USDA
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BLUE MOUNTAINS
FOREST PLAN REVISION - 2017
Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests

March Newsletter

Timber and Vegetation Management, New Team Leader, and Sustainable Documents

We are continuing to work on the new Forest Plans for the Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests. The Plans will guide how the Forest Service manages approximately five million acres of public lands in eastern Oregon and Washington.

Over the past year, these newsletters have provided periodic updates on the Forest Plans and Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS). For example, we announced in early 2016 that we are analyzing two new Alternatives in the FEIS. Many of the changes we are making, including the two new Alternatives, are the result of substantive public input as well as updated information provided by resource specialists. Please visit our website to find past newsletters and additional information: fs.usda.gov/goto/BlueMountainsPlanRevision.

In this newsletter we will provide insights into how the new Forest Plans may address timber and vegetation management. Key topics include:

- *Why the Forest Plans address timber and vegetation management*
- *Timber Volumes: Allowable Sale Quantity and Timber Sale Program Quantity*
- *Increasing the Pace and Scale of Restoration*
- *Post-Fire Salvage*
- *Old Forest and Individual Old Trees*

We will also introduce our new team leader and discuss a more sustainable approach to document publication.

This forest stand on the Malheur National Forest, near Camp Creek, has benefited from thinning and prescribed burning.

for the greatest good

Please note: As in previous newsletters, we are sharing examples of Forest Service analysis and staff recommendations that are informing the new Forest Plans and FEIS. However, these documents are still in progress, so we do not have final decisions to announce at this time.

Why the Forest Plans Address Timber and Vegetation Management

National Forests have a long history of supplying a diverse range of products that support the needs of local communities and the nation. Timber harvest on National Forests provides economic, social, and ecological benefits in addition to the benefits provided by other forest-related goods and services, such as clean water and recreation. Today, timber harvest continues to be part of the National Forests' multiple-use mandate, codified in federal statutes including the Multiple-Use and Sustained Yield Act of 1960, which directed the Secretary of Agriculture to manage National Forests for timber, range, water, recreation, and wildlife.

The amount of appropriate land base available to support forestry activities is an important factor influencing timber production and harvest. We use two definitions in the Forest Plans:

1. Areas Suitable for Timber Production: *Lands where planned harvesting is appropriate for the primary purpose of producing regular crops of timber.*

2. Areas Suitable (or Available) for Harvest: *Lands where timber harvest is appropriate if the primary purpose is related to multiple-use objectives other than regular timber production – such as forest restoration thinning, fuels reduction, and habitat improvement.*

The Forest Plans for the Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests recognize timber production and harvest as suitable uses in specific Management Areas. In those areas, timber production or harvest can be important tools to manage vegetation for ecosystem restoration, wildlife habitat, and wildland fire resilience. Without the local timber industry, the capability of the Forest Service to affordably manage vegetation would be limited.

Forest Plan approval results in, among other things, designation of lands suitable for timber production and timber harvest [16 USC 1604(k) and 36 CFR 219.14 (1982)]. The Desired Condition in the Forest Plans states: "Land classified as suitable for timber production has a regularly scheduled timber harvest program that provides social and economic benefits while contributing to ecosystem health and sustainability. Land classified as unsuitable for timber production, but where timber harvesting can occur for other multiple-use purposes, has an irregular timber harvest program that contributes to ecosystem health and sustainability while providing benefits to people."

The Forest Plan Revision Team is studying two new Alternatives: Alternative E Modified and Alternative E Modified-Departure. (To understand what "Departure" means, please see below.) As discussed in previous newsletters, Forest Service staff have recommended adjusting Management Area boundaries in the two new Alternatives, which would increase the areas suitable for timber production by approximately 56,000 acres across the Blue Mountains National Forests.

Timber Volumes: Allowable Sale Quantity and Timber Sale Program Quantity

Two long-term harvesting schedules have been developed in the Forest Plans along with estimates of their resulting volume. These harvesting schedules are called Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ) and Timber Sale Program Quantity (TSPQ).

