

Wallowa Whitman Forest Collaborative
Alternatives Workshop – Lower Joseph Creek Restoration Project
February 26, 2014
Blue Mountain Interagency Fire Center Dispatch Office
9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

Meeting Objectives

- Understand the current science behind forest stand condition assessments, and the current definitions of HRV (Historic Range of Variation), stand structures, plant associations, etc.
- Understand the range and nature of comments received during the public scoping comment period for the Lower Joseph Creek Restoration Project, and the primary issues emerging from public comment,
- Understand how issues generated by field assessments, FS specialists and public comments lead to the development of alternatives within the NEPA process,
- Clarify the line officer's role to guide and approve various stages of the NEPA process, including the selection of alternatives, and
- have an open discussion on the range of alternatives that may best address the public comments received for the Lower Joseph project during the scoping comment period (which ended on Feb 10, 2014)
 - This will include a discussion on the potential use of Forest Plan Amendments to remove trees larger than 21" and treat Old Growth Reserves

Participants: Nils Christoffersen, Ayn Shlisky, Miles Hemstrom, Steve Edwards, Bruce Dunn, Vince Naughton, Bill White, Ron Rochna, Darlene Rochna, Lindsay Warness, Linda Dillavou, Kris Stein, Glen Sachet, Jon Paustian, Steve Derry, Barb Wales, Gunnar Carnwath, Brian Spradlin, Paul Boehne, Larry McCalden, Jenifer Ferriel, Neil McCusker, Rex Storm, Brian Kelly, Patrick Shannon, Veronica Warnock, Tom Montoya, Bill Aney, Ann Werner, Lori Baird, Susan Jane Brown, Billy Joe George

Meeting Summary

Following introductions and a review of meeting objectives, the participants offered memories and appreciation for Tim Lillebo.

Ayn Shlisky, Blue Mountain ID Team Leader for the Lower Joseph Creek Project, provided an update of the status of work on the project against the 12 month timeline. They anticipate having a draft EIS by summer with a final EIS by December. She expressed appreciation for the effort and commitment of the Collaborative to contribute

constructively to the project. An effective analysis meeting is scheduled for April 9, and a field trip for late June.

Miles Hemstrom of the Institute of Natural Resources and the USFS PNW Lab in Corvallis provided background analysis on the reference condition and modeling work being done to support the NEPA analysis. The model starts with a large landscape look at the Blue Mountain region (24.6 million acres – of which 6.7 million acres are NFS lands). The Lower Joseph Creek Project modeling area is a sub-set – and covers 453,000 acres, including 103,000 acres of NFS lands.

The modeling program ran a variety of scenarios including one for a more active management strategy, one focused on restoration, and a no management alternative.

The model starts with the distribution of potential vegetation types and land type associations. There are over 20 land type associations in the Blues – characterized by topography, climate, potential vegetation type, etc. Lower Joseph Creek Project area is dominated by two land type associations: (i) incised plateaus, and (ii) canyonlands.

The model is a state and transition model. It starts with current cover types, structure conditions, vegetation types, and then projects growth, fire, etc. It projects impacts of management and natural disturbance on vegetation and resource attributes. The model is run over a long time period and projects trends from the different management scenarios which can be compared to current conditions. The reference conditions stabilizes in 250-300 years – it is dominated by ponderosa pine and western larch-lodgepole pine. The current conditions are dominated by Douglas-fir, and to a lesser degree grand fir and Englemann spruce.

To move current conditions to desired reference conditions, management should seek to increase the dominance of western larch (with lodgepole) and ponderosa pine on the incised plateaus (moist), and ponderosa pine in the canyonlands (dry). The patch sizes for large and giant trees should increase across both land type associations, as should the patch sizes for open patches of grass/forb/shrub and seedlings/saplings.

Restoration is not a single entry treatment – no single treatment can sufficiently impact conditions to affect long-term trajectories. Most of the Blue Mountains are considerably outside reference conditions, including Lower Joseph Creek. The proposed action for lower Joseph Creek does move conditions towards the desired reference conditions, but these impacts are temporary and are not substantial in the context of the larger planning area.

Neil McCusker, Silviculturalist with the Blue Mountain ID Team, summarized the proposed forest vegetation treatment designs and potential Forest Plan Amendments. Seral species (esp ponderosa pine and western larch) and Old Forest are both under-represented in current forest conditions. Current conditions are also more homogenous, characterized by heavier stocking densities and fewer clumps and openings. Treatments are designed to favor early seral species, promote a greater representation of old forest,

reduce forest density to low and moderate, and create greater spatial variation in clumps and openings.

Forest Plan Amendments will be proposed to support these treatment goals. Trees larger than 21" will be proposed for treatment to favor truly old trees (>150 years), and early seral species (esp ponderosa pine and western larch, also to some degree Douglas-fir). They may also be proposed to address encroached grasslands and to help restore Aspen.

