



United States Department of the Interior
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Crater Lake National Park
Post Office Box 7
Crater Lake, Oregon 97604



IN REPLY REFER TO:
Y1419

December 19, 2015

Crater Lake National Park invites your participation in public scoping for the West Panhandle Forest Restoration Project Environmental Assessment

Dear Interested Party;

The National Park Service (NPS) is beginning a public planning process for the West Panhandle Forest Restoration Project in conformance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The proposed Restoration Project would restore forest structure and vital ecosystem components in the Panhandle of Crater Lake National Park while reducing the risk of a catastrophic wildfire occurring in this area of the Park. The Panhandle area of Crater Lake National Park is a roughly 2.4-mile long tip of land extending from the park's southern boundary along Highway 62 (see Figure 1 in the attached Project Summary). As shown in Figure 1, the West Panhandle Forest Restoration Project is proposed only for the portion of the Panhandle west of Annie Creek.

The NPS anticipates preparing an Environmental Assessment (EA) in conformance with NEPA to assess the potential impacts on the environment from implementation of the plan. Public scoping is the first step of public involvement in the NEPA and EA development process. Its objective is to engage agencies, organizations and the public early by soliciting input on the proposed action, environmental issues that should be addressed in the EA, possible project alternatives and sources of data that should be considered. Scoping allows agency and public concerns to be identified early and helps focus the analysis in the EA on important issues.

Public Comment: The four-week comment period will close on January 16, 2016.

You are encouraged to participate by submitting comments online or by letter. The preferred method for submitting comments is via the internet through the NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) site at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/CRLApanhandle>. Click on the "Open for Comment" link to comment. You may also mail or hand deliver comments to "West Panhandle EA c/o Superintendent, Crater Lake National Park, P.O. Box 7, Crater Lake, Oregon, 97604.

Comments will not be accepted by FAX, email, or in any other way than those specified above. Bulk comments in any format (hard copy or electronic) submitted on behalf of others will not

be accepted. Before including your address, phone number, email address or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment - including your personal identifying information- may be made publically available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment that your personal identifying information be withheld from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

Scoping Questions

Below are some example questions focusing on issues pertinent to scoping that you may consider as you are reviewing the attached summary information of the proposed project.

- What important issues regarding the potential environmental effects of the proposed action that should be considered in the EA?
- Would there be short- or long-term impacts to park resources or to park visitors as a result of this project?
- What alternatives to the proposed project should be considered?

If you have any questions regarding this process, please contact Greg Funderburk at greg.funderburk@nps.gov or 541-594-3062. We appreciate your participation in this process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Craig W. Ackerman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Craig W. Ackerman
Superintendent

Enclosure: West Panhandle Forest Restoration Project, Summary of Proposed Project

Crater Lake National Park

West Panhandle Forest Restoration Project

Summary of Proposed Project

Why is the NPS Proposing the West Panhandle Forest Restoration Project?: The West Panhandle, a 507-acre western portion of the Annie Creek Extension (also known as the Panhandle) was added to Crater Lake National Park in 1932 in part to protect old-growth mixed conifer forests. The ecological significance of the Panhandle forest has increased since its acquisition as old-growth forest stands on neighboring lands have declined dramatically (part of a global trend). For much of the 20th century, forest management called for the aggressive suppression of wildfires and, as a result, the Panhandle area has been encroached by smaller-diameter shade-tolerant conifers and is blanketed by a thick litter and duff ground cover. These conditions have increased the probability of a high intensity, high severity wildfire and have diminished the health of shade intolerant pine species through aggressive competition from shade-tolerant conifers normally kept in check by period wildfire.

The 2004 Crater Lake National Park Fire Management Plan (FMP), allows prescribed burning in the Panhandle; however, efforts to use prescribed burning to restore forest structure and composition in the Panhandle following this long period of fire exclusion were marginally successful, and resulted in high mortality of old ponderosa pines (contrary to resource objectives). The NPS permits timber cutting within a national park in order to control attacks of insects or diseases or to conserve the scenery or the natural or historic objects of the park unit (16 U.S.C. §3). The proposed action would selectively reduce stand density based on specific stand prescriptions with the goal of facilitating future prescribed burning under conditions that would more closely mimic the natural fire regime of the area.

Figure 1 displays the location of the project area within Crater Lake National Park. The map identifies current stand density and special habitat (Aspen Grove) within the project area based upon preliminary inventories. The silvicultural prescription for each treatment unit will be developed based upon project objectives specific to each stand's current and desired future conditions.

