



Forest Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Malheur National Forest | Prairie City and Emigrant Creek Ranger Districts

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Final Environmental Impact Statement Executive Summary

CLIFF KNOX PROJECT



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Malheur National Forest – Prairie City and Emigrant Creek Ranger Districts
Grant and Harney Counties, Oregon

Lead Agency:

USDA Forest Service

Responsible Official:

**Craig Trulock, Forest Supervisor
431 Patterson Bridge Road / P.O. Box 909
John Day, OR 97845**

For Information Contact:

**Jeremy Loud, District Ranger
327 SW Front Street / P.O. Box 337
Prairie City, OR 97869
541-820-3801**

Abstract: The Forest Service has prepared a draft record of decision and a final environmental impact statement for the Cliff Knox Project which is located on National Forest System lands on the Malheur National Forest, Prairie City and Emigrant Creek Ranger Districts in Grant and Harney Counties, Oregon. The Cliff Knox Project is proposed to improve forest resiliency and reduce the risk of uncharacteristic disturbances, while also improving unique habitats across the 40,300-acre planning area. It is proposed to foster forest and aquatic ecosystems resilient to a changing environment; restore ecosystems that are naturally adapted to wildland fire; provide social, economic, and environmental benefits from forest resources; and create jobs and opportunities for local communities. The Cliff Knox Final Environmental Impact Statement documents the analysis of two action alternatives to meet this need.

The draft record of decision is based on a review of the Cliff Knox Final Environmental Impact Statement, specialist reports, scientific literature, the Malheur National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Malheur Forest Plan; USDA Forest Service 1990a), as amended, and the response to public comments received. The selected alternative, identified in the draft record of decision, applies vegetation restoration activities (including commercial, small diameter commercial, and non-commercial treatments, as well as prescribed burning, and managing unplanned ignitions) and road related activities to meet the purpose and need for the project.

The draft record of decision is subject to objection pursuant to 36 Code of Federal Regulations 218. Objections will only be accepted from individuals and entities as defined in 36 Code of Federal Regulations 218.2 who have previously submitted specific written comments regarding the proposed project during scoping or other designated opportunity for public comment in accordance with 36 Code of Federal Regulations 218.5(a). Specific directions on how to file an objection are provided in 36 Code of Federal Regulations 218.8 (<http://www.ecfr.gov>).

Summary

The Malheur National Forest proposes to authorize forest restoration activities, unique habitat restoration, strategic roads treatments, prescribed burning and unplanned ignitions, and road activities within the Cliff Knox planning area. The area affected by the proposal includes approximately 40,300 acres in the Bluebucket Creek and Cliff Creek-Malheur River subwatersheds, which includes the entire Malheur River Inventoried Roadless Area and a section of the Malheur Wild and Scenic River corridor. Over the last century, tree species composition, tree density, landscape pattern, and the fire regime in the Cliff Knox planning area has changed from historical conditions and the area is susceptible to insect and disease infestation and uncharacteristic wildfire. This action is needed to:

- Increase forest resilience to drought, insect and disease outbreaks, and uncharacteristic wildfires by moving the landscape toward a more historical range of variability for structure, density, and species composition.
- Increase public and firefighter safety throughout and adjacent to the planning area by restoring fuel profiles to types primarily conducive to surface fire, with special attention to lands adjacent to strategic roads and areas identified as wildland-urban interface.
- Maintain existing old forest structures and move them toward levels present historically and promote old trees (greater than 150 years old) to increase their abundance over the long term.
- Restore and promote regeneration of hardwoods, including quaking aspen and mountain mahogany.
- Improve or maintain roadless area characteristics of the Malheur River Inventoried Roadless Area, as defined by the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (36 CFR 294.11).
- Increase water availability for native vegetation by reestablishing historical openings and grasslands, thinning overstocked stands, and removing encroaching juniper and other conifers where they did not historically occur.
- Improve quantity and quality of forage for large ungulates, especially in big-game winter range management areas.
- Improve existing road networks to provide access to the forest while reducing road related impacts to aquatic and terrestrial habitat, and water quality.
- Capture the economic value of forest products and other resources to support local economies and provide employment opportunities.

The action alternatives were developed through a collaborative process involving the public, the Blue Mountains Forest Partners collaborative group, and Malheur National Forest staff. Beginning in 2016, meetings and fieldtrips with the public and collaborative group were held to discuss existing and desired conditions of the Cliff Knox planning area, and a potential suite of activities to move toward those desired conditions. The 30-day scoping period began on July 20, 2018. The major issues raised during scoping included impacts to big game security areas, naturalness and character of the Malheur Inventoried Roadless area and the Malheur Wild and Scenic River corridor, and treatments within connectivity corridors. These issues led us to develop one action alternative to the proposed action, for a total of three alternatives:

- **Alternative 1 (no action):** The ‘no action alternative’ is required by the National Environmental Policy Act. Under the no action alternative, no management activities would occur. Alternative 1 is designed to represent the existing condition and is analyzed for projected future conditions if no activities proposed in any of the alternatives are authorized. It serves as the baseline to compare and

describe the differences and effects between taking no action and implementing one of the other alternatives.

