



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

MEDFORD DISTRICT OFFICE



FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

for

DECISION RECORD #4

of the

COTTONWOOD FOREST MANAGEMENT PROJECT

(DOI-BLM-OR-M060-2011-0003-EA)

INTRODUCTION

The Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Cottonwood Forest Management Project (DOI-BLM-OR-M060-2011-0003-EA) documented the environmental analysis conducted to estimate the site-specific effects on the human environment that may result from the implementation of the Cottonwood Forest Management proposal. In response to public comments received during the EA review period, minor revisions were made to the EA for the purposes of clarification. The Revised EA, original Decision Record, and FONSI were posted on the Medford District BLM website on August 23, 2011 (<http://www.blm.gov/or/districts/medford/plans/index.php>).

The Cottonwood Forest Management Project implemented under Decision Record #4 would harvest trees in conifer forest stands on BLM-administered land primarily within the Keene Creek sub-watershed of the Jenny Creek Watershed. Under Decision Record #4, approximately 96 acres of conifer forest identified as Northern Spotted Owl Dispersal habitat would be thinned in a manner to maintain the habitat function and provide for long-term sustainable forest production (Revised EA p. 1-1). The Public Land Survey System description for the Cottonwood Project Area¹ under Decision Record #4 is: T. 39 S., R. 3 E., in sections 4, 5, 9; Willamette Meridian, Jackson County, Oregon.

Based on the context and intensity of the impacts analyzed in the Revised EA (Chapter 3), I have determined that my decision to implement the proposal, as described in Decision Record #4 for the Cottonwood Forest Project, is not a major Federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment, individually or cumulatively with other actions in the general area. I considered the following criteria, suggested by CEQ (40 CFR 1508.27), for evaluating intensity or severity of the impact of the Cottonwood Project.

¹ The Cottonwood Project Area includes areas where action is proposed, including units where forest thinning is proposed, or roads used and maintained for hauling (up to County roads).

The Cottonwood Forest Management Project implemented under Decision #4 will:

1. Not result in significant beneficial or adverse effects.

- Soil productivity would be protected by requiring designated skid trails and using existing skid trails to the extent practical, limiting compaction from current harvest activities to 12 percent of the harvested area (Revised EA p. 3-12). Mechanized harvesting would only be allowed when soil moistures are 15 percent by weight at 3 inch depth, or over snow with a minimum snow depth of 18 inches. This is consistent with the 1995 RMP under which the proposal was developed (PRMP/EIS p. 4-13; Revised EA, p. 3-12).
- Soil erosion from tractor and cable yarding, permanent road construction, temporary road construction, road decommissioning, and road maintenance will be minimized through the application of Best Management Practices to be implemented through required project design features (Revised EA pp. 2-14 to 2-33).
- Water quality and aquatic habitat would be maintained:
 - Since no timber harvest would occur within Riparian Reserves, stream temperatures would not be affected (Revised EA p. 3-20).
 - If BMPs are implemented properly, any sediment transported from road maintenance and haul activities are expected to be an immeasurable fraction of the total sediment load and would not be detectable at downstream locations (Revised EA p. 3-20).
 - There would be no net increase in road densities (Revised EA pp. 2-3 to 2-5, 3-20), road densities would decrease substantially (16%) in Riparian Reserves (Revised EA p. 3-22), thus reducing road related sedimentation over the long-term as decommissioned roads become stabilized and vegetation reestablishes in the road bed. Recovery of shade producing vegetation in riparian areas could decrease stream temperatures over time.
 - There would be no new road construction or renovation under the implementation of the Cottonwood Project under Decision Record #4.
- All thinning treatments would maintain overstory canopy cover of 40 to 60 percent; thus, there would not be any increase in acreage below 30 percent canopy cover (an indicator used to assess the risk of increasing frequency and magnitude of peak flow) (Revised EA p. 3-20). The removal of small diameter vegetation (<8 inches diameter) for pre-commercial thinning/fuels reduction would not appreciably reduce canopy cover. Therefore, there would be no risk for increasing the frequency and magnitude of peak flow as a result of implementing the Cottonwood Forest Management Project.
- Fuel levels would increase immediately following forest management activities, however this increase in fuel loading would not create a significant increase in the risk of large-scale wildfires for the short-term (Revised EA p. 3-82). This is because:
 - slash piling is required soon after yarding is completed on a unit by unit basis, which breaks up the continuity of the fuel bed and its ability to carry fire;
 - slash is green when first cut and gradually becomes more susceptible to burning;

