

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Sherman Creek Wildlife Area 5-Year Habitat Improvement Project

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposes to: approve funding through the Pittman Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife to implement a habitat enhancement project (grant W-94-D-26). As part of this project, WDFW proposes to use program income generated from the sale of timber to pay for the project and to acquire Perpetual Timber Rights (PTRs) on three other Wildlife Management Areas. The habitat enhancement will be conducted on Sherman Creek Wildlife Area, in Ferry County, Washington, and the PTRs to be purchased are on the Oak Creek, LT Murray, and Wenas Wildlife Areas. The Proposed Action is designed primarily to improve wildlife habitat with added benefits of reducing hazardous fuels, improving forest health, and further accomplishing goals consistent with the Sherman Creek Wildlife Area Management Plan (WDFW 2006). Commercial thinning (not exceeding 4,000 acres) and prescribed burning (not exceeding 30% of the project area) are proposed to meet the goals and objectives of this project. Thinning would maintain and create an additional mix of forage interspersed with hiding/security and thermal cover to maintain or improve the current habitat for mule deer on Sherman Creek Wildlife Area. Prescribed fire would be used to remove decadent vegetation to allow regeneration of understory vegetation and slow forest succession. Secondly, funding resulting from the timber harvest, in excess of that needed to fund the habitat improvement project, would be utilized to purchase 24,042 acres of PTRs, currently in private ownership on Oak Creek, LT Murray, and Wenas Wildlife Areas. Acquiring the PTRs will give WDFW management control over habitat management on Oak Creek and LT Murray/Wenas Wildlife Areas; thus, increasing their ability to meet their goals and objectives for these areas. In the Environmental Assessment, this Proposed Action was Alternative 2.

Alternatives Analyzed

In the Environmental Assessment (2008), which is herein incorporated by reference, the Service has fully analyzed one alternative to the proposal and has considered other alternatives, but not analyzed them fully due to conflicts with meeting the identified project purposes and needs. The two alternatives considered fully are the No Action alternative and the Proposed Action alternative, which is described above.

The No Action Alternative involved no changes in current management direction. There would be no habitat improvement, stand density management, or fuels reduction treatments. The wildlife area would continue to accumulate fuels with the potential for a wildfire. Routine activities, such as road maintenance, weed control (according to the Weed Control Plan), and suppression of unplanned fires would continue. Recreational use of the area would also continue uninterrupted, including camping, hunting, wildlife watching, and hiking. As no timber harvest would occur, funds would not be available to purchase the PTRs on Oak Creek, and LT Murray, and Wenas Wildlife Areas.

An alternative was considered that decreased the habitat improvement project from 4,000 acres to 3,000 acres. This alternative, however, would not have met the purposes and needs because it would not have addressed forage availability and forest stand density issues throughout the wildlife area. These were determined through an interagency committee that assessed the potential habitat value on the wildlife area and determined that the acreage in the Proposed Action is optimal to restoring the deer habitat. In addition, this alternative would not address all insect infestations and high fuel load risk on the area. Because of these shortcomings this option was not fully developed.

Another alternative was considered that increased the habitat improvement project from 4,000 acres to 5,000 acres. However, this alternative would not have met the purposes and needs of this project because stand densities would be reduced below target levels. Since thinning and prescribed fire treatments were designed with a target cover/forage ratio of 40:60, they are considered the maximum necessary to meet the wildlife improvement objectives.

An alternative that utilized only state funds was also considered, but eliminated due to the lack of available funding to implement the project. Therefore, without the federal grant funds, the project could not be implemented in a manner that met the state purposes and needs. Due to these shortcomings, this option was not fully developed.

The proposal was selected over the other alternatives because: it would enhance habitat for mule deer. Providing suitable habitat for mule deer was the original purpose for acquiring the wildlife area and is, therefore, the purpose that the wildlife area must meet for consistency with this grant program. Deer habitat has continued to degrade on the wildlife area for several decades due to long term fire suppression, associated forest successional changes, and insect and disease related forest health issues. Maintaining the status quo under the no action alternative would cause deer habitat to continue to degrade and would increase the chance of catastrophic wildfire that could further damage deer habitat for many years.

The proposed action, as the preferred alternative, would thin some of the dense mix of conifer stands and move them more toward a Ponderosa pine habitat with an increased shrub layer. More open stands produce more forage for deer. The proposed spacing and thinning plan would provide adequate cover and the resulting stands would be less susceptible to stand replacing wildfire, thus, providing good deer habitat on a continual basis. This would ensure the wildlife area is functioning at the level required by its initial funding source. Once more open stands are created through the thinning project; they would be maintained into the future using prescribed fire on a periodic basis. In short, this alternative met the identified purposes and needs.

Implementation of the agency's decision would be expected to result in the following environmental, social, and economic effects.

The proposed thinning of forest stands will reduce cover for deer, elk, and some other wildlife species and increase forage due to increased grass, forb, and shrub components of the vegetation and increased vigor among these plant groups. While this will be an improvement to big game habitat, it will be relatively minor in the context of the overall wildlife area and surrounding habitats on the adjacent Colville National Forest. Snag numbers, for cavity nesting species, will

likely increase over the long term due to thinning, snag retention best management practice (BMP), and controlled burning activities, but the impacts of these actions will be local and insignificant due to the small size of the area treated and insignificant on a large scale. Overall forest health will likely improve to some degree due to removal of suitable conditions for forest pests and diseases associated with thinning and prescribed fire. As with other impacts, while this will be a benefit, it is not expected to be significant due to the spatial and temporal scales of the project.

