

REVISED SCOPING/INFORMATION PACKAGE

SINLAHEKIN STEWARDSHIP PROJECT BLM Wenatchee Field Office

Introduction

This information package summarizes a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposal to conduct hazardous fuels reduction treatments and improve wildlife habitat via Stewardship Contracts in the Sinlahekin Valley.

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 information package is to inform interested and affected parties of the proposal and to solicit comments to assist with the NEPA review of the proposal. The analysis of the proposal is underway and will be documented in an Environmental Assessment (EA). Public 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 also fulfill the purpose of and need for the project.

This information package reflects a revised scoping period end date. The scoping period has been extended until January 24, 2011. All other information provided in this package is the same as provided in the original scoping notice.

Project Area Description

The 2,833 acre project area lies on both sides of the Sinlahekin Valley between the communities of Loomis and Conconully, Washington, in Okanogan County (see enclosed map). The northernmost part of the project area lies within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) adjacent to the town of Loomis. The legal description for the project area is: Township 36 North, Range 25 East, Sections 3, 4, & 9, Township 37 North, Range 25 East, Sections 11, 14, 19, 20, 21, 22, 27, 28, 33, 34 and Township 38 North, Range 25 East, Sections 14, 15, 23, & 24 (see map included at the end of this document).

The north portion of the project area is within 1 ½ miles of the town of Loomis, Washington. Loomis has been designated as a “community at risk” in the Okanogan County Community Wildfire Protection Plan.

The BLM lands are scattered throughout the Sinlahekin Valley and are managed at the landscape scale, similar to adjacent state lands administered by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), to promote benefits to the ecosystem. The proposed project area is managed for wildlife habitat as stated in Executive Order 8920 on October 22, 1941, and dispersed recreation and timber production as described in the Spokane District Resource Management Plan Record of Decision (BLM 1987), as amended (BLM 1992).

Background

Vegetative management activities directed at fuels and fire hazard reduction within the proposed Project Area have not occurred in many years. Furthermore, the absence of wildfires in the area for four or more decades has resulted in dense forest stands crowded with understory trees. The present age distribution and stand structure in the project area present high fire hazards, because the small understory trees and brush provide fuel ladders to the overstory. The present vegetative condition presents potential for a wildfire that could result in complete stand mortality.

Historical evidence in the form of fire-scarred trees indicates that, before fire exclusion, this area experienced low to mixed severity fires every 6 to 15 years. These periodic fires acted as a natural thinning agent maintaining early-seral species with open understories of predominantly grasses and forbs. The frequency, severity, and size of wildland fires have increased in the region over the last 100 years, and particularly so within the last 20 years. These changes have resulted in a different mix of tree species and age classes, with uniform stands of middle-aged trees predominating at present in contrast to historic conditions that included predominantly large and older age class trees.

Proposed Action

The BLM is proposing a Stewardship Contracting Project on 2,833 acres of public land in Okanogan County, Washington. Stewardship activities would consist of commercial and non-commercial thinning, prescribed fire use, hazardous fuels reduction, seeding or restoration work, treatment of noxious weeds, and slash disposal. Vegetation treatments would be conducted over a 10-year period. Treatments would reduce stand density and remove disease and insect-infested trees. Approximately 750 thousand board feet (MBF) of timber would be removed from the project area.

Nine potential treatment units have been identified; these are shown on the map located at the end of this document. Table 1 presents the forested and non-forested acreage within each unit as well as the treatment types proposed for each unit. *Note: The acreages and treatment types identified in Table 1 are preliminary only and will be refined through the NEPA process.*

Table 1. Preliminary Treatments Proposed within the Sinlahekin Project Area.

Unit*	Forested Acres	Non-Forested Acres	Thinning & Sale of Conifers	Fuels Reduction (Small Trees & Brush)	Prescribed Fire	Weed Control	Aspen Management
1	162	348	Possible	Yes	Yes	Possible	n/a
2	110	70	Yes	Yes	Yes	Possible	n/a
3	100	16	Yes	Yes	Yes	Possible	Yes
4	10	20	Yes	Yes	Yes	Possible	Possible
5	74	86	Yes	Yes	Yes	Possible	Yes
6	86	74	Possible	Possible	Possible	Possible	Yes
7	523	367	Possible	Possible	Possible	Possible	Yes
8	502	558	Possible	Possible	Possible	Possible	Possible
9	80	0	Possible	Possible	Possible	Possible	n/a

*Treatment units are displayed on the map located at the end of this scoping package.

