



October 15, 2018

Michael Korn
Bureau of Land Management
Roseburg District Office
777 NW Garden Valley Blvd
Roseburg, OR 97471

In Reply to: Third Rock Environmental Analysis

Dear Mr. Korn:

Introduction

American Forest Resource Council (AFRC) is a regional trade association whose purpose is to advocate for sustained yield timber harvests on public timberlands throughout the West to enhance forest health and resistance to fire, insects, and disease. We do this by promoting active management to attain productive public forests, protect adjoining private forests, and assure community stability. We work to improve federal and state laws, regulations, policies and decisions regarding access to and management of public forest lands and protection of all forest lands. AFRC represents over 50 forest product businesses and forest landowners throughout the West. Many of our members have their operations in communities adjacent to the Swiftwater Resource Area, and the management on these lands ultimately dictates not only the viability of their businesses, but also the economic health of the communities themselves. The state of Oregon's forest sector employs approximately 76,000 Oregonians, with AFRC's membership directly and indirectly constituting a large percentage of those jobs. Rural communities, such as the ones affected by this project, are particularly sensitive to the forest product sector in that more than 50% of all manufacturing jobs are in wood manufacturing.

O&C Lands and Models

AFRC has been advocating for sustainable timber management on O&C Lands for well over a decade. Our membership depends on a BLM timber program that is designed to sustain itself into the future. We have expressed our concerns with how the past management paradigm under the Northwest Forest Plan of exclusive thinning impacted the BLM's ability to achieve this

sustainability. When that plan was conceived in 1994, the BLM assured the public that the timber resources on O&C Lands would be managed based on the principles of sustained yield. This assurance was based on a carefully crafted harvest plan that included both regeneration and thinning treatments directed by detailed modeling effort. Those models, and particularly the regeneration harvest, were largely ignored during the 20 years following completion of the plan—regeneration harvest was deferred in favor of a management scheme based solely on thinning. A similar modeling effort was completed again for the 2016 RMP's. Once again, the BLM assured that their timber resources would be managed based on the principles of sustained yield as directed by the O&C Act, and this assurance was once again supported by a carefully crafted set of models that included a combination of regeneration harvest and thinning. AFRC wants to ensure that the implementation failures of the Northwest Forest Plan described above are not replicated under the current RMP. A failure to implement would be characterized by the BLM ignoring the sustained yield models and proposing treatments in conflict with those models.

The BLM recognized this fact in a 2012 RMP Evaluation Report on the implementation of what then was their current Resource Management Plan (RMP). Among other findings, this report led the BLM to the following two realizations:

- The determination of the ASQ is based upon an assumed; mix, intensity and cycle of regeneration and thinning harvest. Adherence to the principles of sustained yield, at the declared ASQ harvest level, is based on implementation of these assumptions.
- Accelerated rates of thinning without replenishment of younger forest stands through regeneration harvest means that opportunities for thinning will eventually be exhausted. The current approach to a forest management regime that deviates so considerably from the RMP assumptions used in determination of the ASQ is **not sustainable** at the declared ASQ level.

A similar modeling effort was completed for the 2016 RMPs, published by BLM last summer. Once again, BLM assured that their timber resources would be managed based on the principles of sustained yield as directed by the O&C Act, and this assurance was once again supported by a carefully crafted set of models that included a combination of regeneration harvest and thinning, AFRC wants to ensure that these well documented implementation failures of the Northwest Forest Plan validated in the 2012 RMP Evaluation Report are not replicated under the current RMP.

Roseburg SYU

HMP Desc	Age Grp 2013	First Decade	First Decade
		Regen	Thinning
Low Intensity	1) 0-30		
	2) 40-70	625	4,404
	3) 80-110	1,266	180
	4) 120-150	995	
	5) 160-190	7	
	6) 200+	126	
Total Low Intensity		3,020	4,584

In our scoping comments we included the table above compiled from BLM source databases used in the modeling for the Proposed Resource Management Plan (PRMP). As we stated above, BLM’s requirement to manage their lands under the principles of sustained yield can only be met if the implementation of the plan adheres to what was modeled. These modeled numbers were also integral to calculating each District’s Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ). **The ASQ for the Roseburg SYU is only sustainable if these models are followed as closely as possible.** For example, if the Roseburg SYU fails to implement 1,266 acres of regeneration harvest in stands in the 80-110-year age group in the first decade, then the District’s ASQ will eventually be unattainable. Likewise, if the Roseburg SYU chooses instead to focus their regeneration harvest in stands in the 40-70 year age group above 625 acres, the ASQ will eventually be unattainable. In order to ensure that this last scenario does not occur, the Swiftwater Field Office needs to coordinate their Decision Documentation and implemented actions off of the Third Rock EA along with actions in the LITA authorized from other analyses across the entire Roseburg SYU.

