



File Code: 1950
Date: March 11, 2013

Dear Interested Participant:

The Heppner Ranger District is in the process of developing a proposed action for the Kahler Dry Forest Restoration project and has completed a preliminary analysis of the proposal. This proposal will include vegetation treatments to improve forest resiliency and reduce the risk of uncharacteristic disturbances, and is intended to provide, develop, and enhance effective and well-distributed habitats throughout the planning area for all existing native and desired nonnative vertebrate wildlife and aquatic species. Treatments may be applied to approximately 10,677 acres and prescribed fire treatments applied to approximately 27,422 acres, within a project area of approximately 32,848 acres. The proposed project area is located about 40 miles southwest of the town of Heppner, Oregon, and is within Grant and Wheeler counties. Legal locations that the proposed project is within are as follows: T7S, R24E, Sec 13, 14; T7S, R24E, Sec 8-18, 20-24; T7S, R25E, Sec 4-10, 14-27, 34-36; T7S, R26E, Sec 31; T8S, R25E, Sec 1, 2, 11-14; T8S, R26E, Sec 5-30, 33-35 (Willamette Meridian).

Detailed maps and additional information regarding this proposal can be found at: <http://go.usa.gov/2Bpx>

The project area is defined by the Lower John Day River-Kahler Creek watershed (1707020401) and contains the following subwatersheds: Alder Creek (170702040108), Lower Kahler Creek (170702040104), Upper Kahler Creek (170702040103), Haystack Creek (170702040105), and Bologna Canyon (170702040101). Holding lines required for prescribed fire fall outside of the formal project boundary in some areas, and include a small amount of land in the following subwatersheds: Buckhorn Creek (170702041105), Brown Creek (170702041106), Wilson Creek (170702020804), Middle Big Wall (170702020805), and Lower Big Wall Creek (170702020806).

The Kahler Dry Forest Restoration Project proposes actions in seven different management area strategies, as designated by the Umatilla National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. Table 1 shows each management area strategy within the project area, with proposed treatment acres.

Table 1 - Forest Plan Management Areas

Management Area	Total Acres in Project Area	Acres Proposed for Vegetation Treatment	Acres Proposed for Prescribed Fire
A4 – Viewshed 2	901	336	755
A6 – Developed Recreation	50	20	50
C1 – Dedicated Old Growth	1616	12	1,402
C3 – Big Game Winter Range	11,958	3,045	8,567
C5 – Riparian	793	192	599
D2 – Research Natural Area	84	0	84
E1 – Timber and Forage	17,446	7,072	15,965
Total	32,848	10,677	27,422



Background Information

The Umatilla Forest Collaborative Group (UFCG) began formal meetings in September of 2011 to provide proposals for forest management solutions for the Umatilla National Forest. The UFCG is a wholly-independent collaborative group that is open to the public, and the Umatilla National Forest is not bound in any way to the proposals or decisions of the group. The mission of the UFCG is to develop and promote balanced solutions from a diverse group of stakeholders to improve and sustain ecological resiliency and local community socioeconomic health in and near the Umatilla National Forest. This collaborative is made up of representatives from environmental organizations, timber industries, county governments and various state, local, and federal agencies.

The Kahler Creek watershed was proposed by the UFCG as an area where the need for restoration of dry forest conditions could be undertaken. Management of forest density, structure, and composition were identified as restoration objectives to promote forest resiliency, contribute to social and economic needs, reduce the risk of uncharacteristic disturbances, and provide high quality, well-distributed habitat for dry upland forest associated wildlife species. Additional interests included restoration of natural disturbance (i.e. frequent low severity fire) regimes in dry upland, shrubland, and grassland habitats to promote resiliency and improve forage in big game winter and summer ranges, maintenance or restoration of water quality, fish habitat, and wildlife connectivity, and contributing towards maintaining industry infrastructure and local communities.

The Kahler Dry Forest Restoration Project was then selected as a project the UFCG wanted to focus on and help develop proposals toward restoration of dry forests in eastern Oregon. Oregon governor John Kitzhaber designated the Kahler Dry Forest Restoration Project as an Oregon Solutions project on February 1, 2012 because the project supports Oregon's Sustainable Community Objectives. The UFCG developed a proposed purpose statement and management guideline document for Forest Service consideration during the development and implementation of this project.

