PineGrass Plantation Habitat Improvement Project

Introduction

The Middle Fork Ranger District of Willamette National Forest proposes to implement habitat restoration activities involving a number of young stand management techniques designed to maintain an open stand of trees with a diverse ground vegetation layer. The stands proposed for treatment range from 15 to 40 years of age and were created by past clear-cutting of mature stands. They are scattered across the upper Middle Fork and Hills Creek Reservoir fifth-field watersheds, generally in lower or mid-elevations, and typically occur on southerly slopes (see attached map). All these plantations are within the Middle Fork Mixed Conifer forest type (see USDA, 2008, Appendix B), a dry forest type that contains some trees species not very common on the Willamette National Forest. Prior to fire suppression efforts, these stands were more open than these forests are now. Historically, the dense forest floor vegetation in these forests was dominated by native grasses and forbs.

Proposed Actions

The following management activities are proposed within 73 plantations, totaling about 1650 acres, as shown on the attached map. Not all the activities described below will occur on all acres or within all stands. Specific stand prescriptions will be detailed at the time funding is available to do the treatments in order to account for changes as these young stands develop:

- Thinning of conifers less than 11” in diameter to generally favor and release pine species and reduce the density of these stands to an extent that these acres will represent open, mid-seral conditions for the next 20 years. This thinning will be quite variable with spacing ranging from 14 to 30 plus feet. Large and small clumps of unthinned trees will remain in most stands;
- Pruning to reduce ladder fuels; pruning will lift live crowns above the projected flame lengths of prescribed fire, generally no more than about 16 feet above the ground. In no case will more than 50 percent of the live crown of a tree be removed through pruning;
- Abatement of fuels resulting from the first two items, to include hand piling and burning, lopping and scattering, chipping when near road sides, and/or fuel pull-back from the stems of key trees;
- Snag creation through girdling or top cutting;
- Mowing (mastication) or hand cutting of shrubs and young conifer trees; no less than approximately 40 percent of the shrub layer in a given stand will be maintained in a mature (uncut) condition;
- Prescribed underburning;
- Planting of under-represented tree species, particularly Oregon white oak and sugar pine;
- Seeding of preferred native forage herbaceous vegetation and native herbaceous understory species;
- Abatement of non-native and/or invasive plants through manual removal or mowing.

Fifty nine of the stands (representing about 73 percent of the acres proposed for treatment) are entirely or partially within recently designated critical habitat for the northern spotted owl (USDI, 2012). Stands within critical habitat will be treated in a similar way to areas not designated as critical habitat.

No activities will occur within 25 feet of perennial stream channels, and any thinning within riparian reserves will maintain at least a 50% canopy closure within primary shade zones of perennial streams. Treatments may occur near intermittent streams, but no vegetation providing for bank stability will be affected and all stream channels will be protected from disturbance.

The above activities will be implemented as funding and/or volunteer labor is available. We hope that there will be considerable interest on the part of wildlife and restoration groups or individuals to accomplish much of this work with volunteer efforts. There has been expression of support in this regard for an “Adopt-a-Plantation” concept where individuals or groups would implement prescribed activities within many of the smaller (2 to 5 acre) project units.

Proposed treatments will improve forage conditions for deer and elk on about 1,080 acres in moderate level, and 570 acres in high level emphasis areas as designated under the Willamette National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan.

**Purpose and Need**

The need to restore the Middle Fork Mixed Conifer forest type (within which all the PineGrass stands occur) to its historic low density open forest conditions has been extensively addressed elsewhere for other projects (see the Jim’s Creek Savanna Restoration project [USDA, 2006] and the 2008 Middle Fork Watershed Analysis update [USDA, 2008]), and will not be repeated here, except in summary.

