

Lower Joseph Creek Restoration Project: Proposed Action Description

Introduction

In 2013, the Chief of the U.S. Forest Service asked all National Forests across the nation to increase the pace of ecosystem restoration efforts. In turn, the Regional Forester for the Pacific Northwest Region initiated the Eastside Restoration Strategy to address the Chief's request by prioritizing accelerated restoration across the eastside of Oregon and Washington (with the Blue Mountains being the first priority). The Regional Forester requested that accelerated restoration be implemented considering 1) collaboration in project planning and implementation, 2) the role of restoration in supporting local economic and community vitality, and 3) the need to plan efficiently to shorten the time period between project initiation and implementation.

By April 2013, a dedicated Eastside Restoration Coordinator and Team Lead were hired and funded to put together a high level interdisciplinary project planning team to complete implementable large landscape restoration plans. In August 2013, three projects were selected for planning on National Forest System lands in the Blue Mountains, including the Lower Joseph Creek Restoration Project in Wallowa County. In September 2013, seven interdisciplinary team (IDT) members were hired to complete project planning.

The Wallowa County Natural Resources Committee and the Wallowa-Whitman Forest Collaborative began formally working together February of 2013 to provide proposals to the Forest Service regarding the Lower Joseph Creek Watershed Analysis. These collaborative efforts are made up of representatives from environmental organizations, timber industry, county governments, general public and various state, local, and federal agencies. The mission of these groups is to improve the social, economic and ecological resiliency of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest and local communities through collaboration by a diverse group of stakeholders. In December 2013, the Wallowa County Natural Resources Advisory Committee and their partners completed the Lower Joseph Creek Watershed Assessment. The assessment showed the current status of forest range, wildlife, transportation, riparian, fuels, and recreation, cultural, and socioeconomic resources. The assessment compared the current status of some of these resources with the historic ranges of variability and/or the desired conditions and has recommended a series of projects to restore, maintain or enhance the existing conditions.

Goals for accelerated restoration require the implementation of varied innovative planning strategies, including not only the dedication of U.S. Forest Service staff strictly to planning, but also the use of collaboration, agreements, and contracts with other agencies, organizations, and individuals with compatible goals.

Project Area

The Lower Joseph Creek project area lies adjacent and east of Oregon State Highway 3 on the northern boundary of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest (WWNF), approximately 20 miles north of Enterprise. The project area is bounded by Cold Springs Ridge to the northeast, Forest Road 46 to the east, and Elk Mountain to the south. It contains the upper reaches of the Joseph Creek drainage, including the watersheds of Lower and Upper Swamp Creek, Peavine Creek, Rush Creek, Davis Creek, Sumac Creek, Lower and Upper Cottonwood Creeks, Broady Creek, Horse Creek, Cougar Creek, and Green Gulch.

The area is characterized by deep canyons with very steep, grass-covered side slopes interspersed with numerous exposed rock (basalt) layers. Vegetation is generally composed of: 1) warm/moist forest communities on steep canyon slopes (42% of forested area), 2) warm/dry forests on south-facing slopes, in transitional areas with scablands, and on shallower soils (about 30%), 3) cool/dry forest on gently rolling uplands with deeper soils (26%), and 4) relatively small amounts of wet mixed conifer and subalpine fir/Engelmann spruce forests. Elevations range from about 3600 to 5000 feet.

Purpose and Need for Action

The project takes advantage of effective collaboration between representatives from environmental organizations, timber industry, county governments, the general public, and various government agencies to assess conditions and develop restoration and management strategies in the Lower Joseph Creek project area. All interested parties will have an opportunity to provide input on how this project develops, including the types of treatments, products produced, and monitoring that occurs.

In general, relative to desired conditions, the Lower Joseph Creek project area exhibits: 1) a deficit of forest stands with large trees and open canopies, 2) an overabundance of young open forest stands with relatively dense tree seedling understories (cold and moist forests), 3) a surplus of small diameter downed woody fuel and fuel ladders, 4) reduced understory plant diversity and productivity, 5) reduced grassland extent due to conifer expansion into grassland habitat, 6) improving trends in fish habitat quality and connectivity and opportunities for continued improvement, 7) reduced fire frequencies, and increased vulnerability to uncharacteristic disturbance from wildfire, 8) roads with native surface conditions, and other management impacts to wetlands, springs, riparian areas and stream channels, and 9) opportunities to contribute to the economic vitality of the local community.

Tangible products, such as wood, fiber, firewood, watershed restoration projects, forage, wild edible plants and mushrooms, and income generated from this project would contribute to the stability of highly valued forest and range products infrastructure, family wage earners and local industries. In turn, these products and income will support other local businesses, hospitals, and services contributing to the overall economic vitality of Wallowa County and northeast Oregon. In addition, less tangible but valuable results are expected, such as learning how to build strong working relationships among local collaborators and the Forest Service, developing effective restoration plans, and creating NEPA-ready projects that can be quickly implemented.

The Wallowa-Whitman National Forest is committed to meeting our Federal Trust Responsibility to consult and coordinate with American Indian Tribes. Actions analyzed to meet the purpose and need will address potential effects to treaty reserved rights and cultural resources.

