Proposed Action
Opportunity to Provide Scoping Comments

Storrie Fire Fuels Reduction in Spotted Owl and Goshawk Habitat Project

Mt. Hough Ranger District
Plumas National Forest
Plumas County, California

California spotted owl. Photo by Kameron Perensovich, 2010.

Comments Welcome

The Mt. Hough Ranger District of the Plumas National Forest proposes to reduce hazardous fuels to improve wildlife habitat adjacent to the Storrie Fire in Plumas County, California. Proposed activities for the Storrie Fire Fuels Reduction in Spotted Owl and Goshawk Habitat Project (hereafter, Storrie PAC Project) include: hand thinning, hand piling, burning of piles, underburning, and the obliteration of non-system roads. The project goals are to reduce hazardous fuels, re-introduce fire as an ecological process, and restore terrestrial wildlife habitat. The public is encouraged to take part in the environmental analysis process for this project by submitting written comments specific to this project.

Introduction

The Mt. Hough Ranger District is beginning the environmental review process for the proposed Storrie Fire Fuels Reduction in Spotted Owl and Goshawk Habitat Project. The proposed project would reduce hazardous fuels in the protected activity centers (PACs) of California spotted owls and northern goshawks.

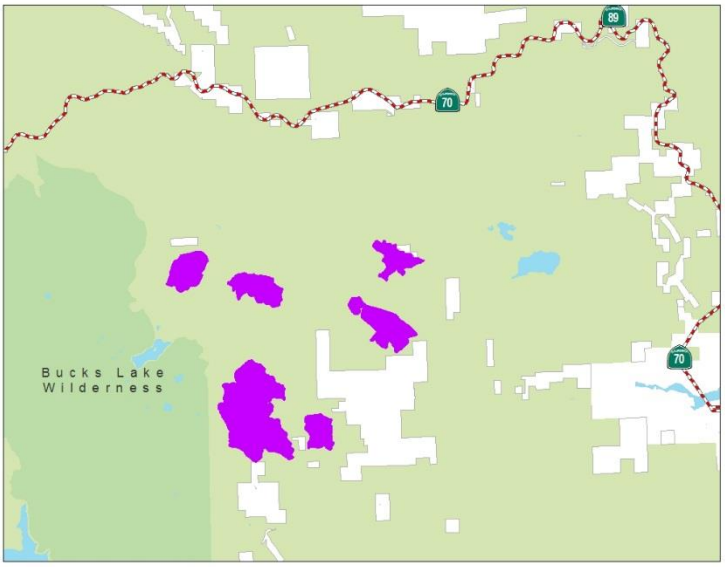

Figure 1. Vicinity map for the Storrie PAC Project area

The Storrie PAC Project is part of the Plumas National Forest Fire Restoration effort. Fire settlement funds received by the Forest Service provide a unique opportunity to restore ecosystem health, function, and resilience within the areas affected by the Storrie wildfire in 2000. The Storrie PAC Project is located adjacent to the Storrie Fire area approximately 5 to 10 air miles west of Quincy, California, on the Mt. Hough Ranger District of the Plumas National Forest, in Plumas County, California (Figure 1). The proposed units for the Storrie PAC Project are east of the Bucks Lake Wilderness and north and west of Meadow Valley, California. The proposed project units encompass all or portions of Township 25N, Range 8E, sections 31, 32, and 35; Township 24N, Range 8E, sections 2-6, 8-11, 15-17, 20-22, Mount Diablo Base Meridian.

The project area contains portions of six spotted owl Protected Activity Centers (PACs), and three northern goshawk PACs. Proposed treatments would include hand thinning, pile burning, and underburning on approximately 1,999 acres (Figure 2). Underburn ignition would be achieved by hand crews or using aerial ignition via helicopters. The Storrie PAC Project is subject to the standards and guidelines for vegetation management contained in the Plumas National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (PNF LRMP) (USDA 1988) as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (SNFPA) FSEIS and ROD (USDA 2004a, b).