- green fuels can dampen fire behavior and hand piles usually need to cure for 4-6 months before they will burn;
 - The BLM would administer contracts to complete post-harvest fuels treatments within 6 months to 2 years following completion of harvest activities (Revised EA p. 2-14). Following treatment of activity fuels, fire hazard would be lower than pre-harvest conditions due to the reduction in ladder and canopy fuels (Revised EA p. 3-82).
- Surveys were completed for great grey owls. Five reproductive sites located in the vicinity of the project area would be protected, each with a 1/4 buffer or equivalent area polygon (Revised EA, p. 3-52).
 - Special Status and/or Survey and Manage mollusk species would be protected by no treatment buffers (Revised EA, p. 2-21, 3-54 to 3-55).
 - While no active golden eagle nest sites have been detected since the 1990s (Revised EA, p. 3-44), large tree structure important for nesting would be retained in the project area (Revised EA, p. 3-52). Preferred foraging areas, open areas with a brush component would remain functional as foraging areas for the golden eagle (Revised EA p. 3-44, 3-52).
 - Snags and down coarse woody material would not be targeted for removal to maintain habitat for cavity nesting wildlife species (Revised EA, p. 2-12, 2-21, 3-50, 3-54, and 3-86).
 - The implementation of project design features will minimize the potential for the introduction and spread of noxious weeds (Revised EA p. 3-102).
 - The total carbon dioxide emitted during the 20 year analysis periods is considered negligible in the context of total U.S. carbon dioxide emissions of 6 billion metric tons (Revised EA, 3-114). Within two years of thinning the carbon emission level for the 20 year analysis period would be offset by carbon storage in tree growth (Revised EA, p. 3-115).

See criteria number nine below for discussion of species listed under Endangered Species Act, candidate species, and additional discussion of special status species.

2. Not result in significant impacts on public health or safety.

No aspects of the Cottonwood Forest Management Project have been identified as having the potential to significantly and adversely impact public health or safety.

The following Project Design Features would be required to ensure public safety in areas of concentrated recreation use:

Sign(s) would be placed on road 39-3E-3 at intersection with Hyatt Prairie road alerting the public of possible interactions with logging trucks and associated equipment during winter logging and hauling activities; sign(s) would be placed on road 39-3E-3, near yellow gate just southwest of Table Mountain Sledding Hill, instructing drivers to slow down and alerting drivers that pedestrians may be crossing the road; the purchaser would be required to post a flagger near the Table Mountain Snow Play parking area on road 39-3E-3 to provide for pedestrian safety if winter hauling is occurring on weekends or holidays (including designated holiday breaks for the local Rogue Valley public schools (Revised EA p. 2-32, 3-107).

Prescribed burning operations will 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 (Revised EA, p. 3-116 to 3-117). By implementing actions to minimize smoke effects and by complying with DEQ regulations, smoke associated with the proposed action will not reduce air quality of the Medford/Ashland area.

3. *Have no significant, adverse effects on unique characteristics of the geographic area.*

No wilderness areas, wilderness study areas, prime farmlands, wild and scenic rivers (or rivers suitable for wild and scenic designation), caves, parks, refuge lands, or areas of critical environmental concern exist in the in the Cottonwood Forest Management Project Area.

No portions of the project area implemented under Decision Record #4 are located in an area proposed by the public as the Greensprings Mountain portion of the South Cascades Wilderness proposal.

4. *Not have highly controversial environmental effects.*

“Highly controversial”, in the context of 40 CFR 1508.27(b) (4), refers to substantial disagreement within the scientific community about the environmental effects of a proposed action. It does not refer to expressions of opposition or expressions of preference among alternatives or differences of opinion concerning how public lands should be managed.

The Cottonwood Forest Management project is similar in nature to many other forest management projects that have been implemented within the scope of the Medford District Resource Management Plan across the Medford District. The anticipated effects of harvesting timber, post-harvest fuels reduction, and new road construction, documented in the EA, are well known and no highly controversial effects have been identified.