The EA states on page 2, “Deferring harvest now would forgo the opportunity to contribute timber volume toward meeting the 32 million board feet (mmbf) declared ASQ (NCO ROD/RMP, p. 6) for the Roseburg sustained-yield unit in accordance with sustained yield timber management as directed by the NCO ROD/RMP (pp. 5-6, 59).” The BLM states that each individual timber sale and project are integral to the District meeting its Annual ASQ and Decadal ASQ therefore analyzing the conformance to the models which created those ASQ numbers on a per project basis is necessary. AFRC also believes each timber sale and project are integral in achieving the Annual and Decadal ASQ. If the projects are integral to meet ASQ and ASQ was determined based on the models from the RMP EIS, then the projects should be conforming to the models to meet the ASQ.

The Third Rock EA describes why the proposed stands are being proposed for treatment. The EA describes the purpose of this action is to “conduct regeneration harvest to produce timber to contribute to the attainment of the declared ASQ.” We assume the BLM is considering any timber

harvest off of lands designated as HLB to be “contributing to ASQ.” However, there is a distinct difference between managing timber sustainably and simply contributing to the ASQ. While aimlessly harvesting timber off of lands designated as HLB would “contribute ASQ volume”, it would not necessarily do so in a sustainable manner. The ASQ that you are “contributing to” was calculated based on the above vegetation models. Therefore, in our opinion, the BLM should have described in the EA that the stands selected for regeneration and thinning treatments were selected because the vegetation models compel the BLM to do so. Instead, page 2 of the EA states that “these stands have reached a condition that makes them suitable for commercial timber harvest.”

Please include in your analysis how this project meets the RMP Direction of “Manage forest stands to achieve continual timber production that can be sustained through a balance of growth and harvest”.

Please identify how this project conforms with the greater strategy of following the modeled outputs to sustainably acquire the Annual and Decadal ASQ.

There is one area where we are especially questioning the deferral of acres from scoping to EA. Within section 21 to the West of stand 21A, a large area within the LITA LUA and within the age classes 40-70 years old was deferred.

Please clearly explain why this area was deferred. If take avoidance is the reason, please be transparent as to how it will scientifically avoid take.

Northern Spotted Owl (NSO)

AFRC would like to remind the Swiftwater Resource Area that management direction and land use allocations in the 2016 ROD/RMP are intended to constitute the BLM contributions to the recovery of the northern spotted owl. The ROD explicitly describes how this direction does so on pages 22-24. In summary, the ROD describes this contribution via: **a.) maintenance of a network of large blocks of forest to be managed for late-successional forests; b.) maintenance of older and more structurally-complex multi-layered conifer forests; c.) timber harvest in the HLB consistent with the concepts of Ecological Forestry, and d.) mitigation of the effects of the barred owl by avoiding the incidental take of NSO’s until implementation of a barred owl management program.** In other words, the fact that the BLM adopted the liberal designation of 80% of the O&C Lands into reserves, including nearly all of the older stands, along with “lighter-touch” silvicultural prescriptions in the HLB should allow for implementation of sustained-yield timber management on remaining O&C Lands in the HLB unencumbered by NSO concerns. Incidental take avoidance should be the only reason why treatments in the HLB get deferred for NSO considerations. AFRC appreciates the inclusion of the adaptive management strategy within this EA and thinks continuing to include it in future EA’s is essential in maintaining transparency.

Stands were however identified as dropped due to Northern Spotted Owl (NSO) Recovery Action 32 (RA 32). The NCO ROD/RMP outlines what to keep in mind when it comes to NSO habitat and take avoidance. RA 32 is not something that needs to be analyzed when determining

stands to include. Page 31 explains that approximately 4% or 219 acres were dropped from the project due to RA 32. The final sentence in the first paragraph states, “The LUA for this habitat was also changed to LSR with the NCO ROD/RMP because it was considered RA 32 habitat. To be clear, these acres ended up being dropped due to the LUA identification and not for RA 32, correct?”

