



# United States Department of the Interior

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## **DRAFT FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT FOR THE LOWER GRAVE VEGETATION MANAGEMENT PROJECT DOI-BLM-OR-M070-2013-003-EA**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The Grants Pass Field Office, Medford District Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Lower Grave Vegetation Management Project Environmental Assessment (EA) is available for public comment from January 14, 2014 to March 2, 2014. The purpose and need of the project is to implement forest management activities that improve forest health and vigor and reduce wildfire danger while providing a sustainable supply of timber and other forest commodities. Alternative 2 analyzes for 1,010 acres of forest management activities, 0.78 miles of temporary route reconstruction, 1.12 miles of new temporary route construction, 0.31 miles of permanent road construction and 47 miles of existing road maintenance.

All proposed forest management activities were analyzed under the Lower Grave Vegetation Management Project EA (DOI-BLM-OR-M070-2013-003-EA).

### **II. DETERMINATION OF SIGNIFICANCE**

The discussion of the following significance criteria applies to the intended actions and is within the context of local importance. Chapter 3 of the EA discloses the effects of Alternative 2. None of the effects identified, including direct, indirect and cumulative effects, are considered to be significant and do not exceed those effects described in the 1995 Medford District Resource Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement (1994 RMP/EIS). The environmental effects of Alternative 2 do not meet the definition of significance in context or intensity as defined in 40 CFR § 1508.27. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not necessary and will not be prepared.

**Context.** The Lower Grave Vegetation Management Project proposes to actively manage 1,010 acres of forests within a portion of the Grave Creek Watershed. The Grave Creek Watershed is approximately 104,559 acres. The Lower Grave Vegetation Management Project proposes to treat less than 1% of the lands contained within the Grave Creek Watershed. Local interests reside within Josephine County. Alternative 2 by itself does not have international, national,

region-wide, or state-wide importance.

**Intensity.** The following discussion is organized around the Ten Significance Criteria described in 40 CFR § 1508.27(b) as they pertain to the context of the Lower Grave Vegetation Management Project under Alternative 2.

**1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.** The most noteworthy predicted environmental effects of Alternative 2 include:

- a) **Soil Erosion and Sensitive Soils.** Because of the implementation of PDFs, accelerated erosion, chronic erosion, or excessive soil displacement that would occur as a result of any proposed actions associated with this project is not expected. The magnitude and extent of soil erosion from all activities would be consistent with the impact analysis and conclusions provided in the 1994 Medford RMP EIS (EA p. 128).
- b) **Fuel Loading and Fire hazard.** Alternative 2 would reduce fuel loading on approximately 378 acres (EA, p. 18), and may also be implemented in conjunction with other proposed treatments for this project (EA, p. 18). Long-term beneficial effects are anticipated in terms of decreased fire hazard on approximately 378 acres which could be utilized as strategic holding points for fire suppression personnel for the next 10 to 20 years (EA, p. 65). Alternative 2 would result in a short term increase (six months to 2 years) in fire hazard due to the presence of slash or until the time it is treated and/or partially decomposed (EA, p. 65). The implementation of PDFs and BMPs listed in the EA on pages 25 through 26 would reduce fire hazard within harvest units. Treatments completed under this project would affect the fuel characteristics at the surface, mid and upper canopies altering the current trend of large scale high severity fire events by disrupting fuel continuity, uniformity and structure by reducing potential fire behavior (EA, p. 65). By treating the understory and overstory vegetation, potential fire behavior is reduced to surface fires and passive crown fires (EA, p. 64).
- c) **Water Quality.** With the implementation of no-treatment buffers (Ecological Protection Zones), BMPs, and specific PDFs identified in Chapter 2.3, would result in no direct or long term input of sediment to streams and thus no cumulative effects to water quality (EA, p. 139). Riparian Reserve thinning is proposed in areas that are not currently achieving Aquatic Conservation Strategy objectives. In those Riparian Reserves which could benefit from proposed treatments, an EPZ has been identified to ensure protection of stream channel structure and water quality (EA, p. 19).
- d) **Soil Compaction and Productivity.** Total compaction/displacement associated with tractor skid trails, landings and cable yarding corridors would account for an average of 10.63% per unit. Across the Planning Area, the overall compaction would be 8.17% and soil productivity loss would be 2.86% (EA, p. 116). Each tractor harvest unit in Alternative 2 would be below 12% compaction and 5% productivity loss as analyzed in the 1994 Medford District RMP/EIS.
- e) **Botany.** See 9 below.

f) **Northern Spotted Owl.** See 9 below.

