• Eliminate non-key issues or those that have been covered by relevant previous environmental analyses;

• Identify alternatives to the proposed action;

• Identify opportunities for cooperative restoration projects on private land; and

• Identify potential environmental effects (that is, direct, indirect, and cumulative effects) of the proposed action and alternatives.

The draft EIS is expected to be filed with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and to available for public review by June 1999. The comment period on the draft EIS will be 45 days after the EPA publishes the notice of availability in the **Federal Register.** The final EIS is scheduled to be available in September 1999.

To assist the Forest Service in identifying and considering issues on the proposed project, comments on the draft EIS should be as specific as possible. Referring to specific pages or chapters of the draft statement is also helpful. Comments may address both the adequacy of the draft EIS and the merits of the alternative formulated and discussed in the statement. (Reviewers may wish to refer to the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act at 40 CFR 1503.3 in addressing these points.)

At this early stage, I believe that giving reviewers notice of several court rulings related to public participation in reviewing environmental processes is important. First, reviewers of draft environmental impact statements must structure their participation in the environmental review of the proposal so that it is meaningful and alerts the agency to the reviewer's position and contentions (*Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corp.* v. *NRDC,* 435 U.S. 519, 533; 1978). Also, environmental objections that could be raised at the draft environmental impact statement stage but that are not raised until the final environmental impact statement is completed may be waived or dismissed by the courts (*City of Angoon* v. *Hodel,* 803 F. 2d 1016, 1022 (9th Cir. 1986) and *Wisconsin Heritages, Inc.* v. *Harris,* 490 F. Supp. 1334, 1338 (E.D. Wis. 1980). Because of those court rulings, participation by those interested in this proposed project by the close of the 45-day comment period is essential, so that substantive comments and objections are made available to the Forest Service when it can consider and respond to them in developing issues and alternatives in the final EIS.

After the 45-day public comment period, the comments received will be reviewed and considered in preparing the final EIS. The forest supervisor of the Siuslaw National Forest is the responsible official for this EIS. After considering public comments and responses, environmental consequences discussed in the final EIS, and applicable laws, regulations and policies; as the responsible official, I will reach a decision on this proposal. This decision and the evidence supporting it will be documented in a record of decision, which is subject to Forest Service appeal regulations (36 CFR Part 215).

Dated: February 9, 1999.

James R. Furnish,

Forest Supervisor.

[FR Doc. 99–4646 Filed 2–24–99; 8:45 am]

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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Rimrock Projects, Umatilla National Forest, Grant, Morrow, and Wheeler Counties, Oregon

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement.

SUMMARY: The Forest Service will prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) on a proposal to implement ecosystem management projects designed to promote long-term resiliant, sustainable watershed conditions. Project guidance is provided by the Ecosystem Analysis of the Wall Watersheds (September 1995). The project area is located on the Heppner Ranger District and lies approximately 25 miles southwest of Heppner, Oregon, within the Wall Creek watershed (subwatersheds 24A–G).

Proposed project activities consist of in-channel fish structure maintenance, hydrologic stability projects (road obliteration/decomissioning, road resurfacing/reconstruction), wildlife enhancement projects, aspen habitat enhancement, noxious weed treatments, range improvements, recreation opportunities, landscape prescribed fire, and restoration of forest stand structure/composition using a variety of silvicultural treatments including commercial timber harvest. The proposed action is designed to reduce risks to ecosystem sustainability, prevent further degradation of forest health, reduce risks of catastrophic wildfire, improve or maintain water quality and aquatic habitat, and provide economic return to local economies. The proposed projects will be in compliance with the 1990 Land and Resource Management Plan FEIS for the Umatilla National Forest, as amended, which provides overall direction for management of this area.

DATES: Written comments concerning the scope of the analysis should be received on or before March 31, 1999.

ADDRESSES: Send written comments and suggestions to the Responsible Official, Delanne Ferguson, District Ranger, Heppner Ranger District, P.O. Box 7, Heppner, Oregon 97836.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Charlene Bucha Gentry, Project Team Leader, Heppner Ranger District, Phone: (541) 676–9781.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The decision area contains approximately 42,000 acres within the Umatilla National Forest in Grant, Morrow, and Wheeler Counties, Oregon. It is within the boundary of the Wall watershed which includes Lower, Middle, and Upper Big Wall; Porter; Lower and Upper Wilson; and Indian subwatersheds. The legal description of the decision area is as follows: R.25E. T.6S. sections 24–28 and 32–36; R.25E. T.7S. sections 1–5, 9–15, 23–25, and 36; R.26E. T6S. sections 16, 19–23, and 26–35; R.26E. T.7S. sections 1–36; R.26E. T.8S. sections 1–6, 8–16, and 24; R.27E. T.7S. sections 13–36; R.27E. T.8S. sections 2–10 and 16–19; and R.28E. T.7S. sections 19, 30, and 31, W.M. surveyed. All proposed activities are outside the boundaries of any roadless or wilderness areas.

Fish habitat projects include maintenance and restoration of in-channel structures. Proposed hydrologic stability projects include 34 miles of road obliteration or decommissioning, 37 miles of road resurfacing, 47 miles of road reconstruction, installation of a culvert to replace a low-water ford (Forest Road 23), and installation of three low-water fords designed for fish passage (concrete approaches with a suspended grate) on Forest Road 23 and 2300100 where they intersect with Big Wall Creek. Aspen habitat enhancement includes removal of encroaching conifers, construction of ungulate-proof fences, prescribed burning, and mechanical root stimulation. Range improvements consist of the construction of barbed wire fencing on three creeks to protect riparian areas. Bull Prairie Reservoir has silted in considerably in the 32 years since its construction. Excavation of three identified areas along the shoreline of the reservoir would remove cattails, deepen the lake shoreline, and enhance

fishing opportunities. Landscape prescribed fire across the analysis area would reduce the potential for future catastrophic wildfires, enhance wildlife habitat, maintain forest health, and reduce fuel loadings. A variety of silvicultural methods would treat approximately 5,500 acres within the area. This would result in an estimated 33,000 ccf (17.5 million board feet) of wood products produced for local economies. Proposed silvicultural treatments are as follows:

Precommercial Thinning: Saplings (generally up to 6 inch dbh) would be thinned to a tree per acre variable spacing to promote growth, restore and maintain a more sustainable species composition, and to promote visual quality along Hwy 207. This treatment is proposed on about 380 acres.