The PineGrass plantations were all at one time (before commencement of fire suppression and harvest) part of an open forest type dominated by scattered large Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, incense cedar, and sugar pine overstory (with a density of 5 to 20 trees per acre) above an herb grass, and shrub dominated understory. There is a need to reduce the density of these stands, to treat the resultant fuels; to restructure tree crowns to enable them to survive underburning; and to reestablish a frequent fire regime in order to restore the native grasses and herbs, reduce the coverage and stature of shrub vegetation and to make these stands more resilient to prescribed and wildfire. In some of these areas there may also be a need to reestablish native ground vegetation and/or native conifers by planting seed or tree seedlings.
The Middle Fork Willamette Downstream Tributaries Watershed Analysis (USDA, 1995, page 1-4) and the Upper Middle Fork Watershed Analysis (USDA, 1996) to some extent recognized the uniqueness of the mixed conifer forest type and recommended (page 6-2) that management strategies be developed to maintain the functions of that open forest habitat. A recent update of these watershed analyses (USDA, 2008, Appendix B) amplified the uniqueness of this forest type and highlighted the need to restore at least a portion of this landscape to its historic, more open condition. This need is driven by the historic diversity of these stands, the loss of much species diversity due to fire suppression, and the desire to increase the resistance of these forests to damage from wildfire (an improvement of the fire regime condition class, as per USDA, et. al., 2005). This need to restore historic forest structures applies to all land allocations in the Mixed Conifer forest type. Riparian areas and wetland habitats also have been changed due to an increase in tree density, and these areas too can benefit for restoration activities if done in a sensitive way.

The Integrated Natural Fuels Management Strategy (USDA/USDI, 2000) also recognized the importance and rarity of pine and oak dominated sites (page 15), established the desired to maintain and restore such habitats (Appendix D-2), and recommended that oak and pine stands may need treatment to provide for retention of oak, pine and native vegetation. The PineGrass Plantation Management Project begins to implement these recommendations for the reasons discussed below.

![Typical PineGrass Plantation with native grasses and some Oregon white oak.](image-url)
There are many reasons to restore this forest type to its historic condition, and they all relate to restoration and maintenance of natural vegetative biodiversity for the purpose of maintaining all species that historically occupied this landscape. This restoration of the historic open conditions will also help to make these forests more resilient in the face of changing climate and wildfire.

There is a secondary need to restore these stands to their past more open conditions relating to the continuing decline in the quantity and quality of big game (deer and elk) forage habitat in this watershed. Fire suppression, lack of regeneration harvest over the last 20 years, and continued reforestation and growth of dense young stands has resulted in a deficiency of open, early-successional foraging habitat in these watersheds (USDA, 2008, Appendix B). Restoration of these young stands to their historic more open conditions will provide important and much needed big game forage habitat while providing for general biodiversity objectives.

Decision

I have decided to implement the proposed actions described above based upon the analysis that has been done in the process of fully developing these prescriptive actions in an interdisciplinary fashion. In making this decision I have considered the following:

1.) The proposed actions may be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) as per direction in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15, Section 32.2 (6) “Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction.” No road construction or herbicide use is proposed with this project;

2.) There will be a positive resource effect in that the plantations will be restored to or set upon a trajectory to become a more open, historically resilient condition and the native herbaceous ground vegetation will be enhanced in vigor and will provide for higher quality wildlife forage;

3.) There will be no impacts to aquatic resources; the proposed activities, as described above, will maintain the conditions within perennial stream courses. The greater riparian area conditions will be improved through restoration of historic, more diverse and resilient stand structure and composition through restoration of the historically more diverse stand conditions;

4.) There are no conditions present that might lead to a finding of extraordinary circumstances (FSH 1909.15, Section 31.2). The table below presents our determination of the lack of extraordinary circumstances that could cause the proposed action to have significant environmental effects;

5.) Seasonal restrictions of noise producing activities will be implemented to avoid the potential for disturbing northern spotted owls. All smoke and certain noise producing activities will occur after September 30 and before March 1, as described in the Terrestrial Wildlife Report;
6.) Forest Service internal and external scoping efforts, and a set of specialist reports contained in the Analysis File for this project, have determined that the anticipated effects of the proposed action would not be significant. Internal scoping for this project indicates this project will provide a number of environmental and biological benefits; no detrimental impacts to resources are anticipated.