The actions proposed in the Storrie PAC Project would provide connectivity to fuel treatments planned and implemented under the Meadow Valley Defensible Fuel Profile Zone and Group Selection Project. Implementation of this project would therefore reduce hazardous fuels in wildlife habitat and would contribute to a reduction in hazardous fuels across the landscape.

Background

The Storrie Fire burned approximately 56,000 acres in 2000. This fire converted thousands of acres of conifer forest dominated by long-lived trees and characterized by frequent, low-severity fire regimes into shrublands dominated by montane chaparral species with infrequent, high-severity fire regimes. Before the fire, the late-seral, closed-canopy forests provided suitable nesting and foraging habitat for California spotted owls and northern goshawks. The post-fire montane chaparral is not suitable nesting or foraging habitat for spotted owls or goshawks.

Due to the overwhelming loss of suitable forest habitat within the Storrie Fire area, it is critical to retain remaining habitat within and adjacent to the fire perimeters and to increase the fire resiliency of this habitat so that it can persist for both the short-term (next decade) and long-term (into the next century). Existing old forest habitat in watersheds adjacent to the Storrie Fire area has been identified for fuel reduction treatments to respond to the loss of suitable habitat within the fire perimeter that cannot be restored for over a century. Due to the future risk of wildfire, there is a strong need to protect remaining old forest habitat for California spotted owls and goshawks and also for other late-successional species such as marten and fisher.

Over the past century, historic forest management practices combined with fire suppression have altered fire regimes, forest structure, and function. Currently, within the project area, fuels are at dangerous levels which could lead to stand-replacing fires. The Draft Interim Recommendations for the Management of California Spotted Owl Habitat on National System Lands lists the risk of high intensity fire and the loss of habitat from stand-replacing fire as two of the essential challenges that federal land managers seek to address (USDA 2015). The Plumas NF is experiencing larger and more severe fires. More than one third of the Mt. Hough Ranger District has burned within the past 20 years with over 75,000 acres burned at high severity. The severity of these burned areas has had a major impact on wildlife habitat. The Storrie PAC Project addresses the need to reduce the risk of stand-replacing fire within important wildlife habitat.

Purpose and Need for Action

Purpose 1: Maintain and enhance habitat for Region 5 Forest Service sensitive wildlife species

Objectives:

- Reduce fuel loading within and adjacent to spotted owl and goshawk Protected Activity Centers (USDA 2015).
- Integrate fuels management while conserving old forest ecosystems (USDA 2004b, p. 34).
- Re-introduce fire into fire-adapted ecosystems (USDA 2004b, p. 34).
- Reduce the detrimental impact of National Forest System (NFS) roads and trails and non-system, un-maintained, roads and trails (non-system routes) on wildlife habitat (USDA 2010 a,b).

Need for Action:

High densities of small and intermediate sized trees combined with a heavy buildup of surface litter result in hazardous fuel accumulations throughout the majority of the Storrie PAC Project area. Stands in these conditions are highly conducive to the initiation and spread of crown fire under severe fire weather conditions, therefore increasing the potential for large, high-severity, stand-replacing fire events to occur. The spotted owl and northern goshawk PACs proposed for treatment are at extreme risk. Fuel modeling showed that in the event of a future wildfire, the majority of the acres within these PACs would burn at high severity. High severity wildfire has been shown to cause negative effects to spotted owl site occupancy (Lee and Irwin 2005; Roberts et al. 2011; North 2012; Clark et al. 2013). In contrast, low to moderate severity fires, historically common within montane forests of the Sierra Nevada, maintain habitat characteristics essential for spotted owl site occupancy (Roberts et al. 2010).

As a result of the high severity burn within the Storrie Fire, late-seral, closed-canopy habitat (spotted owl nesting habitat) decreased dramatically from pre-fire conditions, and total available spotted owl habitat (nesting and foraging) was also greatly reduced. Remaining conifer forest stands adjacent to the fire area are vulnerable to future high-severity fire events

Additionally, road and trail densities are high throughout the Storrie PAC Project area. These high road densities include unclassified (non-system) routes. These non-system routes were not added to the NFS transportation network during the travel management planning process (USDA 2010 a, b), but have not yet been physically obliterated or closed. Because these non-system roads remain physically open for unauthorized travel, they provide unauthorized access to these wildlife habitat areas and allow unauthorized motor vehicles to disturb wildlife during the breeding season. There is a need to identify the minimum road network to provide for legitimate uses of NFS land.