The Umatilla National Forest has a strong interest in maintaining its relationship with the UFCG and working with this group on the Kahler Dry Forest Restoration Project and other projects across the Forest. After considering the UFCG's work and thoughts on the potential Kahler project, the Forest decided to analyze this proposal through the NEPA process. The Forest Service has initiated the NEPA analysis as outlined below.

Purpose and Need for Action

Fire suppression and past harvest throughout the Kahler project area have caused a shift in stand density, structure, and species composition away from the range of variability historically associated with dry forests. In turn, this shift has altered the availability and distribution of habitat for terrestrial wildlife species, including Forest Plan Management Indicator Species and Region 6 Sensitive Wildlife Species.

There is a shortage of old forest single stratum (OFSS) forest structure, which is characterized by a single overstory layer, with medium to large trees of early successional tree species such as ponderosa pine or western larch. Currently, only 6% of the forested land within the project area is classified as OFSS, whereas historically 40-60% of the forest would have been in this condition.

Specific needs for the Kahler area are as follows:

- Restore, maintain, and promote single stratum old forest structure, moving the area toward its historical range of structure, density, and species composition.
- Maintain and promote old trees (>150 years old) throughout the project area.
- Provide a supply of commercial forest products to support and maintain local infrastructure.
- Reduce insect and disease risk, where currently outside the historical range, to dry upland forest stands and associated wildlife.
- Reestablish the character of a frequent fire regime to the landscape to aid in maintaining open stand conditions and fire-tolerant species, improve big game forage, and reduce conifer encroachment.
- Reduce encroachment of western juniper into areas where it did not historically occur to improve big game forage, the quality of grassland and steppe-shrubland habitat for wildlife, the diversity and productivity of riparian plant communities, and water availability for native vegetation.
- Provide, develop, and enhance effective and well-distributed habitats throughout the Forest for all existing native and desired nonnative vertebrate wildlife species, particularly those associated with late and old structural stages in dry upland forest stands (e.g. white-headed and Lewis' woodpecker).
- Provide for a high level of potential habitat effectiveness at the landscape scale to meet the needs of big game in the winter range management area.
- Address habitat issues in big game winter range areas including the existing extent and distribution of cover, the quantity and quality of forage, and disturbance associated with roads and trails open to full-sized vehicles and OHVs.

The purpose of the Kahler Dry Forest Restoration Project is to restore dry forest conditions to a resilient, fire adapted landscape by moving the project area towards its range of variability in forest structure, tree density, species composition, and associated wildlife and aquatic habitat.

Treatment of the project area will help foster early seral recruitment, lead to increased individual tree vigor, and increased resilience to wildfire and insect related disturbance that will incorporate and address wildlife and aquatic habitat issues associated with the current landscape.

Proposed Action

Upland Forest Thinning

The Kahler project proposes to use variable density thinning with skips and gaps to reduce tree density, shift species composition, and promote old forest structure across approximately 10,677 acres within the project area. Approximately 10-15% of each proposed unit will remain untreated in "skips" that are half an acre or larger in size, and approximately 10-15% of each proposed unit will become open "gaps" that are ½ to 2 acres in size. Between the skips and gaps, units will be thinned to a variable density with an average residual basal area that is determined by the unit's plant association (generally 30-50 ft²/acre). There will be an option to remove select young (<150 years old) grand fir or Douglas-fir trees that are 21 inches in diameter or larger and interacting with the crown of a desirable leave tree. No other trees that are 21 inches or larger will be removed. Tree species preference will be for ponderosa pine and western larch. Diseased trees and those with severe mistletoe infestations will be targeted for removal where they are outside of historical ranges. Trees may be removed using ground-based, skyline, or helicopter

methods. Minimum snag and downed wood standards will be maintained. After harvest, non-commercial thinning may occur to reduce small (≤ 7 " inches in diameter) tree density, using either hand thinning or mechanical equipment. Hand thinning of western juniper may occur across the entire project area in order to reduce and/or eliminate its encroachment into grasslands, dry meadows, and riparian areas where it did not historically occur in order to maintain or improve big game forage, the quality of grassland and steppe-shrubland habitat for wildlife, the diversity and productivity of riparian plant communities, and water availability for native vegetation.

Prescribed Fire

Following mechanical treatment, approximately 27,422 acres of the project area will be treated using prescribed fire. Ignition may take place from within RHCAs. Burning may occur in spring or fall; acreage would not be burned all at once, but rather in small increments over a period of several years. This treatment would reintroduce fire to a fire-dependent ecosystem blackening about 50-75% of the area to lessen the impact of a future wildfire, improve forage quality for big game, and encourage ponderosa pine recruitment. Existing roads and the use of natural barriers would be used to contain prescribed fires. All ignition methods may be used, including hand held drip torch, ATV-mounted drip torch, and helicopter ignition.

