

REGIONAL ECOSYSTEM OFFICE

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MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 20, 2011

TO: John Allen, Forest Supervisor, Deschutes National Forest

FROM: Michael Hampton, Forest Service Representative to the REO

SUBJECT: Regional Ecosystem Office Review of the Popper Vegetation Management Project, Sisters Ranger District, Deschutes National Forest

Summary: The Regional Ecosystem Office (REO) interagency Late-Successional Reserve (LSR) Work Group has concluded its review of the documents provided by the Sisters Ranger District of the Deschutes National Forest. You asked us to review the proposed Popper Vegetation Management Project, specifically for those activities in the Three Creeks Late-Successional Reserve (LSR), on the Sisters Ranger District. The REO, based upon review by the LSR Work Group, concurs with the Forest in its finding of consistency with the Standards and Guidelines (S&G) under the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) for the Popper Vegetation Management Project.

Basis for the Review: The overall Popper Vegetation Management Project treats approximately 12,563 acres to reduce the threat of large scale wildfire to people, property and important ecosystem components; as well as improve forest health; contribute wood products to the local and regional economy; and to reintroduce fire in fire dependent ecosystems. Of the overall project area, 4,277 acres are in designated wildland-urban interface. A subset of the proposed action would treat a total of about 522 acres in the Three Creeks LSR. Within the LSR, two types of treatments are proposed:

- 1) Fuels reduction treatments, specifically the creation of a shaded fuel break, adjacent to Forest Road 16, sections of Forest Roads 1628 and 1600-370, and the Three Creeks Lake recreation complex.
- 2) Fuels reduction activities in portions of Riparian Reserves within the LSR.

The district requested REO review of the project to provide concurrence that it is consistent with the NWFP. The need for review includes the removal of live and dead trees within the LSR in order to create a shaded fuel break and within the context of changed landscape conditions.

As required by the NWFP S&G (C-11), the Forest has prepared a Late-Successional Reserve Assessment (LSR assessment). The Wychus LSR Assessment (WLSRA) was reviewed by the REO with a letter of concurrence issued on September 25, 2002. The Popper Vegetation Management Project interdisciplinary team (IDT) reviewed the WLSRA in the spring of 2009 and determined that the LSR goals, desired future conditions, and criteria for developing appropriate risk reduction treatments were still relevant as a guide for project planning. Since 2002, however, the Ranger District has experienced a number of large wildfires that have burned about 1/3 of the district. This is in conjunction with an outbreak of mountain pine beetle which

has resulted in large scale mortality of lodgepole pine. The Popper project area is one of the remaining areas on the southern end of the district not to experience a large scale wildfire.

The LSR Workgroup reviewed the project to determine if the silvicultural activities are consistent to ensure that the treatments are beneficial to the creation of late-successional forest conditions. Specifically the proposed actions were reviewed for consistency with the Standards and Guidelines for risk reduction (C-12 and C-13) under the Guidelines to Reduce Risks of Large-Scale Disturbance for lands East of the Cascades and in the Oregon and California Klamath Provinces.

Background and Project Description: The 3,078 acre Three Creeks LSR, is the only LSR located within the larger 17,194 acre Popper Vegetation Management Project Area. The high elevation forest is composed of stands of lodgepole pine, mountain hemlock and subalpine fir with some mixed conifer. The LSR does not contain nesting, roosting, or foraging habitat for the northern spotted owl and instead focal species include black-backed and three toed woodpeckers, great gray owl, wolverine, marten, cup fungus, Newberry's gentian, long-toed salamander, and the Cascade frog (WLSRA, pg II-84).

Forest Road 16 is the main ingress and egress route for access to the Three Creeks Recreation Complex, one of the most popular recreation areas on the Deschutes N.F. with up to 400 people in the general area on any given summer day.