Commercial Thinning: Stand densities would be reduced to a residual square foot of basal area per acre based on recommended stocking levels appropriate for the plant association to restore a more ecologically sustainable structure and species composition. All stands would remain fully stocked upon completion of harvest activities. This treatment is proposed on approximately 5,100 acres.

Proposed commercial thinning units would be harvested using tractor, harvester/forwarder, and helicopter logging systems. Access for harvest would require reconstruction of about 47 miles of existing roads and construction of approximately 12 miles of temporary roads. The temporary roads would be closed and obliterated upon completion of harvest activities. Activities that would occur concurrently or in association with timber harvest include subsoiling of landings and temporary roads to mitigate soil compaction, waterbarring, seeding of skid trails and landings for noxious weed control, and burning of some slash.

Public participation will be especially important at several points during the analysis, beginning with the scoping process (40 CFR 1501.7). Scoping will include listing of this EIS in the Spring 1999 issue of the Umatilla National Forest's Schedule of Proposed Activities; letters to agencies, organizations, and individuals who have already indicated their interest in such activities; and news releases in the East Oregonian and other local newspapers. No public meetings have been planned at this time; they will be scheduled later as needed. This notice is to encourage members of the public, interested organizations, federal, state and county agencies, and local tribal governments to take part in planning this project. They are encouraged to visit with Forest Service officials at any time during the analysis and prior to the decision. Any information received will be used in preparation of the Draft EIS. The scoping process includes:

1. Identifying potential issues
2. Identifying major issues to be analyzed in depth
3. Considering alternatives based on themes which will be derived from issues recognized during scoping activities
4. Identifying potential environmental effects of project and alternatives (i.e. direct, indirect, and cumulative effects and connected actions).

Preiliminary issues include: effects of proposed activities on water quality and the anadromous and resident fisheries resource; effects of the proposed activities on Threatened, Endangered and Sensitive (TES) species and what opportunities exist to improve habitat; and the ability of proposed activities to restore historic vegetation composition, structure, and pattern.

A full range of alternatives will be considered, including a ''no-action'' alternative in which none of the activities proposed above would be implemented. Based on the purpose and need, as well as issues gathered through scoping, the action alternatives will vary (1) the number, type and location of projects, (2) the silvicultural and post-harvest treatments prescribed, (3) the amount and location of harvest and thinning, (4) the type and amount of excavation to occur in Bull Prairie Reservoir, and (5) the type and amount of repairs to occur on Forest Road 23.

Appropriate Federal, state, and local permits or licenses will be obtained for activities associated with the project, including Oregon Division of State Lands Fill and Removal Permit.

The Draft EIS is expected to be filed with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and to be available to the public for review by July 1999. At that time, the EPA will publish a Notice of Availability of the Draft EIS in the **Federal Register**. The comment period on the Draft EIS will be 45 days from the date the EPA publishes the notice of availability in the **Federal Register**. It is important that those interested in the management of the Umatilla National Forest participate at that time.

The Final EIS is scheduled to be completed by October 1999. In the Final EIS, the Forest Service will respond to comments and responses received during the comment period that pertain to the environmental consequences discussed in the Draft EIS and applicable laws, regulations, and policies considered in making a decision regarding the proposal.

The Forest Service believes it is important to give reviewers notice at this early stage of several court rulings related to public participation in the environmental review process. First, reviewers of draft environmental impact statements must structure their participation in the environmental review of the proposal so that it is meaningful and alerts an agency to the reviewer's position and contentions. *Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corp.* v. *NRDC*, 435 U.S. 519,553 (1978). Also, environmental objections that could be raised at the draft environmental impact statement stage but that are not raised until after completion of the final environmental impact statement may be waived or dismissed by the courts. *City of Angoon* v. *Hodel*, 803 f.2d 1016, 1022 (9th Cir, 1986) and *Wisconsin Heritages, Inc.* v. *Harris*, 490 F. Supp. 1334, 1338 (E.D. Wis. 1980). Because of these court rulings, it is very important that those interested in this proposed action participate by the close of the 45-day comment period so that substantive comments and objections are made available to the Forest Service at a time when it can meaningfully consider them and respond to them in the final environmental impact statement.

To assist the Forest Service in identifying and considering issues and concerns on the proposed action, comments on the draft environmental impact statement should be as specific as possible. It is also helpful if comments refer to specific pages or chapters of the draft statement. Comments may also address the adequacy of the draft environmental impact statement or the merits of the alternatives formulated and discussed in the statement. (Reviewers may wish to refer to the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations for implementing the procedural provision of the National Environmental Policy Act at 40 CFR 1503.3 in addressing these points).

The Forest Service is the lead agency. Delanne Ferguson, District Ranger, is the Responsible Official. As the Responsible Official, she will decide which, if any, of the proposed projects will be implemented. She will document the decision and reasons for the decision in the Record of Decision. That decision will be subject to Forest Service Appeal Regulations (36 CFR part 215).

Dated: February 8, 1999.

Delanne Ferguson,

District Ranger.

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