
Chips Ahoy Project Summary

The Priest Lake Ranger District of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests is proposing an ecosystem restoration project for the Upper West Branch of the Priest River. The project area is on the Priest Lake Ranger District in Bonner County Idaho and Pend Oreille County Washington.

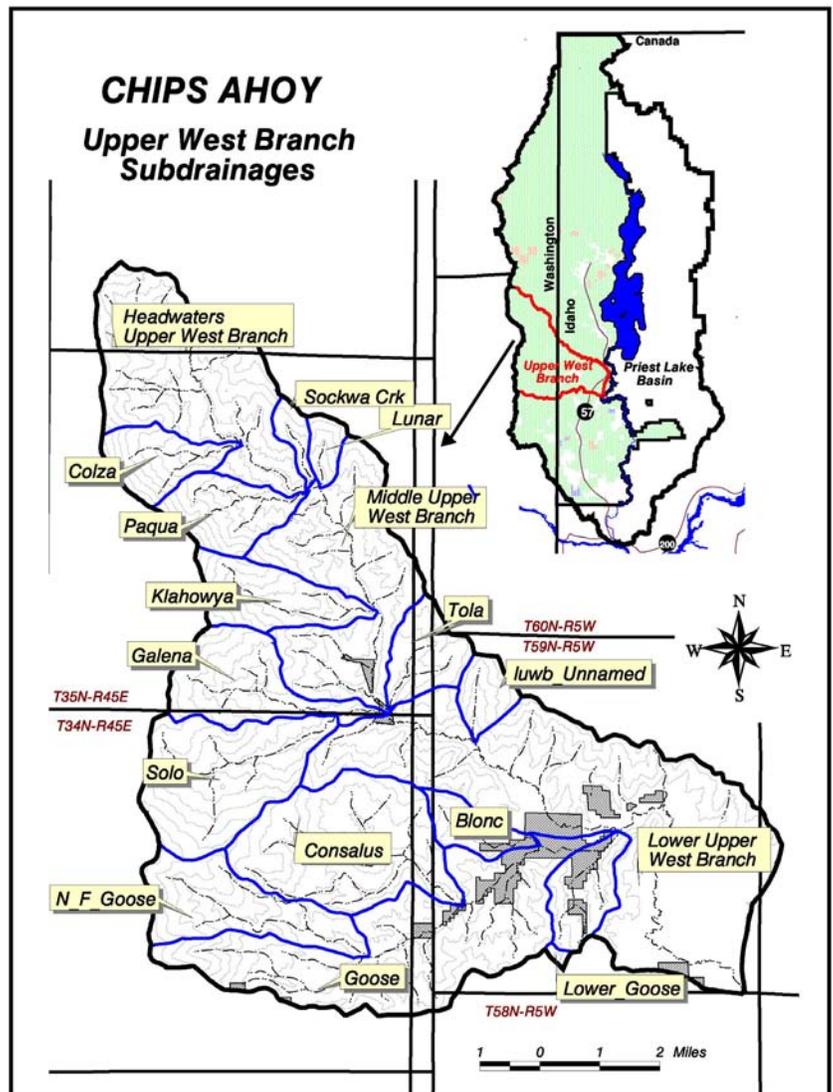
A Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) was prepared following the Regulations for Implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (40 CFR 1500-1508), which directs the procedures for documenting analysis of proposed management activities on federal lands. This summary document provides an overview and introduction to the DEIS and the issues that drove alternative development. If you would like more complete information, please contact the Priest Lake Ranger District to request a copy of the DEIS.

The Chips Ahoy Project Area

The Chips Ahoy project area encompasses most of the Upper West Branch of the Priest River watershed. It covers approximately 38,000 acres of the 45,000 acres in the entire Upper West Branch watershed. The project boundary includes the entire watershed below Paqua Creek. About 36,000 acres are National Forest lands in the Priest Lake Ranger District; about 2,000 acres are private land. About 20 homes and ranches are found within the project area.

Ecosystems in and around the Chips Ahoy project area are diverse, ranging from valley bottom meadows to sub-alpine forested peaks. The project area provides habitat for a wide variety of game and non-game species including federally listed threatened and endangered species. The area is also important to the local economy because it contains groomed snowmobile routes, hiking trails, hunting and fishing opportunities, wood products, and huckleberries.

The Chips Ahoy DEIS describes the current and desired future conditions of the ecosystems in this area. Key issues and concerns pertaining to the project were identified through internal discussions by resource specialists and the responsible official, as well as meetings with, and written comments received from the public and other governmental agencies.



