Middle Fork Irrigation District (MFID) is a permit holder on the Forest that operates water diversions, pipelines, irrigation canals and Clear Branch dam at Laurance Lake. Currently, MFID operates the approximately 11,000 foot long Glacier Ditch for the purpose of supplying water for irrigation, general agricultural use, stock water and fire protection to 1,347 acres (21 percent of the irrigated land in the district) for high value farm land in the upper Hood River valley. Approximately 500 feet of the canal are located on National Forest System lands on the Hood River Ranger District. This canal is operated year round for Fire protection services and stock water. Summer time flow rates include irrigation and general agricultural uses.

**Purpose and Need for Action**

Water loss in the Glacier Ditch due to infiltration and back failures has been measured by weir flow method and amounts to 275 to 300 acre-feet of water per year. This lost water results in sedimentation and degradation of Evans Creek, a clear running steelhead producing stream. Additional water lost in the Glacier Ditch may not be used by the district for other purposes, including hydroelectric production or mitigation. The open canal also transports organic debris (leaves and fir needles) that plug sprinklers and filters irrigation equipment increasing the need for flushing and maintenance, and inhibits the use of new more efficient water application methods such as drip and micro-irrigation. Finally, the open canal transports weed seed and may contribute to the spread of invasive weed species as it travels through national and county forestlands and onto private property. The overall purpose of the project is to improve the Glacier Ditch and improve water quantity and water quality within the irrigation district. As such, there is an underlying need to pipe the Glacier Ditch canal to achieve these purposes.

**Proposed Action**

MFID proposes to install 5,400 feet of 18-inch HDPE pipe in the upper Glacier ditch and 5,600 feet of 24-inch HDPE pipe in the lower Glacier ditch to totally enclose and eliminate the open canal. The larger pipe size in the lower Glacier ditch section is required by the flat profile of the open canal. In this area, the ditch only drops 19-feet in 5,600-feet of run. Enclosing and eliminating the open canal would save water directly by avoiding back failure and infiltration losses as well as provide high quality water to the MFID patrons and enable the patrons to deploy new more efficient irrigation technologies, thereby, saving additional water into the future. The ability of the open canal to transport weed seed would be eliminated by completion of this project. MFID also plans to reduce monitoring and control expenses and increase efficiency by installing telemetry equipment at the end of the new installation to reduce the need.
for site visits and allow for tighter control and operation of MFID facilities. Finally, saving and storage of 275 to 300 acre-foot of water annually that can later be utilized for other beneficial uses increases MFID’s flexibility in hydroelectric production goals and environmental mitigation. If used for hydroelectric production exclusively, this amount of water would result in the generation of 282,000 kilowatt hours annually. The ultimate disposition of saved water made available as a result of this project would be determined in a collaborative effort between MFID and local, state, and federal stakeholders now working on the MFID Fisheries Management Plan for future MFID operations. After the pipe is installed, the right-of-way will be graded to maintain equipment access for inspections and repairs, if needed.

This environmental planning process and decision covers the impacts to piping the 500-feet of the Glacier Ditch located on National Forest System lands on the Hood River Ranger District. This is part of the upper Glacier ditch section described above. The legal description for these projects is T1S, R9E, Sections 23, 26, and 27.

**Project Design Features/Mitigation Measures**

The National Environmental Policy Act defines “mitigation” as avoiding, minimizing, rectifying, reducing, eliminating or compensating project impacts presented in the proposed action. These project design features are used to minimize the environmental impacts of the proposed actions. The following are a required component of the proposed action to address resource management concerns and to guide the removal of trees for restoration projects.

- In accordance with FSM #2080.44-10, Engineering Special Project Specification R6/SPS 601.011 will be included as standard provisions in the contract to require washing of machinery before entering the Mt. Hood National Forest to prevent the spread of invasive plants.

- Gravel, rock, and/or soil excavated from the project area should remain in the project area.

- Upon the completion of the project, MFID will seed the Glacier Ditch pipeline project area on National Forest System lands with a native seed mixture that is approved by qualified Forest Service personnel.

- Install a locked Power River gate at the sediment basin-end of the project to restrict the unauthorized vehicle access to the pipeline right-of-way.

**Scoping and Public Involvement**

The Forest Service conducted public scoping to identify any concerns with the proposed activities. The Glacier Ditch Piping project was first published on the Mt. Hood National Forest website in April 2010 and included in the Spring 2010 Schedule of Proposed Action (SOPA). No comments were received through these efforts. Scoping Letter describing this project along with three other MFID projects was distributed in March 2011 to approximately 25 organizations and interested individuals. The organizations included environmental groups; federal, state and county agencies; other irrigation districts; and tribal government. No comments were received as result of the letter. The projects also were discussed with the stakeholder (Middle Fork Irrigation
District) and other interested citizens. All the projects received support to move forward.

**Decision**

I have decided to implement this project as proposed. It is my decision for Middle Fork Irrigation District to pipe the upper Glacier Ditch as described under the Proposed Action section of this Decision Memo.

**Reasons for Categorical Exclusion**

I find the proposed action for the Glacier Ditch Pipe project can be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement because the action fits into Category 31.2-7 [36 CFR 220.6(e)(3)], described in Forest Service Handbook 1909.15-2007-1, April 17, 2009. This category states: “Approval, modification, or continuation of minor special uses of NFS lands that require less than five contiguous acres of land.”