ASQ represents the maximum amount of planned volume that may be sold per decade from lands suitable for timber production. While ASQ is expressed as an average annual volume, the limit is for the entire decade, so deviations from the annual average are allowed. ASQ is not a goal or target; it is a ceiling or limit for timber production. It is also important to note that volume resulting from salvage harvesting does not count toward this

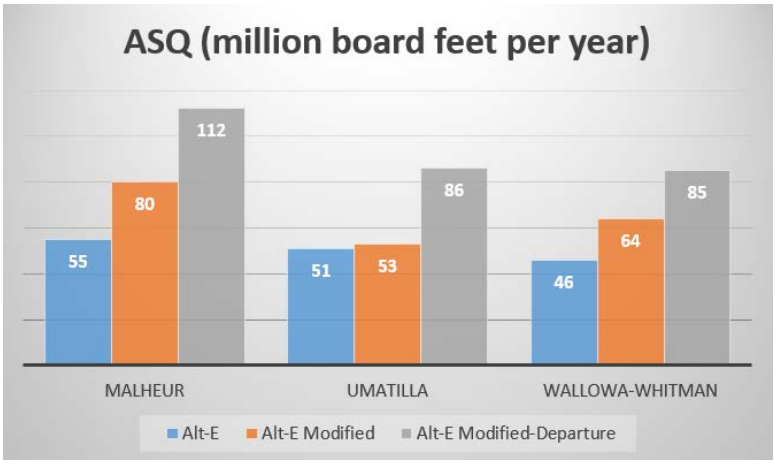

Chart depicts the average annual ASQ during the 20-year planning horizon.

limit, because it is not part of a regularly planned timber production program.

TSPQ is the projected timber harvest schedule and resulting volume from timber sales on all forest lands, whether suitable for timber production or harvest. The portion of this volume that comes from lands suitable for timber production is restricted by the ASQ limit, but volumes from other lands suitable for harvest do not count toward the ASQ limit. The ASQ chart above and the TSPQ chart to the right show that the ASQs and TSPQs increase from Alternative E to Alternative E Modified, and then increase dramatically in Alternative E Modified-Departure.

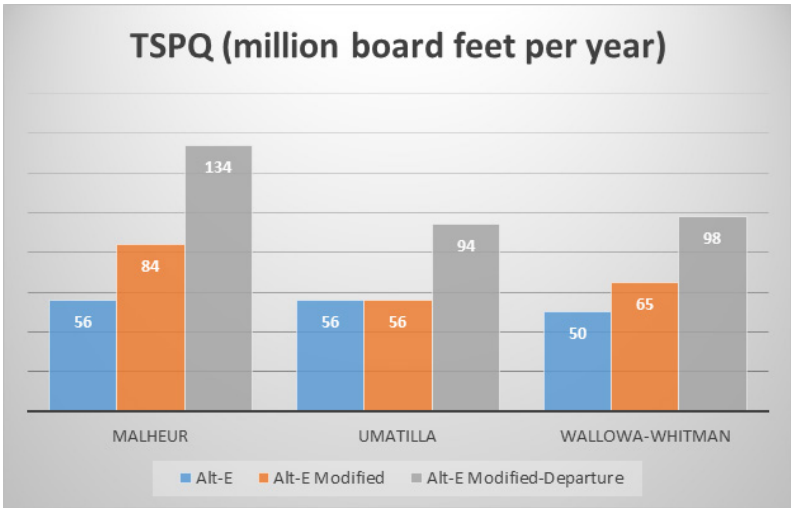

Chart depicts the average annual TSPQ during the 20-year planning horizon.

Increasing the Pace and Scale of Restoration

We received many comments about "increasing the pace and scale of restoration" to improve forest resilience, which includes reducing the risks of uncharacteristic fires or insect and disease outbreaks. Other benefits would include enhanced habitat for big game animals and an increase in the flow of forest products to local mills. Although forest restoration treatments typically involve mechanical thinning and/or prescribed fire, the following section describes how the new Alternatives address thinning, which is most relevant to ASQ and TSPQ.