Within roadless areas, forest management is allowed if it's needed to maintain or restore the characteristics of ecosystem composition and structure, and risk to uncharacteristic disturbance. Road construction (including temporary roads) is not allowed to accomplish restoration work. Any treatment in roadless areas would focus on areas that can be accessed without temporary roads. Treatment options might include helicopter logging, pre-commercial thinning, or prescribed burn only.

Ayn Shlisky, Blue Mountain ID Team Leader, provided an overview of NEPA basics and the type of comments that are useful in the scoping process. The basic purpose of scoping is to engage interested stakeholders in the project, and use their contributions to help define the scope of the project, and the range of alternatives. The NEPA team integrates both internal (USFS) and external input.

For Lower Joseph Creek, the project seeks to restore forest and watershed conditions and contribute to the local economy. The proposed action largely mirrors the suggested management actions resulting from Wallowa County's community planning process. As the scope is defined the helps determine key issues which are subject to more detailed analysis. This analysis is packaged in a Draft EIS and submitted for public comment. The line officers reviews the comment and selects a preferred alternative that is the basis for the Final EIS and eventual Record of Decision (ROD).

Useful comments during scoping identify significant cause and effect relationships and suggest methods to measure effects. They focus on issues and effects relevant to the eventual project decision, and help prioritize consideration of various effects. They also can suggest alternatives to mitigate issues or effects.

Comments that are difficult to use include those that speak to issues beyond the scope of the project, or are unrelated to the decision or are issues already decided by law. Comments that are conjectural and unsupported by science have limited value, as are those that are overly general or purely position statements.

Following the review of internal and external comments, the ID Team develops alternatives that meet the purpose and need and address unresolved conflicts about the effects of the proposed action.

For Lower Joseph Creek – scoping generated 57 submitted comments addressing 957 specific issues. The three most significant issues raised in public comment were roads

and travel management, timber management and vegetation conditions, and land designations – including old growth areas and inventoried roadless areas.

Critical questions resulting from public scoping include the following:

What is the best network of roads to meet different needs while also reducing any adverse impacts of roads?

What vegetation treatment strategies best restore composition and structure to HRV? What size and species should be removed? How can the impact of harvest and prescribed burning be minimized?

What types of forest management are needed in old growth areas and inventoried roadless areas to move toward HRV?

The regulatory agencies did comment in support of treatment in riparian areas, where treatment prescriptions could be generated by site specific analysis.

Members of the Collaborative were asked to summarize the comments they submitted during the scoping period. All comments are a part of the public record.

Bruce Dunn: *maximize the timber acres to be treated mechanically, *acres that are to be treated with fire, pretreatment should include salvage or removal of firewood, pulp, and sawlog material, *roads that are to be closed should be closed by gates, *close all temp roads and all existing naturally closed roads after treatment, *experiment with controlled grazing management instead of exclusion fencing in riparian zones, *open roads need to be treated and maintained.

Lindsay Warness on behalf of Boise Cascade: develop alternatives that maximize economic benefit for local communities; maximize benefits through increased investment; *infrastructure should be a key element of the project; *look at considering wildfire risk for recreational activities in the area; *develop alternative that removes 21” trees throughout the landscape; *is it realistic to prescribe 90,000 acres for prescribed burning?; *consider multiple types of removal; insure all jobs are accounted for (not just those in the woods); *provide clarification on connectivity units – look at wildlife permeability; review riparian areas for management; road closure/decommission – least expensive, least intrusive, etc.; *emphasize benefits of the project, not the detrimental affects of the project;

Rex Storm, on behalf of the Associated Oregon Loggers: *urge optimization of economic harvest, maximize residual volume; *economic feasibility is critical to the project – optimize harvest value (not demand that every leave or cut be marked); *create openings and gaps; *harvest imminent tree mortality; *fully harvest planned NEPA prescription; *support 21” diameter waiver forest plan amendment; *support expanding

the 21”+ forest plan amendment to include all species at discretion of decision maker and FS silviculturist; *size and scope of project area is correct – landscape scale is in a positive direction; *urge FS to avoid limiting options by use of connected-options language; *urge use of prescriptive logging methods; *support project being developed by local agreement – collaborative of Wallowa County NRAC and WWFC is worthwhile – should give credence and strength to the FS; *support harvest of large areas across the landscape; *support road construction improvements for enhanced use (design, construction, maintenance to support FS objectives); *support harvest of some riparian areas to support watershed function; *support harvesting to support long term scenic objectives; *support aggressive reforestation of openings that are created via thinning; *move toward mosaic diversity of trees; *reduce overall road density; *consider gates that are seasonally changed; *schedule prescribed burns that complement recreation use; *include plans for noxious weed control and monitoring.

Brian Kelly: *Generally supportive of use of thinning principles based on good ecology; *recommend against commercial harvest in certain areas; * recommend against commercial harvest in Hells Canyon Recreation area; *cool moist forest types management should be different than for warm dry forest *old structure should be protected regardless of size; *recommend against construction of new and temporary roads; recommend use of mosaic multiple density thinning; *recommend that we identify opportunities to include aspen in management; *HRV is a guideline, but not a be-all, end-all; *all trees 150 yrs of age or older should be protected; *commercial logging in old growth reserves should be avoided; *important function of old growth preserves must be evaluated separately from silviculture objectives/wildlife, connectivity, prescribed fire, roads, old growth, 21” rule, aquatic restoration, dwarf mistletoe, livestock grazing, invasive weeds, cultural issues (native Americans), research natural areas.