No listed plants occur in the area and any impact to listed wildlife would be minor and short lived. Noxious weeds may spread in the short term, but BMPs and a noxious weed control plan are in place to render the spread of noxious weeds insignificant. Effects on water and air quality will be short term and insignificant because of BMPs and short lived, limited scale treatments. Some potential exists for increased particulate matter in the air due to controlled burning; however, impacts from smoke will be minimized by BMPs and State smoke management rules. There will likely be short-term, insignificant impacts to recreational users as small areas will be closed to public entry when project activities are in progress. The public will be notified about these areas prior to treatment and the impacts will be short lived. Any socio-economic impacts would be minor and of short duration due the relatively small scale of the project and the fact that it will be implemented over a five year period. Regarding cumulative impacts, the project is actually expected to reduce the existing cumulative effect of the unhealthy forest condition that has resulted from years of fire suppression and lack of habitat management. While this is a localized improvement upon the existing condition, it is not expected to be significant due to the small scale of the project.

The impacts from the purchase of the PTRs are primarily administrative, as it will improve WDFW's ability to manage those wildlife areas as whole units, rather than share that management responsibility with a private entity. This will also result in minor benefits to recreationists through improved access and clarified management. But these impacts are not expected to be significant, as WDFW already owns the underlying property and the purchase of the PTRs will simply provide for more holistic management of their wildlife areas.

Measures to mitigate and/or minimize adverse effects have been incorporated into the proposal as defined below.

As discussed above, the Best Management Practices (BMPs) that are included as part of the proposed action will avoid, minimize, and mitigate many of the impacts expected to result from its implementation. The Proposed Action will not be undertaken without these BMP's. To ensure project compliance, these BMPs will be incorporated into the commercial thinning and prescribed fire contract and WDFW staff will monitor to make sure that they are being properly implemented.

The proposal is not expected to have any significant adverse effects on wetlands and floodplains, pursuant to Executive Orders 11990 and 11988 because: the Proposed Action will not have significant adverse effects on wetlands and floodplains for a

number of reasons: (1) riparian areas will not be entered during project activities; (2) WDFW will maintain buffers along all streams to prevent adverse impacts to stream corridors and water quality; and (3) best management practices will be utilized in upland areas to prevent erosion and reduce sedimentation to streams to insignificant levels.

The proposal is not expected to have any significant effects on the human environment because: the Proposed Action will not have significant impact on the human environment because the scope of the project is relatively small and the duration of overall impacts to the various aspects of the human environment are short term. Also, BMPs will be utilized to minimize any potential impacts from project activities on the human environment.

The proposal has been thoroughly coordinated with all interested and/or affected parties. Parties contacted include:

Department of Ecology, Environmental Review Section, Olympia
Department of Natural Resources, SEPA Center, Olympia
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Upper Columbia River Basin Field Station, Spokane
US Army Corps of Engineers, Seattle
NOAA - Fisheries, Seattle
State Parks and Recreation Commission, Olympia
Dept of Archaeology and Historic Preservation
Western Watershed Project, Boise, Idaho
Ferry County Planning Department, Republic
Colville Confederated Tribes, Nespelem
Spokane Tribe, Wellpinit
Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fisheries Commission, Portland, OR
WDFW, Habitat Program; Region 1, Spokane
WDFW, Fish Program; Region 1, Spokane
WDFW, Wildlife Program; Region 1, Spokane
Kittitas County Planning Department, Ellensburg
Department of Transportation, South Central Region, Yakima
WDFW, Habitat Program, Region 3, Yakima
WDFW, Fish Program, Region 3, Yakima
WDFW, Wildlife Program, Region 3, Yakima
Yakima County Planning Department, Yakima
Yakama Nation, Toppenish
Stevens County Planning & Community Development, Colville
Stevens County Commissioners
Yakima County Commissioners
Ferry County Commissioners
Kittitas County Commissioners

The individuals above are those to whom the draft Environmental Assessment (EA) was provided with a request for feedback. Two comment letters were received and are included as Appendix A to the EA. All comments were either incorporated into the EA through clarifying or

additional language, or responded to in the Scoping and Public Comment section of the document. Individuals that provided comments on the draft Environmental Assessment will be notified of this decision and Finding of No Significant Impact with a direct mailing.

Therefore, it is my determination that the proposal does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment under the meaning of section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (as amended). As such, an environmental impact statement is not required. An environmental assessment has been prepared in support of this finding and is available upon request to the FWS facility identified above.

References:

USFWS, Environmental Assessment for the Sherman Creek Wildlife Area 5-Year Habitat Improvement Project, May 2008.

USFWS, Biological Assessment for the Sherman Creek Wildlife Area 5-Year Habitat Improvement Project, May 2008.

WDFW, Sherman Creek Wildlife Area Management Plan, 2006.

WDFW, SEPA Determination of Non-significance, March 28, 2008.

WDFW, SEPA Notice of Final Determination, April 14, 2008


Assistant Regional Director, MBSP

May 15, 2008
Date