Many commenters felt that Alternative E (as published in 2014) would not thin enough of the dry upland forest, especially in overly dense areas prioritized for restoration and fuels reduction. Based on the reasoning provided in substantive public comments, and after having more in-depth conversations internally and externally, Forest Service staff designed the two new Alternatives to provide additional opportunities to improve forest resilience.

Alternative E Modified: This new Alternative would maintain an overall level of acres harvested similar to Alternative E, but it would focus those acres more intensely on portions of the dense-dry upland forest in need of thinning. Within 20 years, Alternative E Modified would plan to increase thinning to roughly 33% of the dense-dry upland forest that is suitable for timber harvest. This approach is consistent with the "non-declining flow" (or even-flow) requirement of the National Forest Management Act, which limits the ASQ to a volume that can be harvested annually "in perpetuity." The intent of non-declining flow is to prevent current harvest levels in one decade from forcing lower harvest levels in future decades, which is especially important in communities where the local economy revolves around a steady supply of timber from National Forests.

One consequence of non-declining flow is that it may preclude the rapid treatment of large quantities of overstocked dense-dry upland forest. When forests are overstocked, the volume removed from a single acre today cannot necessarily be reproduced by a harvest of the re-growth on that same acre 30 or 40 years later. Thus, compliance with the non-declining flow rule may result in a slower conversion of dense-dry forest into more healthy and natural open conditions. On the other hand, the rapid harvest of overstocked forests also has consequences, including a potentially sharp decrease in harvest volumes in future years.

Alternative E Modified-Departure: Planning regulations allow a temporary suspension of, or "departure" from, the non-declining flow requirement. This is why our other new Alternative is called Alternative E Modified-Departure. Within 20 years, this Alternative would plan to thin about 70% of the dense-dry upland forest that is suitable for harvest. From the standpoint of timber production lands, the Departure Alternative would plan to treat nearly all of the dense-dry upland forest within 20 years. With most of the thinning completed in the first 20 years (see the blue line on the chart below), harvest levels would be expected to decrease substantially as the Forests transition back to a more sustainable "maintenance" level of harvest in future decades.

While both new Alternatives would provide some benefits, there are also potential impacts that need to be considered and analyzed. The Departure Alternative, in particular, given its dramatic increase in timber harvest during a short timeframe, will require close scrutiny for potential impacts, such as increases in traffic due to logging trucks, erosion from land disturbance, disruption to wildlife habitat, spread of invasive species, etc.

The economic implications of a front-loaded harvest schedule can also be problematic. Modeling for the Departure Alternative suggests harvest levels could be reduced to less than one-half of what they were in the first 20 years (see chart). The Forest Service's socio-economic analysis indicates that full implementation of the Departure Alternative during the 20-year planning horizon would likely lead to a classic "boom and bust" cycle for communities surrounding the Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests. Unsustainable levels of timber harvest in other parts of the U.S. have left communities in distress during the 19th and 20th centuries. Because of this documented history of boom and bust, the Forest Service normally does not support Departure Alternatives. Below are some potential implications:

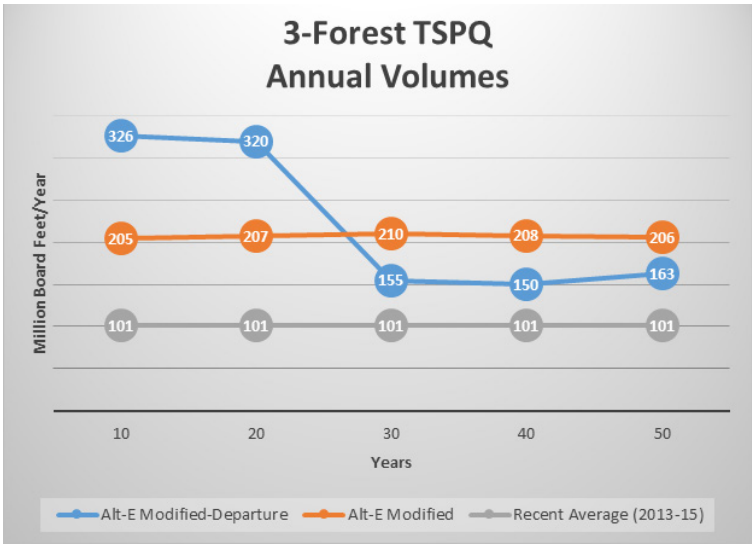

Chart depicts the average annual TSPQ during the 20-year planning horizon and a projection out to 50 years.