I find the proposed action can be categorically excluded because there are no extraordinary circumstances identified by the interdisciplinary team of resource specialists that analyzed this proposal. Resource conditions that were considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstance related to the proposed action warrant further analysis and documentation are listed below (A-F). As stated in Section 30.3 of the handbook, “the mere presence of one or more of these resource conditions does not preclude use of a categorical exclusion. It is the degree of the potential effect of a proposed action on these resource conditions that determines whether extraordinary circumstances exist” (FSH 1909.15).

A. **Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species.** The Endangered Species Act requires that federal activities do not jeopardize the continued existence of any species federally listed or proposed as threatened or endangered, or result in adverse modification to such species designated critical habitat. Biological Evaluations were prepared for sensitive, threatened or endangered wildlife, fish and botanical species. These are available in the project record, located at the Hood River Ranger District in Parkdale, Oregon.

The following rare, uncommon, federally listed, and special status wildlife species are in or adjacent to the project area: northern spotted owl, Pacific fringe-tailed bat, neotropical migratory birds, mule deer and elk. The proposed project does not remove spotted owl habitat and is outside the disruption distance from the nearest spotted owl nest site, therefore there is **no effect** to this species. The projects do not impact habitat for Pacific fringed-tailed bat; therefore, there is **no impact** to these species. The project will have **no effect** to neotropical migratory birds because the work is occurring outside the breeding season. Lastly, the project is within winter range for deer and elk, but the work will be completed in the spring. As such, the project may **impact individuals, but is not likely to cause a trend towards Federal listing or loss of viability to the species.**

Four Endangered Species Act (ESA) listed fish are present in the Hood River watershed: Lower Columbia River Chinook and coho salmon, Lower Columbia River steelhead trout,
and Columbia River bull trout. There would be no effect/impact to any ESA listed fish species or Regional Forester’s Special Status aquatic mollusks/insects as a result of these projects. Lastly, there will be no effect Essential Fish Habitat established under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

Also, there are no known sites for botanical species that are currently listed Regional Forester’s Special Status List. Consultation is not required for wildlife, fish or botanical species.

B. Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds. Analysis for the effects of the project on floodplains, wetlands and municipal watersheds is included in the Fisheries Biological Evaluation contained in the project record. The proposed project would not impair floodplain function as no work is proposed with an active floodplain. There are no municipal watersheds or wetlands in the action area.

C. Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas. The project is not located in congressionally designated areas.

D. Inventoried roadless areas. The project is not located in inventoried roadless areas.

E. Research natural areas. The project is not located in research natural areas.

F. American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites / Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas. A complete heritage resource inventory survey was performed for the proposed projects. The heritage resource survey followed protocol established in the 2004 Programmatic Memorandum of Agreement between the Region 6 USDA Forest Service, the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office, and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. The inventory survey was negative for the presence of heritage resources. No heritage resources will be affected by the project.

**Findings Required by Other Laws**

**National Forest Management Act:** The interdisciplinary team reviewed the applicable Standards and Guidelines of this proposal. The analysis demonstrated that this decision is consistent the Mt. Hood Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan), as amended by the Northwest Forest Plan, as required by the National Forest Management Act.

**Aquatic Conservation Strategy:** I find that this project is consistent with the Aquatic Conservation Strategy (ACS) objectives. The ACS analysis is contained in the Fisheries Biological Evaluation, located in the project record. I have also considered the existing condition of riparian reserves, including the important physical and biological components of the fifth-field watersheds and the effects to riparian resources. I find that the proposed action is consistent with riparian reserve standards and guidelines and will contribute to maintaining or restoring the fifth-field watersheds over the long term.

**Clean Water Act and State Water Quality Laws:** The Fisheries Biological Evaluation have determined that this project complies with the Clean Water Act and state water quality laws, which will protect beneficial uses. With project design criteria and Best Management Practices,
water quality will be maintained through implementation of this proposed action.

**Invasive Plants:** By considering the prevention of invasive plant introduction, establishment and spread of invasive plants, the planning process is consistent with the Pacific Northwest Invasive Plant Program Preventing and Managing Invasive Plants Record of Decision issued in 2005 and the Site-Specific Invasive Plant Treatments for Mt. Hood National Forest and Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area in Oregon, including Forest Plan Amendment #16 Record of Decision issued in 2008. A noxious weed risk assessment was prepared for this project.

**Other Laws or Requirements:** Finding associated with the Endangered Species Act, Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act and National Historic Preservation Act are discussed under the Reasons for Categorical Exclusion section of this document. The proposed action is consistent with all other Federal, State, or local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment and cultural resources.

**Implementation**

Implementation of this decision may occur immediately. Implementation for this project is scheduled to occur in May 2011 and is anticipated to take two to three days. While this decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to Forest Service regulations at 36 CFR 215.8(a)(4), I encourage you to discuss this project with either of me if you have any concerns about implementation.

**Contact Person**

Detailed records of this environmental analysis are available for public review at the Hood River Ranger District. For further information about this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, please contact Jennie O’Connor Card at the Hood River Ranger Station, 6780 Highway 35 Parkdale, Oregon 97041; Phone: 541-352-1255; Fax: 541-352-7365; or Email: jennieoconnorcard@fs.fed.us.

**SIGNATURE OF DECIDING OFFICER**

/s/ Daina L. Bambe  
Daina L. Bambe  
District Ranger, Hood River Ranger District  
May 6, 2011  
Date
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