Decision Memo

Flatiron Commercial Thin

USDA Forest Service
Heppner Ranger District, Umatilla National Forest
Wheeler County, Oregon
T. 7 S., R. 25 E., Sections 5 and 6, Willamette Meridian

Location

The Flatiron Commercial Thin project consists of three thinning units totaling approximately 70 acres. Two units are composed of uneven-aged dry, ponderosa pine forest, while the other unit is uneven-aged mixed-conifer forest. The area lies adjacent to the forest boundary in the western portion of the Heppner Ranger District, south of Lee Prairie, north of Flatiron spring, and near the intersections of forest roads 21 and 2516. Unit 1 is approximately 26 acres and is located in the Brown Creek subwatershed (170702041106). Unit 2 is in the Juniper Creek subwatershed (170702041106) and is approximately 21 acres. Unit 3 is approximately 22 acres and is located in the Wilson Creek subwatershed (170702020804). All units are in Management Area E1 - Timber and Forage. Approximate elevation of all units is 4,600 ft.

Background

All three Flatiron units are at increased risk of stand level mortality from insects, disease and wildfire due to excessive stocking of trees. Stocking levels are due to several factors including fire suppression and historic harvest and grazing methods. Unit 1 is a dry upland forest stand composed of primarily ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, and grand fir overstory, with numerous large old trees surrounded by younger in-growth. Unit 2 contains both moist upland mixed-conifer and dry upland portions. In the moist upland portion of the unit, there is evidence of recent insect related mortality, and there is an accumulation of dead and down wood. Mistletoe infections occur throughout the stand on mature western larch and Douglas-fir, affecting the growth and vigor of these trees. In the dry upland portion of the unit, there are several old ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir that have experienced decline due to competition from younger trees. Unit 3 is a dry upland forest stand at risk from the same mortality agents as in Units 1 and 2. In addition, Unit 3 contains a mature aspen stand that has experienced increased competition from conifers and loss of regeneration likely due to browsing.

Proposed Action

The Flatiron Commercial Thin project proposes to reduce stocking levels by using a commercial timber sale. This project will use variable density thinning to reduce current stocking levels to those recommended for each unit (Tables 1 and 2). Variable density thinning will leave a patchwork of different tree densities throughout each unit, with some areas containing dense clumps of trees, while other areas will have very few trees. Tree species preference will be for early seral types, such as ponderosa pine and western larch. No trees over 21” dbh will be removed. Thinning will be heavier around older trees to release them from competition and reduce the threat of mortality from wildfire. Additionally, downed wood, needles, and duff
around the base of these large trees may be raked outside the crown dripline to facilitate future underburning and reduce the risk of heat injury.

All snags within treatment units will be left standing, unless they are determined to be a hazard by the timber sale operator and meet Region 6 Danger Tree criteria. If felled as hazards, trees would be left within treatment units to provide downed wood habitat. Hazard trees would also be felled along roads used to access the timber sale units. Only those trees that are determined by a Qualified Person to be an imminent danger using the most recent Region 6 Field Guide for Danger Tree Identification and Response would be felled along system roads and temporary roads used during implementation.

Trees will be removed using ground-based methods. Slash will be piled at landings and burned at a later date. Depending on usability and marketability of dead and downed wood (biomass), some may be removed where current amounts are well in excess of management area guidelines. Minimum downed wood standards will be maintained (Table 3), and those areas with substantial natural regeneration occurring will be excluded. Closed roads 2519081, 2519082 and 2100380 will be temporarily opened during project implementation for access to the units.

This project proposes to thin the aspen stand, which is part of Unit 3. Most conifers under 21” dbh will be removed within a 50 ft radius or an aspen tree length and a half, whichever is greater, around the stand to help reduce competition to the aspens and increase overall stand health.

Following commercial thinning, non-commercial thinning of residual trees under 7” dbh may be done in each unit.

There are a large number of trees over 21” dbh in the project area. Forest Vegetation Simulator (FVS) results indicate that it will likely not be possible to achieve the recommended basal area and SDI values, since trees over 21” dbh will be retained. Tables 1 and 2 show expected post-treatment values, indicating that basal area and SDI will be close to recommended ranges following this project, though will likely fall slightly above those ranges. Following the thinning treatments, underburning may take place through each of the three units as outlined in the Long Prairie Fuels Reduction Decision Memo, signed December 9, 2009. The need to rake duff around 21” and greater dbh trees will be assessed prior to application of a prescribed burn.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 – Expected post-treatment basal area values based on FVS results</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Current</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recommended</td>
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<td>Expected Post-Treatment</td>
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<table>
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<th>Table 2 – Expected post-treatment SDI based on FVS results</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Current</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recommended</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expected Post-Treatment</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 – Forest Plan standards for downed wood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Density</th>
<th>Downwood/Log Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ponderosa pine/Douglas-fir</td>
<td>3-6 pcs/ac</td>
<td>Small end dia. &gt;12 inches</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Piece length &gt;6 feet</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total length 20-40 feet</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Decision**

I have decided to implement the Flatiron Commercial Thin project. This project will include thinning to reduce stocking levels from current levels to recommended levels (Tables 1 & 2). No new road construction will occur. All equipment will be restricted to designated skid trails. Forest Service Roads 21, 2516, 2519, 2519082 and 2100380 will be used for access and haul (see attached map). Activity fuels will be piled at landing areas during operations and later burned. This decision will be implemented immediately following direction at 36 CFR 215.9(c).