g) **Red Tree Vole.** Oregon red tree vole (RTV) (*Arborimus longicaudus*) is a 2001 ROD Survey and Manage species (Category C, survey and manage known sites). RTV surveys were completed to protocol. Three active RTV sites may be negatively affected and would not be managed to the full extent of the RTV Management Recommendations (USDA & USDI 2000). These sites would also be analyzed and reviewed as potential Non-high Priority (NHP) sites (IM-OR-2012-036) and would have harvest in suitable habitat occurring within one site-potential tree length of an active nest or associated inactive nests. No active nest trees would be cut. Additionally, any inactive tree within 100 meters of an active tree would not be cut (EA, p. 103). The release of these three RTV sites from full management recommendations is expected to have negligible impacts to the RTV populations within the east Grave Creek watershed (E, p. 107).

**2. The degree to which the selected alternative will affect public health or safety.** Public health and safety would not be affected. The Proposed Action is comparable to other projects which have occurred within the Grants Pass Resource Area with no unusual health or safety concerns. The Planning Area is not located within a Class 1 designated airshed or non-attainment area. Activity fuel burning operations would follow all requirements of the Oregon Smoke Management Plan and the Department of Environmental Quality Air Quality and Visibility Protection Program, ensuring that smoke related impacts to public health and safety are mitigated. The impact of smoke on air quality is expected to be localized and of short duration. Particulate matter would not be of a magnitude to harm human health, affect the environment or result in property damage (EA, p. 167).

Dust created from vehicle traffic on gravel and natural-surface roads and logging operation would be localized and of short duration. Additionally, four routes that occur near residences have been identified for approved surface stabilizers (EA, p. 29). Alternative 2 is consistent with the provisions of the Federal Clean Air Act (EA, p. 167). Public health and safety would not be affected thus the impacts from Alternative 2 would be insignificant.

**3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farm lands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.** It was the BLM's recommendation to the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) in the December 23, 2014 letter that the Lower Grave Vegetation Management Project will have "No Adverse Effect" to cultural resources. Consultation with SHPO is ongoing. Final consultation determinations will be reported in the final FONSI and subsequent Decision Record for the project.

There are no eligible rivers under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, as amended, in the Lower Grave Vegetation Management Project Planning Area. There are no Research Natural Areas (RNAs) or Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) as designated by the Medford District RMP in the Planning Area. There are no park lands, prime farm lands, wetlands, or ecologically critical areas in the Planning Area (EA, pp. 167-168).

Recreation users in the Planning Area may experience increased log truck traffic during the

operational months; however, this type of activity is typical for the area because of harvesting on private and other government managed lands. The area is open to dispersed recreation use, as is most of the Grants Pass Resource Area. Alternative 2 would have a neutral effect on dispersed recreation in the Resource Area and would be insignificant.

**4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.** The effects of the Alternative 2 on the quality of the human environment were adequately understood by the interdisciplinary team to provide analysis in the EA.

Public comments and input have been considered throughout the analysis for this project and the interdisciplinary team and the BLM responded to those comments in Chapter 1.6 and page 220 the EA. While comments and scientific research were mentioned by the public, the action of the Lower Grave Vegetation Management Project are within those identified in the 1995 Medford District RMP and the predicted effects are disclosed in Chapter 3 of the EA. The IDT utilized a variety of applicable science to determine the effects of the actions in Alternative 2, as disclosed in Appendix 6 of the EA. None of the comments were considered controversial in respect to their context and intensity in determining significance.

**5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.** The effects of the Proposed Action are not unique or unusual. The BLM has experience with similar forest management projects and have found the effects to be reasonably predictable. The environmental effects to the human environment are fully analyzed in Chapter 3 of the EA. Public concerns and input have been considered throughout the analysis; see Chapter 1.6 and page 220 of the EA. The activities analyzed in Alternative 2 are routine in nature, which includes standard PDFs, BMPs and seasonal restrictions. These effects are well known and do not involve unique or unknown risk to the human environment.

**6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.** Alternative 2 does not set a precedent for future actions that might have significant effects nor does it represent a decision in principle about future consideration. Alternative 2 would meet the 1995 Medford District Resource Management Plan (RMP).

Chapter 1 of the Lower Grave Vegetation Management Project EA identifies how Alternative 2 would be consistent with the Purpose and Need and for compliance with higher level EIS documents. Chapter 3 evaluates the effects of the No Action Alternative and Alternative 2 and the findings are that all proposed activities would be compliant with the effects anticipated under the 1995 Medford RMP. Any future projects would be evaluated through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process and would stand on their own as to environmental effects.