7.) This project presents some excellent restoration and historic educational opportunities using various mediums including talks, tours, and use of volunteer work parties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential Extraordinary Circumstances (see FSH 1909.15 – 31.2)</th>
<th>Present in the project area?</th>
<th>Would the project cause Significant Effects on this Resource?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Federally listed threatened or endangered species (TES) or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species (SSSP)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Botany: There is a low likelihood of rare botanical species in the project area because the young stands are not habitat for these species. The sites proposed for activities have already been disturbed by previous clear cut harvesting. Surveys in possible habitat were conducted in the summer of 2012 and no Sensitive species were found. Adjacent known sites of rare species will not be modified or impacted by the proposed activities. Invasive plants will be abated. Wildlife: Habitat associated with some species listed as Threatened or Sensitive occurs within or adjacent to treatment areas. There will be no adverse effects to species or their habitat related to proposed activities. Any potential impact to sensitive species is considered minor and discountable based on a low likelihood of presence and the amount of undisturbed habitat for any affected species elsewhere throughout the watershed. Some project units are within currently designated critical habitat for the northern spotted owl, Project units are not located in current suitable or dispersal habitat for the northern spotted owl, nor would activities disturb the species in adjacent suitable habitat. Therefore the project may affect but is not likely to adversely affect spotted owls or proposed critical habitat associated with project activities where units fall within such habitat. Fisheries: A pre-field review indicates there will be no effect on listed fish or designated critical habitat. The project will have no impact on aquatic special status species since it would not conduct ground disturbing activities within or directly adjacent to any permanent stream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential Extraordinary Circumstances (see FSH 1909.15 – 31.2)</td>
<td>Present in the project area?</td>
<td>Would the project cause Significant Effects on this Resource?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>The project activities would not occur within floodplains, municipal watersheds, or wetlands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas or national recreation areas</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>The project activities do not occur within or near any congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas or national recreation areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inventoried Roadless Areas or potential wilderness areas</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No project activities would occur within Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Natural Areas</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No project activities occur within or near Research Natural Areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No project activities occur on any known American Indian or Alaska Native religious or cultural sites.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>The project area has been surveyed for cultural sites; while some sites were located, the activities prescribed are not ground-disturbing. Project activities would have no significant effect on known archaeological sites, historic properties or areas.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Public Involvement and Comment**

The PineGrass project was first introduced to the public in the Willamette National Forest’s Winter, 2012 Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) publication, and has appeared in all editions of the SOPA since that time. A formal Public Scoping letter was sent on February 28, 2012 to a mailing list of 22 individuals, organizations, and Tribal governments. These individuals and organizations have expressed interest in similar projects in the past. To date we have received comments on this proposal from four individuals from three organizations. Most of those comments were generally supportive of the project and can be viewed at the Middle Fork District Office.

A draft version of this Decision Memo was available for public comment from November 12 to December 12, 2012. Two sets of comments were received; one, from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation expressed general support of the project and concurrence with the purpose and need for action. The other, from Oregon Wild, contains several negative comments and suggestions for changes in the decision. My responses to those comments are contained in the attached comments response Appendix to this Decision Memo. My responses also involved some minor modification of the wording of this Decision Memo.
Consistency

This Decision tiers to the Willamette National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan Final Environmental Impact Statements and is consistent with the Willamette National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan), as amended by the 1994 Record of Decision for Amendments to Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Planning Documents Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl (USDA/USDI, 1994). Specifically, it implements Forest Plan direction to Maintain or enhance Biological diversity (FW-201, 207, FW-211, and MA-9d-07), and to begin an improving trend in the quality of big game habitat in High and Moderate emphasis Big Game Management Areas (FW-135, 147, 148, 150, and 151). This proposal is also in compliance with direction in the 2011 Revised Recovery Plan for the Northern Spotted Owl (USDI, 2011) for management of Dry Forests (pages III-20 to 41) and the 2012 Final Spotted Owl Critical Habitat designation (USDI, 2012, pages 26, 27, and 29), since it conserves or restores natural ecological processes (including fire) in rare (on the Willamette National Forest) dry forests where they have been modified or suppressed. The project also provides for restoration of resilience and resistant to the future effects of climate change.

During the public comment period for this Decision, a new northern spotted owl critical habitat designation was made. This new designation included many proposed PineGrass stands that were not considered to be in critical habitat when the project was initially developed and consulted upon. This project was included with others in a re-initiation of informal consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in a supplemental biological assessment to address new project effects associated with the revised 2012 critical habitat. The USFWS issued their response to the assessment in a letter of concurrence (LOC) signed January 28, 2013. In the LOC the Service concurred that 2012 critical habitat effects associated with projects such as PineGrass are insignificant and treatments are fully consistent with the Recovery Plan and the Final Critical Habitat designation. The US Fish and Wildlife Service concurred that the PineGrass project may affect, but would not adversely affect spotted owl habitat, including critical habitat, and may provide for a long-term beneficial effect.

