

## East Face Project Preliminary Purpose and Need

May 2014

The East Face planning area encompasses an estimated 44,000+ acres in the Upper Wolf Creek subwatershed of the Wolf Creek-Powder River watershed and the Anthony Creek and portions of Antone Creek drainages in the North Powder River watershed. The planning area straddles two counties (Baker and Union) and ranger districts (La Grande and Whitman), encompasses portions of 4 different wildland urban interface areas (WUI's) and includes over 20 miles of shared boundary with private, state and Bureau of Land Management forest and range lands. Within these WUI areas there are numerous buildings and residences along with industrial and non-industrial private forest and range lands. In addition, the planning area encompasses the highly used Anthony Lakes recreation area including ski resort facilities, numerous campgrounds, recreational trails and recreation residences, and the headwater portions of the Beaver Creek drainage that serves as a municipal watershed for the city of La Grande.

The planning area reflects landscape vegetation patterns shaped by past large wildfires and forest management activities. Past large wildfires (namely the Anthony Burn) have resulted in large homogenous patches of lodgepole pine dominated stand conditions. Past management included even aged regeneration harvests within the moist mixed conifer forests and partial removal/intermediate thinning treatments on moist as well as drier upland forest types. The past natural and human disturbances have altered the structure, composition and diversity of forest stands across the planning area departing from expected historic forest conditions. An assessment of the range of variability of forest structures indicate excess levels of mid-successional understory re-initiation structures and severely under-represented levels of late-successional Old Forest Single Stratum structures across all forest types. Within the cool moist forest types, early successional stand initiation and late-successional old forest multi-stratum structural conditions are also under-represented compared to estimated historic ranges. Given the departure from historic conditions, *there is a need to restore and promote forest structural and compositional conditions reflective of historic ranges across the planning area.*

Coupled with past disturbances, decades of successful fire suppression has led to development of denser forest conditions, increased proportions of shade tolerant/fire intolerant species and accumulation of fuels and understory conifers resulting in an increased wildfire risk within the planning area as well as the neighboring private, state and other federal forest and range lands. An estimated 35% of the forest stands exhibit high levels (overstocked) of existing tree densities and 50+% of the planning area is characterized as fire condition class 2 or 3 indicating a moderate to significant alteration of fire regimes from their historical range. Similarly, a west-wide assessment of potential fire risk completed by the state of Oregon highlights pockets of elevated fire risk within and surrounding the East Face Planning area. In association with the west-wide risk assessment, the northern Blue Mountains has been identified as a pilot area for applying Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy (CWS) principles. East Face has been identified as a pilot project to apply CWS principles including restoration and maintenance of resilient landscapes and creating fire adapted communities. The combination of elevated wildfire risk with the location and proximity of the planning area to important recreational, private, state, other federal, municipal and shared landscape values *creates a need to enhance*

*overall landscape resiliency to future wildfire, insect and disease risk, and opportunity to apply cohesive wildfire strategy principles across landownerships.*

The cold forests within the planning area include stands of threatened whitebark pine trees characterized by varying levels of mortality from introduced blister rust, increased encroachment by subalpine fir due to reduced fire frequency and increased vulnerability to changes in temperature and precipitation associated with predicted climate change scenarios. These whitebark pine communities provide a unique and valuable habitat for a variety of wildlife species and represent an increasingly rare high elevation forest type in the western United States. The increased encroachment of subalpine fir into whitebark pine stands not only increases competitive stresses on the whitebark pine, but also increases the risk of uncharacteristically severe wildfire and responses to climate changes in these ecologically important communities. *There is a need to maintain and enhance the overall representation and resiliency of threatened whitebark pine stands in the planning area.*

The geographic location of the project area along the east face of the northern Elkhorn Mountains provides unique and diverse wildlife habitat potential. The project area is situated in a transition area between winter range on the lower slopes/valley bottom and high elevation summer range areas. Fire suppression and increased conifer densities have led to reduced amounts and distribution of early seral habitat in the planning area. Coupled with this, big game impacts to agricultural lands have been an issue for farms and ranches in the valley east of the planning area. In response, an intensive winter feeding program has been implemented for many years on the Elkhorn Wildlife Management parcel located adjacent to the planning area in an effort to reduce big game impacts to agricultural lands. *There is a need to enhance the diversity and quality of habitat conditions across the planning area to assist with reducing impacts to agricultural lands and improve overall diversity and distribution of wildlife habitat.*

The geographic location of the East Face planning area also places it in a key position for providing landscape connectivity between the agricultural, open range habitat and wilderness areas to the east, with the heavily forested Elkhorn Mountains and associated roadless and wilderness areas adjacent to and west of the planning area. Moist forests located on northerly aspects support important old forest structures and corridors providing for both local and landscape connectivity of habitats. *There is a need to maintain and enhance connective corridors to provide for resilient and sustainable local and landscape level connectivity.*

Northeast Oregon communities have a strong reliance on the natural resources of the area and established infrastructures that benefit from resource management activities on the public lands. Forest, ranching and recreational industries are key contributors to the local and regional economy and resource management opportunities afforded on public lands are an important part of maintaining and sustaining these industries and associated infrastructure. *There is a need to support local communities and economies by providing a diversity of resource management activities, recreational opportunities and commodity outputs from public lands.*

The East Face project represents the first forest project that will be taken through the local forest collaborative group from start to finish. This presents a tremendous opportunity to build and strengthen relationships, embark in mutual learning and capitalize on the collective input and knowledge of the collaborative group.