



**File Code:** March 2, 2009

**Date:** 1950

Dear Interested Party:

Umatilla National Forest, Pomeroy Ranger District is beginning an environmental analysis for the proposed South George Vegetation and Fuels Management Project. We are planning to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) that will evaluate issues and concerns specific to South George project planning area. Analysis will evaluate potential effects of the proposed action to landscape and resource values in the area. This letter provides preliminary information about the project planning area, purpose and need for the project, and specific project activities proposed. We are asking for your comments and any information you may want considered during development of this project.

**Location:**

The South George project planning area located on Pomeroy Ranger District is approximately 21,200 acres in size and is located primarily in Asotin County with a small portion in Garfield County, Washington. It is within portions of T.7N., R.44E., section 1; T.7N., R.43E., sections 1-2; T.8N., R.43E., sections 1, 2, 10-15, 21-28, 33-36; T.8N., R.44E., sections 5-8, 17-20, 26-36; and T. 9N., R.43E., section 35. It is located in South Fork Asotin Creek and Upper George Creek Subwatersheds of the Asotin Watershed (see attached maps).

South George project planning area is bounded by the National Forest boundary to the north and east, Smoothing Iron Ridge to the west, and breaks of the Grande Ronde River to the south. Asotin Creek and Wenatchee Creek inventoried roadless areas (IRA) are adjacent on the west and south sides of the project planning area. Existing road (Forest Roads 4400, 4300, and 4304) separate the IRAs from the project planning area boundary. Elevations range from 3,200-6,000 feet. Ecosystems in and around South George project planning area are diverse, ranging from dry sage grasslands to cold sub-alpine forests. The project area contains numerous camping areas, hiking trails, scenic vistas, big game hunting opportunities, timber products, and huckleberries. Most of the area is accessible by vehicle. Wildlife in the project area includes elk, white-tailed deer and mule deer, and black bear.

Anatone and Cloverland Wildland Urban Interface<sup>1</sup> (WUI) areas are adjacent to the north and eastern boundaries of the project planning area, and are identified in the Asotin County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). Approximately 550 acres within the project planning area is owned by Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife.

---

<sup>1</sup> Wildland urban interface (WUI) – A WUI is the area where structures and other human development meet or intermingle with wildland vegetative fuels. It surrounds a community at risk, including a community's infrastructure or water source and may extend beyond 1.5 miles of a community depending on topographic features used as an effective firebreak or containing Condition Class 3 land posing a threat to the community.



Management areas identified in Umatilla's National Forest's Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) in the project planning area include the following:

- A6- Developed Recreation (20 acres)
- C1- Dedicated Old Growth (900 acres)
- C3- Big Game Winter Range (1,200 acres)
- C3A- Sensitive Big Game Winter Range (2,300 acres)
- C4- Wildlife Habitat (15,200 acres)
- C5- Riparian (Fish and Wildlife) (1,050 acres)

Commercial harvest would occur in management areas C3 and C4.

**Background:**

Stand composition, density and structure in the project planning area have been altered from historical conditions due to fire suppression and other forest management practices. A majority of current forest stands originated as a result of fire disturbances occurring up to the 1930's, and have not experienced fire since then. Late seral tree species have become dominant after long periods without disturbance and are more susceptible to disturbance-caused mortality than early seral species. Overall forest health has generally declined due to overstocking and an increase in the amount of shade tolerant species.

Findings from the historical range of variability analysis show that dry upland forest sites once dominated by old forest stands of ponderosa pine have closed in with shade tolerant species such as Douglas-fir and grand fir. Species composition on dry-forest sites indicates that Douglas-fir and grand fir are over-represented, and ponderosa pine is under-represented. For moist forest sites, species composition analysis shows that Douglas-fir, western larch, and lodgepole pine are under-represented and below their historical range, while grand fir and spruce-fir are over-represented.

Findings also show that existing insect and disease susceptibility based upon historical range of variability is well above historical range for defoliators (western spruce budworm and Douglas-fir tussock moth), fir engraver beetles, and root diseases (Armillaria and laminated root disease).

