

Decision Notice
& Finding of No Significant Impact
Canyon Dam Fuel Reduction and Forest Health Project

USDA Forest Service
Mt. Hough Ranger District, Plumas National Forest
Plumas County, California

Decision and Reasons for the Decision

Background

The project was designed to address undesirable resource conditions, which include hazardous fuels and declining forest health, while providing local economic benefits. During 2003, the Almanor Basin Fire Safe Council initiated discussion of the need for treating hazardous fuels in the Canyon Dam wildland-urban interface. The need to address declining forest health developed as a result of visits to the project area in 2004, where Forest Service foresters observed dense forest stand conditions and bark beetle activity related to the dense conditions. The Herger-Feinstein Quincy Library Group Forest Recovery Act (HFQLG FRA) directs the Forest Service to “develop a resource management program that promotes ecologic and economic health for certain Federal lands and communities in the Sierra Nevada area.”

The need for action (EA pages 1-4) includes the following:

1. Need to reduce hazardous fuels that threaten: public and firefighter safety; developed resources such as homes; and land features such as trees, scenic views, and wildlife habitats.
2. Need to improve forest health (tree vigor and resistance to fire, insects and disease), which is declining due to high tree densities.
3. Need to provide local economic benefits.

The environmental assessment (EA) documents the analysis of three alternatives to meet these needs.

Project level MIS Selection and Project-level effects analysis for the Canyon Dam Project is based on the Pacific Southwest Region (R5) “Draft – MIS Analysis and Documentation in Project-Level NEPA, R5 Environmental Coordination”, May 23, 2006. A Forest scale examination of habitat, population attributes, and trend for each selected project-level MIS, documented in the June, 2006 Plumas National Forest Management Indicator Species Report, has been incorporated into the Empire analysis. Selected project-level MIS reflect the May 30, 2006 letter “Clarification on Plumas National Forest MIS List” and the MIS identified in the Plumas LRMP, Appendix G (1988).

Decision

It is my decision to select Alternative A, which is described in the EA on pages 7 through 9. Alternative A, including all project-specific design criteria (EA pages 9-10), provides the best opportunity to accomplish the identified need for action.

My decision to implement Alternative A is based on the following reasons: (1) it reduces fuels and the potential for extreme fire behavior within the Canyon Dam wildland-urban interface; (2) it develops forest vegetation that will be more resilient to fire, healthier and more resistant to forest diseases and insects; and (3) it provides local economic benefits through job opportunities, saw timber and biomass.

I considered the need to take action, the issues identified during scoping, and adverse effects in making my decision. I weighed the effects of treating fuels against not treating fuels (no action). Fuel conditions and forest densities are already high and will only increase in the future. Taking no action would only make the potential results of a wildland fire or insect/disease epidemic increasingly catastrophic. Without thinning and burning, the key environmental components are more likely to be adversely affected by wildfires or insects/disease than they would be otherwise. I am not willing to accept the risks associated with no action.

The decision meets quantifiable objectives (EA, Table 2.3 page 11) for the project. Compared to the No-Action Alternative, Alternative A would result in:

over two times as many acres with an average flame length less than four feet;

over two and one half times fewer acres susceptible to crown fire;

forest density conditions meeting desired conditions (45 percent relative stand density) for over half of the project area compared to no reduction in stand density with the No-Action Alternative;

about 1.5 million board feet of saw timber, 5,000 hundred cubic feet of biomass, and 22 year-around jobs as compared to no saw timber, biomass or year-around jobs with the No-Action Alternative.