This decision is also consistent with direction for sensitive species management contained in the Record of Decision to Remove or Modify the Survey and Manage Mitigating Measures Standards and Guidelines in Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Planning Documents Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owls (March, 2004), as well as guidelines within the South Cascades Late-Successional Reserves Assessment. It is also consistent with the Forest Service Handbook (FSH) guidelines for Categorical Exclusion from Documentation (FSH 1909.15, Chapter 30).

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to administrative review (appeal) pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215. In light of a recent court ruling (Sequoia ForestKeeper v. Tidwell, 11-cv-00679-LJO-DLB (E.D. Cal.)), the Forest Service will provide public notice, comment, and opportunity for administrative appeal for projects and activities documented with a “Decision Memo” (36 CFR 220.6(e)) until new instructions are issued by the Washington Office, or the Agency issues regulations addressing the Court’s ruling. Only persons who submitted comments during the 30-day draft
Decision Memo review period have standing to appeal the project decision. The 45 day appeal period for this decision begins on the day a notice of this decision is published in the Eugene Register Guard. Appeals may be:

1) Mailed to: Appeal Deciding Officer, Forest Supervisor, ATTN: APPEALS, 3106 Pierce Parkway, Suite D, Springfield, OR 97477;
2) E-mailed to: appeals-pacificnorthwest-willamette@fs.fed.us. Please put APPEAL and name of project in the subject line. Electronic appeals must be submitted a part of an actual e-mail message, or as an attachment in Microsoft Word (.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, or containing viruses, will be rejected. It is the responsibility of the appellant to confirm receipt of appeals submitted by electronic mail;
3) Delivered to: Willamette National Forest Supervisor’s Office, 3106 Pierce Parkway, Suite D, Springfield, Oregon between 8 am and 4:30 pm, M-F between 8 am and 4:30 pm, M-F or ;
4) Faxed to: Willamette National Forest, Springfield Interagency Office, ATTN: APPEALS at (541)225-6222.

Implementation Date

The proposed action may be implemented after the 45 days appeal period ends if no appeal is filed; or after the appeal has been resolved should an appeal of this decision be received. As of this writing, funding for these restoration activities has not been secured. Implementation of this project, once the decision is signed and all the above review processes have been consumated, will begin as soon as such funding is secured or volunteer labor is recruited.

Contact Person

For further information regarding the proposed action or this decision, please contact Dick Davis (541-782-5256) or Tim Bailey (541-782-5248) at the Middle Fork Ranger District, 46375 Highway 58, Westfir, OR 97492.

/s/ Molly Juillerat, acting for
DUANE F. BISHOP
District Ranger

February 8, 2013
Date
Literature Cited


Response to comments on the PineGrass Habitat Improvement Project Draft Decision Memo – published November 12, 2012

February 8, 2013

Two sets of formal comments on the Draft Decision Memo for this project were received during the November 12 to December 12, 2012 public comment period. One was from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, consisting of a general statement of support and interest in the project, and support for the purpose and need for action, specifically in terms of big game early-seral habitat needs. The other set of more critical comments was from Oregon Wild, consisting of several specific comments. The comments are italicized, and my responses follow each one. Literature citations refer to those cited at the end of the Decision Memo

*We support ecologically sound restoration including enhancement of the under-represented pine components in the upper Middle Fork watershed. We support the focus on young stands. We support the emphasis on spatially variable treatments.*

Excellent; then you support this project, which has been developed to begin restoration of degraded and underrepresented pine forests in young (managed) stands using spatially and methodologically variable treatments.

*This project involves a rather large amount of acres for a CE. There are reasons to carefully consider the trade-offs involved in this project, such as the tension between low density stand conditions and spotted owl habitat requirements.*

This Decision Memo has been prepared and signed under the authority granted by Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15, Section 32.2, invoking categorical exclusion (6): “Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction.” This category does not have a treatment acreage limit, but does allow for up to an entire mile of low standard road construction. This proposal does not involve any road construction or herbicide use and does not involve use of heavy, ground disturbing machinery. I find this project totally compatible with and within the scope of this particular type of categorical exclusion from the need to prepare an environmental assessment. It should also be noted that while 1,650 acres may seem like a large parcel of land in some contexts, in the context of this landscape that acreage represents only 0.7 percent of the total area of the watersheds within which the PineGrass project occurs.