- **Alternative 2 (proposed action):** Alternative 2 is the proposed action and preferred alternative and would authorize forest restoration and unique habitat restoration activities and strategic roads treatments that would be achieved through approximately 18,700 acres of commercial and small diameter thinning, 10 acres of commercial thinning only, 4,360 acres of small diameter thinning, 4,260 acres of non-commercial thinning, and 40,250 acres of prescribed burning. Alternative 2 would also authorize 224 miles of road maintenance, 14 miles of temporary road construction, 4.7 miles of road re-opening, 12.4 miles of road closure, 11 miles of road decommissioning, 3.2 miles of road relocation, and 19.8 miles of confirmation of past administratively closed roads. This alternative also includes a forest plan amendment to change dedicated old growth areas (Management Area 13), harvest within late and old structure stands, not maintain connectivity between all late and old structure and old growth stands and reduce summer and winter range cover. Detailed descriptions are found in Chapter 2, Appendix A – Activity Tables, and Appendix B – Maps.
- **Alternative 3:** Alternative 3 was developed in response to significant issues raised during scoping regarding big game security areas, naturalness and character of the Malheur Inventoried Roadless area and the Malheur Wild and Scenic River corridor, and treatments within connectivity corridors. Alternative 3 would authorize forest restoration and unique habitat restoration activities and strategic roads treatments that would be achieved through approximately 16,570 acres of commercial and small diameter thinning, 10 acres of commercial thinning only, 6,200 acres of small diameter thinning, 3,670 acres of non-commercial thinning, and 32,970 acres of prescribed burning. Alternative 3 would also authorize 223 miles of road maintenance, 14 miles of temporary road construction, 4.7 miles of road re-opening, 44.1 miles of road closure, 11 miles of road decommissioning, 3.2 miles of road relocation, and 19.8 miles of confirmation of past administratively closed roads. This alternative also includes a forest plan amendment to change dedicated old growth areas (Management Area 13), harvest within late and old structure stands, not maintain connectivity between all late and old structure and old growth stands and reduce summer and winter range cover. Detailed descriptions are found in Chapter 2, Appendix A – Activity Tables, and Appendix B – Maps.

Major conclusions include:

- Silvicultural treatments would collectively reduce the proportion of stands existing above management zones for stand density and move stands towards historical structures. This would decrease the risk of a large, stand-replacement fire and/or insect outbreaks. Over time, late and old structure (old forest single stratum and old forest multi-strata) would increase. The ratio of old forest multi-strata to old forest single stratum would start moving toward historical levels within the planning area. Old forest single stratum would increase over 40 years and move into the historical range of variability. The action alternatives would produce similar effects, but at different scales depending on the acreage and types of treatments.
- Silvicultural treatments would increase the height-to-live crown ratio and retain the largest trees, which reduces crown fire initiation. Crown density would also be reduced, lowering active crown fire potential. Treatments would change the size and arrangement of available fuel and/or reduce the amount of fuel available to burn, reducing flame lengths, crown fire activity, and emissions. Treatments would also reduce the horizontal and vertical fuel loading. The action alternatives would produce similar effects, but at different scales depending on the acreage and types of treatments.
- Upper Snake River bull trout (an Endangered Species Act threatened species) and designated critical habitat would have an Endangered Species Act determination of may affect, not likely to adversely affect in the short term and a beneficial effect in the long term.

- The action alternatives would vary in the amount of open roads from 152.2 miles to 120.4 miles.
- The action alternatives could produce up to 134,000 hundred cubic feet (ccf) of sawtimber.
- Other undeveloped land greater than 1,000 acres would be reduced under the action alternatives by 44 percent.
- The action alternatives would vary in the percent of project area providing big game security from 7 to 16 percent.
- The effects to the Malheur River Inventoried Roadless Area and Malheur Wild and Scenic River Corridor would be limited in scope and intensity. Effects would be short term and not expected to significantly alter the character of the area.
- Connectivity corridors would be treated, and the effects would include displacement of wildlife species during implementation, and a decrease in big game cover for the short term.

A draft record of decision accompanies the Final Environmental Impact Statement and is based on a review of the Cliff Knox Final Environmental Impact Statement, specialist reports, scientific literature, the Malheur National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Malheur Forest Plan; USDA Forest Service 1990a), as amended, and the response to public comments received. The draft record of decision identifies the selected alternative, which is a blend of both action alternatives. The selected alternative applies vegetation restoration activities (including commercial, small diameter commercial, and non-commercial treatments, as well as prescribed burning, and managing unplanned ignitions) and road related activities to meet the purpose and need for the project.

The draft record of decision is subject to objection pursuant to 36 Code of Federal Regulations 218. Objections will only be accepted from individuals and entities as defined in 36 Code of Federal Regulations 218.2 who have previously submitted specific written comments regarding the proposed project during scoping or other designated opportunity for public comment in accordance with 36 Code of Federal Regulations 218.5(a). Specific directions on how to file an objection are provided in 36 Code of Federal Regulations 218.8 (<http://www.ecfr.gov>).

Based upon the objections received on the draft record of decision, the responsible official will decide whether to:

- Select one of the action alternatives that has been considered in detail, or
- Modify the selected alternative, and
- Identify what mitigation measures would apply, or
- Select the no action alternative.