At this time, no additional road construction is anticipated. Access would occur via existing BLM, state, and county roads or through existing easements and/or road use agreements.

Monitoring sites, to be used in conjunction with a citizen-science program and by BLM staff to monitor project effectiveness, would be established at select treatment sites. The monitoring sites would consist of short, above-ground posts to locate the monitoring location.

Purpose and Need

Currently, the project area landscape is dominated by shrub steppe, and dense forests of ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir infected with dwarf mistletoe. These ecosystems are a high priority for treatment because, after many decades without fire, they are currently at increased risk for severe fires that would be out of the historic range of variability in terms of both fire size and severity. The current conditions, including high stand densities, ladder fuels, and disease, contribute to an unnaturally high risk of catastrophic wildfire and risk of losing wildlife habitat, recreation opportunities, or other resource values.

This project is needed to reduce hazardous fuels and associated high-severity fire risks as directed by the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) of 2003 (P.L. 108-148). Fire suppression and/or exclusion has resulted in:

- An increase of non-native plants with a corresponding decline of native plants
- An increase of the woody shrub component in rangeland and grassland
- An increase in tree densities and historically uncharacteristic high fuel loads
- A decline of late seral species
- A change of the tree species ratio (specifically, an increase of Douglas-fir and a decrease of ponderosa pine)
- An increase in tree pathogens (most notably, dwarf mistletoe)
- Altered hydrologic function and increased competition for limited soil moisture
- Altered nutrient cycling

The project is also needed to reduce heavy fuel loading along the Sinlahekin Road which serves as the main fire escape route for the area. A portion of the road is located in the proposed project area. To serve as an adequate escape route, the flammable fuel densities in proximity to the route must be maintained at low levels.

The purpose of the Sinlahekin Stewardship project is to:

1. Reduce hazardous fuels to better manage surface fires and to reduce crown-fire potential in order to protect resources on BLM-administered lands, including wildlife habitat. Improve fire prevention and suppression opportunities on BLM-managed lands within the project area.
2. Improve forest and rangeland health by reducing stand densities presently causing competition and stress among trees and vegetation. This would promote healthier, more vigorous and robust tree stands and shrub steppe which, in turn, would be better able to

resist parasitic insect and mistletoe infestations. More widely spaced tree crowns would also decrease the potential for a continuous running crown fire.

3. Enhance safe access and ingress/egress routes through the area in the event of wildfire.
4. Reintroduce fire into the ecosystem.
5. Improve understory vegetation conditions to benefit wildlife habitat in the long-term.

Preliminary Issues

The following issues or factors have been identified preliminarily for further analysis or consideration in the EA.

- Potential effects to mule deer winter range habitat
- Potential effects to threatened and endangered species and habitat, including grizzly bear, wolf, and Canada lynx
- Potential effects to livestock grazing
- Potential air quality effects during prescribed fire treatments

Public Input Needed

Please submit your comments on the proposed action and other issues to be considered to the address noted below by **January 24, 2011**. The comment period has been extended; initially, the scoping period was scheduled to close on December 22, 2010.

Public comments may be submitted electronically or by U.S. Mail to the addresses noted below.

Please send electronic comments to:

OR_Spokane_Mail@blm.gov with “Sinlahekin Stewardship EA” in the subject line.

Please send U.S. Mail comments to:

Attn: Sinlahekin Stewardship EA

BLM – Wenatchee Field Office

915 Walla Walla Ave.

Wenatchee, WA 98801

For all comments submitted, please identify whether you are submitting comments as an individual or as the designated spokesperson on behalf of an organization.

Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, be 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.

If you have questions, please contact Mark Williams, BLM Wenatchee Field Office Forester, at (509) 665-2100.