Purpose and Need for the Chips Ahoy Project

The purpose and need for proposed management activities in the Chips Ahoy project area include four primary considerations – vegetation, aquatics, wildlife habitat, and recreation. The purpose and need reflect Forest Plan direction and goals as well as the current and desired future conditions for the Chips Ahoy project area described below.

Vegetation

The existing condition of the project area is not meeting Forest Plan goals, as described in detail in the DEIS. There is a need to trend the vegetation composition, structure, and diversity of forest stands in the project area toward tree species and stocking levels similar to historic levels that are better able to resist insects, diseases and stand-replacing wildfires. The Chips Ahoy proposed action would meet this need for change through silvicultural treatments to meet the following objectives:



- Increase the amount of dry forest communities that are dominated by ponderosa pine and are closer to historic stocking levels.
- Increase the amount of moist forest communities that are dominated by western white pine and western larch. Begin to re-establish western white pine as a significant component of its historic range.
- Restore the role of fire by creating stand conditions that allow a repeated pattern of low-intensity ground fires to create results similar to historic fire patterns.
- Trend stands toward species composition that favors species less susceptible to root disease.
- Increase structural diversity and the percentage of large, older trees.
- Contribute to the supply of commercial wood products to help meet the national demand for wood products and local employment opportunities. The amount of timber harvested would be a by-product of meeting the ecosystem restoration objectives described above.

Aquatics

There is a need to improve the aquatic ecosystems (watershed and fisheries) in the Upper West Branch of the Priest River drainage, as described in detail in the DEIS. Specifically, that need includes reducing erosion and sediment delivery from road surfaces and ditches that are currently contributing sediment to the Upper West Branch and its tributaries.

The need for change would be met by permanently closing or putting into storage roads that have been identified as no longer needed for the transportation system in the project area.

Wildlife

Forest stands across the project area are relatively similar in size and age and are not providing a diversity and wide range of plant and animal communities and habitats. There is a need to trend toward an ecosystem composed of vegetation that more closely resembles the historic conditions. Specifically, there is a need to improve the diversity of forest structures in the area, including larger patch sizes with less fragmentation. This would provide for wildlife, fish, and plant habitat diversity.

These needs for change would be met through silvicultural treatments designed to achieve the objectives described above for vegetation.



Recreation

There is a need to maintain snowmobile access to the project area while protecting water quality, fisheries, and wildlife habitat. Through a prior environmental analysis, it was decided to remove approximately 1.6 miles of Road 1108 in the riparian area of Consalus Creek. As road 1108 is an established snowmobile route, there is a need to provide continued access to the area for winter recreationists.

Desired Future Conditions

Vegetation

The desired condition for forests in the project area includes multi-species stands that are well adapted to the specific site characteristics, with long-lived, seral species (ponderosa pine, western larch, and western white pine) well represented. Forest stands would be resistant to natural disturbances such as insects, disease and wildfire and would provide a wide range of benefits including watershed protection, wildlife habitat, recreation, and a sustained yield of forest products.

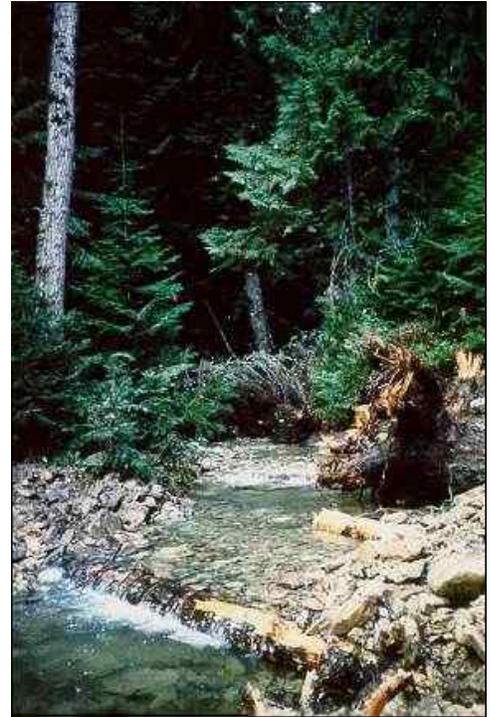
Aquatics

The desired condition for the Upper West Branch and its tributaries is a trend toward watershed recovery to a Properly Functioning Condition. Watersheds that are considered in a Properly Functioning Condition are operating and responding appropriately in their current environment. Such systems can absorb and respond to disturbances under which they have evolved within their historic range.

Wildlife

The desired condition for the project area is the wildlife habitat maintains habitat for viable populations and contributes to the conservation and recovery of threatened and endangered species as outlined in the species recovery plans and the habitat of identified sensitive species prevents the need for federal listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Forests in the project area are providing a diversity and wide range of plant and animal communities and habitats. The ecosystem is composed of vegetation that closely resembles the historic range of variability. There is a diversity of forest structures in the area, including larger patch sizes with less fragmentation. This would provide for wildlife, fish, and plant habitat diversity.



