

USDI, Bureau of Land Management  
Three Rivers Resource Area, Burns District  
Hines, OR 97738

Finding of No Significant Impact  
and  
Decision Record  
for  
Fir Gulch/Coleman Creek Fuels Reduction  
Environmental Assessment  
OR-025-03-010

INTRODUCTION:

Fir Gulch and Coleman Creek are located in the Stinkingwater Mountains, approximately 31 and 34 miles east of Burns. Fir Gulch and Coleman Creek have isolated populations of Douglas fir, 40 and 3 acres in size, respectively, and they are the only fir stands found on the Stinkingwater Mountains. There are three predominant age classes within the stands: large (30 to 50+ inches) estimated 250 to 350-year-old trees, closed canopy (18 to 30 inches) trees of approximately 80 to 100 years, and small (2 to 10 inches) trees of less than 50 years.

Six to fourteen inch diameter western junipers are common throughout the stands. The duff is at least 12 inches deep under the largest trees and contains numerous small branches. Overall the fuel loading is heavy, primarily from the ground fuels, fir reproduction, and junipers. There is evidence of past fires in the form of old fire scars present on several of the larger trees. The historic fire regime is estimated to be 20 to 40 years based on anecdotal evidence observed in the series of fire scars on some of the larger trees within the stand (personal observation of Jon Reponen, Forestry Specialist). It has been 80+ years since the last fire, at least twice the estimated historic fire regime, and fuel loading is at the point that a stand replacing fire is likely. A stand replacement fire would kill at least 90 percent of the vegetation, leaving the earth scorched and black. A stand replacement fire could also entirely remove the Douglas fir from this vegetative community. In addition, areas with junipers outside of the stands have been cut and thus have created a path for fire to enter the stands from the outside.

These are unique and valuable areas of small isolated conifer communities. These conifers have high wildlife values due to the habitat diversity created by the juxtaposition of these communities. The proposal is to implement forest management activities to lessen the effect of wildfire and preserve important and unique wildlife habitat.

## SUMMARY OF PROPOSED ACTION:

A combination of thinning, raking duff, fuel piling, and burning would take place to reduce fuels and lessen the risk of losing the stands during a late summer wildfire. All actions would take place between August 1 and April 1 to minimize goshawk disturbance. The risk of noxious weed expansion would be minimized by ensuring equipment is clean prior to entry into the site, minimizing human disturbance, and follow-up monitoring, for at least 2 years, to ensure no new noxious weed establishment.

### 1. Within the Stands

Ground fuels (slash and duff) within 10 feet of medium size Douglas fir (18 to 30 inches) and within 20 feet of larger Douglas fir (30+ inches) would be gathered, raked, and piled. Douglas fir less than 10-inches Diameter Breast Height (DBH) would be thinned outside goshawk core stands. The goshawk core stands are the areas within one-eighth mile from the goshawk nests. Douglas fir less than 6 inches DBH would be thinned in goshawk core stands. All dead and live juniper trees with a DBH of less than 18 inches would be cut. All dead and live junipers over 18 inches DBH not providing cavity-nesting habitat would be cut. All thinned and cut vegetation, and other dead slash less than 18 inches DBH would be piled. One medium size Douglas fir per acre would be cut and one medium size Douglas fir per acre would be girdled throughout the stand. This would be done in house to ensure the correct trees are cut and girdled. The medium size cut trees would be left on the ground to serve as down woody debris habitat, while the girdled trees would provide snag habitat. All piles would be constructed at least 10 feet away from any medium size Douglas fir, and at least 20 feet away from any larger Douglas fir, junipers providing cavity-nesting habitat, snags or large down woody debris (18+ inches). This would provide a large enough buffer to protect the roots of the trees and prevent the fire from igniting the snag or large down woody debris. Pile construction would also not occur within any riparian vegetation or intermittent parts of the stream. Piles would then be burned in the fall.

### 2. Outside or Perimeter of Stands

Treatments would consist of burning the existing cut junipers within 200 feet of the project areas. This would reduce the combustible fuels outside of the stands created by the past juniper cutting projects.

## FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT:

This proposal is in conformance with objectives and land use plan allocations in the 1992 Three Rivers Resource Management Plan (RMP). Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts contained in the Environmental Assessment (EA) and all other information, I have determined that the proposed action and alternatives analyzed do not constitute a major Federal action that would significantly impact the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not necessary and will not be prepared.