Additionally, note that another category of exclusion (#11) provides for activities not to exceed 4,200 acres, some two and one half times more acreage than the PineGrass project proposes to treat, so this amount of acreage is not unprecedented when it comes to invocation of a categorical exclusion.

I believe there are no tensions between low density stand conditions and spotted owl habitat requirements. These stands do not now constitute any type of suitable owl habitat (most treatment areas do not even meet the canopy closure requirements for dispersal habitat), it would
take a long time for these rather open stands sometimes dominated by ponderosa pine to develop into suitable owl habitat, and the Northern Spotted Owl (NSO) Revised Recovery Plan places emphasis on restoration of resiliency and ecosystem functions, as discussed below in greater detail. Furthermore, these stands, before they became over-grown as a result of fire suppression, never did contain suitable northern spotted owl habitat

Make explicit plans to manage these stands toward high quality owl habitat over time to fulfill CHU goals. The finding of "no effect" on spotted owl habitat is difficult to accept given that heavy thinning at this stage of development may change the future structure of stands in ways that may be both positive and negative. This can be mitigated by leaving generous untreated skips embedded within units;

The purpose and need for action that drives the activities to be implemented under the PineGrass project does not relate at all to managing these stands to achieve high quality owl habitat over time. If that were the case, this project would not be proposed as currently described; we would be proposing an aggressive site preparation and tree planting effort to establish denser stands.

The stands being treated in the PineGrass project constitute neither suitable northern spotted owl habitat, nor dispersal habitat, thus the initial no effect call. This assessment was made prior to the December, 2012 update of Northern Spotted Owl Critical Habitat, which added a considerable amount of new NSO critical habitat to this area. About 1,200 acres (or 73 percent) of the 1,650 acre PineGrass project is now within a critical habitat unit. Northern spotted owl US Fish and Wildlife Service consultation was re-initiated as a result of this new information, with a determination (made in the January 28, 2013 Letter Of Concurrence) of may affect - not likely to adversely affect within critical habitat Unit 6, West Cascades South, sub-unit WCS-4. This call was made because these acres are not now suitable habitat, would still not be suitable habitat ten years from now even if the PineGrass proposal was not implemented, and because implementation of this project would not affect the overall function of this critical habitat unit. Additionally, the PineGrass project, as initially and currently conceived, is entirely in compliance with the dry forest restoration recommended by the Revised Northern Spotted Owl Recovery Plan (see USDI, 2011, pages III-11, 20, 21, 32-34, 37, 38 ) and the Final Critical Habitat Rule (see USDI, 2012, pages 26, 27, 29, 32, 183, 184, 276, 281, 285, 286, 290).

As mentioned in the draft and final Decision Memos (page 1), large and small clumps of unthinned trees will remain in most stands. The Silvicultural Prescription written for this proposal (located in the project’s Analysis File at the Middle Fork Ranger Station) further explains that in many portions of these stands the canopy is beginning to close or has already closed (page 6), and some areas are dense enough that most of the prescriptive elements would no longer be effective, or would generate so much slash as to be infeasible to implement in those areas. Most of these dense areas will remain untreated to retain the inherent diversity of stand structures that now exist. There will be untreated skips in these stands to balance the activities in other portions of the stands that will maintain more open conditions; however it is difficult to say if these untreated areas would be considered “generous”, since that terms was not defined.
Note also that this comment seems to contradict the first statement above, regarding support of “ecologically sound restoration including enhancement of the under-represented pine components”. Enhancement of the underrepresented pine component, as well as the associated components of Oregon white oak and native grasses, can only occur if these stands are maintained in an open condition that does not provide NSO dispersal or suitable habitat. If we were to manage these stands to accelerate the development of high quality owl habitat, those underrepresented ecosystem components would be suppressed and eventually killed by the dense stand of conifers necessary for classification as suitable northern spotted owl habitat.

*Leave enough trees (probably in untreated skips) to recruit adequate levels of snags and dead wood throughout the life of the stand. This is especially important in riparian reserves. The finding of "no impact" to aquatic resources is hard to swallow given that trees will likely be removed that would otherwise grow and eventually be recruited to streams;*

More than enough trees will be retained to maintain appropriate levels of snags and dead wood throughout the life of these stands which occur within a dry forest type with a frequent fire regime. The Mixed Conifer forest type never had an abundance of snags and dead wood habitat due to its frequent fire regime, (see Appendix A - Middle Fork Mixed Conifer Forest Type Overview, of the 2009 update of the Upper Middle Fork Watershed Analysis). See also the response to the above comments regarding the retention of dense clumps of trees, and the presence of riparian areas in these stands addressed below.