Implementation of this project would promote the desired future condition within the project area. This condition is as follows:
1) Stocking levels that are closer to the management zone for each stand as described in “Suggested Stocking Levels for Forest Stands in Northeastern Oregon and Southeastern Washington: An Implementation Guide for the Umatilla National Forest” by Powell, 1999.
2) Promotion of forest stand health through individual tree management and deterrence of stand level disease and/or insect outbreaks.
3) Promotion of tree resiliency to prescribed fire through removal of accumulated needle mat and duff around large trees.
4) Promotion of late and old structure characteristics, such as large tree survival and recruitment, large snag recruitment, and complex canopy structures.

By incorporating the design criteria as described above, the degree of the potential effect is minimal and does not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment and therefore does not require further analysis in either an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement. This action is consistent with and categorically excluded within **Category 12 of FSH 1909.15 Sec. 31.2: commercial thinning of live trees in overly dense stands to improve the health of remaining trees.**

**Finding of No Extraordinary Circumstances**

The categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects which may significantly affect the environment.

This project has been reviewed by the Forest Archeologist and has been determined to meet the criteria in the 2004 Programmatic Agreement for a No Historic Properties Affected
determination. This project will have no adverse effects to Native American religious or cultural sites, archeological sites or historic properties or areas.

This project has been reviewed by the Forest soil scientist and has been determined to meet forest plan standards and guidelines for detrimental soil condition and erosion hazard. This project will follow all contemporary contractual design criteria and erosion control measures for soil and water quality.

The Biological Evaluation for Proposed, Endangered, Threatened, and Sensitive Fish and Habitats concluded that this project will have no effect on any aquatic habitat parameters and consequently would have no effects to any fish species.

The Biological Evaluation for plants found the Flatiron Commercial Thin has no populations of threatened, endangered or sensitive plant species in or adjacent to the project area. This project will have no impact on any currently listed Region 6 sensitive plant species and no effect on any federally listed threatened plant species.

The Biological Evaluation of proposed, endangered, threatened, candidate, and sensitive wildlife species concluded that the project will have no impact on the Columbia spotted frog and California wolverine, and no effect on the gray wolf. The evaluation concluded that the project may impact Lewis’ woodpecker individuals or habitat, but is not likely to contribute to a trend towards federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species. No other proposed, endangered, threatened or sensitive species or their habitats occur within the project area.

This project is not within research natural areas, inventoried roadless areas, wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas. Consequently, I find that the Flatiron Commercial Thin has no extraordinary circumstances and does not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect (40 CFR 1508.27) on the quality of the human environment. Therefore, this project is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment. The categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects that may significantly affect the environment.

**Public Involvement**

The Flatiron Commercial Thin project was listed in the *Summer 2010 Umatilla National Forest Schedule of Proposed Activities (SOPA)*. On July 15, 2010 letters were sent to parties interested in this project. Documentation of comments can be found in the project record at the Heppner Ranger District office.

**Findings Required by Other Laws**

This decision is consistent with the *Umatilla National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement* and *Record of Decision*, dated June 11, 1990, as amended in Plan Amendment #10, *Interim Strategies for Managing Anadromous Fish-producing*
Watersheds in Eastern Oregon and Washington, Idaho and Portions of California (PACFISH), dated February 24, 1995; and Plan Amendment #11 Continuation of Interim Management Direction Establishing Riparian, Ecosystem, and Wildlife Standards for Timber Sales dated June 12, 1995 as required by the National Forest Management Act. The project was designed in conformance with forest plan standards and incorporates appropriate Forest Plan guidelines for management area E1 – Timber and Forage: Manage forest lands to emphasize production of wood fiber (timber) and encourage forage production (Forest Plan, pages 4-178 to 4-181). This project also complies with the requirements of 36 CFR 219.

This action does not pose a violation of federal, state, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. This action will have limited context and intensity individually or cumulatively, to the biological, physical, social, or economic components of the human environment. It will have no adverse effect on consumers, civil rights, minority groups, or women; wetlands, floodplains, or municipal watersheds.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is not subject to administrative appeal.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this decision contact Brian Spradlin, District Environmental Coordinator, Heppner Ranger District, PO Box 7, Heppner OR 97836, or telephone 541-676-2127.

TODD D. BUCHHOLZ

District Ranger

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