Riparian Area Thinning

Approximately 800 acres of dry upland, high density forest stands are within intermittent stream riparian habitat conservation areas (category 4 RHCAs) in proposed units and would be treated to maintain or restore riparian habitat and upland vegetation including improvement of channel function and floodplain connectivity using a variable width no-mechanical zone adjacent to the stream channels. The no-mechanical zone width would vary depending on topography, stream type and vegetation. Within selected areas of the no-mechanical zone, hand thinning of small diameter (≤ 7 " dbh) trees may occur. Selected trees may be felled along streams and left in the channel to provide for down wood. Some skipped areas within units would be located adjacent to stream no-mechanical zones to create variability along the stream corridor.

Tamarack Fire Lookout Thinning

An administrative site that includes a rental cabin, fire lookout, and communications equipment on Tamarack Mountain will be treated to improve public and firefighter safety, improve views from the lookout, and reduce the risk of loss from wildfire. Approximately 25 acres of surrounding forest stands and travel corridors have been identified for thinning treatment using the same prescription as outlined above in the upland forest thinning action. Some trees over 21 inches DBH may be felled or topped.

Connected Actions

In addition to the above treatments, the following connected actions would occur as a part of this project:

Danger Tree Removal

Danger tree removal would occur along Forest Service roads within the project area along haul routes. Danger trees are assessed as imminent or likely depending on their failure potential. All trees rated imminent would be felled and removed. Trees rated as likely would be evaluated by a qualified person to

determine the risk to operations. Where possible, danger trees may be felled and left on the ground to contribute to wildlife habitat.

Access

Temporary roads may be used to access some proposed units, and would be decommissioned following the project. System roads would be cleared of brush to meet visibility standards and bladed where needed.

Some closed roads would be temporarily re-opened to access treatment units for the duration of activities. Opening would involve removal of closure devices, brush clearing, and blading as necessary. These roads would be re-closed using the same type of closure device (signs or barricades) following the completion of activities. Waterbars and/or seeding with native seed would be applied as needed to prevent soil movement.

All roads and road crossings will be evaluated as to their potential negative impacts to wildlife and aquatic resources and remedies, including closures, may be addressed. The following roads have been identified for possible closure due to wildlife impacts resulting from the proposed action (see enclosed map):

Proposed Year-Round Road Closures	
Road	Miles
2141000	1.2
2406040	3.4
2408023	0.6
2500060	0.7
2500068	0.3
2500035	0.6
2500200	1.3
Total Year-Round Road Closures	8.1
Proposed Seasonal Road Closures	
2407020	1.8
2408020	2.0
2408000	3.7
Total Seasonal Road Closures	7.5
Proposed Year-Round Trail Closures	
O-2400140 OHV	0.4
Total Year-Round Trail Closures	0.4
Total Miles of All Closures	15.6

In addition to the proposed road closures listed above, a new permanent road 0.3 miles in length will be constructed to alleviate stream crossing issues currently occurring on the O-2400140 OHV trail (proposed for closure). This new permanent road would take the place of the closed O-2400140 OHV trail, and be administratively closed as a road after project implementation, but maintained as an open OHV trail.

Treatment of Residual Debris

All units with residual fuel loads above the Forest Plan standard would be treated manually (lop and scatter or piled), mechanically (grapple piling, grinding, crushing), removed off site and used as Biomass

material, and/or with prescribed burning to reduce fuel loads to standard. Burning of residual materials would depend upon the harvest system used. The types of burning treatment options would range from all residual materials left in the units to be burned when conditions permit, to materials piled and burned at each landing. Landings would be about ¼ acre in size and occur on average once every 25 acres. Fire would be applied by hand-held drip torch, ATV-mounted drip torch, or helicopter. Burning could occur in either spring or fall for up to five years after thinning or harvest activities are complete. Existing roads and or natural barriers would be used to contain prescribed fires. Water would be drafted from pre-approved sources for control.

Rehabilitation of Soil Disturbance

Upon completion of activities, skid trails, landings, or exposed mineral soil would be treated as necessary to reduce soil erosion or compaction.

