Draft Decision Memo for the 2012 Young Stand Density Management Project

USDA Forest Service
Sweet Home Ranger District
Willamette National Forest
Linn County, OR

Purpose and Need

The project’s purpose is to reduce the stocking levels of stands that are approximately 10 to 30 years old, except in the Cougar Rock SIA where stands are about 40 years old. Reducing stocking levels would in turn, increase tree growth, improve forest health, improve or maintain huckleberry habitat, reduce fuel loads, and provide forage and long-term habitat for wildlife.

The project is needed because young plantations, established following timber harvest, have grown larger and have begun to compete with each other for growing space, light and nutrients. This competition can lead to decreased diversity, growth and vigor, decreased huckleberry habitat, decreased wildlife forage and habitat and increased fire risk.

Proposed Action

The proposed actions include young stand density management, conifer tree pruning, wildlife habitat and forage improvement and huckleberry habitat improvement, which will occur east of Sweet Home in the Middle Santiam, Upper North Santiam, South Santiam, Upper McKenzie, Blowout, Thomas, Wiley, Calapooia and Quartzville watersheds and in the Cougar Rock Special Interest Area (CRSIA). The project area spans across approximately 6,000 acres district wide (see map below for more specific locations) and will be completed over several seasons. The majority of the acres are located within the Adaptive Management Area (AMA), General Forest (Matrix), and Late Successional Reserve (LSR) management allocations. Of those acres, approximately 1,300 are located in the AMA management allocation, 1,700 acres in the Matrix management allocation and approximately 2,500 acres are located in the LSR management allocation. The remainder of the acres are located within the Scenic-Modification Middleground, Scenic-Partial Retention Middleground, Scenic-Retention Foreground or Wildlife Habitat management allocations. Some of the thinning would take place within the Riparian Reserve management allocation which overlays the previously mentioned management allocations. Treatment within Riparian Reserves is intended to accelerate the development of larger trees that are desired to meet the Aquatic Conservation Strategy Objectives.

Young stand density management will be accomplished by thinning using power chain saws while pruning will be done by hand. In order to meet management objectives, trees to be cut will be seven inches and less at diameter breast height. This will release young, overstocked stands from competition and stimulate diameter and height growth and canopy development of the selected leave trees. To further
the release of trees competing vegetation such as ceanothus and rhododendron will be cut back from trees in stands where treatment is needed. Salvage of conifer bough material may occur on some units where sufficient material would be left after thinning.

Huckleberry habitat improvement in the CRSIA includes thinning trees and/or pruning live limbs up to 6 feet in height in managed stands, no actions will occur in un-managed stands. This project is supported through annual collaboration with the Warm Springs, Siletz and Grand Ronde tribes. Proposed stands within the CRSIA are older than the average stands that are proposed for young stand density management, at approximately 40 years old. These stands have been previously thinned to approximately 300 trees per acre; however, huckleberry response was not as expected. In order to provide more light to the huckleberries, stocking levels will be reduced to approximately 170 trees per acre. There will be no diameter limit of trees to be cut in the CRSIA; however, the current average diameter is nine inches diameter at breast height (DBH). These trees are not considered to have significant merchantable value due to the long haul and relatively short height. This action will also be accomplished by thinning using power chain saws while pruning will be done by hand.

The following measures would be implemented to provide adequate resource protection:

1) Leave a 35-foot untreated area adjacent to all perennial stream channels;
2) Leave a 10-foot untreated area along selected roads to minimize the potential for spread of noxious weeds;
3) Require a 25-foot pull-back of created slash in units along selected roads to reduce the risk of fire starts adjacent to roads;
4) Require a 66-foot pull-back of created slash in units along all hiking trails within or adjacent to the units, unless unit size or shape indicates a lesser pullback in which case hand piling the slash would be the preferred method of slash disposal;
5) Leave a 100-foot untreated area around wetlands and other special habitats;
6) No noise disturbing activity, such as chainsaw use, heavy equipment, helicopter Type II (including KMax), pile driving or rock crushing, may be used within stands which lie ¼ miles of a known or predicted Northern spotted owl nest site and will be restricted from March 1 to July 15th.
7) No noise disturbing activity, such as chainsaw use, heavy equipment, helicopter Type I or II, pile driving or rock crushing, may be used within stands which within active peregrine falcon nesting areas from January 1st to July 31st.
8) Bough salvage will meet all the requirements in the 2012 Sweet Home RD Bough Sale Project CE.