Recreation

The desired condition for the project area is to provide for a variety of dispersed recreation opportunities and to maintain snowmobile access to the project area while protecting water quality, fisheries, and wildlife habitat.

Proposed Action

The proposed action for the Chips Ahoy Project is designed to improve the health and productivity of terrestrial and aquatic habitats by restoring forest vegetation and reducing sediment risks. The proposed action is also designed to trend the project area toward improved forest health and increased biodiversity. The resulting changes in forested conditions would provide more diverse habitat for wildlife species in the area. Proposed road maintenance and decommissioning activities would help reduce the amount of sediment entering the Upper West Branch watershed.

Proposed activities for the Chips Ahoy Project would include:

- Selective cutting in overcrowded stands of trees to promote the growth and productivity of species such as larch and ponderosa pine
- Regeneration cutting in stands where there is high mortality, risk of high mortality, or undesirable species and replanting the stands with desired longer-lived species
- Burning to reduce fuels, improve growing conditions, and restore fire as an ecological process
- Improving the design, drainage and stream crossings of existing roads to reduce sediment risks to aquatic habitat

- Building temporary roads, decommissioning unneeded existing road segments; and putting some road segments into storage for future use

The specific activities in Alternative B – the Proposed Action – are described in detail in the DEIS. In general, our proposal for management includes vegetation treatments on 1,640 acres, 2.5 miles of temporary road construction, 58 miles of road decommissioning or storage, 32 acres of prescribed burning for wildlife habitat and ecosystem, and rerouting winter recreation away from portions of Road 1108 to Road 333B.

Decision To Be Made

The Draft environmental analysis is not a decision document. The DEIS discloses the environmental consequences of proceeding with the proposed action or any of the alternatives. After the DEIS goes through the 45-day comment period, a Final EIS will be produced. The Responsible Official (IPNF Forest Supervisor Ranotta McNair) will then select an alternative based on the information in this document, on public comments, and on how well the preferred alternative meets the purpose and need of the project and complies with applicable state and federal laws, agency policy and Forest Plan direction.

The decision to be made involves the selection of an alternative. If an action alternative is chosen, the decision will include:

- When proposed activities could begin and whether there are any timing restrictions.
- What type of restoration treatments would occur and where.
- What type of fuels treatment would occur and where.
- Which elements of the Transportation Plan, including road improvements, would be implemented, and when.
- Associated activities that would take place, such as monitoring and mitigation measures.
- Priorities for other opportunities that have been identified, including pre-commercial thinning and watershed restoration activities

HOW TO SUBMIT COMMENTS

All comments must be postmarked by the end of the comment period. The ending date has been noted in the enclosed cover letter.

Mail your comments to:

**Chips Ahoy Project Draft EIS
Priest Lake Ranger District
32203 Highway 57
Priest River, Idaho 83856
Attn: David DelSordo**

or

E-mail your comments to:

comments-northern-idpanhandle-priest-lake@fs.fed.us.

The subject line must contain Chips Ahoy Project
Acceptable formats are MS Word, Word Perfect, or RTF.

or

*Contact David DelSordo,
the Chips Ahoy Project Leader, at: 208-443-2512
ddelsordo@fs.fed.us*

Alternatives Considered in Detail

This section describes Alternative B, (the Proposed Action), Alternative C (No Road Construction Alternative), and Alternative D (No Regeneration Harvest Alternative) as developed by the Interdisciplinary Team in response to the issues and concerns expressed by the public and internal resource specialists.

The proposal also includes design criteria, or features, developed by the resource specialists to address the issues that did not warrant analysis of separate alternatives. For example, heritage resources and sensitive plant concerns vary little, if any, between alternatives; they lend themselves to being treated in a common manner for all action alternatives (Alternatives B, C, and D).

Alternative A - No Action

The No Action alternative provides the resource specialists a means for evaluating the current ecosystem conditions as a baseline. It can also be used to compare the projected effects of each management alternative. The decision-maker and members of the public can use this alternative to look at the changes in the ecosystem that would take place with implementation of any of the other alternatives, as well as the consequences of deferring activities if this alternative were selected.

It is important to keep in mind that “No Action” does not mean there would be no further management in the project area. The current level of management would continue. Activities such as fire suppression, projects analyzed in earlier environmental analysis and decisions, and routine road and trail maintenance would continue.