What are the objectives of the Restoration Project: The proposed Restoration Project would restore forest structure and vital ecosystem components in the Panhandle of Crater Lake National Park while reducing the risk of a catastrophic wildfire occurring in this area of the Park. The specific objectives of the (NPS) for the West Panhandle Forest Restoration Project are:

1. Increasing the probability of survival of old, shade-intolerant overstory trees (including five-needle pines) by reducing competition;
2. Reducing the probability of high severity fire by reducing crown fuel continuity;
3. Increasing landscape-scale heterogeneity by creating a mosaic of stand and patch structures (including an increase in understory diversity);
4. Promoting ponderosa pine overstory recruitment by creating regeneration opportunities and shifting species composition;
5. Reducing conifer competition in small aspen groves and stands of five-needle pines; and

6. Creating a fuels condition that would allow for effective implementation of prescribed fire treatments in the Panhandle per the Crater Lake National Park Fire Management Plan.

Scoping of Issues and Alternatives

In conformance with NPS guidelines for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act, the NPS is conducting internal and public scoping of environmental issues and proposal alternatives in anticipation of the preparation of an Environmental Assessment (EA) for the West Panhandle Forest Restoration Proposal. Preliminarily, the alternatives proposed to be addressed in the EA are:

1. No Action, Status Quo – Continue with direction from current FMP.
2. Proposed Restoration Alternative - Implement FMP in combination with specific mechanical treatments within the project area.

Proposed Restoration Alternative: Crater Lake National Park proposes to implement silviculture-based restoration using mechanical tree removal to restore forest composition, structure and function. A variety of silvicultural prescriptions would be used to meet each project objective: radial release, structural thin, reserve patches, creation of small gaps, and species-specific treatments. The specific prescription for any given area is dependent on the current stand structure, site quality, and spatial context of the stand (i.e., assessing where it sits in the landscape so heterogeneity and diversity can be enhanced and maintained). The prescription elements fall into five basic classes:

1. Radial Release would remove small diameter conifers beneath/adjacent to the crown radius of old-growth pines to reduce direct competition for soil moisture/nutrients within the rooting zone of the old trees to promote vigor and reduce understory ladder fuels to lower potential for torching.
2. Reserve/Retention Patches are areas where no cutting would occur to protect sensitive areas, promote heterogeneity, and provide for wildlife travel corridors.
3. Patch/Gap Cuts would create small openings of various sizes to promote pine regeneration/growth (typically near remnant seed trees in areas of dense fir stands), and increase understory cover and structural diversity in homogenous stands.
4. Structural Thin areas would be thinned to a variable density to reduce basal area, stand density and ladder fuels of shade-tolerant conifers throughout the "matrix" of the project area (i.e., in areas not designated as radial release, reserve or patch cuts). Variable cutting guidelines ensure spatial heterogeneity and uneven spacing while reducing average stand volume to carrying capacity thresholds.
5. Special Habitat areas would receive site-specific treatments to restore and promote aspen groves or phenotypically white pine blister rust-free five-needle pines (e.g., sugar pine and western white pine.)

To correctly apply the 5 prescriptive treatments to the project area, an intensive stand inventory would be conducted by a forestry crew to quantify stand structure, composition, and site quality using standard protocols. The inventory will be analyzed by a silviculturist who will develop stand maps and assign treatment prescriptions using computer modeling to project stand development patterns needed to meet project objectives. The forestry crew will then use the maps to mark the trees and estimate the volume of trees to be removed. A forester will use this data to develop the

specifications for mechanical harvesting and restoration. The project would be implemented by a contractor with quality control oversight by the project forester and Crater Lake staff.

Implementation of the mechanical treatment would use wheeled or tracked forestry equipment to reduce understory tree densities and ladder fuels. The construction of temporary landings and skid trails would be required within the West Panhandle to remove cut trees from the site. Approximately 250 truckloads of material would be removed from the site and hauled to the local cogeneration plant or wood processing facility. The completed project would include the removal of cut material, slash and residue treatment and the rehabilitation of all landings and skid trails. Pre- and post-project surveys would be completed for invasive plant species, and threatened, endangered, and rare species.

Project implementation would occur as early as fall of 2016 and, depending on weather conditions, could recommence in fall of 2017. Implementation in early fall avoids the peak visitation period of the park and would reduce impacts to park visitors. During implementation, heavy equipment would be visible to park visitors and thru-traffic. The NPS would maximize interpretive opportunities and provide interpretive information to park visitors and local communities. Interpretive displays would be posted at park information centers and the Ponderosa picnic area, Annie Falls overlook, the Lodgepole picnic area and Mazama Village/campground. Though some haul trucks may use Highway 62 during some phases of project implementation; much of the project traffic would access the project area using existing roads leading from the Fremont-Winema National Forest to the west of the Panhandle. Project operations that could cause traffic delays would be scheduled to avoid periods/hours of higher park visitation. Effectiveness of the restoration treatment would be evaluated and key changes in ecological and fire behavior parameters assessed to determine whether to follow-up with prescribed fire for maintenance of forest structure, composition, and function. Prescribed burning in the Panhandle would be subject to a separate NEPA process to ensure conformance with the Park's FMP.