Scoping and Public Involvement

Public participation was invited through the Willamette National Forest's quarterly "Schedule of Proposed Actions" and in a scoping letter sent to interested and affected people and organizations on January 12, 2012. A list of addresses where the letter was sent is available in the project file. Comments, questions, or concerns that were received have been replied to and can be found in the project file.
Categorical Exclusion Criteria

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment because: 1) it is a routine action that does not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment, 2) it falls within an established category, 36 CFR 220.6(e)(6), that is excludable from analysis and documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or environmental assessment (EA) under Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, Chapter 31.2 (6), and 3) I have determined that there is no cause-effect relationship between the proposed action and the potential effect on any of the resources listed in Table 1, therefore; no extraordinary circumstances exist.

The table below evaluates whether there are extraordinary circumstances that would cause the proposed action to have significant environmental effects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extraordinary Circumstance to be Evaluated</th>
<th>Present?</th>
<th>Is project causing Significant Effect on this Resource?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>T and E Species - Proposed activities are Not Likely to Adversely Affect the Northern Spotted Owl or its habitat. Critical Habitat &amp; Proposed Critical Habitat - Proposed activities are Not Likely to Adversely Affect Critical Habitat for the Northern Spotted Owl. Sensitive Species – No sensitive wildlife species will be impacted by proposed activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No Effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas or national recreation areas</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No Effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inventoried Roadless areas or potential wilderness areas</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No Effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Natural Areas</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No Effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No Effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No Effect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the information in the table above, I find that no extraordinary circumstances exist for this project.

Decision and Rationale for Decision
Based on my review of the information presented in this document and the supporting documents in the project record, I have decided to implement the proposed action as described above. The action addresses the purpose for the project and the need to thin young, overstocked conifer stands on approximately 6,000 acres of the Sweet Home Ranger District.

Through past experience and review of similar projects, I have concluded that this project is not a major Federal action. It will have limited context and intensity (40 CFR1508.27), individually or cumulatively, to the biological, physical, social, or economic components of the human environment. It does not pose a violation of Federal, State, or local law requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. The action that I have selected falls within a category established by the Forest Service that normally does not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment and no extraordinary circumstances exist that would cause the proposed action to have any significant environmental effects. Therefore this action is excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment, so neither will be prepared.

In addition, no concerns with the project were brought up during the public scoping process and no significant effects are anticipated. Supporting documentation for this determination including a Biological Evaluation prepared by the District Wildlife Biologist, Fisheries Biologist and Botanist, site specific comments and concerns and input from the District Interdisciplinary Team are all located in the project file at the Sweet Home Ranger District office.