Prevention of Invasive Plants

Prevention standards would be applied to prevent the initiation and spread of invasive plants. Prevention and control of invasive plants within the project area will be consistent with the Region 6 Invasive Plant Program Record of Decision, 2005 and treatment will be consistent with the 2010, Umatilla National Forest's Invasive Plants Treatment Project Record of Decision.

Forest Plan Amendments

It is anticipated that the Kahler Dry Forest Restoration Project will require amendments to the Umatilla Land and Resource Management Plan in order to carry out the proposed action. Potential amendments may include the following:

1. The Habitat Effectiveness Index (HEI) and cover standards in the Winter Range Management Area (Monument and Kahler Basin Winter Ranges, combined) are below Forest Plan minimums. To treat existing cover stands in the C3 management area, a Forest Plan amendment would be needed.
2. There will be an option to remove select young grand fir or Douglas-fir trees that are over 21” and interacting with the crown of a desirable leave tree. This will require an amendment to the Forest Plan to allow the cutting of trees 21” or greater.
3. Existing HEI in the western portion of project area is currently at a minimum due to cover conditions resulting from the Wheeler Point Fire. Loss of additional cover may result in a HEI that is below Forest Plan standards. An amendment to the Forest Plan would be required in this case.
4. Approximately 11 acres of management area C1 – Dedicated Old Growth immediately surround the Tamarack lookout site. Any harvest within this area will require a Forest Plan amendment. Replacement of affected acres with adjacent or nearby old forest stands, if necessary, would also require a Forest Plan amendment to change Forest Plan management areas allocations.

Comments

The Kahler Dry Forest Restoration Project is a proposal and not a decision. Please contact me with your concerns about this proposal and any information that you want considered during development of this project. Your comments will be used to identify issues associated with the proposal and in the development of possible alternatives that could also achieve the purpose and need of the project. You

may also want to suggest methods for determining possible effects of the proposed or research that you feel could be pertinent. It will be most helpful if comments are stated in terms of: action, changes in the environment resulting from that action, and the effect those changes will have on resources within specific geographic areas and time periods. The more specific your comment is the easier it will be for my team of resource specialists to address it during project development.

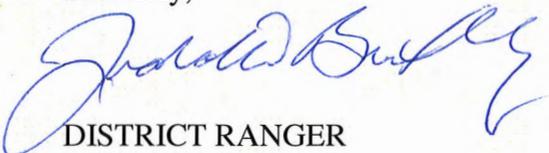
Your written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments concerning this project will be most useful in our planning process if received by April 10, 2013. However, if we receive comments after this date, we will attempt to incorporate them to the best of our abilities. Written comments should be submitted to Todd Buchholz, District Ranger, PO Box 7, Heppner, OR 97836. Oral comments must be provided at the Responsible Official's office during normal business hours via telephone - (541) 676-9187, TDD/TTY - (541) 278-3995, or in person. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), portable document (.pdf) or Word (.docx) to:

comments-pacificnorthwest-umatilla-heppner@fs.fed.us.

If you have questions or want additional information about this project you may contact Jonathan Day, Silviculturist, at (541) 676-2129 or jday@fs.fed.us.

Thank you for your interest in the Umatilla National Forest.