- **"Boom"** - An average annual timber harvest above 300 million board feet across the three National Forests could significantly increase employment associated with the forest products industry. Accordingly, populations could rapidly increase in many Blue Mountains communities. A rapid increase in population and demand for housing would decrease housing availability and affordability, so residents who rent and work in low-wage sectors would have difficulty finding affordable housing. Public services could also be overwhelmed during the boom, including schools, hospitals, and police departments.
- **"Bust"** - In the aftermath of the boom, after 20 years, a substantial decline in timber harvest could lead to: decreased incomes, increased poverty, increased bankruptcy (personal and business), increased foreclosure rates, decreased populations, decreased tax revenues, decreased school enrollments (following school expansions during the boom), and increased crime rates, which are associated with economic busts.

Funding is an additional consideration for both new Alternatives. We received many public comments asserting that budget assumptions in the Forest Plans should not limit our opportunity to enhance forest conditions. Upon further consideration, staff developed the two new Alternatives to allow for more forest harvest and restoration over a 20-year period than recent average budgets could accommodate. To fully implement the new Alternatives would require added funding for planning, preparation, and contract administration. The increases in ASQ and TSPQ volumes would provide "solution space" if additional funds were to become available. Please note, however, that ASQ and TSPQ volumes are neither targets nor commitments. Actual harvest levels and acres treated will depend on a variety of factors, including funding, that are often beyond the control of individual National Forests.

Post-Fire Salvage

Salvage logging is the practice of harvesting trees that have been killed by wildfire, flood, wind, disease, insects, and/or other natural disturbances. While providing economic benefits to timber companies and communities, and providing funding for reforestation, salvage logging can also improve safety (e.g., removing "hazard trees" at risk of falling near roads and trails). At the same time, there are potential impacts to consider. Salvage logging activities can damage soils and impact the land's ability to regenerate. There are also habitat considerations. For instance, high-severity, stand-replacing wildfires can provide high-quality wildlife habitat for species that depend on standing dead trees, such as the black-backed woodpecker. In such cases, it can be challenging to balance the habitat value of burned areas with the economic value of the salvageable timber.

Alternative E, as published in 2014, addressed this challenge with the following management direction: "Post-Fire

Habitat WLD-HAB-19 Guideline-4: Greater than 50 percent of post-fire source habitat should be retained and should not be salvage logged, except in the wildland urban interface." One critique of this approach is it does not consider how much habitat has been created by fire and whether there is enough to meet the needs of dependent species.

Post-fire salvage logging operations on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest

Forest Service staff recommended a different approach in the two new Alternatives. It would direct line officers to use the Desired Conditions for "post-fire habitat" to guide whether and to what extent salvage logging is appropriate. We developed the Desired Conditions for post-fire habitat from an analysis of the natural range of variation, which approximates a range of conditions representing a natural amount of post-fire habitat that we would expect to see occurring on the landscape at any given point in time.

Old Forest and Individual Old Trees

Old forest stands are some of the most valuable in the Blue Mountains. Some people see old forests and large old trees as important parts of their cultural heritage and identity. Many people also consider old forests and trees to be aesthetically pleasing, and others might emphasize their ecological value in a healthy and resilient forest. Some also see economic value in old forests as a sustainable timber resource.

Currently, the occurrence of dry and moist mixed conifer forests characterized by old and large trees is far below the estimated natural range of variation. Without these old fire-adapted forests, the risk of severe wildfire damage is higher and wildlife species are negatively impacted if they are dependent on old and large trees. Forest Plan amendments in 1995 (also known as "Eastside Screens") attempted to address these issues with standards that largely eliminated the harvest of trees greater than a 21-inch diameter and also restricted most harvesting within old forest stands. During the 22 years since these standards were adopted, new science findings and practical experiences with forest restoration have demonstrated a need for more flexibility in old forest management.

