

Deschutes Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project and Central Oregon Partnership for Wildfire Risk Reduction

Project Level Ecosystem Monitoring Report – Summary

Project Evaluated: Sisters Area Fuels Reduction Project – Comet and Cosmo

Field Visit Date: June 21, 2011

Units Visited: Comet Unit 2, Cosmo Unit 999 (black bark and old growth areas)

Summary Comments on Implementation and Effectiveness

After visiting the Comet and Cosmo units, field review participants concluded that:

1. Overall, the project purpose and need were met on the units visited, although more black bark trees should have been removed in parts of the Cosmo unit to achieve forest health and wildfire risk reduction goals.
2. Treatments were implemented in accordance with the Environmental Assessment and Record of Decision.
3. Best Management Practices and Mitigation Measures described in the EA were adhered to.
4. The Forest Service did a good job of coordinating with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to meet wildlife cover goals and with the Sisters Trail Alliance to maintain recreational quality.
5. The contractor on these two units did an excellent job minimizing impacts; the units were very clean and very few skid trails and “soil flip” were visible one year post-treatment.

Considerations for Future Project Planning

Coordinate with stakeholders early and often.

As experience with this project showed, early and ongoing coordination with concerned stakeholders helps ensure that potential concerns do not raise conflicts during or after implementation. In this case, coordination with recreational stakeholders during unit layout resulted in skid trail and landing layout that minimized conflict and delays. In future, when projects are planned in areas with heavy recreational use, recreational user groups should meet with the agency during the NEPA analysis to identify site-specific characteristics, such as trail-defining trees, that they want maintained or improved. It may also be helpful to continue coordinating during prescription development and marking.

Train marking crews and check marking to ensure project goals and prescription specifications are met.

When working with novel and complex prescriptions, and when different marking crews are used on each project, it is important to train each crew in the specific project goals as they will look on the landscape. Concepts such as “gappy-patchy” forest structure, wildlife clumps, “tweener” trees, and “trail-defining” trees are not intuitive and need to be demonstrated and practiced in the field. It may be necessary to mark leave clumps, as was done on this project, so that marking crews do not revert to traditional even spacing when goals include wildlife clumps or a gappy-patchy tree arrangement.

Marking crews and silviculturists may need additional mechanisms for checking marked stands to make sure they meet silvicultural prescriptions. When marked to meet fuels reduction and forest health goals, dense stands can “look like a sea of blue paint.” This does not mean they are overmarked. There may be a need for additional checks to make sure prescribed density goals are being met.

Use stewardship contracts to help fund restoration.

The Sisters Ranger District used service-type stewardship contracts (IRSCs) on this project. There are a number of benefits to using a stewardship contract instead of a timber contract on forest health and fuels reduction projects. Forest health goals cannot always be met through timber contracts, and using a combination of timber and service contracts requires repeated entries, usually over a few years. If a stewardship contract is used, commercial thinning as well as other fuels reduction and forest restoration can all be achieved in a single entry. Also, a stewardship contract requires that the agency use best value contracting, which includes taking contractors past performance into account when reviewing bids. Finally, for the Deschutes Collaborative Forest Restoration Project, the value of saw log material removed on restoration projects counts as match if it is removed under a stewardship contract, but not if it is removed under timber sale authority.

If enough merchantable timber is included that the product value is greater than the cost of the service work, the agency can use a timber sale stewardship contract (IRTC) and does not need to have appropriated dollars available for the service work. Receipts from IRTCs can be used for service work on the same or other stewardship projects. Use of IRSC and IRTC is encouraged throughout the CFLRP landscape.

Use maintenance mowing and burning to restore understory.

Treatments should address grass and forb regeneration by burning or mowing soon after thinning. Opening up the tree canopy encourages grass and forb regeneration, but ideally restored stands would be burned soon after thinning, with a return interval of approximately five years for maintenance burns to get understory conditions to HRV for a significant number of acres. Because of air quality regulations and resident concerns about smoke and fire risk, it may be necessary to mow instead of burn to reduce brush and improve forb and grass recovery. Since

lack of funding for service work is a constraint to understory treatment, IRTCs should be used wherever possible.

Develop a strategy for snag creation in areas with low snag densities.

Snags are important for wildlife habitat, and snag creation should be considered as a part of forest restoration projects. Consider a goal of one to two snags per acre.

Include aspen regeneration in forest health treatments.

When improved forest health is a project goal, silvicultural prescriptions should address aspen regeneration. Aspen stands are scarce and distressed across the landscape. Where aspen stands are found, aspen restoration should be included in vegetation management goals and planning, even if this adds complexity to the planning.