



United States Department of the Interior
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
MEDFORD DISTRICT OFFICE
ASHLAND RESOURCE AREA
3040 Biddle Road
Medford, Oregon 97504



FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)
For the
HOWARD PRAIRIE FUELS REDUCTION PROJECT
(DOI-BLM-OR-M060-2011-0009-EA)

INTRODUCTION

The Medford District Bureau of Land Management, Ashland Resource Area (BLM) analyzed fuels reduction activities on 795 acres of forest lands; the analysis is documented in the *Howard Prairie Fuels Reduction Project Environmental Assessment (EA)*. The Howard Prairie Fuels Reduction Project is designed to reduce hazardous fuels by thinning small diameter conifer trees (7 inches diameter breast height (dbh) and smaller) on 795 acres of vegetation; approximately 665 acres are BLM-administered lands and 130 acres are Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) withdrawn lands, in the Upper Jenny Creek Watershed and adjacent to Howard Prairie Reservoir. The proposed treatments would reduce the fire hazard and the risk of fire to move from the forest floor to the canopies of overstory trees.

Fire hazard rating in the project area is high and the entire project area is located within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). Fire hazard assesses vegetation by type, arrangement, volume, condition and location; these characteristics combine to determine the threat of fire ignition, the potential for fire to spread if ignited, and the difficulty of fire control. Activities within the vicinity of the project area such as increased development of homes, dispersed and developed camping and recreational use, and travel corridors add to the risk that human-caused wildfire ignitions may occur. Fuels reduction treatments are needed to reduce hazardous fuels and the threat of large-scale high intensity wildfires threatening resources on federally-administered lands and private property, and adjacent homes in the WUI.

The Public Land Survey System (PLSS) description for the Howard Prairie Fuels project is: T. 38 S., R. 3 E., in Sections 19, 29, and 32, T. 39 S., R. 4 E., in Sections 5 and 6, Willamette Meridian, Jackson County, Oregon.

Based on the context and intensity of the impacts analyzed in the EA (p. 13-61), I have determined that Alternative 2, the selected alternative, with the associated project design features from the Howard Prairie Fuels Reduction 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 Howard Prairie Fuels Reduction Project.

The Howard Prairie Fuels Project will:

1. Not result in significant beneficial or adverse effects.

The increase in erosion rates over present levels would be less than 15 percent as a result of burning handpiles because the piles would be spaced throughout and occupy approximately 3 to 5 percent of the total area. Potential long-term positive effects to soil productivity would be realized from the proposed actions as the risk of catastrophic fire is diminished (EA, 20-21).

The proposal maintains watershed, sediment, and water runoff processes and riparian function.

- Given the implementation of Best Management Practices (BMPs) and project design features (PDFs), erosion and sedimentation would not appreciably increase beyond background rates (EA, 22).
- Timing and magnitude of stream flows will be unaffected. The area is entirely within the snow zone and canopy cover will not be appreciably decreased (EA, 23).
- With the implementation of the PDFs identified in Chapter 2, together with diligent administration of the contract, this project will have little direct effect on hydrology related processes because stream channels and riparian areas are being protected from ground disturbance (EA, 22-23).
- Stream temperatures will remain unaffected in the listed stream segments in the project area as the effective shade target for both intermittent and perennial streams will be maintained (EA, 22).
- In the long term, there is a possibility that these treatments could improve stream temperatures in the long term by increasing growth and vigor of remaining conifers and hardwoods (EA, 22).

This project would have no direct effects to fish or aquatic habitat.

- Canopy cover and compaction would remain unaffected; therefore, treatments would have no mechanism to affect peak stream flows (EA, 24).
- Sediment or ash delivery to aquatic habitats is not anticipated as a result of this project.
 - Due to low gradient topography it is unlikely that soil disturbed from underburning would have the potential to migrate downslope into aquatic features (EA, 25).
 - Vegetative buffers around stream channels and other aquatic features and the debris rings around burned piles would be sufficient to capture any off-site movement of disturbed particulates, in the unlikely event it did occur (EA, 25).

Although minor changes in composition may occur, habitat will continue to support the same species of plants and wildlife (EA, 43).

There may be short term local disturbance or loss of habitat to small mammals and ground nesting birds, but the scale of the project area, patchiness of the treatment, retention of large standing and down dead wood, and reserve areas buffered out for high priority species, will provide refugia for some of these impacted animals and birds (EA, 39).

Impacts to Endangered Species Act (ESA) listed threatened and endangered species are discussed in CEQ consideration number 9.

With vegetation inventory and weed treatments, existing noxious weed population sizes are expected to decrease and new establishments are expected to be minimized (EA, 56).

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

No aspects of the project have been identified as having the potential to significantly and adversely impact public health or safety. The implementation of hazardous fuel reduction treatments, as designed under this project, would have a beneficial impact on public health and safety by reducing the threat of large-scale high intensity wildfires in the drainages treated. Prescribed burning operations would follow all requirements of the Oregon Smoke Management Plan and the Department of Environmental Quality Air Quality and Visibility Protection Program (EA, 60).

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

The Howard Prairie Fuels Reduction Project Area does not contain and will not impact any 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.

The project area is located within the Howard-Hyatt Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA) and the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail SRMA. The Hyatt-Howard Prairie SRMA was established due to its important recreational value as a result of the areas two reservoirs, trails on the Dead Indian Plateau, and year around recreational use (Hyatt-Howard SRMA Recreation Area Management Plan (1995). The PCNST SRMA was established as a result of the importance of the PCNST as a National Scenic Trail and its popularity for use by hikers and equestrians. Proposed treatments are not expected to alter recreation patterns and trends in the Hyatt-Howard SRMA and PDFs will ensure that both direct and indirect impacts to the PCNST and Lily Glenn Trail and its users will not occur. Specifically, no thinning would occur within 50 feet of either side of the trail centerline of the PCNST and no hand piling would occur on the PCNST or the Lily Glenn Trail. Additionally, risk associated with wildfire that could potentially negatively affect recreation resources will also be lowered through completion of this project (EA, 58-59).

