

Migratory Landbird Conservation

Bald Fire Salvage and Restoration Project Lassen National Forest

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Under the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), the Forest Service is directed to “provide for diversity of plant and animal communities based on the suitability and capability of the specific land area in order to meet overall multiple-use objectives.” (P.L. 94-588, Sec 6 (g) (3) (B)). The January 2000 USDA Forest Service (FS) Landbird Conservation Strategic Plan, followed by Executive Order 13186 in 2001, in addition to the Partners in Flight (PIF) specific habitat Conservation Plans for birds and the January 2004 PIF North American Landbird Conservation Plan all reference goals and objectives for integrating bird conservation into forest management and planning.

In late 2008, a *Memorandum of Understanding between the USDA Forest Service and the US Fish and Wildlife Service to Promote the Conservation of Migratory Birds* was signed. The intent of the MOU is to strengthen migratory bird conservation through enhanced collaboration and cooperation between the Forest Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service as well as other federal, state, tribal and local governments. Within the National Forests, conservation of migratory birds focuses on providing a diversity of habitat conditions at multiple spatial scales and ensuring that bird conservation is addressed when planning for land management activities.

The Lassen National Forest is proposing to manage lands on the Hat Creek Ranger District located approximately 14 miles southeast of Fall River Mills, California. A 31,324 acre parcel of U.S. Forest Service lands is proposed for treatment in response to the Bald Fire which occurred in 2014. The proposed treatments include²:

Table 1 - Alternative 1 - Proposed Treatment

Alternative 1	Estimated Acres	Percent of Project Area
Hazard Tree Removal	4,815	15%
Area Salvage	3,632	12%

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² For a more thorough description of the project proposal and alternatives, please refer to the Bald Project Environmental Assessment.

Area Fuels	5,499	18%
Reforestation Only	417	1%
Total proposed for treatment	14,363	46%
Natural Recovery	16,961	54%

Alternative 2 is the No Action. Under the No Action alternative, none of the activities proposed would be implemented, however road maintenance work could include falling of all safety hazard trees along open roads.

Alternative 3 is limited to roadside hazard tree removal. To respond to concerns raised during public scoping, the Responsible Official has proposed limiting treatment to hazard tree removal (along approximately 129 miles of NFS roads and approximately 10 miles of the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railway). In this alternative, the total footprint of treatments on national forest lands under Alternative 3 would be approximately 4,736 acres.

Proposed management is intended to implement direction contained within the Lassen National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. Opportunities to promote conservation of migratory birds and their habitats in the project area (MOU Section C and D) were considered during development and design of the Bald Project.

The following summarizes specific items incorporated into project design that will benefit landbird conservation as well as minimize impacts.

- Large and medium patches of existing burned forest habitat interspersed throughout the burned area would be left untreated under the proposed action to allow for natural recovery (54% of the project area).
- To provide for snags and down woody debris across the treatment areas, retention islands would be designated in all treatment units except road hazard removal units. Retention islands would consist of small-untreated patches within the boundary of treatment units that range in size commonly between two to five acres, and would comprise 20 percent of the acres within each unit. Retention islands would be distributed across the unit to provide a variety of burned conditions representative of those present in the unit prior to treatment and will contain numerous snags of all available sizes.
- Integrated Design Features (IDFs) will be incorporated as part of the Action Alternatives for the project. They are implementation parameters that would be incorporated into treatments, contracts, or used to guide Forest Service personnel in conducting implementation. They include items such as protecting streams and riparian vegetation, and avoiding unique habitats such as deciduous hardwoods. The IDFs are described more fully in the Environmental Assessment and would be implemented in addition to standards and guidelines from the Forest Plan, and California Best Management Practices (BMP) regarding Water Quality Management.

- Strategies to avoid harvest in or near oak, aspen, cottonwoods, meadows, stream channels and seasonal wetlands would serve to retain and promote diverse and desired ground cover. With reforestation (tree planning) occurring on about 39% of burned area, and varying techniques/densities of reforestation being proposed, an abundance and diversity of understory vegetation will be retained throughout the project area. Cluster planting and wide-spaced conventional planting would leave larger gaps between planted trees than in traditional reforestation. Conifers would not be planted within 20 feet of live black oak tree crowns, including sprouts greater than three feet tall. Reforestation of conifers would also not occur within 150 feet of aspen and cottonwood communities on the east, south, and west sides of the community, or 100 feet on the north side to maximize light to the stand and allow for expansion. Reforestation would not occur within 50 feet of the meadow edge or within 20 feet of stream channels and seasonal wetlands with existing riparian communities. Also, the 20% retention islands within units would not be harvested or reforested.

Likely impacts to habitats and select migratory bird populations resulting from the Bald Project have been assessed in further detail within the project Management Indicator Species (MIS) report, the Black-Backed Woodpecker Report, and impacts to select TES birds and their habitats have been analyzed in the project Biological Evaluation (BE). The two types of MIS habitat being treated include a very small amount of snags in a green forest ecosystem, and a larger amount of snags in a burned forest ecosystem. The MIS report found that activities would not modify the currently stable trends for those habitats or species that depend on them. The Black-backed woodpecker report found that there would be a moderate loss of burned snags, but untreated habitats would remain in adequate supply and distribution to support numerous breeding pairs. The Biological Evaluation for the Bald Project also documents effects to various migratory landbirds including northern goshawk and found the project would not cause a trend towards a loss of viability.

The action alternatives for the Bald Project are designed to remove fire killed trees in stands where burn severity was 50% or greater, and then restore a forested vegetative condition (reforestation) to those areas. Potential impacts to migratory species are minimized through the adherence of LRMP Standards and Guidelines for snags/down woody debris, avoidance of streamside management zones, no treatment in riparian areas and wetlands, and limiting harvest and fuel reduction treatments to stands where widespread or complete tree mortality is expected.

It is my professional finding that the Bald Project would have minimal impacts to individual migratory birds and would not adversely affect migratory landbird conservation. This finding is based on the results of analysis conducted in the BE, MIS and black-backed woodpecker reports; considers that treatments are limited to high burn severity stands, and considers that proactive design features are incorporated into project design that maintain habitat diversity (wildlife retention islands inside units, avoidance of unburned areas, riparian vegetation, hardwoods, and shrublands, etc.). The project meets the intent of the Migratory Landbird MOU.

References:

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