**7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.** The interdisciplinary team evaluated Alternative 2 in the context of past, present and reasonably foreseeable actions. Significant cumulative effects outside those already disclosed in the 1995 RMP/EIS are not predicted. A complete disclosure

of the effects of Alternative 2 is disclosed in Chapter 3 of the EA.

The BLM anticipated that most project impacts on greenhouse gas levels and carbon storage would be negligible when placed in the context for analysis of global, regional and continental scale (EA, p. 178). Therefore Alternative 2 does not contribute to cumulatively significant impacts.

**8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or other objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.**

Cultural resource surveys within the Planning Area and application of appropriate PDFs would result in no effect to cultural resources as a result of these activities (EA, p. 146). PDFs are designed to avoid direct effects and minimize indirect effects to significant cultural and paleontological resources (EA, p. 146). Cultural resource surveys of the Planning Area have been completed. Site specific protection measures, referred to as Project Design Features and Best Management Practices would be applied to protect cultural sites. If cultural resources are discovered during project implementation, the project would be redesigned to protect the cultural resource values present, or evaluation or mitigation procedures would be implemented based on recommendations from the Resource Area Archaeologist with input from federally recognized Tribes, approval from the Field Manager, and concurrence from the State Historic Preservation Office (EA, p. 37).

**9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.**

- a) **Fish:** There is one federally listed fish species that occurs within the Planning Area. The Southern Oregon/Northern California Coast coho salmon is listed as threatened. Coho Critical Habitat (CCH) is found adjacent to 5 thinning units (1-A, 1-A2, 1-A3, 1-C1, and 1-C2) at an average of 200 feet from CCH in Grave Creek. These thinning units will have Ecological Protection Zones which are no-treatment areas and retain 40-60% canopy cover within the Riparian Reserves and uplands (EA, p. 169).

The Lower Gave Project haul road segments and road-related activities intersect two streams at three location containing CCH. These three road segments represent three bridges (Grave Creek and Coyote Creek) on CCH streams. Sediment would not be expected to enter CCH as a result of haul or maintenance of haul roads, with dry condition haul, well-vegetated ditch lines, properly functioning cross drains and existing filter strips or sediment barriers installed to prevent delivery into CCH (EA, p. 169).

Alternative 2 will follow all provisions of the Clean Water Act (40 CFR § D) and Oregon Department of Environmental Quality provisions for maintenance of water quality standards. The Proposed Action will have no effect on coho salmon, CCH or Essential Fish Habitat (EFH); therefore ESA consultation was not required. Therefore Alternative 2 does not adversely affect Southern Oregon/Northern California Coast coho salmon or CCH.

- b) **Plants:** A portion of the Planning Area is within the range of *Fritillaria gentneri*, as determined by the 2004 United States Fish and Wildlife Service (Services) Biological Opinion. Final units were surveyed according to the Service's 2-year protocol; vascular plant surveys were conducted in the springs of 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013, and no new *Fritillaria gentneri* sites were found. There would be no anticipated effect from Alternative 2 on any federally listed plant (EA, p. 168).
- c) **Northern Spotted Owl (NSO):** The Lower Grave Vegetation Management (LGVM) Planning Area contains one Threatened and Endangered wildlife species, the federally threatened NSO. The Medford District BLM prepared a Biological Assessment and received a Biological Opinion on June 21, 2013 (Howard Graves Formal – Tails#: 01EOFW00-2013-F-0137). The BLM re-consulted and submitted a Biological Assessment (Lower Grave Vegetation Management Project-October 17, 2014) and provided an additional biological assessment amendment to the Lower Grave Vegetation Management Plan and submitted it to the US Fish and Wildlife Service on January 27, 2015. The Fish and Wildlife Service is currently reviewing the amended Biological Assessment. Final consultation determinations will be disclosed in the final Finding of No Significant Impact.

#### **Spotted Owl Critical Habitat Unit (CHU)**

For the LGVM Project approximately 525 acres of nesting, roosting, foraging (NRF) and dispersal habitat proposed for treatment in the Planning Area are within Critical Habitat Unit 10, sub-unit KLE-2 and KLE-3 (EA, p. 74).

The Medford District has determined that treating and maintaining approximately 156 acres of NRF habitat in critical habitat is not expected to adversely affect NSO critical habitat because the treatment will not change the intended function of the habitat, and the conditions that would classify the stand as NRF would remain post-treatment (EA, p. 99).

The Medford District has determined that the proposed maintenance of 279 acres of dispersal-only habitat within critical habitat is not expected to adversely affect NSO critical habitat because the treatment will not change the intended function of the habitat and the conditions that would classify the stand as dispersal would remain post-treatment (EA, p. 100).