The Howard Prairie Fuels Reduction Project meets the Visual Resource Management objectives for VRM II described in the Medford District RMP. The project would likely not attract the attention of the casual observer in the area of the proposed project. Additionally, the project will likely have no effect on most of the visual elements (form, line, color, and texture) of the landscape and vegetation in the project (EA, 59).

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 Howard Prairie Fuels project is similar in nature to many other fire management/fuels reduction projects that have been implemented within the scope of the Medford District Resource Management Plan across the Medford District. The anticipated effects of fuels reduction, documented in Chapter 3 of the EA, are well known and no highly controversial effects have been identified.

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 anticipated effects of implementing the Howard Prairie Fuels Reduction Project are well known and supported with referenced literature throughout the EA, and are similar in nature to the effects estimated and observed for other fuels reduction projects 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 Howard Prairie Fuels Project will not set any precedents for future actions with significant effects. The Howard Prairie Fuels Reduction Project will implement actions approved for forest management under both the 1995 Medford District Resource Management Plan (RMP)(which incorporated the Northwest Forest Plan) and the 2008 Medford District RMP, and is therefore 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 (see CEQ consideration number one).

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 Howard Prairie Fuels project area. The action will not affect objects listed on the National Register of Historic Places, nor will it cause destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources as any resources recorded during the survey will be buffered and protected from project activities (EA, 61).

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.*

Informal consultation was completed with the US Fish and Wildlife Service. The effects of the project on spotted owls were analyzed in the Fall 2010 NLAA BA (USDI 2010) which concluded the Howard Prairie Fuels Project “may affect and would not likely adversely affect” (NLAA) spotted owls because northern spotted owl NRF and dispersal habitat will be maintained post treatment, and there will be no change to acres of owl habitat post project (EA, 39). Both the pre-treatment NRF and dispersal habitat for spotted owls would be maintained and would retain the characteristics important to spotted owls post-treatment. Treatments are unlikely to displace resident owls based on their traditional use of the area, but PDF’s will further ensure that no disturbance would occur during the critical nesting period (EA, 39-40).

The Pacific fisher (*Martes pennanti*) was petitioned for listing as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act on three occasions. In 2004 and 2006, the USFWS determined that listing fishers as threatened was warranted, but was precluded by higher priority listing actions (USDI FWS 2004). The species remains a USFWS candidate species (USDI, USFWS 2004, 71 Fed. Reg. 53777, Sept. 12, 2006) (EA, 33). Proposed fuels treatments would maintain large standing and down dead wood, which provides habitat for denning and resting, and would maintain canopy important for fishers (EA, 33).

There would be no effect on sites of special status botanical species as the Howard Prairie Fuels analysis area is entirely outside the ranges of all Federally Endangered species found on the Medford District (*Arabis macdonaldiana*, *Fritillaria gentneri*, *Limnanthes floccosa* ssp. *grandiflora*, and *Lomatium cookii*).

Surveys have documented no occurrences of Bureau Special Status or 2001 Survey and Manage plant species within the Howard Prairie Fuels analysis area that occur within 100 feet of roadsides within the analysis area and/or within 100 meters of proposed units (EA, 44-45).

The one known and documented fungi site present in the analysis area occurs 100 meters outside of a unit, a distance great enough to ensure the survival and health of the mycelial mat associated with that site. Thinning, piling and burning activities will all be restricted to within unit boundaries, and this site and associated mycelia are protected by distance from the unit (EA, 48).

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

The Howard Prairie Fuels Reduction proposal is designed to comply with the 1995 Medford District Record of Decision (ROD) and Resource Management Plan (RMP), and is also compliant with Management Direction, Objectives, and Best Management Practices of the 2008 ROD and RMP (EA, 3). With implementation of required Project Design Features, the proposed action would not threaten a violation of any federal, state, or local environmental protection laws. Project Design Features are an integral part of the Proposed Action. They are developed to avoid or reduce the potential for adverse impacts to resources. The Project Design Features (PDFs) also incorporated Best Management Practices (BMPs) to reduce nonpoint source pollution to the maximum extent practicable. BMPs are considered the primary mechanisms to achieve Oregon Water Quality standards (EA, 8).

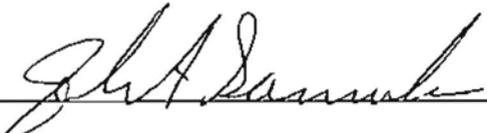
The Howard Prairie Fuels Reduction Project is consistent with the Medford District Resource Management Plan as amended by the 2001 *Record of Decision and Standards and Guidelines for Amendments to the Survey and Manage, Protection Buffer, and other Mitigation Measures Standards and Guidelines* (2001 ROD), as modified by the 2011 Settlement Agreement.

The proposed action is also in conformance with the direction given for the management of public lands in the Medford District by the Oregon and California Lands Act of 1937 (O&C Act), Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA), the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973, the Clean Water Act of 1987, Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974 (as amended 1986 and 1996), Clean Air Act, the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, and the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979.

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)*) (EA, 61).

FINDING

I have determined the Howard Prairie Fuels project 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 context and intensity of the impacts described in the EA, my understanding of the project, review of project analysis, and review of public comments. The analysis of effects documented in the 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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7-12-11

Date