Along Forest Road 16 within the LSR, there is a significant amount of standing dead and down lodgepole pine interspersed with "dog-hair" thickets of smaller diameter trees. Approximately 83% of the area proposed for treatment along Forest Road 16 is located in the lodgepole pine plant association with high, 80% to 100%, mortality in trees over 2"- 4" dbh. Since mortality has been occurring over the last 15 years, the majority of the dead lodgepole pines are beginning to fall to the ground, contributing to surface fuel loading. The area is rated as High Hazard, High Risk, and High Intensity for fire and "a stand replacement, high intensity fire in the lodgepole pine plant association [in the Three Creeks Management Area] is inevitable" (WLSRA, pg. V-15). The highest priority from a fire suppression strategy in the LSR is to protect fire fighter and public safety (WLSRA, pg. V-15). The LSR is also adjacent to the Three Sisters Wilderness, which contains vast expanses of dead standing trees. A fire initiating in the Wilderness could spread as a crown fire into the LSR and beyond.

The creation of a shaded fuel break along Forest Road 16, sections of Forest Roads 1628 and 1600-370, and the campground complex in the Three Creek Lake area, is proposed to reduce the risk of large scale disturbance to the LSR and to provide safe ingress and egress in the Three Creeks Lake recreation area. The objective is to slow the spread of the fire, reduce fire intensity and flame height, and provide defensible space for fire suppression crews. Where the stands have high mortality, the fuel break will resemble a regeneration harvest. Where live trees remain, mainly in the mountain hemlock, subalpine fir and mixed conifer stands, there will be sufficient live trees to create a shaded fuel break of 20 – 40 foot tree spacing. Minimum coarse woody debris will be maintained and advanced regeneration protected to the extent possible. Activity fuels would be piled and burned. Within the riparian reserves (RR) along Forest Road 16, no mechanical equipment would be allowed and activity fuels would be hand piled and burned outside of the RR.

Review of the Project: The LSR Work Group reviewed the proposed action and the supporting documentation: "Popper Vegetation Management Project; Project-level Consistency Review for Activities in the Three Creeks Management Strategy Area; Wychus Late Successional Reserve; Sisters Ranger District, Deschutes National Forest. Members of the LSR Workgroup held conference calls with members of the Sisters R.D. Interdisciplinary Team on January 23, 2009, December 15, 2010, April 7, 2011 and concluding on June 14, 2011. Initially the district was proposing to update the Wychus LSRA, but later decided to defer the amendment of the LSRA and instead bring in the Popper project for project level review.

The interagency LSR Work Group review concluded that the proposed treatments in the LSR meet the objectives for managing LSRs. This conclusion was reached in part for the following reasons:

- The project is consistent with NWFP Standard and Guidelines (C-12 and C-13) Guidelines to Reduce Risks of Large Scale Disturbance, East of the Cascades and in the Oregon and California Klamath Provinces.
- The proposed management activities will result in a greater assurance of long-term maintenance of habitat. The treatment area is focused west of Forest Road 16 given that fires typically start in the Wilderness high country and travel east due to the prevailing winds. The shaded fuel break would provide a safe point for fire suppression resources to reduce the likelihood of fires moving east of Forest Road 16 into the eastern and northeastern sections of the LSR which would impact additional habitat. The fuel break would also reduce the risk of fire moving outside the LSR into adjacent Inventoried Roadless Areas to the east. The Popper project area is one of the remaining areas on the southern end of the district not to experience a large scale wildfire and therefore maintaining habitat is key for many species.
- The activities are clearly needed to reduce risks given the high level of mortality of lodgepole pine stands, increasing surface fuel loadings from the falling dead lodgepole, and the high public use of the area. The shaded fuel break provides an anchor point for fire suppression operations and helps to compartmentalize the reserve, allowing for the greater protection of focal species and their habitats as well as safer ingress and egress for firefighters and the public.
- The treatment activities will not prevent the LSR from playing an effective role in the objectives for which they were established. Approximately 522 acres of the 3,078 acre LSR, or 17%, will be treated. The fuel break creation would remove foraging and nesting habitat for black-backed and three-toed woodpeckers, but would still provide residual green trees for dispersal. Effective habitat for these bird species is found throughout the Popper project area in general and the Three Creeks LSR in particular.

Conclusion: Based on the interagency REO LSR Work Group's review of relevant documentation and discussion with Sisters Ranger District staff, the REO concurs with the Deschutes National Forest's conclusion that the Popper Vegetation Management Project on the Sisters Ranger District is consistent with the Northwest Forest Plan.

If you have questions regarding this review, please contact Kim Mellen-McLean at 503-808-2677.



for MICHAEL HAMPTON
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