Under the No Action Alternative, none of the proposed silvicultural treatments, prescribed burning, road improvement or watershed improvement activities would be implemented with this project. No action would be taken at this time to restore vegetation composition and structure, improve wildlife habitat, or maintain hydrologic function and improve the aquatic resources.

Alternative B – Proposed Action

This alternative is an integrated multi-disciplinary approach to ecosystem management. It is designed to:

- Begin the restoration of forest ecosystem processes, vegetation composition and structure, improve dry site old growth habitat, and return the role of fire back into the ecosystem
- Reduce sediment entering aquatic systems from old roads
- Improve various wildlife habitat structural components (i.e. flammulated owl)
- Maintain snowmobile access in the project area

The restoration of forest composition and structure would be met through a combination of silvicultural treatments and prescribed burning. Water quality, fisheries, and wildlife issues are also addressed. A groomed snowmobile route would be changed to accommodate the decommissioning of portions of Road 1108 and less than a mile of new road constructed to maintain snowmobile access.

Table 1. Comparison of Alternatives. All acres and miles are rounded to the nearest number.

Alternative C

Alternative C was developed in response to public comments regarding the effects of roads and road construction. Concerns included the relatively high road density in the project area, the level of maintenance the roads receive, and that roads are sources of sediment, which affects aquatic systems.

This alternative describes the expected results of meeting the Purpose and Need of this project while looking at ways to address concerns associated with road systems. It does not include construction of any temporary or permanent roads; however, it would place some existing roads into storage and decommission other existing roads.

Those proposed vegetation treatment units that would be accessed via the temporary roads proposed in Alternative B were not included, or the logging systems were changed to helicopter yarding for this alternative. The restoration of forest composition and structure would be met through a combination of silvicultural treatments and prescribed burning.

There would be no road construction – temporary or permanent. The snowmobile reroute described in the proposed action Alternative B would not occur. The decommissioning of portions of Road 1108 would be deferred until a suitable alternate snowmobile route is established.

Alternative D

Alternative D was developed in response to public comments regarding the effects of creating forest openings during regeneration harvests. This alternative describes the expected results of meeting the Purpose and Need of this project while looking at ways to address concerns associated with forest openings. It does not include any regeneration harvests. The restoration of forest composition and structure would be met through a combination of silvicultural treatments and prescribed burning.

Vegetation Treatments	Alt B	Alt C	Alt D
Selective cutting	800	720	800
Regeneration harvest	840	840	0
Ecosystem Burn	32	32	32
Total Acres	1671	1592	832
Logging Systems	Alt B	Alt C	Alt D
Helicopter	592	734	183
Log Forwarder	197	197	197
Skyline	504	416	194
Skyline / Tractor	143	113	64
Tractor	203	100	162
Total Acres	1639	1560	800
Fuels Treatments	Alt B	Alt C	Alt D
Grapple Pile	197	197	197
Lop and Scatter	583	503	542
UnderBurn	859	859	93
UnderBurn / Lop & Scatter	33	33	
Total Acres	1671	1592	832
Road Work in Miles	Alt B	Alt C	Alt D
Temp road construction	2	0	0
Road Reconstruction	58	58	15
Existing Road Storage	30	30	30
Existing Road Decommissioning	28	26	28
New Road Construction	1	0	1

Silvicultural Treatments

Several silvicultural treatment methods would be used to meet the Purpose and Need for this project.

Group selection prescriptions (uneven-aged management) would create a mosaic of forested openings and thinned areas. The openings would treat the areas in the stand with the highest risk of insect and disease, and amounts of ladder fuels. Ponderosa pine and larch would regenerate in these openings; the thinned areas would favor the retention of the largest existing ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir and larch.

Commercial thinning would improve the health and vigor of the residual stands by favoring the development of the biggest and best quality trees. Ponderosa pine, western larch and white pine would be the favored species.



Sanitation and salvage treatments would occur in areas where small pockets of insect and disease occur (generally less than two acres in size). Examples include areas with a high risk of mountain pine beetle infestation, or in root disease centers.

Improvement cutting prescriptions would be used to increase the overall quality and integrity of the dry site stands. Removing ladder fuels beneath the canopy, and around the large old relic trees would lower the risk of stand-replacing crown fires in the future.

Regeneration harvesting would use the irregular shelterwood and seed tree with reserve tree methods.

Fuels Treatments and Ecosystem Burn to Benefit Wildlife

Underburning would have multiple roles in beginning the restoration of historic attributes in the proposed treatment units. Fire would be used as tool to burn slash, recycle nutrients, resprout decadent brush (browse for wildlife), reduce heavy duff layers around relic trees, harden the bases of ponderosa pine (creating long-standing, rot-resistant snags for wildlife), and prepare the units for natural or artificial regeneration (planting) of seral species.