Please identify if these stands where in the HLB or in a reserve.

There are 2 occupied and 3 unknown assumed occupied NSO nest sites within the project area. The maps in the appendix do not show the Hiatus Creek, Kelly Creek, or Taylor Creek nest sites as occupied on them. Can they be identified on the map as assumed occupied in the future?

Page 37 identifies the Hiatus Creek site to be an exception where minute habitat loss could occur. The sentence before it is talking about NRF in core-use area, but from the maps it appears that the habitat loss would be in the home range, not in the core-use area of this site. Please clarify where this small amount of habitat is being lost.

Page 38 starts to discuss dispersal habitat. There is no proposed action within the core-use area of any of the 2 occupied and 3 unknown assumed occupied NSO nest sites. There are however stands within the home range of the occupied stands that are being proposed under the Adaptive Management Strategy to take on the prescriptions of Alternative 3. This means those stands (5A, 5B, 5C, 5D, and 33M) are being proposed to maintain the Dispersal-Only habitat at or above 40% canopy cover. Given this language, AFRC is confused regarding the nature of how the BLM assessed the impacts of treatments to stands identified as Dispersal-Only habitat in the context of high-priority NSO sites and incidental take avoidance. An Information Bulletin dated July 21, 2017 was sent to the District Managers of each BLM District managing under the 2016 RMPs. This bulletin was titled “*Timber sale planning approaches to avoid take of northern spotted owls under the 2016 RMPs.*” Appendix 2 of this bulletin titled “Evaluation of Take Potential” includes guidance on how to assess incidental take. Page 1-16 of this Appendix reads that the best available science indicates that forest habitat needs of the owl should be assessed at the core and home-ranges scales. Specifically, that literature has demonstrated the “*importance of having sufficient amounts of NRF habitat within owl core areas*” and that “*populations are stable when the average proportion of NRF habitat in the home range is 30-50%.*” Nowhere in this document is there any guidance or scientific literature that suggests the home-range and core area as adequate scales for assessing needs of dispersal habitat. In fact, on the contrary, page 1-19 of this bulletin suggests that “*the effects analysis for owl dispersal habitat considerations is informed by landscape conditions, as suggested by Thomas et al. (1990) along with Lint et al. (2005) and Davis et al. (2016).*” More specifically this page goes on to read that “*as assessment of dispersal habitat condition was recommended on the quarter-township scale by Thomas et al. (1990)*” and that “*the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has subsequently used fifth-field watersheds or larger landscapes for assessing dispersal habitat conditions because watersheds or provinces offer a more biological meaningful way to conduct the analysis.*”

The purpose of dispersal habitat described by Thomas et al. is to "...facilitate movement of owls between HCAs..." The name of the HCAs (habitat conservation areas) was later changed in the NWFP to Late Successional Reserves (LSRs). To provide a high level of connectivity between HCAs, the distance between HCAs of seven miles was selected. They opted not to adopt a corridor strategy but "...developed management standards for the intervening matrix..." between the HCAs. Thomas et al. established standards and guidelines which specified "...that 50% of the forest matrix outside HCAs be maintained in stands of timber with a mean d.b.h. of 11 inches or greater, with at least 40% canopy closure." They believed that "...50% of the land base in a regulated forest would be older than 40 years old..." with a rotation age of 80 years and expected that this would be "...suitable for passage by dispersing spotted owls." It is clear that dispersal requirements were not to be applied inside HCAs (LSRs) or within spotted owl home ranges but rather would apply to the land between these measure on a fifth-field watershed or larger.

AFRC can find no analysis in the Third Rock EA that reflects any of this guidance on how to assess dispersal habitat needs in the context of NSO take avoidance. Being explicit about the impacts of removing dispersal habitat should be included within the assessment. After the first paragraph on page 40 there should be an explicit explanation from the BLM and related back to the likelihood of take given in the BO from the FWS relating to the need for maintenance.

We would like an explanation from the BLM that describes the analytical and scientifically-based process used to determine that any unit within the adaptive management strategy would need to have dispersal habitat maintained.