## Rationale:

This determination is based on the following: The following critical elements of the human environment have been analyzed in the Three Rivers RMP/Final EIS, and are not known to be present in the project area or affected by enacting either alternative: Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, Wild and Scenic Rivers, Special Status Flora, American Indian Religious Concerns, Paleontology, Floodplains, Prime or Unique Farmlands, and Hazardous Materials. The following two critical elements are not discussed in the Three Rivers RMP/FEIS, but are either not known to be present or affected: Adverse Energy Impacts and Environmental Justice. All potentially impacted resources were analyzed in the EA specific to the proposed action. The following resources were analyzed in the EA: air quality, water quality, wetlands and riparian, migratory birds, Special Status fauna, noxious weeds, cultural heritage, soils, vegetation, wildlife, rangeland management, recreation, visual resources, socioeconomics, fire management, and forestry. Impacts to these resources are considered nonsignificant (based on the definition of significance in 40 CFR 1508.27) for the following reasons:

### Air Quality:

The air quality currently meets or exceeds air quality standards outlined by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality. The proposed action would have only minor and short-term impacts on air quality while the project was being implemented.

### Water Quality:

The project areas are located at the uppermost parts of the Alder Creek and Coleman Creek watersheds. Within the project areas water generally flows in response to snowmelt and precipitation events. Under the proposed action current water quality conditions would be maintained. Any increase in sediments would be minimal due to topography, soils, and project design. The proposed action would reduce the chances of a stand replacement fire thus ensuring stable upslope soil conditions and healthy riparian zones that will contribute to high water quality.

### Wetlands and Riparian:

The unnamed tributary to Alder Creek has the only riparian zone in the proposed project areas. Under the proposed action current riparian conditions would be maintained. The proposed action would reduce the chances of a stand replacement fire thus limiting the threat of fire damage to the riparian vegetation.

### Migratory Birds:

Direct impacts to migratory birds would be minimized by total avoidance of the project areas during nesting and fledging seasons. Snag and decadent wood availability would increase. In the long term as the trees get larger, migratory birds such as cavity nesters that prefer large trees would have improved habitat quality. Species which utilize deciduous shrub habitat would benefit with the regeneration of chokecherry, bitter cherry, and aspen. There would be a reduction in habitat quality for birds that prefer dense understories and those that forage and nest in the small age class fir trees.

### Special Status Fauna:

There are no known Federally listed Threatened or Endangered wildlife species in the general area. There are two species found within the proposed project areas that have increased monitoring due to population concerns (Special Status Species). These species are the northern goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) and redband trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss newberri*). Under the proposed action northern goshawk habitat would either be maintained or enhanced. Direct effects on goshawks would be minimal as nesting and fledging seasons would be avoided. The proposed action would not impact redband trout in the short term. The proposed action would reduce the chances of a stand replacement fire thus ensuring stable upslope soil conditions and a continual supply of large woody debris to the stream channel to maintain diverse and complex fish habitat.

### Noxious Weeds:

There would be minimal increases in the risk of introduction of new weed populations or the expansion of existing weed populations as a result of implementing the proposed action. Monitoring for noxious weeds would occur for at least 2 years following treatment, and any weeds attempting to establish a population would be treated.

### Cultural Heritage:

Cultural surveys were completed and four sites were recorded within or adjacent to the project areas. The proposed action would have no known impacts on cultural heritage as the four recorded sites would be avoided.

### Soils:

Minor increases in soil erosion could occur the first couple of years after the project is implemented from the removal of duff around the larger fir trees and pile burning. Soil erosion would likely decrease thereafter as understory vegetation regenerates.

#### Vegetation:

Under this alternative existing vegetation would likely be enhanced. The vegetation within the project areas would be better apt to deal with wildfire. Understory forbs, grasses, and shrubs would likely reestablish. Forest health and vigor of the fir stand would be enhanced.

#### Wildlife:

Under the proposed action wildlife habitat would be maintained. The fir stands would likely persist even in the event of a catastrophic wildfire. The stands would continue to provide excellent hiding and thermal cover. Foraging opportunities for big game and other herbivores would increase as understory grasses, forbs, and shrubs reestablish.

#### Rangeland Management:

There would be no known adverse impacts to rangeland management activities. Some increased forage and palatability would result from the proposed treatments.