Desired Conditions:

- Surface and ladder fuels conditions are such that crown fire ignition is unlikely and the majority of the PAC has fuel loads that would burn at low severity.
- Suitable nesting and foraging habitat is present and provides continued use by Region 5 Forest Service sensitive wildlife species. Essential habitat features such as multi-storied canopies, large trees greater than 24 inches in diameter at breast height (DBH), at least 60-70 percent canopy cover, some very large snags (greater than 45 inches DBH), and higher than average amounts of snags and down woody debris are retained and opportunities for future recruitment of these features are maintained throughout the landscape (USDA 2004b, p. 37, 41, 45).
- Roads and routes provide safe public access and travel while reducing adverse impacts to wildlife habitat and ecological functions associated with the transportation system.

- A transportation system that meets project needs and future resource management needs while reducing future maintenance costs. Provides for natural surface and sub-surface runoff patterns.

Proposed Action

Proposed Treatments and Activities

The proposed action would reduce fuels through implementation of approximately 1,999 acres of hand thinning and prescribed burning treatments. Treatments would manipulate both live and dead forest vegetation to: 1) reduce threats from large, high-severity wildfires to habitat for wildlife species and 2) restore fire-adapted ecosystems through the re-introduction of fire while retaining habitat features critical for foraging and nesting (i.e. large trees and snags, high canopy cover).

Vegetation treatments would include hand thinning and prescribed burning (Table 1 and Figure 2).

Table 1. Summary of vegetation treatments proposed under the Storrie PAC Project.

Treatment Type	Acres
Hand thin and pile	1,999
Prescribed fire as a standalone treatment	where feasible
Prescribed fire as a follow-up treatment	1,999
Total acres proposed for treatment	**1,999**

The proposed action would also improve the transportation system and reduce impacts to water, soil quality, wildlife habitat, and ecological functions associated with the transportation system as described in Table 2 and shown in Figure 2.

Table 2. Proposed transportation system activities associated with the Storrie PAC Project.

Treatment Type	Miles
Non-system road obliteration after project	8.0

Hand thin and pile 1,999 acres: Hand thinning within spotted owl PACs would be designed to reduce hazardous fuels in order to protect and perpetuate old forest ecosystems dominated by large forest structures and multilayered canopies. Specific treatment areas would be laid out by the Wildlife Biologist and Fuels Specialist based on fuel loading and the risk of losing key ecosystem characteristics. Hand crews would be used to thin from below cutting small-diameter ground and ladder fuels into manageable sized pieces for piling. Larger diameter woody debris would be retained for wildlife habitat and would not be piled and burned. Thinning prescriptions would take into account growing positon, vigor, and species preferences, and would be applied on a sliding scale within diameter classes to maintain a heterogeneous, multistoried stand structure with all age classes represented. Piles would be burned during wet periods when the risks of escape are negligible. All treatments would be timed to avoid disrupting the breeding behavior of spotted owls and goshawks.

Prescribed fire 1,999 acres: Prescribed fire reintroduces fire into a landscape in a controlled and systematic manner. This project proposes prescribed fire as a follow-up option along with hand thinning pretreatments as described above. Additional standalone treatment of prescribed fire underburning may be initiated where feasible based on existing fuel loads. Specific fuel moisture and weather conditions must be met in order to manage fire intensity and to ensure that smoke impacts are minimized. Fire holding lines may include roads, trails, hand or machine lines, natural fire breaks, and even snow. Hand held drip torches are typically used for ignition; however, aerial ignition using helicopters may also be used for larger firing operations. The Forest Service would prioritize acres for implementation based on residual fuel loading, strategic placement, and technical feasibility. Reentry of prescribed fire underburning every five to ten years would be needed to reestablish natural fire cycles and maintain desired habitat characteristics.