I also considered the cumulative effects of the project on soils and watershed. I looked at treating fewer acres, as with Alternative C, versus exceeding the watershed threshold of concern to treat more acres under Alternative A. I read the Cumulative Watershed Effects and Soils Assessment (located in the project record), which repeatedly noted that the threshold of concern does not mean to stop all action, but it does mean to take a closer look. I asked the project team leader to visit the project area with me to look at the stream channels in sub-watershed 1. We also looked at unit 9 (92 acres) in sub-watershed 1 as well as units in sub-watersheds 3 and 4. Based upon my site visit, it was apparent to me that further field reconnaissance was required and I decided to supplement the analysis in the CWE and Soils Assessment with an addendum report that incorporated additional field observations. I requested Emily Moghaddas, an experienced professional in soil and watershed, to take a closer look at the effects of Alternative A to sub-watershed 1. Emily walked both the private and public land within sub-watershed 1 and prepared an addendum report on the effects of Alternative A.

The addendum report highlights that project-related thinning activities are not expected to result in chronic sedimentation or accelerated erosion of the sub-watershed. The report also highlights that the temporary road used to access unit 9 would likely remain as a permanent feature on the landscape and that it would potentially contribute sediment and runoff into the small stream system. I decided to obliterate the temporary road by pulling the fill and stabilizing the slope to reduce the associated erosion and sedimentation risks. I also decided to reduce the risk of additional soil compaction in unit 9 by incorporating a limited operating period so that

equipment operates in the unit when there is the least likelihood of compaction. Due to the type of activities and small sub-watershed size compared to the contributing area of the Almanor watershed, the cumulative effects of the proposed treatments on Lake Almanor would be negligible.

The adverse effects of the project are summarized below (pages 4-5) under the heading Finding of No Significant Impact. I recognize the effects to wildlife, sensitive plants, soils, watersheds, local communities, and visitors, and I am willing to make the tradeoff because Alternative A would:

have minor effects on the environmental components;
provide the maximum reduction of fuels and forest densities; and
reduce the risks associated with future wildland fires or insect/disease epidemics.

Alternatives Considered

Pages 7 through 10 of the EA provide detailed descriptions of the alternatives. Alternative A includes 670 acres of fuel and forest density reduction treatments, which include a mix of mechanical thinning, hand thinning, and burning.

Provided below is a brief summary of why the other alternatives were not selected.

Alternative B (No Action). This alternative was not selected because it would not meet the desired conditions (EA pages 3-4).

Alternative C. This Alternative includes 578 acres of fuel and forest density reduction treatments. This alternative was not selected because analysis indicates that the adverse effects of treating the additional 92 acres under Alternative A are minor while at the same time Alternative A best meets the need for action.

Five additional alternatives described on pages 6 and 7 of the EA were considered but eliminated from detailed consideration because of one or more of the following reasons:

it would fail to meet project objectives;
it would be outside of the scope of the identified needs for the project; and/or
it would detract from spotted owl occurrence and productivity within the home range core area.

Public Involvement

A brief description of the Canyon Dam Fuel Reduction and Forest Health Project has been included in the Plumas National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) each quarter since July 2004. Representatives from the Mt. Hough Ranger District have attended monthly Plumas County Fire Safe Council meetings since April 2004 to provide updates on the project.

During December 2004, a representative from Mt. Hough Ranger District visited the project area with the Tribal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) coordinator for the Greenville Indian Rancheria. During March 2005, Mt. Hough Ranger District conducted a consultation with federally recognized tribal governments.

The Mt. Hough Ranger District conducted a public scoping process for the project from January 11 through January 27, 2006. It was initialized by a Legal Notice published in the Feather River Bulletin on January 11, 2006 and a letter including the proposed action was sent to about 100

agencies, organizations, Native American entities (including federally recognized tribal governments, tribal groups currently applying for federal recognition, and Native American organizations/non-profit groups), adjacent landowners, and individuals who expressed interest in the project. In addition, scoping comments were received from March 9 through April 8, 2005, when the project was originally proposed. The interdisciplinary team used the scoping comments to develop a list of issues. One significant issue was identified during the scoping comment period (EA page 5). A list of non-significant issues and reasons regarding their categorization as non-significant is located in the project record.