Veronica Warnock made additional comments: This project provides an opportunity to assess the roads system. Emphasized need to keep fisheries issues in mind. Keep in mind when it is ecologically appropriate to cut 21” trees. Great to see that some active non-timber restoration is a part of the P&N. Lot of opportunity that has been identified (non-timber). Retain potential wilderness characteristics within the overlapping area that exists in both the treatment area and the potential wilderness area. Veronica emphasized an interest in “retaining the potential wilderness characteristics of the area.” Veronica noted that HCPC had created a lobbying entity for wilderness back in the 1980’s. There are no current wilderness proposals in the project area, but HCPC remains interested in exploring possibilities.

It was suggested that it would be helpful to have a map that shows the overlap in some of the areas (proposed treatment areas, wilderness areas, and HCPC’s reference to “potential wilderness areas,” etc.). It was also agreed that HCPC’s representative to the Collaborative would keep the rest of the Collaborative informed of any action or plans being considered by HCPC’s lobbying entity.

There was discussion about whether any new roads – including temporary roads – would be built. Whether or not individuals or organizations were opposed to the construction of

new roads is dependent upon the details of the actual proposal – those would need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. During our upcoming field trip, it may be helpful to look at possible short spur roads to facilitate logging. Whether or not these roads are acceptable to some individuals within the Collaborative depends on whether the prescription addresses “true ecological restoration”.

The Forest Service is legally obligated to follow the NEPA process. The collaborative process is optional. However, the collaborative process provides strength to the outcome. The group is confident that there will be good consensus so the Forest Service will have good guidelines. There were a lot of diverse comments and perspectives presented.

Treatment Design and Potential Forest Plan Amendments

There was some discussion of composition, structure, density, and pattern within the landscape. Some species are under-represented, some over-represented. The proposed action talked about the need for amendments to the forest plan. One of these amendments may be the 21” diameter harvest cap. Maybe there are instances where it is necessary in order to meet restoration objectives to cut a 21” tree. Some of these instances may include species composition, stand openings, encroachment into grassland, etc.

Restoration Treatment Design

Discussion about what mix of trees will make up the post-treatment condition within the project area. There is a certain order in which trees will be considered for retention. This defines the prescription on the landscape.

There was concern that mistletoe, insect, disease, and imminent mortality have not been considered in this design.

There was discussion about Old Forest Preservation Areas and Forest Plan Definitions. There may be instances in which old growth preservation areas may be treated to meet restoration objectives while conserving mature and old growth condition. Considerations may include sustainable density (density related mortality, drought, insects, high severity fire), and appropriate structural stage.

Roadless Areas

Roadless Rule:

* Timber cutting is allowed if...it is needed “to maintain or restore the characteristics of ecosystem composition and structure, such as to reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire effects, within the range of variability that would be expected to occur under natural disturbance regimes of the current climatic condition.”

* Road construction (including temporary roads) is not allowed to accomplish restoration work.

Options for Lower Jo Roadless Areas:

* treat only those areas within the proposed action that can be accessed without temp roads

- * plan to helicopter log those areas within the proposed action that cannot be accessed by existing road system
- * no commercial treatment in the roadless area
- * no cutting treatment in the roadless area (prescribed burn only)

Riparian Habitat Conservation Area Treatments

Information was presented with regard to the process to document treatment of RHCAs. Much of the inventories have already been done. However, we do not currently have an inventory of the vegetation within the RHCAs. Proposed treatment of RHCAs will focus on category four streams (non fish bearing, intermittent, non-perennial). In order to proceed, we must balance treatment against riparian management for those RHCAs. We've got the Watershed Analysis – we are currently at the RHCA Characterization stage. Need to work through a prescription for those category four streams based on the treatment needs in collaboration with the silviculturist and the wildlife specialist.

There is a requirement to maintain forest structure over 100 feet on each side of category four streams, which represents about 25% of the total acreage in any management area. The proposed treatment of any RHCA would be consistent with the prescription for the surrounding areas. Riparian Management Objectives (RMOs) are established mainly for fish bearing streams. For category four streams, RMOs are different – must look at the stream in relation to category one streams.

It is important to protect the current and future supply of large woody material in those stream channels – that is the main concern for the team in regard to mgmt within those riparian areas.

Moving Forward

The team will review the comments that were submitted and develop alternatives.

On April 9th there will be a meeting to present the Effects Analysis. Given the variety of comments that were submitted, consensus may not be possible. It is important to have an adequate range of alternatives – this group is one sounding board for the larger community. Where there is disagreement between Collaborative members that often reflects the broader community as well. Perhaps we as a group could help to streamline/facilitate the process.

March meeting: Will get a brief update on Lower Jo, but most of the discussion will be in regard to East Face.

Meeting adjourned at 3:51 p.m.