Alternative 2 – Proposed Action

AFRC advocates for the Proposed Action to be chosen for this project. The stark reality given in this EA is that the stands within this project area need to be reset. The canopy cover in the project ranges between 85%-100%. By regenerating these stands, the BLM will create a mosaic on the landscape akin to that of historic stature. It is obvious, from Table 2-7, that the Proposed Action will meet the purpose and need of the project more fully than the No-Action Alternative and Alternative 3.

Riparian Reserve Thinning

Utilization of gap cuts to promote early seral habitat in the reserves, treatments to diversify all areas of the reserve, and prescriptions that account for the full range of objectives that the RMP mandates should be considered. RR stands that are <10 acres can have group selection openings at most 2.5 acres in size.

Why does the BLM limit group selection openings to 0.25 acres in this case?

Non-commercial Silvicultural Treatment – Sugar Pine Release in LSR

There is one unit in the LSR being proposed for sugar pine release where the cut or girdled trees would be left on the landscape. If the trees are cut and have been identified as having an average DBH of 13in.

How will the BLM pay for the Non-commercial Silvicultural Treatment – Sugar Pine Release in LSR?

What is the purpose of leaving the trees in place? Not enough snags, not enough down wood, no road to stand, etc?

Road Management

AFRC appreciates that almost all of the roads can be utilized in the dry and wet season.

Is there any reason Road 25-2-21.1 cannot be made into a wet season road?

Alternative 3

There is a canopy cover maintenance for Alternative 3 of 40% at the individual stand level even though the majority of stands proposed for treatment are not within any NSO site. The NCO ROD/RMP does not specify anywhere that 40% canopy cover is required to be maintained in any management activity. In addition, the Third Rock EA identifies dispersal-only habitat having 40% canopy cover, whereas the NCO ROD/RMP defines dispersal habitat having 40% canopy closure.

Why is it that page 15 identifies a canopy cover requirement? Please describe why this arbitrary requirement has been identified as a need within this alternative as a whole.

Please identify why the use of canopy cover has been used compared to the RMP direction to use canopy closure.

Page 16 states, “Depending on harvest operability, incidental yarding corridors may be established through designated skips.” Shouldn’t this say gaps, not skips?

The next paragraph says that there should be emphasis on removing a higher proportion of smaller tree sizes. What is the long term goal of this stand? Is there a deficit of large trees in this area? Is the intent to have a final/ overstory removal in these stands where the largest trees should be left? Please explain why the emphasis for removal should be on the largest trees in these stands.

The fuels management is quite different in Alternative 3 compared to the Proposed Action. Only 80 acres are to be piled and burned under Alternative 3, while up to 174 acres will be piled and burned under the Proposed Action. We can understand the lack of logging residue and fuels created from thinning operations versus regeneration harvest, but the acres treated are the same in each Alternative.

What is the reason for the significant decrease in piling and burning the fuels out of the fire prone forests in the area?

Project Design Feature

The timber products provided by the BLM are crucial to the health of our membership. Without the raw material sold by the BLM these mills would be unable to produce the amount of wood products that the citizens of this country demand. Without this material our members would also be unable to run their mills at capacities that keep their employees working, which is crucial to the health of the communities that they operate in. These benefits can only be realized if the BLM sells their timber products through sales that are economically viable. This viability is tied to both the volume and type of timber products sold and the manner in which these products are permitted to be delivered from the forest to the mills. There are many ways to design a timber sale that allows a purchaser the ability to deliver logs to their mill in an efficient manner while also adhering to the necessary practices that are designed to protect the environmental resources present on BLM forestland.

The primary issues affecting the ability of our members to feasibly deliver logs to their mills are firm operating restrictions. As stated above, we understand that the BLM must take necessary precautions to protect their resources; however, we believe that in many cases there are conditions that exist on the ground that are not in step with many of the restrictions described in BLM EA's and contracts (i.e. dry conditions during wet season, wet conditions during dry season). We would like the BLM to shift their methods for protecting resources from that of firm prescriptive restrictions to one that focuses on descriptive end-results; in other words, describe what you would like the end result to be rather than prescribing how to get there. There are a variety of operators that work in the Medford BLM market area with a variety of skills and equipment. Developing an EA and contract that firmly describes how any given unit shall be logged may inherently limit the abilities of certain operators. For example, restricting certain types of ground-based equipment rather than describing what condition the soils should be at the end of the contract period unnecessarily limits the ability of certain operators to complete a sale in an appropriate manner with the proper and cautious use of their equipment. To address this issue, we would like to see flexibility in the EA and contract to allow a variety of equipment to the sale areas. We feel that there are several ways to properly harvest any piece of ground, and certain restrictive language can limit some potential operators. Though some of the proposal area is planned for cable harvest, there are opportunities to use certain ground equipment such as fellerbunchers and processors in the units to make cable yarding more efficient. Allowing the use of processors and fellerbunchers throughout these units can greatly increase its economic viability, and in some cases decrease disturbance by decreasing the amount of cable corridors, reduce damage to the residual stand and provide a more even distribution of woody debris following harvest.