KLE-2 is still expected to maintain the intended conservation function of north-south and east-west connectivity between subunits and critical habitat units by providing demographic support for NSOs. No downgrade or removal of critical habitat would occur, supporting the 88 total historic NSO sites in this critical habitat sub-unit (EA, p. 100).

KLE-3 is still expected to maintain the intended conservation function of north-south and east-west connectivity between subunits and critical habitat units because the proposed downgrading of 7 acres of NRF habitat would result in a reduction of only 0.02% of the NRF habitat within sub-unit KLE-3. The 97 total historic sites within KLE-3 would

continue to provide demographic support in the sub-unit (EA, p. 101).

### **Spotted Owls**

The proposed timber harvest, permanent and temporary routes and landing constructions would treat and maintain, downgrade or remove 454 acres (EA, p. 85-86) of nesting, roosting and foraging habitat and treat and maintain 494 acres and remove 2 acres (EA, p. 85) of dispersal habitat. While adverse effects are anticipated at only three of nine spotted owl territories, only two of these adversely affected owl sites have been recently occupied and no downgrade or removal of habitat occurs within the occupied core area.

The Revised Recovery Plan recommends continued implementation of the NWFP conservation framework. This proposed action conforms to the NWFP. Alternative 2 is located on Matrix lands which under the NWFP include a land-use allocation for timber production. Alternative 2 will not affect NWFP LSR reserve allocations.

Alternative 2 contributes to the objectives of the Revised Recovery Plan Recovery Action 10. The project only treats and maintains spotted owl habitat within occupied owl sites, with treated habitat more likely to be ecologically sustainable because residual stands should be less susceptible to mortality (EA, p. 88). Thinning of young stands and/or capable habitat is more likely to improve the dispersal function of the stands and accelerate and improve the development of future spotted owl NRF habitat. The project limits the downgrade of owl habitat to the outer home range area of one unoccupied owl site (#40402O). Additionally, the project limits the downgrade of owl habitat to an unoccupied alternate core area location of site (#0068O) within the territory of #0068A. Treat and Maintain prescriptions within the core area resulting in short term adverse effects with long term habitat improvements and fire resiliency occur within a third site (#4625B).

Biologists conducted surveys to identify forest stands that meet the characteristics of Revised Recovery Plan, Recovery Action 32. Based on these surveys, no harvest activities, fuels treatments, road construction, yarding corridors, or skid roads are planned within these stands (EA, p. 41).

The LGVM Project action area is located with the Klamath Province which also serves as a recovery unit for the spotted owl. The amount of habitat loss under the NWFP to date has been lower than projected. For the Klamath Province in Oregon, over 880,000 acres of spotted owl NRF habitat still remains and only approximately 1.5% of the provincial baseline has been impacted ( Double Bowen Vegetation Management Project BO #OIEOFW00-2014-F-0209 11/24/2014). The downgrade and removal of up to 66 acres of NRF as proposed in the LGVM Project is not anticipated to reduce the unit's capacity for recovery.

There are 9 spotted owl sites associated with Alternative 2 and no downgrade or removal of nesting, roosting and foraging habitat will occur within occupied spotted owl home ranges. While adverse effects are anticipated to three sites, only two of the three territories are occupied. Monitoring of the known owl sites will continue through project implementation. Significant disruption of breeding, feeding or sheltering of spotted owls

is not anticipated for reasons discussed above.

The cumulative amount of treatment of dispersal and suitable owl habitat would not preclude spotted owls or other late-successional forest species from dispersing within or through the watershed. It is unlikely it would reduce the survival or recovery of the NSO. The cumulative effects of this project would not preclude owls occupying historic home ranges and continuing to occupy or reproduce in the LGVM Planning Area (EA, p. 110).

**10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.** The Proposed Action does not violate any known federal, state, or local law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment. Furthermore, the Proposed Action is consistent with applicable land management plans, policies, and programs (EA, p. 9).

### **III. FINDING**

I have determined that the Proposed Action does not constitute a major federal action having a significant effect on the human environment; an environmental impact statement is not necessary and will not be prepared. This conclusion is based on my consideration of the Council on Environmental Quality's criteria for significance (40 CFR §1508.27), with regard to the context and the intensity of the impacts described in the EA, and on my understanding of the project, review of the project analysis, and review of public comments. As previously noted, the analysis of effects has been completed within the context of the Medford District's Resource Management Plan and the Northwest Forest Plan. This conclusion is consistent with those plans and the anticipated effects are within the scope, type, and magnitude of effects anticipated and analyzed in those plans. The analysis of project effects has also occurred in the context of multiple spatial and temporal scales as appropriate for different types of impacts and the effects were determined to be insignificant.