Several of the Alternatives under consideration in the new Forest Plans attempt to integrate and balance the conservation and restoration of old forest with the benefits of more active management. As a case in point, the two new Alternatives would not strictly limit the removal of trees above 21 inches in diameter. Instead, the two new Alternatives would allow specific exceptions to remove some large or old trees to meet ecosystem management objectives. For example, the grand fir tree is a fire-prone species, and there are areas where removing grand fir can reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire. Our analysis of the natural range of variation and the work of other scientists has shown that, in many cases, grand fir is now much more abundant in certain areas than it ever has been naturally. Therefore, active management can help to move those areas closer to the Desired Condition. Other examples of proposed exceptions for removing some large or old trees would include managing fuel loads in the wildland-urban interface or improving aquatic habitats by restoring large wood to streams.

Our New Team Leader

The Forest Plan Revision Team is happy to announce that we have a new team leader, Victoria Anne. Victoria is returning to the Forest Service after working for the Bureau of Land Management as a NEPA Planning and Environmental Coordinator since 2011 in Nevada and Arizona. Her knowledge and experience base includes working with several interdisciplinary teams to develop strengthened NEPA projects that included planning for prescribed fires, mining, hydraulic fracturing, wild horse and burro "gathers" and fertility reduction studies, grazing permit renewals,

and processing range-improvement requests with sage-grouse and other species dependent upon sage-brush habitat.

When working with the Forest Service, Victoria's role was as a Soil Scientist on the Tongass National Forest and on the Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forests and Pawnee National Grasslands. She worked primarily on timber sales in Alaska, and on fuels reduction projects in Colorado. Victoria also has several years of experience working with privately owned agencies and academia as an accountant, public speaker, trainer, and facilitator. Welcome Victoria!

Toward More Sustainable Documents

Since this newsletter refers to trees and forest products, we thought it would be appropriate to talk about printing Forest Service documents. As a natural resource agency, we consider the environmental impacts of printing and mailing documents, which can consume large amounts of paper, ink, and energy. As you might expect, printing and mailing documents can also be very expensive. It would cost well-over $100,000 to provide copies of our Revised Forest Plans and Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) to everyone on our current mailing list. **To minimize printing costs and conserve taxpayer dollars, we will be making the Forest Plans and FEIS available *online*.**

Compared to paper documents, online and electronic documents offer several benefits to readers. Using a computer, readers can search for key words to focus on sections that are most important to them. Readers of online and electronic documents can also zoom in or out to improve their perspective of a map or chart. Some people may wish to use the copy-paste tool as they read to copy an excerpt and paste it into another document. Additionally, our online and electronic documents will be accessible to all computer users, including those with disabilities.

Once published, how can you access the Revised Forest Plans, Draft Records of Decision, and FEIS?

- **We will provide a variety of public notifications when these documents are available.**
- **All documents will be online at fs.usda.gov/goto/BlueMountainsPlanRevision**

We understand that online documents don't work for everyone, so we plan to order limited paper and electronic copies (e.g., CDs). Paper and electronic copies will be available for reference at select public libraries in eastern Oregon and Washington state. You can find the library list on our website or contact an office of the Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests. **If you have a special need not accommodated by the options above, please contact us by May 10, 2017 to allow time to address your special need in our publication plan.** Dial (541) 523-1279, or TTY for the hearing and speech impaired: 1-800-877-8339.

Coming soon! Public conference call with Forest Service staff

Wednesday, April 19, 2017 • 5:30-6:30 p.m. • Dial: 1-888-844-9904 (Access Code: 2651088#)

We will discuss the topics covered in this newsletter and answer questions from the public. Please email your questions to bluemtnplanrevision@fs.fed.us by ***April 13***, and we will do our best to respond during the call. Please note: This will be a broadcast-style call with one-way audio. To listen to previous recorded calls and read the transcripts, please visit fs.usda.gov/goto/BlueMountainsPlanRevision, and see "Recent Communications."