The purpose and need for action is consistent with the 1990 Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended (Forest Plan). It is supported by differences between existing and desired ecosystem conditions, as determined from the Forest Plan, local policy recommendations for desired ranges of variation in vegetation conditions, local landscape assessments (e.g., Lower Joseph Creek Watershed Assessment (2013)), collaboration with the Wallowa-Whitman Forest Collaborative and other publics, other agencies, consultation with Tribes, and field reviews. The purpose and need is also driven by goals of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy (2011), particularly goals to restore and

maintain landscape resiliency to fire-related disturbances, and reduce risk of wildfire to human communities and infrastructure. The purpose and need is also consistent with the Endangered Species Act for the protection and restoration of Snake River steelhead as well as the Clean Water Act for protection of water quality and waterways in the project area.

Proposed Action

The Forest Service proposes to implement activities across the approximately 98,561 acre Lower Joseph Creek project area. Silviculture treatments would provide a diversity of forest structures that are more in line with desired conditions, and more resilient to anticipated future environmental conditions. Thinning, and mechanical fuel treatments across approximately 20,000 acres would encourage the development of large tree structural characteristics, understory plant diversity, forage productivity, and resilience to disturbances such as wildfire. Thinning of largely younger trees across an additional 5,000 acres, which are in the process of recovery after stand replacement disturbance, would encourage the development of spatial heterogeneity and increase the proportion of early seral tree species. Silvicultural treatments would generally retain and protect large trees of early seral species and trees with old growth physical characteristics consistent with historical reference conditions. Prescribed burning of hazardous fuels, where ecologically appropriate, on up to 90,000 acres would reduce fuel loads, increase understory productivity and diversity, allow fire to perform its natural ecological role, and reduce uncharacteristic disturbance from wildfire, insects, and disease.

Restoration of wetlands and springs would allow these landscape components to play their natural role in providing for effective grazing management, wildlife habitat, and high quality drinking water. Restoration of some riparian areas would protect and restore watershed function. Riparian and flood plain restoration may include road closure or modification, channel reconstruction, fencing, planting, conifer removal, instream structure placement, and bank stabilization.

The transportation system would be managed through road construction, reconstruction, use of temporary roads, and seasonal or permanent closures, as needed to support public access, proposed forest management activities, wildlife habitat quality, and aquatic habitat connectivity. The majority of road-related activities would make use of the existing system road network. A roads analysis will be conducted to assess the transportation system and the appropriate actions needed to meet project and administrative needs, public access, forest plan standards and guidelines, future needs, and consultation guidance for federally listed fish. Approximately 1.5 miles of new system road would be constructed; 24 miles of system road would be reconstructed; and 26 miles of new temporary roads would be constructed. Of the roads that have already been identified for seasonal or permanent closure under past decisions, or that have been naturally closed, 40 miles would be seasonally closed, and approximately 45 miles would be permanently closed or decommissioned, as determined in the roads analysis and an evaluation of each segment's status, future need, and impact on other resources. Roads proposed for any type of closure will focus on resource damage to water quality, fish habitat and wildlife habitat. Where possible, detrimental soil impacts from roads would be mitigated.

In the interest of landscape learning and streamlining NEPA, two Research Natural Areas, which have been proposed for establishment in the WW Forest Plan (Horse Pasture Ridge (338 acres) and Haystack Rock (425 acres)) would be established and serve as untreated baseline study areas. The establishment of the two RNAs will require no changes in current land management allocations, except for any necessary

adjustments to RNA boundaries mapped in the current Forest Plan to facilitate management or correct mapping errors.

Additional benefits of implementation of the proposed action include maintenance and enhancement of culturally significant resources, settings, viewsheds, and sensitive plant and animal species habitat, including those of interest to the Tribes. A monitoring strategy will be developed to support adapting management strategies and sharing lessons learned through time. Input from interested parties and the most current, applicable science will be used to guide this monitoring.

Connected actions that would be included in the analysis include road maintenance, and hazard tree cutting or removal. Fuels associated with silvicultural treatments (activity fuels) would be treated with a suite of available tools including, but not limited to, mastication, removal, pile and burn, cutting and scattering limbs, or prescribed fire.

Project design elements and site specific mitigation measures would be developed during the analysis of individual activity areas to reduce or eliminate unwanted effects, including those affecting tribal resources and cultural values. Mitigation measures may include seasonal operating restrictions, snag creation, and/or soil amendments (e.g., adding biochar) on compacted or detrimental soils.

Potential Forest Plan Amendments

The following forest plan amendments would be needed in order to fully meet the purpose and need and desired future conditions for the Lower Joseph Creek Restoration Project.

1. The Forest Service proposes to amend the forest plan in some areas to allow for the removal of trees greater than 21” in diameter at breast height. To ensure conservation of old trees, the project would adopt scientifically-derived guidelines, such as the “Van Pelt guidelines” (2008), to assess tree age regardless of the diameter individual trees.
2. The Forest Service may need to amend the forest plan, if necessary, to allow tree harvests that restore old growth characteristics, natural ecological processes, or habitat for old growth dependent species in Old Growth Preserves (Forest Plan Management Area 15).
3. The Forest Service may need to amend the forest plan in some areas where restoration activities would not meet visual quality objectives in the short-term.
4. The Forest Service proposes to establish the Horse Pasture Ridge (338 acres) and Haystack Rock (425 acres) Research Natural Areas (RNAs). These RNAs were identified and proposed but not established during the 1992 Forest Plan Revision process for the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.