Fire regime condition classes, which describe deviation from natural fire regimes in terms of fire return intervals and vegetative change from historical composition and density, have been modified in the project planning area due mainly to past harvest history and fire suppression. In many areas fuels that would have historically been consumed during periodic wildfires have increased above historical levels. Today, fires in dry and moist forests would exhibit moderate to severe effects characterized by high fire severity and intensity on landscapes that historically had low to moderate severity. Without treatment, the South George project planning area would continue to transition from a low or moderately altered fire regime (Condition Classes 1 and 2) to a significantly altered fire regime (Condition Class 3), where the risk of losing ecosystem components would be substantially higher. Surface fuel loads would continue to build and tree density and canopy layering would also increase. Abundant small trees would serve as ladders that carry fire from the forest floor to the tree canopy, increasing the likelihood of high severity, stand-replacement fires. Fire ignitions today would not function as a natural disturbance process within their historical range pertaining to fire size, frequency, intensity, severity, or landscape patterns.

### **Purpose and Need:**

In summary, after reviewing background information of the project planning area, the purpose of and need for action in South George project planning area is to improve forest health, vigor, and resilience to fire, insects, and disease in upland forests that are outside their historical pre-fire suppression conditions for species composition, structural diversity, stocking densities, and fuel loadings. Additionally, there is a need to provide sawlogs and wood fiber products for utilization by regional and local industries.

Pomeroy Ranger District, has determined that based upon current vegetative and fuel trends in South George project planning area, and contrasting them with desired conditions identified in Umatilla National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) the following needs were identified:

**Vegetation** – There is a need to manage vegetation composition, structure, stand density, and diversity of landscape patterns toward desired future conditions across the landscape by favoring fire tolerant species, increasing old forest structure, and reducing stocking density levels that resist insects, diseases, and stand-replacing wildfire(s).

**Fuels** – There is a need to improve suppression capability near private lands, minimize the forest's susceptibility to wildfires of uncharacteristic intensity, and reduce fuel loading to levels expected under natural fire disturbance regimes. This would be achieved by lowering stand densities, increasing the relative abundance of fire tolerant species, reducing existing ladder, surface, and canopy fuels, and re-introducing landscape prescribed fire into the ecosystem.

**Timber Production** – There is a need to provide sawlogs and wood fiber for utilization by regional and local economies.

### **Proposed Action:**

Through a combination of database queries and field reviews numerous areas were identified for potential stand management and fuel treatment activities. Field review began in late summer of 2007 and continued through the fall of 2008. Stand exam data from the mid 1990s to 2005 was used to characterize stands and was adjusted based upon the most current field observations.

In response to the purpose and need identified above, Pomeroy Ranger District proposes vegetation and fuels management treatments to improve the health and vigor of upland forest stands, and to reduce susceptibility to future wildland fires of uncharacteristic intensity by reducing hazardous fuels in South George project planning area. Fuels treatments would be used to reduce existing fuel loads of dead and live natural fuels, reduce fuels generated from harvest activities, prepare sites for regeneration, and maintain desired fuel conditions. One of the primary objectives of these fuel treatments is to break-up fuel continuity on the landscape, so if a wildfire did occur fire intensity would be lessened allowing for safe and effective fire suppression efforts.

Vegetation and fuels treatments would take place beginning in calendar year 2010 and could continue over a period of approximately five to ten years. A portion of landscape prescribed fire activities could begin as early as fall of 2010, if conditions allow, and remaining acres would likely be burned over a period of approximately ten years.

Following are brief descriptions of activities proposed for implementation, along with associated activities that would occur concurrently.