The EA was sent out to 21 individuals and organizations that either responded during the scoping period or expressed general interest in the project. I have reviewed the comments submitted during that 30-day comment period. All comments received are addressed in the “Response to EA Comments” and attached to this Decision Notice as Appendix A.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

Context: The proposed treatments are confined to 670 acres, which constitutes about six tenths of a percent of the Plumas National Forest, which is 1,168,000 acres. The project is small enough that it would be discernable only at the project site and individual watershed scales.

People most affected by the project will be the residents of Canyon Dam, attendees and workers at the Sierra Bible Camp, and those who recreate in the southeast area of Lake Almanor. The implementation of the project will be of limited scope and duration. Thinning consists of the use of chainsaws and mechanized equipment. These activities may cause temporary disturbance of Forest users and adjacent landowners by noise and increased traffic. Active thinning operations are expected to last approximately 90 days per year. Total truck traffic for the project is estimated to be about 300 trips hauling logs and 400 trips hauling wood chips. Thinning is expected to be completed within two to three years after the decision is signed.

Underburning and pile burning is expected to be completed either concurrently with the thinning or after the thinning and it is expected to be complete within the next five to seven years. Prescribed fire activities are expected to be conducted for approximately 20 to 30 days in the fall burning season and 10 to 20 days in the spring burning season each year. This activity may cause minor disturbance to Forest users and adjacent landowners by the smoke and increased traffic.

Intensity: Ten elements of impact intensity identified in 40 CFR 1508.27b have been considered in assessing the potential significance of project effects. They are as follows: No significant adverse *direct or indirect effects to the environment* from this project were identified during the environmental effects analysis. No significant irreversible or irretrievable commitments of resources, such as a loss of soil productivity, water quality, wildlife habitat, or recreational opportunities, would result from this project. By reducing the likelihood of large, highly intense wildfires, the project would enhance long-term productivity and enjoyment of the affected forests.

As described on pages 12 through 29 of the EA, adverse effects and the reasons they are not expected to be significant include:

potential losses or disturbance of wildlife inhabiting the treatment units – the losses or disturbance would affect relatively small numbers and would not be sufficient to threaten species viability, population maintenance, harvest opportunities, or eventual reoccupancy in the treated areas (EA pages 18-20, 26-29);

losses of individuals of starry clarkia (a special-status plant species) – this species is not provided full protection because it is tolerant of disturbance and will benefit from thinning of the canopies (EA pages 28-29);

soil disturbance that could allow noxious weed occupancy – this will be effectively prevented through application of standard management requirements attached to contracts let for project activities (EA pages 20, B-36, B-37);

potential for short-term increases in sedimentation and runoff – the effects would be short-term and would not result in chronic sedimentation, runoff or erosion because of the nature of the activities, project design criteria, and following of best management practices (EA pages 22-26; addendum to the Cumulative Watershed Effects report);

potential for temporary increases in soil compaction – this potential would be reduced by post-project subsoiling of skid trails, landings and areas of legacy compaction, by following best management practices, and by employing a limited operating period for soil protection in unit 9 (EA pages 22-26; addendum to the Cumulative Watershed Effects report);

smoke during prescribed burning – prescribed fire activities will occur based on an approved burn and smoke plan, which will include consideration of burning during weather conditions are conducive to smoke dispersal (EA page 21);

dust emissions – this will be mitigated by road watering and other standard management practices described in contracts (EA page 21); and

reduction in number of snags – the number of snags retained per acre will meet Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (SNFPA) standards intended to preserve habitat for snag-dependent wildlife and provide future down-log habitat required by a variety of wildlife species (EA page 19).

No significant adverse *effects on public health and safety* will result from this project, because OSHA safety regulations will be met during implementation and Forest Service inspectors will monitor all aspects of implementation to ensure public safety. These types of activities (logging, hauling, and burning) have historically occurred on roads and near developed properties in the Canyon Dam area without creating public safety and health problems (EA page 21).