The 2005 Report *Logging to Control Insects: The Science and Myths Behind Managing Forest Insect “Pests”*, also known as the Black Report, was submitted by several commenters during scoping to support their opinion that there is no evidence that logging can control bark beetles or defoliators once an outbreak occurs and in the long run could increase the likelihood of epidemics. This report was addressed in the EA as follows:

The Black Report was reviewed by Forest Health Protection Entomologists from Region 6 of the U.S. Forest Service in November 2005, who concluded that the report contained many erroneous statements that were not even supported by the report’s cited literature and included many citations taken out of their proper context. The Black Report was reviewed by BLM silviculturists who concur with the findings reported by Region 6 Forest Service entomologists. Many papers cited in the report support BLMs approach to managing forests to prevent bark beetle epidemics.

A recent paper, “*The effectiveness of vegetation management practices for prevention and control of bark beetle infestations in coniferous forests of western and southern United States* (Fettig et al., In Press), reviews tree and forest stand factors associated with bark beetle infestations and analyzes the effectiveness of vegetation management practices for mitigating the negative impacts of bark beetles on forests. The review draws from the examination of 498 scientific publications concerning the topic referenced above and other related topics. Fettig et al. reports that native tree-killing bark beetles are a natural component of forest ecosystems and periodic outbreaks will occur as long as susceptible forests and favorable climatic conditions exist. Recent epidemics of some native forest insects have exceeded historical records and management to reduce stand or landscape-level susceptibility must address factors related to tree

density. Increased competition among trees for water, growing space, and nutrients causes trees to become stressed and compromises their resistance mechanisms, thus increasing their susceptibility to bark beetle attacks.

The report concludes that while gaps do exist in information available for some forest cover types and common bark beetle species, thinning as a preventive measure to reduce the amount of bark-beetle caused tree mortality and its effectiveness is supported by scientific literature for most forest cover types including mixed conifer forests, which are the primary focus of concern for bark beetle infestations in the Cottonwood analysis area. (Revised EA pp. 3-75 to 3-76).

This article dispels the claim by some that scientific disagreement exists concerning the use of density management as a preventive measure to reduce bark beetle caused mortality.

5. *Not have highly uncertain and potentially significant environmental effects or unique or unknown environmental risks.*

The analysis does not show that this action will involve any unique or unknown risks. The silvicultural prescriptions and harvesting methods (ground-base) are the same methods used on a regular basis for managing forest stands on BLM-administered lands. The anticipated effects of implementing Decision Record #4 of the Cottonwood Forest Management Project are well supported with referenced literature throughout the EA, and are similar in nature to the effects estimated and observed for other timber sales implemented on the Medford BLM district.

6. *Not establish a precedent for future action or represent a decision in principle about future actions with potentially significant environmental effects.*

The decision to implement the Cottonwood Forest Management Project under Decision Record #4 will not set any precedents for future actions with significant effects. The Cottonwood Forest Management Project will implement actions approved for forest management consistent with the 1995 Medford District Resource Management Plan (Revised EA p. 1-5) and is consistent with actions implemented under the 1995 RMP for over a decade. This project is not precedent setting.

7. *Not result in significant cumulative environmental effects.*

Cumulative environmental effects are “the impact on the environment which results from the incremental impact of the action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions” (See definition of “cumulative impact” in 40 CFR § 1508.7).

Analysis was performed at multiple scales, and included the consideration of past actions, as reflected in current conditions, current actions, and foreseeable future actions on both private and federal lands (EA, Chapter 3, Affected Environment & Environmental Consequences). No significant cumulative impacts were identified.

Also refer to criteria number one above for determination of presence of significant adverse or beneficial effects that could contribute to significant cumulative effects. None were identified.

8. *Have no significant effects on scientific, cultural, or historical resources, including those listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.*

In accordance with the protocol for managing cultural resources on lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (specifically section 106),

as amended, a literature review and archaeological reconnaissance was conducted for the Cottonwood Project Area. Cultural resources recorded during the survey will be buffered and protected from project activities.

The project would not result in restricting access to, and ceremonial use of, Indian sacred sites by Indian religious practitioners or adversely affect the physical integrity of such sacred sites. No sites have been identified in the Project Area. Executive Order 13007 (Indian Sacred Sites) (Revised EA p. 3-117).

This project would have no effect on Indian Trust Resources as none exist in the Project Area. This project was determined to have no adverse effects on properties listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. This includes Native American religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, or historic properties. The proposed project would have no adverse effects on any known cultural resources (Revised EA p. 3-117).