*The draft DM does not appear to describe what will happen in riparian reserves. Please clarify in the final decision that a no treatment buffer of at least 50 feet will be applied to all water features, including intermittent streams and wetlands;*

This clarification has been made, though the draft Decision Notice did say (page 3, item #1 under the Decision heading) that the proposed actions will maintain conditions within perennial stream courses. See also the Soils/Hydrology Specialist Report in the project’s Analysis File, pages 3 and 4. No activities are proposed within 25 feet of perennial stream channels, and any thinning will maintain at least a 50% canopy closure within primary shade zones of perennial streams. Treatments may occur near intermittent streams, but no vegetation providing for bank stability will be affected and all stream channels will be protected from disturbance. It should be noted that the stand conditions and history that created the purpose and need for actions (restoration of a degraded ecosystem) apply as much to riparian reserves as to uplands. This is especially true for intermittent streams; such streams within the Mixed Conifer forest type and particularly on southerly slopes did not have dense conifer vegetation within the entire riparian reserve. All this being said, there are generally few permanent stream channels within any of the PineGrass project stands.

*Minimize use of heavy equipment;*

Off-road use of heavy equipment use is not anticipated.
If volunteers do implementation be sure to give them adequate training and education on ecological habitat diversity. e.g. retain under-represented species and habitat elements; Don't let volunteers use vehicles off roads;

Volunteers implementing any of the proposed restoration activities will be closely supervised and have examples of the various treatments to look at before they begin their work. Most of the groups interested in volunteering for this type of restoration work are very interested in the educational opportunities it provides. No off-road vehicle use is authorized in these stands, regardless who may be working within these stands.

Treat activity fuels in a variety of ways to create a variety of habitat structures and post-treatment conditions;

Activity created fuels will be treated in a variety of ways, including hand piling and burning, brush piling for retention as wildlife habitat, lopping and scattering, chipping when near roadsides, and/or fuel pull-back from the stems of key trees, and addition to prescribed broadcast burning (see Draft and Final Decision Memos, pages 1 and 2).

While we have no objection to enhancement of big game objectives, be sure to achieve that objective within a broader ecosystem restoration framework that benefits the full suite of species associated with complex habitats;

When implemented, the PineGrass project will achieve both objectives of enhancing big game habitat and restoration of historic open-forest conditions to benefit the full suite of species associated with complex and diverse open, late-seral habitat typical of a restored Middle Fork Mixed Conifer forest type. The PineGrass project is part of a broader ecosystem framework. The general need for these activities was determined by the framework established by the 2009 Upper Middle Fork Watershed Analysis Update (and Appendices), and the associated 2009 Upper Middle Fork Watershed Action Plan, both of which specifically mention and recommend restoration of the Middle Fork Mixed Conifer dry forest, within which the Pine Grass stands occur. As far as benefit to a full suite of species associated with complex habitats is concerned, note that a large percentage of the associated watershed, (over 99 percent), will be maintained as dense, complex habitats.

If any legacy trees are identified as a hazard, we urge the FS to establish a safety zone around the tree and exclude workers, rather than cut the tree down;

The term “legacy tree” typically refers to individuals which have survived the last event that disturbed the stand in question. In the case of the PineGrass project, the last disturbing event was regeneration timber harvest, as all the PineGrass stands were created by past harvest activity. Only a few PineGrass stands contain legacy trees remaining from the previous stand, typically mature trees retained for shelterwood purposes, or for wildlife tree retention. Some of these trees have become snags over the last several decades, and some of those could be considered a hazard by State OSHA personnel. No such trees will be cut for hazard reduction, as they provide important and rare standing dead tree habitat in stands with little such habitat. Work around such
potentially hazardous trees will be accomplished in-house or by volunteer labor to avoid the requirement to cut such trees (State OSHA regulations apply only to employees in the private sector and Federal OSHA regulations apply only to personnel involved in timber harvest activities). It is important to do work near such trees (as opposed to creating the above suggested no-treatment safety zones) because the proposed activities will serve to protect such structures from fire to prevent their loss, be it from prescribed or wild fire.

/s/ Molly Juillerat, acting for

DUANE F. BISHOP

District Ranger

February 8, 2013

Date