow access for motorcycle, bike, horse, and foot traffic. Figure 3, attached, shows the spatial extent of the proposed transportation network. In addition to the use of BLM infrastructure, the treatments would also depend on the use of Camas County and Idaho Department of Lands roadways to remove forest products.

Approximately 85 acres of the area to be treated would use a cable (e.g. skyline or highlead) primary transport system with hand cutting to remove logs from the treatment units to a landing. The remaining of the treated areas would use a ground based primary transport system with either mechanized or hand cutting to remove the logs from the units to the landing. The distribution by harvest system is shown in Figure 4. Activity fuels that are created by the log processing would be removed from the units when there is an interest in using the biomass or where it would increase the safety and capability in reducing the fuel levels. If the fuel is not removed from the units then it would be piled and burned under the direction of an approved burn plan.

Preliminary Issues

Preliminary issues have been identified by an interdisciplinary team through meetings and by resource specialists reviewing the proposal. The preliminary issues/affected resources that have been identified for further evaluation within an environmental assessment are as listed below with rationale as to why further evaluation is needed.

- Forest Resources - The proposed project would have an impact on the overall forest health and how the forest community will function ecologically. Additionally, the proposed project will influence what kind of forest management opportunities will be available in the future.
- Fuels and Fire Management - The proposed action would affect the fire/fuels management of the area. By implementing the proposed project, changes in the disease potential and fuel characteristics of the area would change how forest communities are impacted by wildfire and the potential for uncharacteristic fire effects to occur.
- Lands/ Access - The Forest Service (FS) has a right-of-way for both a road and trail in the proposed project area. In order to comply with BLM Right of Way (ROW) regulations the FS will need to be notified of the project and given timeframes when the ROW areas will be used by the BLM. Additionally, work within existing travel routes would reduce the ability for public to use these routes safely.
- Conflicts with livestock grazing – During the projects implementation livestock may be displaced to other portions of the allotment that are not within the proposed treatment areas. Post project requirements may also require that livestock operations be maintained outside of regeneration areas for a specified length of time.

- Potential for an increase in soil erosion - There is potential for impacts to soils from the proposed project as there would be disturbance from vegetation removal and associated infrastructure improvement and construction.
- Conflicts with recreational uses – The proposed project would temporarily displace recreation users during times of implementation. Additionally, after the project’s implementation, travel routes that are currently used may be identified for closure or restricted to specific types of uses.
- Wildlife including Migratory Birds and Special Status Species – The proposed project would temporarily displace wildlife, when present, during times of implementation and would also change the vegetation structure resulting in changes in habitat availability.
- Fish including special status species – The implementation of the proposed project and changes to vegetation surrounding the streams within the project area have a potential to impact fish habitat.
- Potential for an increase in noxious weeds - Currently, Canada thistle is found within the project area. Any major ground disturbance, such as road enhancement, could potentially spread the current seed- bank.
- Potential for impacts to air quality – Smoke from burning residual slash left in the treatment units and piled at the landing areas will temporarily increase the amount of small particle matter in the air.

Preliminary Alternative Development

Currently, the proposed action is being developed further to increase the detail in implementation and design features. Alternatives to the proposed action are also being developed that could use different silvicultural techniques with more or less areas treated and include changes to infrastructure needs.

Decision to be Made

The Shoshone Field Manager will decide whether to approve the implementation of the proposed action or an alternative to the proposed action based on the outcome of an environmental assessment and the issuance of a Finding of No Significant Impacts (FONSI). The decision will include any mitigation and/or monitoring requirements and as outlined in 43 CFR 5003.3 (a) and (b), protests of the decision may be made within 15 days of the publication date.

Public Input Needed

Comments are specifically requested on the proposed action, preliminary issues, and alternatives. Comments made on this proposal would be most helpful if they are received by November 15, 2009 and are directly relevant to the proposal and project area. The BLM will not reject public feedback outside established public involvement timeframes; however, these comments may be considered secondary to comments received in a timely manner and may only be assessed to determine if they identify concerns that would substantially alter the assumptions, proposal, design, or analysis presented in the EA.

Written comments must be submitted to Holly Hampton, Acting Field Manager, 400 West F Street Shoshone ID, 83352. The office business hours for submitting hand-delivered comments are 7:45 am through 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in

a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), Word (.doc), or portable document format (.pdf) to id_shoshone_fo@blm.gov. E-mails submitted to e-mail addresses other than the one listed, in other formats than those listed, or containing viruses may not be received. To be most helpful, comments sent electronically should include the title of this project in the subject line. Please identify whether you are submitting comments as an individual or as the designated spokesperson on behalf of an organization. Issues that are outside the scope of the proposal will not be addressed at this planning level.

Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, it is advised that your entire comment, including your personal identifying information, may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold from public review your personal identifying information, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

The primary contact for questions and comments is Kasey C. Prestwich, Forester, 400 West F Street Shoshone ID, 83352, (208) 732-7204.

Attachments:
Figures 1-4