Findings Required by Other Laws

This decision is consistent with the amended Willamette National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan as required by the National Forest Management Act. It is also consistent with the FY2010-2013 Informal Programmatic Consultation for Activities with the Potential to Disturb Northern Spotted Owls within the Willamette Planning Province Biological Assessment & USFWS LOC #13420-2009-I-0127 and the Biological Assessment for Pre-commercial Thinning in Northern Spotted Owl Habitat with Letter of Concurrence USFWS LOC # 13420-2011-I-0204, the Mid-Willamette Late-Successional Reserve Assessment (August 1998); vegetation management required by the National Forest Management Act (FSH 1909.12 Sect 5.3); and the mediated agreement to the Record of Decision for Managing Competing and Unwanted Vegetation. This type of project was recommended in the South Santiam Watershed Analysis (April 1995, updated in 2005), the Middle Santiam Watershed Analysis (April 1996), and the Quartzville Watershed Analysis (September 2002), Biological Evaluation for FY 2009 Pre-commercial Thinning and Pruning Activities (March 30, 2009).
Table 2: Compliance with Other Laws, Regulations, and Policies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Enacted</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>How applied in this project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>Organic Act</td>
<td>This Law is the foundation for multiple use and Forest Service management of National Forest System Lands</td>
<td>Implementation of this project follows direction in this law for the Forest Service to manage National Forest System Lands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>National j</td>
<td>Creates the environmental impact statement (EIS) and environmental assessment (EA) as instruments of environmental policy. Requires public participation. Council on Environmental Quality regulations allow federal agencies to exclude certain categories of actions from documentation in EA or EIS.</td>
<td>Scoping was conducted as required by NEPA. This project follows FSH 1909.15 Chapter 30 requirements for categorically excludable activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Endangered Species Act (ESA)</td>
<td>Provides broad protection for species of fish, wildlife and plants that are listed as threatened or endangered in the U.S. or elsewhere. Provisions are made for listing species, as well as for recovery plans and the designation of critical habitat for listed species. The Act outlines procedures for federal agencies to follow when taking actions that may jeopardize listed species, and contains exceptions and exemptions.</td>
<td>The project is in compliance with the Endangered Species Act. Applicable procedures were followed with respect to threatened and/or endangered species.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>National Forest Management Act (NFMA)</td>
<td>Requires the Secretary of Agriculture to assess forest lands, develop a management program based on multiple-use, sustained-yield principles, and implement a resource management plan for each unit of the National Forest System. It is the primary statute governing the administration of national forests.</td>
<td>This project was developed in full compliance with NFMA via compliance with the Willamette National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan 1990, as amended. The project follows appropriate standards and guidelines and management direction for the Management Allocations in the project area.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Administrative Review
This decision is subject to administrative review (appeal) pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215. Appeals can be submitted in several forms, but must be received by the Forest Supervisor, the Appeal Deciding Officer, within 45 days from the date of publication of notice of this decision in the Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon. The publication date in the Register Guard, newspaper of record for the Willamette National Forest, is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Attachments received after the 45 day appeal period will not be considered. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

• Mailed to: Appeal Deciding Officer, Forest Supervisor; ATTN: Appeals, P.O. Box 10607, Eugene, OR 97401;

• E-mailed to: appeals-pacificnorthwest-willamette@fs.fed.us. Please put APPEAL and the project name in the subject line. Electronic appeals must be submitted as part of an actual e-mail message, or as
an attachment in Microsoft Work (.doc), rich text format (.rtf), or portable document format (.pdf) only. E-mails submitted to addresses other than the ones listed above or in formats other than those listed above or containing viruses will be rejected. It is the responsibility of the appellant to confirm receipt of appeals submitted by electronic mail;

• Delivered to: Willamette National Forest, Supervisor’s Office at Springfield Interagency Office, 3106 Pierce Parkway, Suite D, Springfield, OR 97477, between the hours of 8:00 am and 4:30 pm, M-F; or

• Faxed to: Willamette National Forest, Supervisor’s Office, ATTN: APPEALS at (541) 225-6222.

The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered appeals are: 8:00 am to 4:30 pm. Electronic appeals must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc) to the email address above. In cases where no identifiable name is attached to an electronic message, a verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature is one way to provide verification. The notice of appeal must meet the appeal content requirements at 36 CFR 215.14.

Implementation Date
This project would be implemented on or after July 16, 2012. Acreages discussed in project documents are approximations based upon preliminary project design. Minor adjustments may be made to unit boundaries and unit acreages during unit layout. The Interdisciplinary Team will review any major differences between the proposal and the final layout.

Contact Information
For further information concerning this decision please contact Lindsay Anderson, Sweet Home Ranger District, 4431 Highway 20, Sweet Home, OR 97386 or by phone at 541-367-3485.

Approved by:

_____________________ ___________
CYNTHIA GLICK Date
District Ranger
Sweet Home Ranger District
Willamette National Forest
The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination, write to USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20250-9410, or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.