Implementation of pile burning and underburning would occur over five to ten years as weather conditions and resource availability permit. All burning would be completed under approved smoke management plans which set the number of acres or piles that can be burned over time and weather parameters under which burning can occur.

Non-system road obliteration: Approximately 8.0 miles of existing non-system routes are proposed for obliteration. Obliteration would include, at a minimum, blocking the ends of the roads to traffic, and may include culvert removal, sub-soiling, re-contouring, revegetation, and removing fill from stream crossings. Some of these routes may be used during project implementation prior to obliteration. The routes proposed for obliteration were not added to the National Forest System (NFS) during the Plumas National Forest Public Motorized Travel Management Sub-part B planning process. The route obliteration proposed for this project is consistent with the Plumas National Forest Public Motorized Travel Management Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision (USDA 2010 a, b).

Road Maintenance associated with project activities: Implementation of this project requires accessing treatment units during the spring and fall when fuel moisture is at a level that allows for the controlled burning of material (i.e. during wet weather). To mitigate affects from the increased vehicle traffic during periods of wet weather, National Forest System (NFS) roads and trails used during implementation may require maintenance in locations where the road drainage system has been compromised.

Environmental Analysis

This project meets the requirements of Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, Chapter 30—Categorical Exclusions from Documentation, Section 32.2, Category 6: “Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction.” 36 CFR 220.6(e)(6) and Section 32.2, Category 20: “Activities that restore, rehabilitate, or stabilize lands occupied by roads and trails, excluding National Forest System roads and National Forest System trails to a more natural condition that may include removing, replacing, or modifying drainage structures and ditches, reestablishing vegetation, reshaping natural contours and

slopes, reestablishing drainage-ways, or other activities that would restore site productivity and reduce environmental impacts" 36 CFR 220.6(e)(20).

This project **would not** be subject to notice, comment, and appeal; **would** be categorically excluded from documentation; and **would** require a Decision Memo and project file.

Project Schedule

The Forest Service is planning to analyze the effects of this project during the summer and fall of 2016. The environmental document will include public involvement to date, disclosure of issues and alternative development, and an effects analysis. The Forest Service expects to issue a decision in the fall of 2016 and implementation could begin as early as Fall 2016.

Responsible Official: Ryan Tompkins, Acting District Ranger, Mt. Hough Ranger District, 39696 State Highway 70, Quincy, CA 95971, is the Responsible Official.

Nature of Decision to be made: The Responsible Official will decide to implement this proposal, implement an alternative that develops during scoping, or not to implement any project at this time.

Comments Requested

The Forest Service is currently seeking information, comments, and assistance from state and local governments, tribes, and other individuals or organizations that may be interested in, or affected by, the proposed management activities. The public is encouraged to take part in the environmental analysis process for the Storrie PAC Project by submitting written comments specific to this project. In order for your comments to be incorporated most effectively, we would appreciate receiving them by **May 13, 2016**.

Comments may be:

- **Mailed** to the attention of Ryan Tompkins, Acting District Ranger c/o Kyla Sabo, Project Leader, Mt. Hough Ranger District, 39696 Highway 70, Quincy, CA 95971
- **Hand delivered** weekdays between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. (PST) at the above address
- **Faxed** to (530) 283-1821
- **Electronically mailed to:** kylasabo@fs.fed.us

Comments submitted electronically must be in Word (.doc or .docx), portable document format (.pdf), plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or in the content of an email message.

Comments should be sent to Ryan Tompkins, Acting District Ranger, c/o Kyla Sabo, Project Leader, Mt. Hough Ranger District, 39696 Highway 70, Quincy, CA 95971, (530) 283-7619. Comments may be (1) mailed; (2) hand delivered between the hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., weekdays; (3) faxed to (530) 283-1821; or (4) electronically mailed to kylasabo@fs.fed.us. Please indicate the name "**Storrie PAC Project**" on the subject line of your email.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, are part of the public record for this proposed action.

If you have questions or need additional information about this proposal or the comment procedures, please contact Kyla Sabo at 530-283-7619 or kylasabo@fs.fed.us.