References

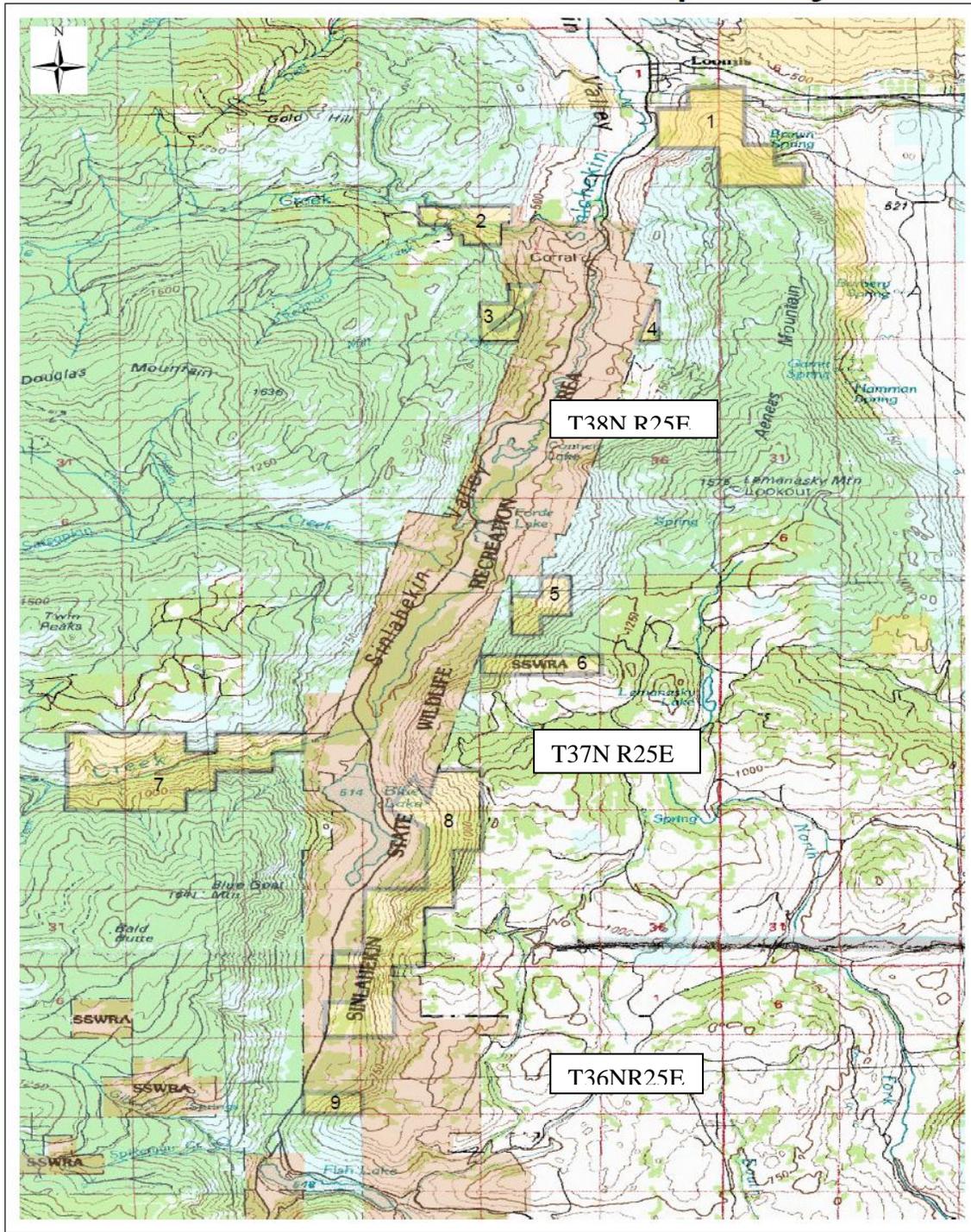
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NWCG. 2003. Fire Regime Condition Class Definition, National Wildfire Coordinating Group, www.nwcg.gov/teams/wfewt/message/FrccDefinitions.pdf

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Cooperative Agreement Numbers PNW-05-CO-11261987-152 and WDFW-05-2528, May 1, 2006.

Sinlahekin Stewardship Project



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| Indian Reservation | Bureau of Land Management |
| Bureau of Reclamation | Other Federal |
| Forest Service | WA State Parks and Recreation |
| Forest Service Wilderness | WA Dept. of Fish and Wildlife |
| National Parks Service | County or City Government |
| | DNR Lands |



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