The newest operating system is tethered logging. This system allows ground based equipment to operate on slopes greater than 35% by decreasing the PSI of the machine and therefore the ground disturbance. Please do not write yourself out of using this innovative technology. **We recommend phrasing the language in your ensuing NEPA document to focus on desired end**

results for soil conditions rather than prescribing the type of equipment necessary to meet those conditions.

Constructing forest roads is essential if active management is desired, and we are glad that the BLM is proposing the roads that are needed to access and treat as much as the project area as possible in an economically feasible way. Proper road design and layout should pose little to no negative impacts on water quality or slope stability. Consistent and steady operation time throughout the year is important for our members not only to supply a steady source of timber for their mills, but also to keep their employees working. These two values are intangible and hard to quantify as dollar figures in a graph or table, but they are important factors to consider. The ability to yard and haul timber in the winter months will often make the difference between a sale selling and not, and we are glad the BLM is working to accommodate this.

As stated above, flexible and condition based PDFs allow for better and more opportunities for the land to get treated in a timely fashion. Project design features should be specific to the project and align with the RMP. If the PDF is outlined in the RMP it does not need to be rewritten in the project document. By including a date, the operator has no opportunity to work when the weather is nice, but it is outside of the timing restrictions. Because shut downs occur in inclement weather during the operating season, it is only fair that operations can occur when conditions are favorable, no matter what time of year it is. Below are concerns and suggestions AFRC has that would align the PDFs with industry's needs and implementation concerns.

CY-2 and GBY-1: Both of these Design Features identify operations during low soil moisture being mandatory but identify different "typical operation seasons."

WL-1: The table is labeled as X, is this a typo?

WL-4: Are the appropriate habitat buffers and seasonal restrictions located within the NCO ROD/RMP or in a different location?

WL-7: Was this suggested by the Fish and Wildlife Service or something the specialist simply determined? What science was used to determine this PDF? Will disruption and the nest continue to be monitored for changes and possibly have the seasonal restrictions taken away?

Please make sure all PDFs are project specific.

Please make sure PDFs are not reiterations of the RMP Standards and Guidelines. However, AFRC does appreciate the identification of source/citation related to each PDF. Knowing which come directly from the ID Team allows for the public to identify

Please delete operating date restrictions, when the objective of the PDF is condition based.

Please make condition based limits and rational available to the public.

Please make sure similar PDFs are consistent.

Other Comments

Table 3-2. Current Forest Stand Attributes (pg. 21) includes EA Unit Number 25-2-21B, yet the maps do not have a 21B and instead have a 21C unit in the LSR. The maps in the appendix seem to have 4 units in section 21. Please clearly label the units in the Final maps. Also, can acres be included as a column in the table for reference?

Under Table 3-2 the weighted snags per acres is disclosed by age class. Earlier in the EA it discusses the need to create 6 more snags per acre to meet RMP direction. Does the BLM have any monitoring data on recruitment of snags after a harvest? How long it may take for trees to become snags or any other information?

Summary

AFRC is excited to see how this project gets finalized. We are hopeful the BLM thinks critically about the comments presented here about the project. Clear, concise, and transparent explanations of decision-making and methodology are key to a defensible NEPA document.

AFRC is happy to be involved in the planning, environmental assessment (EA), and decision-making process for the Third Rock EA. Should you have any questions regarding the above comments, please contact me at my office: 541-342-1892, cell: 541-517-8573, or email: aastor@amforest.org.

Sincerely,

Amanda Astor
Southwestern Oregon Field Forester
American Forest Resource Council