United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
MEDFORD DISTRICT OFFICE
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ROGUE NATIONAL WILD AND SCENIC RIVER
HELLGATE RECREATION SECTION
HAZARDOUS FUEL REDUCTION PROJECT

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
(FONSI)

On the basis of the information contained in the Rogue National Wild and Scenic River – Hellgate Recreation Section Hazardous Fuel Reduction Project's environmental assessment (EA), the project's record, and a consideration of the comments received from the public regarding the project proposal, it is my determination that the decisions documented in the October 2003, Decision Record for this project will not result in significant impacts to the quality of the human environment, beyond those already identified and analyzed in the environmental impact statements to which the EA is tiered. This project is an implementing project under the Medford District RMP, which in turn incorporated the directions from the NW Forest Plan. The EA did not identify any significant impacts which would require preparation of a supplemental environmental impact statement (SEIS).

This finding is based, in part, on my consideration of the Council on Environmental Quality's (CEQ) criteria for significance (40 CFR § 1508.27), both with regard to the context and to the intensity of the impacts described in the EA or articulated in the letters of comment.

- ***Context***:

This project is located within the congressionally designated boundary of the Hellgate Recreation Section of the Rogue National Wild and Scenic River. The project area includes two listed National Historic Register sites. The land within the project area is a mosaic of federal and private ownership. It includes many residential sites and portions of three National Fire Plan designated Communities-at-Risk.

From its inception, the project was designed to preclude significant adverse environmental impacts. The project is also designed to preclude actions that will jeopardize species listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and to minimize adverse impacts to listed or special status species. While the appearance of the forest and vegetation within the project area will be changed as a result of the decision, the characteristic landscape and the overall scenic quality of the river will not be adversely affected. Treatments are designed to be incremental where necessary to minimize the short term visual impact of the treatments while accomplishing the short and long term fuel hazard reduction objectives. In the longer term, the forest stands will begin to appear more as they were before the effective fire exclusion efforts of the last 80 – 100 years. The forest stands will be more vigorous, healthy and resilient. They will be less

susceptible to high severity wildfire because the project will change vegetation / fuel properties (density and structure) in a manner that will reduce the potential for high intensity and high severity wildfire. Property and resource values will be more defensible when wildfire occurs.

A severe wildfire of any extent would result in a loss of resource and property values in the project area. It would likely result in a greatly diminished scenic quality Outstandingly Remarkable Value.

- ***Intensity:***

I have considered the potential intensity / severity of the impacts anticipated from this Hazardous Fuel Reduction Project decision relative to each of the ten areas suggested for consideration by the CEQ. With regard to each:

1) Impacts can be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist regardless of the perceived balance of effects. The assessment has considered both potential beneficial and adverse impacts (See EA Table 4.1, p. 8). Vegetation and habitats will be changed; however, the overall scope and scale of change is relatively small. Resource and property values will be better protected by actions resulting from this decision. None of the individual or cumulative effects have been identified as being significant or outside of the effects already analyzed in the EISs to which the project's EA is tiered. Potential adverse impacts have been substantially or fully mitigated through project design. Potential soils and water impacts have, for example, been mitigated by extensive restrictions on the use of heavy equipment to limit potential soil disturbance. Wildlife habitat impacts have been mitigated by design of the vegetation / fuel treatment prescriptions. Consultations with USFWS and NOAA-Fisheries have concluded that the potential impacts on ESA listed species will not be limited.

2) The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety No aspect of the project has been identified as having the potential to substantially and adversely impact public health or safety. Rather, the project will have a great beneficial impact on public health and safety within the Communities-at-Risk and the wildland urban interface (WUI) areas where the project will reduce the existing fuel hazard. There will be an appreciable portion of the project area moved from a high fuel hazard rating to a low or moderate rating as a result of the project. The number of days each year when weather conditions are such that wildfire might move into the crown or tree canopy and be self sustaining would be decreased. The potential for severe wildfire, with consequent loss of property, and resource and social / recreational values will be appreciably diminished. The safety of firefighters will be elevated as will the potential for them to successfully suppress a wildfire within the project area. The project will have an appreciable beneficial effect on public safety and health.

3) Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity of historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas. As noted above, the Rogue River Hazardous Fuel Reduction Project is within the congressionally designated boundary of the Hellgate Recreation Section of the Rogue National Wild and Scenic River. It is clearly a unique and valued area with identified Outstandingly Remarkable Values. The decision will result in actions that will change existing conditions in the river corridor, but will also protect and enhance the values in both the short and the long

term. Important cultural and historic resources are located within the project area. The decision will maintain their integrity and improve their protection and defensibility in the event of a wildfire (See EA, page 14).

4) The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial. The effects of this project are similar in nature to those of many other vegetation treatment and fuel hazard reduction projects implemented within the scope of the Northwest Forest Plan and the Medford District Resource Management Plan. No unique or appreciable scientific controversy has been identified over the effects of the proposals. Public comments suggested some potential concern about the impacts that might arise from the use of the slashbuster machine. Many of these impacts have been mitigated through project design. The decision has also greatly reduced the potential acreage where the machine might be employed. While there is debate and some opposition to the machine's use, there is no indication that there is any controversy within the scientific community over the effects of using these machines. In general, it appears that the controversy is a political one regarding the conflict in values over the desirability of what the machines are designed to do, but not over the scientific basis for evaluating the effects.

5) The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are likely to be highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks. The analysis has not shown that there would be any unique or unknown risks to the human environment not previously considered and analyzed in EISs to which this decision is tiered. Vegetation and fuel reduction treatments have been pursued and accomplished for many years in the vegetation types typical of the project area.

6) The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration. There has been no indication that this project will establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects. It does not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. The project area is within designated recreation section of the river. It will not result in conditions incongruent with the Recreational designation. Development and resource management within this designated area is the norm, not the exception.

7) Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Any significant cumulative effects have already been identified and analyzed in the Environmental Impact Statements which accompanied the Medford District Resource Management Plan and the Northwest Forest Plan. No additional significant cumulative effects have been identified in the analysis or the public comments. The project design encompasses the full Recreation Section to ensure potential cumulative effects at that scale have been included. The project's anticipated environmental impacts have also been considered in conjunction with other projects at the watershed scale.

8) The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historical resources. The project area includes two listed National Historic Register sites or sites known to be eligible. Specific

consideration will be given to these sites in the design of the pertinent neighborhood plans to ensure that these sites are protected. The Oregon State Historic Preservation Office will be consulted prior to making any final site specific decisions that might impact the integrity of these sites. Cultural sites will be protected according to the project design features.

9) The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. BLM's resource specialists have identified that the project may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect, some individuals of ESA listed species. It may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect, the designated northern spotted owl critical habitat in the project area. The analysis concluded that, while coho salmon, bald eagles, northern spotted owls, and Gentner's fritillary may be affected by some elements of the proposed actions, the species will not be adversely affected. ESA consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA – Fisheries has been completed. They have concurred with the BLM's determinations of "may affect, but not likely to adversely affect" (NLAA) with regard to these species and their designated critical habitat. The degree of adverse impact is thus very small and short term and the overall impact on these species over the long term is potentially beneficial.

10) Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. There is no indication that this decision will result in actions that will threaten any such violation.

Abbie Jossie

Abbie Jossie
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October 28, 2003
Date