References

Clark, D.A., Anthony, R.G. and Andrews, L.S., 2013. Relationship between wildfire, salvage logging, and occupancy of nesting territories by northern spotted owls. The Journal of Wildlife Management, 77(4), pp.672-688.

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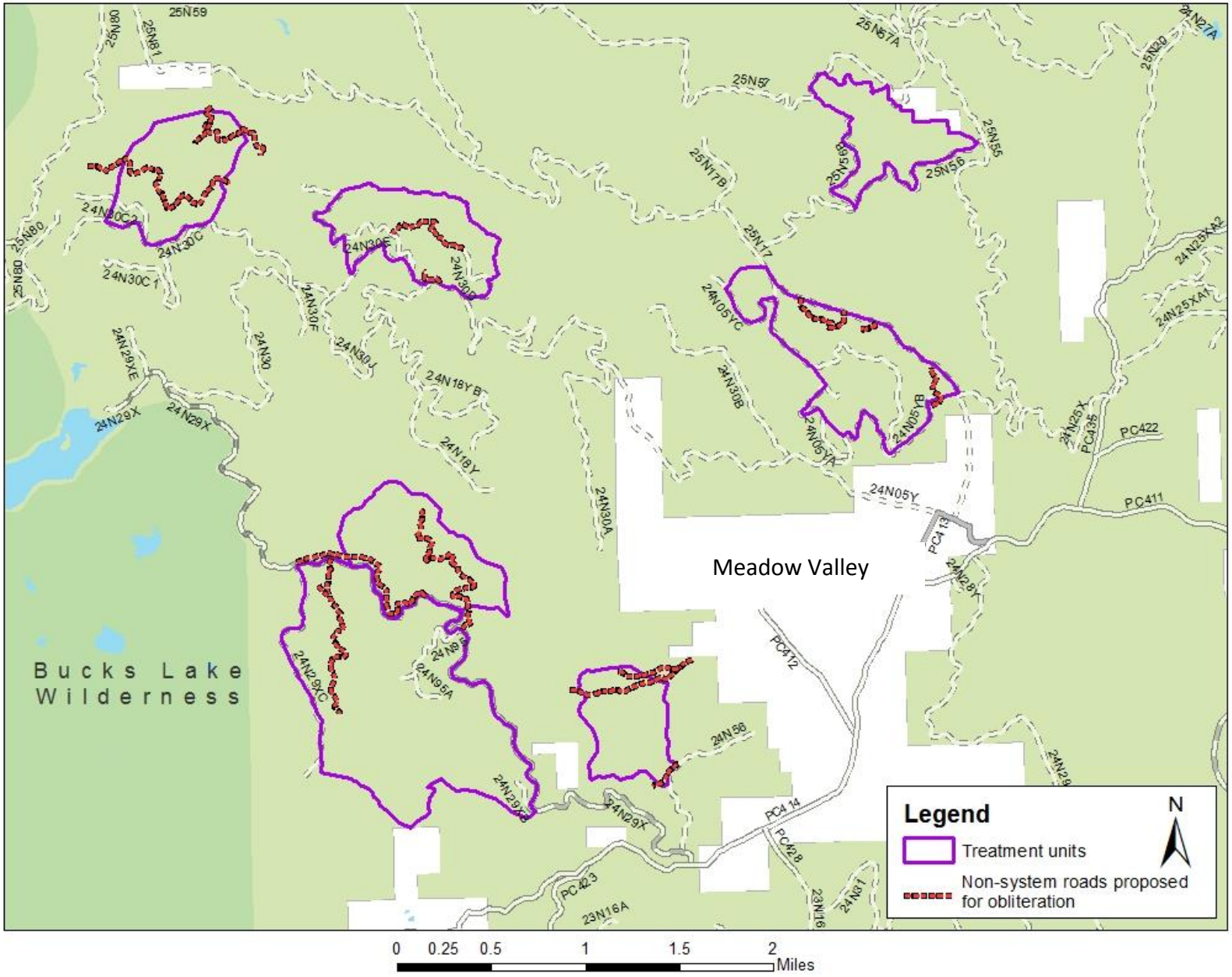

Figure 2. Map of proposed treatments for Storrie PAC project