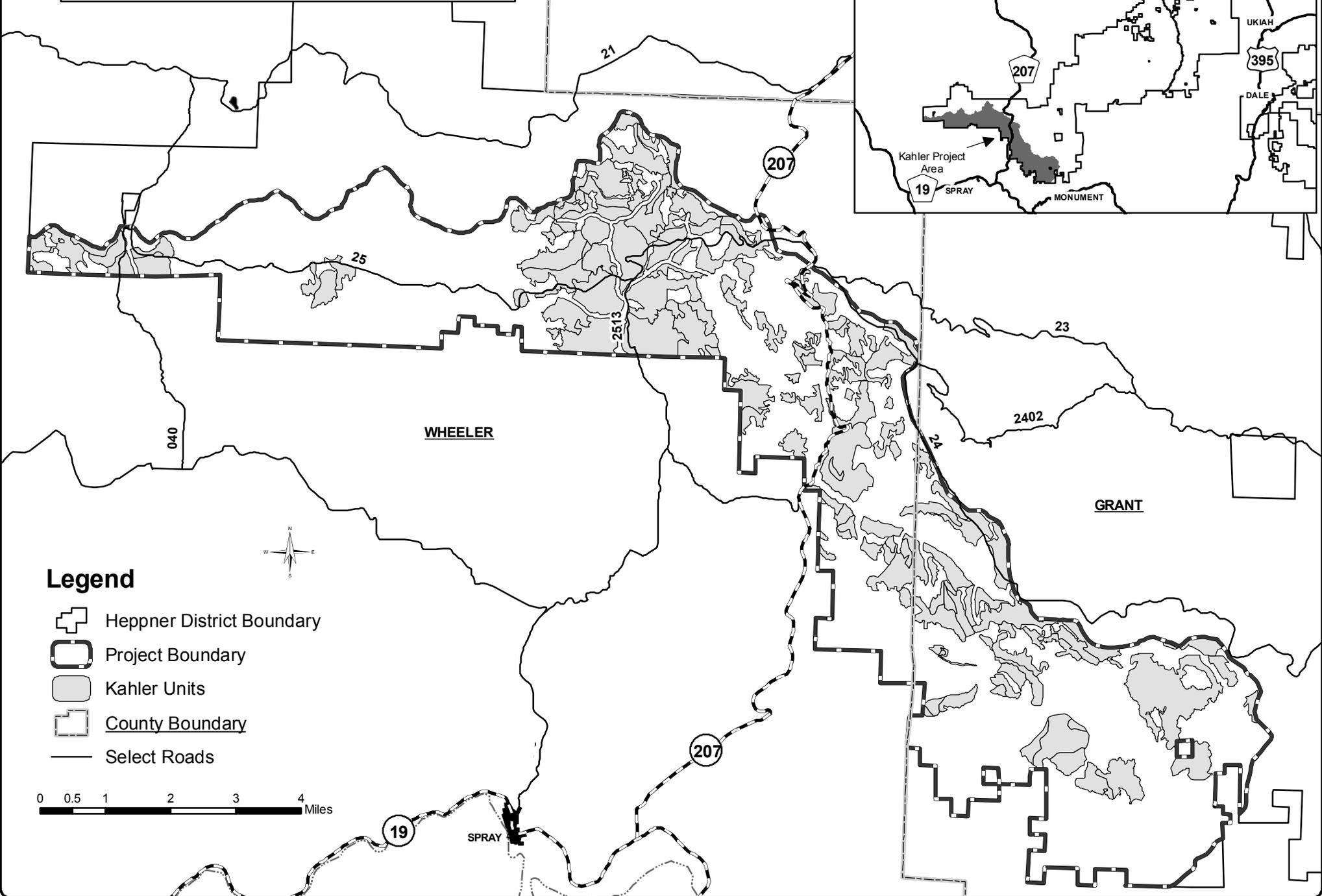
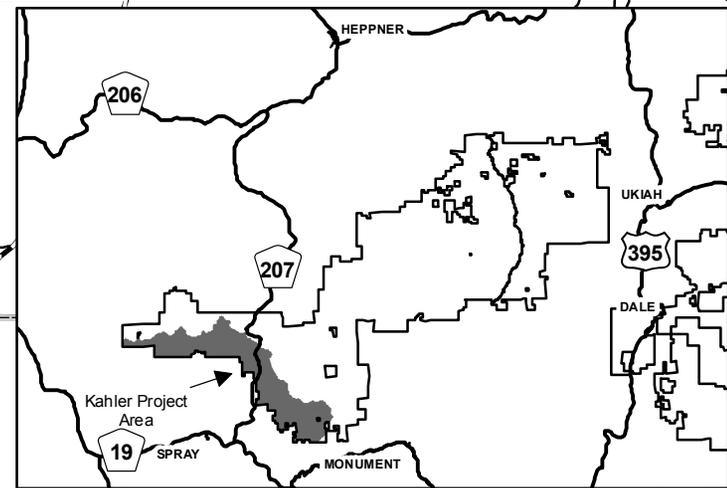
Sincerely,



DISTRICT RANGER
Todd Buchholz

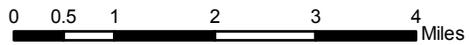
Enclosure: Proposed action and road closure map