Effects to potentially unique areas or characteristics of the project area would be minor because of protection measures integrated into the design of the project (EA pages 21-22).

The project is unlikely to have *highly controversial effects*. The analysis and conclusions of environmental effects by Forest Service resource specialists are not expected to be scientifically controversial. Effects of these types of actions have recently been explored on a scientific basis in the SNFPA FEIS, the SNFPA FSEIS, the HFQLG FEIS, and the Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project report (EA page 22).

The project effects do not entail *uncertain, unique, or unknown risks*. Similar silvicultural and fuel treatments have been implemented on the Mt. Hough Ranger District in recent years (for example, the Chandler and Dancehouse, Meadow Valley, Kingsbury-Rush, and Hungry projects). Based on the results of these previous activities, anticipated project effects are not unknown, unique, or uncertain (EA page 22).

The action would not establish a *precedent for future actions with significant effects* because it

conforms to all existing Forest Plan direction and is applicable only to the project area (EA page 22).

No potentially significant adverse *cumulative effects* of the project have been identified (EA pages 22-29).

The project will not adversely affect any *historical, cultural, or scientific resources*. The action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, because all cultural resources will be avoided by flagging sites and requiring contractors to exclude these areas from any activity. It is possible that some inadvertent disturbance to undiscovered resources may occur. However, should unrecorded sites be found during implementation, work will stop until a qualified specialist evaluates the resource and identifies appropriate measures to protect the site (EA page 26).

The action may have no effect on any *threatened species*, would have no effect on any *endangered species*, and may affect six sensitive wildlife species and one sensitive plant species. Individuals of the seven sensitive wildlife and plant species may be affected by the action, but loss of species viability or a trend toward listing these species as threatened or endangered would not be caused by the action (EA pages 26-29).

The action is *consistent with federal, state, and local laws and policies for the protection of the environment*. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA (EA pages 29-31).

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

The project is consistent with the Plumas National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan as amended, which was amended by the Herger-Feinstein Quincy Library Group Forest Recovery Act Record of Decision (ROD) and Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment ROD (EA pages 5-6). The project complies with the following laws (EA pages 29-31): Clean Water Act; Clean Air Act; Endangered Species Act; Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act; Migratory Bird Treaty Act; National Forest Management Act ; and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Additionally, the project complies with the Archeological Resources Protection Act, National Historic Preservation Act, and State Historic Preservation guidelines (EA page 26; Heritage Resources Report). As part of project implementation, permits would be obtained from the air quality management district and the water quality control board.

Implementation Date

If no appeals are filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of the decision may occur on, but not before, 5 business days from the close of the appeal filing period. When appeals are filed, implementation may occur on, but not before, the 15th business day following the date of the last appeal disposition.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to administrative review (appeal) pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215. This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to the regulations in 36 CFR §215. Appeals must be filed 45 days following the date of the published legal notice of this decision in the *Feather River Bulletin* newspaper of Quincy, California. The publication date of the legal notice in the *Feather River Bulletin* is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal (§215.15 (a)), and those wishing to appeal should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. Notices of appeal must meet the requirements in 36 CFR §215.14. A statement of appeal, including attachments, must be filed (regular mail, fax, e-mail, hand-delivery, express delivery, or messenger service) with James M. Peña, Appeal Deciding Officer, USDA Forest

Service, 159 Lawrence Street, Quincy, California, 95971, E-mail: appeals-pacificsouthwest-plumas@fs.fed.us, FAX: (530) 283-7746. Office hours are 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. Acceptable formats for appeals filed electronically include .doc and .rtf. A copy of the Environmental Assessment is available upon request from the Mount Hough Ranger District.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact James Pass, Project Team Leader, Mt. Hough Ranger District, 39696 Highway 70, Quincy, CA 95971, phone: (530) 283-7683 or e-mail: jpass@fs.fed.us.

Molly Fuller
Acting District Ranger
Mt. Hough Ranger District

July 7, 2006
Date

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