**Timber Harvest** – Commercially harvest approximately 4,200 acres. Free thinning is the primary silviculture prescription (approximately 3,300 acres) with some shelterwood and seed-tree prescriptions (approximately 900 acres) used in declining stands where thinning would not restore stand health or vigor. Treatments would tend to favor early seral tree species such as ponderosa pine and western larch. Harvest methods would include conventional ground based tractor logging (approximately 3,000 acres), skyline logging (approximately 900 acres) and helicopter logging (approximately 300 acres). Some treatment units may include the removal of sawlogs, small diameter trees (generally less than 7.0 inches diameter at breast height (DBH)) and excess down wood for use as woody biomass products. Harvest objectives would vary by stand condition and fuel management objectives. The focus of each treatment would be based on the desired quality of each treatment area after management rather than the quantity of products removed from each area.

- **Fuel Treatments (activity and natural)** – Activity fuels and existing natural fuels would be treated in harvest units. Treatments would be designed to reduce ladder fuels to lower the risk of fire spread into the upper canopy, and reduce ground fuel that would contribute to uncharacteristic wildfire intensity and resource damage. Treatments would also reduce fuel continuity in areas adjacent to private lands. Treatment objectives would be achieved through a combination of the following activities (more than one treatment may occur on a single acre): mechanical thinning (approximately 1,300 acres), prescribed burning of activity fuels (approximately 2,100 acres), grapple piling of activity fuels (approximately 1,000 acres) and yarding with tops attached. Non-commercial thinning by hand or mechanical methods would remove trees that are less than 10 inches DBH in stands with excess ladder fuels (approximately 200 acres)
- **Road Management** – To accomplish implementation of proposed activities approximately 32 miles of closed system roads, and 45 miles of seasonally open roads would be used as haul routes. All system roads would remain the same after project implementation; closed roads would continue to be closed, and seasonally open roads would continue with that designation. Approximately 3.0 miles of temporary road would be constructed of which 1.4 miles would be constructed over previous road templates. All temporary roads would be decommissioned after project activity use. No new road construction is proposed.

**Danger Tree Removal** – Danger trees would be felled and removed along all previously described haul routes used for timber sale activity. If considered economically feasible they would be sold as part of a timber sale. Danger trees within Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCAs) would not be removed; they would be cut and left to provide additional coarse woody debris.

**Landscape Prescribed Fire** – Landscape prescribed fire would occur across approximately 3,000 acres within South George project planning area. This treatment would reintroduce fire to a fire-dependent ecosystem to lessen the effect of a future uncharacteristic large wildfire and improve forage quality for big game. In the majority of the project area, fire intensities would be kept low by keeping fire out of the overstory and burning mainly surface fuels. Individual tree and group torching would likely occur in areas where there is sufficient ladder fuels and in timber stands with high occurrences of mistletoe. Upon completion the area would likely be a mosaic of unburned, lightly burned, moderately burned, and intensely burned patches.

**Instructions for Making Comments:**

We want to be aware of and responsive to any issues, comments, or concerns you may have specific to this project. Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments concerning this action will be accepted until April 6, 2009. Written comments should be submitted to Monte Fujishin, District Ranger, 71 W. Main Street, Pomeroy, WA 99347. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays. Comments can be faxed to (509) 843-4621. Electronic comments should be submitted as part of the actual e-mail message or as an attachment in Microsoft Word, rich text format, or portable document format only and sent to [comments-pacificnorthwest-umatilla-pomeroy@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-pacificnorthwest-umatilla-pomeroy@fs.fed.us). If you choose to contact us by phone the number is (509) 843-1891.

**Note about Comments:**

Please note that comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and are available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, those who only submit anonymously will not have standing to appeal the subsequent decision under 36 CFR Part 215. Additionally pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27 (d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Person requesting such confidentiality should be aware that under FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and where the request is denied, the agency will return the submission (within 10 days) and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address.

If you would like any other information about the project, please contact Ed Koberstein, Project Team Leader, Pomeroy Ranger District, 71 West Main Street, Pomeroy WA 99347, phone (509) 843-1891. E-mail [ekoberstein@fs.fed.us](mailto:ekoberstein@fs.fed.us).

Thank you for your interest in our programs and for you participation in the process. We look forward to receiving your ideas and comments.

Sincerely,

*/s/Monte Fujishin*

MONTE FUJISHIN  
District Ranger

Attachments