**KAHLER DRY FOREST RESTORATION PROJECT
HEPPNER RD, UMATILLA NATIONAL FOREST
PROPOSED ACTION**

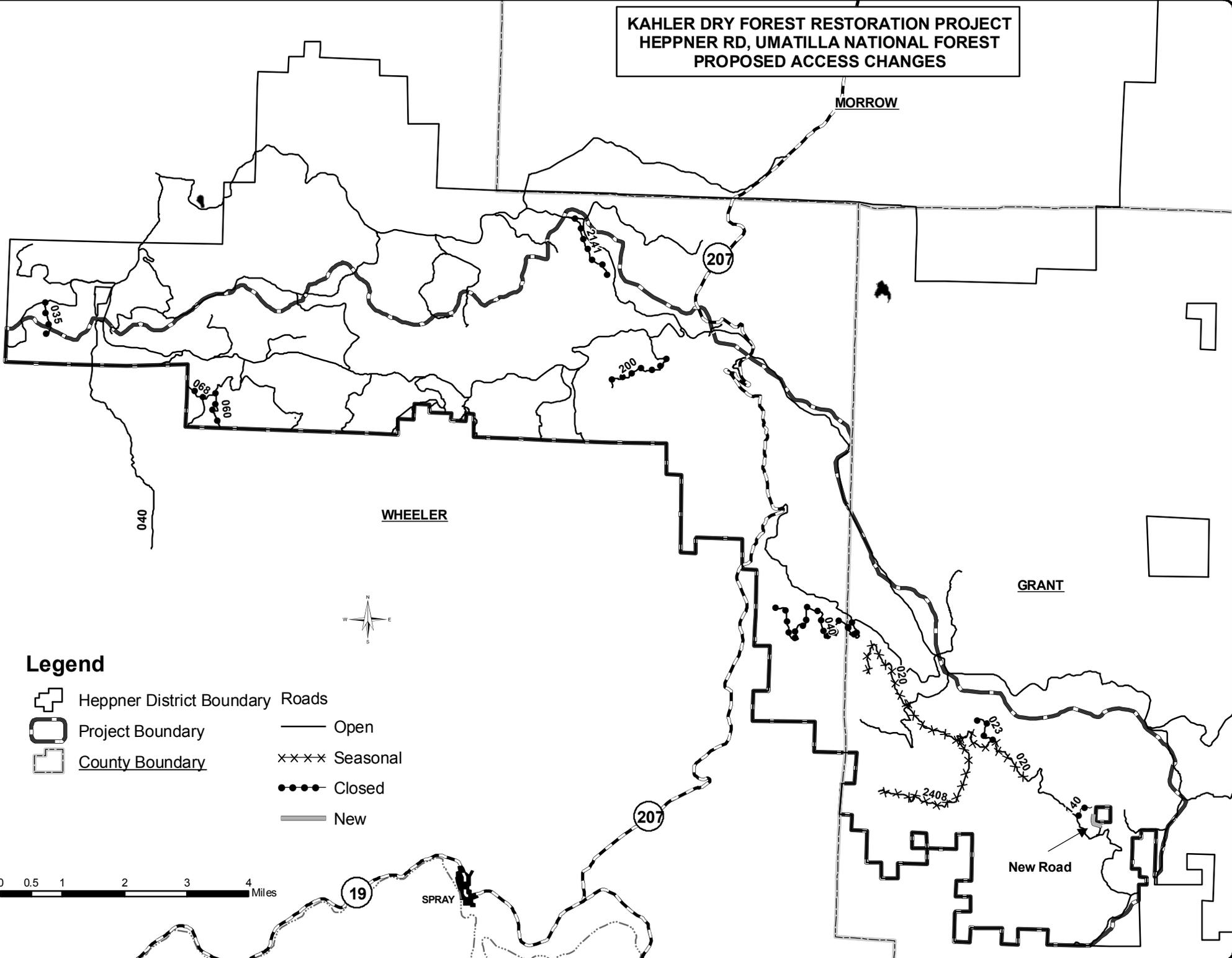


Legend

-  Heppner District Boundary
-  Project Boundary
-  Kahler Units
-  County Boundary
-  Select Roads

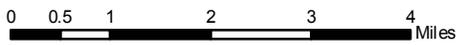


**KAHLER DRY FOREST RESTORATION PROJECT
HEPPNER RD, UMATILLA NATIONAL FOREST
PROPOSED ACCESS CHANGES**



Legend

- | | | | |
|---|---------------------------|---|----------|
|  | Heppler District Boundary |  | Roads |
|  | Project Boundary |  | Open |
|  | County Boundary |  | Seasonal |
| | |  | Closed |
| | |  | New |



19

SPRAY

207

207

200

035

068

060

020

020

023

020

2408

10

MORROW

WHEELER

GRANT

New Road