9. *Have no adverse effects on species listed or proposed to be listed as Federally Endangered or Threatened Species, or have adverse effects on designated critical habitat for these species.*

Northern spotted owls are not likely to be adversely affected by the Cottonwood Forest Management Project. The project is designed to maintain existing northern spotted owl habitat in harvested units. No NSO suitable habitat (NRF) will be affected by the implementation of Decision Record #4. In considering the affects analyzed in the REA, cumulatively, only 17 percent of suitable northern spotted owl nesting, roosting, and foraging (NRF) habitat would be treated within the analysis area, leaving about 83% of existing suitable NRF habitat untreated across the analysis area (Revised EA p. 3-47, 3-50).

Pursuant to the Endangered Species Act (ESA), formal consultation was completed with the US Fish and Wildlife Service. The Service concluded in its Letter of Concurrence (#13420-2010-I-0178) that the District's proposed action is not anticipated to result in any incidental take and is not likely to adversely affect spotted owls, or spotted owl critical habitat within the action area (pp. 14-15).

The Pacific fisher (*Martes pennanti*) was petitioned for listing as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act on December 12, 2000. In 2003 the USFWS released their notice of 90-day petition finding and initiation of status review (68 Federal Register, No. 132, 41169-41174) and in 2004 published their Notice of 12-month petition finding, concluding that listing fishers as threatened was warranted, but was precluded by higher priority listing actions (Federal Register Vol. 69, No. 68, April 8, 2004, 18769-18792). The species remains a USFWS candidate species (USDI, USFWS 2004, 71 Fed. Reg. 53777, Sept. 12, 2006).

The implementation of Decision #4 covered in the Cottonwood Revised Environmental Assessment (Alternative 2) would not contribute to the need to Federally list the fisher as threatened or endangered because habitat features, such as large snags and coarse wood, would be retained throughout the project area, which would provide habitat for denning and resting. There would be no fisher denning or resting habitat treated with the implementation of Decision #4 as all units are currently identified as Dispersal habitat.

Portions of the Cottonwood analysis area are within the range of *Fritillaria gentneri*, a species listed under the Endangered Species Act with ranges on the Medford District. However, all units proposed for activity are outside of the range of *F. gentneri*. The Cottonwood analysis area is entirely outside the ranges of any other Federally Endangered plant species found on the Medford District (*Arabis macdonaldiana*, *Limnanthes floccosa* ssp. *grandiflora*, *Lomatium cookii*) (Revised EA p. 3-87).

There would be no effect on sites of special status or survey and manage botanical species as all sites will be protected as recommended by project design including seasonal restrictions or no treatment buffers, or a combination of both (Revised EA p. 3-93).

There are no federally designated threatened or endangered fish species in the Keene Creek sub-watershed of the Jenny Creek Watershed. As such, there is no designated critical habitat. The implementation of the Cottonwood Forest Management Project would have no effect on any listed fish species (Revised EA p. 3-24).

10. Not Violate a Federal, State, Local, or Tribal law, regulation or policy imposed for the protection of the environment.

Through analysis documented in the Revised EA, the BLM has determined that with implementation of required Project Design Features, the proposed action would not threaten a violation of any federal, state, or local environmental protection laws.

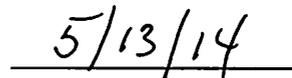
This project was reviewed for the potential for disproportionately high or adverse effects on minority or low income populations; no adverse impacts to minority or low income populations will occur (*Executive Order 12898 (Environmental Justice)*) (Revised EA p. 3-117).

FINDING

I have determined that implementing Decision Record #4 of the Cottonwood Forest Management Project does not constitute a major Federal action having a significant effect on the human environment. No actions authorized in this decision will contribute additively or synergistically to effects from other decisions on the Cottonwood Forest Management Project to create significant direct, indirect, or cumulative effects; 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 context and intensity of the impacts described in the Revised EA, my understanding of the project, review of project analysis, and review of public comments. The analysis of effects documented in the Revised EA has been completed within the context of multiple spatial and temporal scales and within the context of the Medford District Resource Management Plan and the Northwest Forest Plan. The anticipated effects are within the scope, type, and magnitude of effects anticipated and analyzed in those plans.



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Date