#### Recreation:

The project area has low to moderate hunting pressure. The proposed project could disturb hunting in the immediate area if treatments overlap a deer or elk hunting season.

#### Visual Resources:

The project areas fall entirely within the Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class IV. The proposed action meets the objectives of this VRM class. Visual resources would be temporarily affected while treatments are taking place. Upon completion of the project visual resources should be enhanced as the regeneration of deciduous shrubs and trees take place.

#### Socioeconomics:

There could be positive impacts to local economies as most of the work would be contracted out. There could also be minor positive impacts to local merchants as supplies to implement the project are purchased.

#### Fire Management:

All treatments included in the proposed action would reduce fuel loading and help lessen the negative effects of wildfire. Overall the stand should survive any wildfire event.

Forestry:

Under the proposed action forest health would be enhanced. Growth and vigor of the retained trees would be enhanced. The risk of disease and insect infestations entering and/or spreading through the stand would decrease as growth and vigor of the stand increases. The risk of a stand replacement wildfire occurring in the stands would be greatly reduced.

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Joan M. Suther  
Three Rivers Resource Area Field Manager

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Date

#### DECISION RECORD:

Decision: Having considered a range of alternatives and associated impacts within the analysis of the Fir Gulch/Coleman Creek Fuels Reduction EA, it is my decision to implement the proposed action. The proposed action establishes criteria and objectives to reduce surface fuel loading, to reduce overstocking of Douglas fir, to improve forest health, to reduce risk of stand replacement fires, to maintain the health and vigor of the areas larger trees, and to stimulate growth of grasses, forbs, and shrubs.

Rationale: I have selected the proposed action for the following reasons:

The proposed action reduces ladder and surface fuel loading, which reduces the risk of stand replacement fires and protects areas of high resource value from catastrophic wildfire. This action provides conditions which would exist under a historical fire regime, which allowed these unique stands to adapt to periodic wildfire.

It thins overstocked Douglas fir stands, which improves forest health by increasing growth and vigor of retained trees, maintains the health and vigor of larger trees in the area, helps protect the stands from insects and diseases, and stimulates growth of grasses, forbs, and shrubs.

It improves landscape diversity.

Public involvement consisted of direct mailing to five individuals, organizations, tribes, agencies, and a notice in the local newspaper.

It is in conformance with Section 7(a)1 of the Endangered Species Act.

It is in compliance with the Three Rivers Resource Management Plan (1992).

It is in compliance with Federal laws that mandate the management of public land resources (Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976).

The decision does not result in any undue or unnecessary environmental degradation.

I have also considered alternatives to the proposed action including:

Alternative 1 - No Action: This alternative proposed no fuel reduction treatments would take place. I did not select this alternative because it was not responsive to improving the conditions of the Fir Gulch/Coleman Creek Douglas fir stands and lessening the threat of catastrophic wildfire within these unique woodlands that are identified in the purpose and need of the EA.

This decision may be appealed to the Interior Board of Land Appeals, Office of the Secretary, in accordance with the regulations contained in 43 CFR, Part 4 and Form 1842-1. If an appeal is filed, your notice must be filed in the Burns District Office, 28910 Hwy 20 West, Hines, Oregon 97738 by September 3, 2003. The appellant has the burden of showing that the decision appealed is in error.

If you wish to file a petition, pursuant to regulation 43 CFR 4.21, for a stay of the effectiveness of this decision during the time that your appeal is being reviewed by the Board, the petition for stay must accompany your notice of appeal. A petition for stay is required to show sufficient justification based on the standards listed below. Copies of the notice of appeal and petition for a stay must also be submitted to each party named in this decision and to the interior Board of Land Appeals and to the appropriate Office of the Solicitor (see 43 CFR 4.413) at the same time the original documents are filed with this office. If you request a stay, you have the burden of proof to demonstrate that a stay should be granted.

#### Standards for Obtaining a Stay

Except as otherwise provided by law or other pertinent regulation, a petition for a stay of a decision pending appeal shall show sufficient justification based on the following standards:

1. The relative harm to the parties if the stay is granted or denied.
2. The likelihood of the appellant's success on the merits.
3. The likelihood of immediate and irreparable harm if the stay is not granted.
4. Whether or not the public interest favors granting the stay.

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Joan M. Suther  
Three Rivers Resource Area Field Manager

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Date