



File Code: 1950-1

Date: January 27, 2004

Dear Interested Public:

I first contacted you in May 2002 about a new project located east of Chiloquin, Oregon called the Ninemile Timber Sale and Natural Fuels Reduction Project. My initial scoping letter described in general terms a project to accomplish fuels reduction and stocking control in the Ninemile area. The primary aim of the Ninemile Project is to reduce tree stocking and natural fuels accumulations to make forest stands healthier and more sustainable in the face of wildfire, insects, and disease. Ninemile Project also looks at lowering the risk of loss or damage to private property in the event of a wildfire, and to lower the risk of fires coming from private land and causing damage on Forest Service property. This project complements the Chiloquin Community Fuel Reduction Project to the west of Ninemile near the town of Chiloquin.

Work on the Ninemile Project was deferred for a year following the fire season of 2002. The Chiloquin District had one project fire, the Skunk Fire, which occupied the time of my interdisciplinary planning team (IDT) to accomplish the needed salvage and restoration efforts on the burned ground. The team started working again on Ninemile in the summer of 2003.

President Bush signed the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) into law on December 3, 2003. This law, background material, and the interim implementing regulations may be viewed on the Forest Service website at:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/winema/management/hfra/>

I urge you to become familiar with HFRA and the interim planning regulations for HFRA projects. I am directing that the Ninemile Fuels Reduction Project proceed as an HFRA project under the terms of the new legislation. Accordingly, I am re-scoping Ninemile for your concerns and input.

### **Purpose and Need:**

The primary purpose of this project is to restore and maintain ecosystem health inside the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). Secondary purposes are to support jobs in the local economy, to enhance mule deer habitat, to reduce the risk of uncharacteristically severe wildfires, and to achieve overall consistency with the Winema Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) as amended. Current conditions present a high fire hazard because stand densities, accumulated natural fuels, brush densities and other components that contribute to fire intensity and spread are much greater now than under the historic fire regime. Wildfires currently burn at uncharacteristically high severities, killing a majority of the trees that used to survive the frequent, low intensity fires that were the historical norm. Stand growth rates and tree vigor are



low due to heavy vegetative stocking and competition. Big game forage is old, decadent, and of poor quality.

Timber harvest, non-commercial tree removal, mechanical fuels treatments such as brush mowing or slashbusting, prescribed burning, and other treatments will be the tools used to accomplish the fuels reduction needed on Ninemile. These activities will reduce the risk of stand replacement wildfire and insect or disease losses, increase stand health, and improve forage conditions while moving the landscape toward more sustainable conditions.

In the Ninemile Project Area there four underlying needs for the project:

- The need for lower levels of fuel loading and fewer, less continuous fuel ladders. High fuel loadings and excessive fuel ladders have created a high likelihood of large-scale stand replacement wildfires.
- The need for increased stand vigor. Competition from excessive vegetation has reduced stand vigor thus increasing the possibility that insects, disease, or wildfire will destroy the remaining late and older successional trees.
- The need for higher quality mule deer forage. Currently the forage in the project area is predominately old, decadent, and of poor quality.
- The need for commercially valuable timber from the Ninemile Project Area. The management areas within Ninemile, as defined in the Winema LRMP, call for the production of timber. Activities to meet the purposes and the other needs provide the opportunity to produce commercially valuable timber from this area. The sale of timber products can help offset the cost of accomplishment of the remainder of the planned fuel reduction treatments and make the project more cost effective.

### **Proposed Action**

The U.S. Forest Service proposes to meet the purpose and needs within the Ninemile Fuels Reduction Project area by implementing the following activities:

- Commercial and non-commercial conifer thinning as appropriate to increase crown spacing, reduce fuel ladders, decrease competition, and increase forest health.
- Reduction of decadent brush, stimulation of younger forage and the reduction of accumulated natural fuels through the use of prescribed fire, mechanical treatment, and piling.

Many units would receive more than one type of treatment, i.e. commercial thinning and small tree thinning, followed by brush mowing and prescribed burning. It is estimated that activities will begin in fall 2004 with commercial timber harvest. Fuels reduction activities are planned to occur for up to ten years to allow adequate time for contract work to be performed, and to allow enough windows of the proper conditions to conduct underburning. The proposed action and action alternatives would meet the purpose and need of the project and address significant issues.

I have included the following materials to aid you in providing input to the Ninemile Fuels Reduction Project:

**Vicinity Map showing the relationship of Ninemile to the local area**  
**Project Area and Transportation Map with the road system and project area in more detail**  
**Management Area Map with the Winema National Forest management areas displayed**  
**Table of Management Area Descriptions and Acres in Ninemile**  
**Current Fire Hazard Map of Ninemile**  
**Current Condition Class Map of Ninemile**  
**Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) Map of Ninemile**  
**Proposed Action Map of Fuels Reduction Units with Commercial Harvest**  
**Proposed Action Map of Fuels Reduction Units without Commercial Harvest**

The treatment units in the proposed action are shown on the last two maps listed above. These maps display:

- Units where commercial harvest is one part of the series of treatments needed to achieve the desired fuels reduction.
- Units that, due to vegetative structure or past treatments, will not benefit from commercial harvest as part of the fuels reduction.

Following the maps are tables showing the specific types of treatments proposed for each unit, and the unit acres.

### **Submitting Comments**

The Ninemile Fuels Reduction Project is being rescoped under the new Healthy Forest Restoration Act provisions. Even if you replied to the original Ninemile scoping in May 2002, you must submit comments in the next thirty days for your concerns to be heard on the Ninemile Project.

Comments and concerns about the Ninemile Fuels Reduction Project must be submitted in written form. You can mail your comments to Kevin Moore, Ninemile IDT Leader, 38500 Hwy 97 North, Chiloquin, OR 97624. If you have any questions about the project, please feel free to contact myself or Kevin at 541-783-4001. Your comments, however, must come in written form. You may also submit comments electronically at [comments-pacificnorthwest-winema-chiloquin@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-pacificnorthwest-winema-chiloquin@fs.fed.us)

My staff will be holding a public meeting on the Ninemile Project on Wednesday, February 18, 2004 from 6 until 9 pm. We will be available to answer any questions you may have regarding Ninemile, and you may bring your written comments to the meeting.

### **Additional Projects in the Ninemile Area**

The Ninemile Interdisciplinary Team came up with a suite of ecosystem restoration treatments within the Ninemile Project Area in addition to the fuels reduction treatments. These are projects that fix some conditions that exist in Ninemile related to long term effective fire suppression in the area, but do not materially contribute to fuels reduction in and of themselves. These restoration projects include removing small conifers from aspen stands to release aspen (WFL); juniper cutting and lopping to reduce juniper encroachment (JCL); and light meadow burning to stimulate Astragalus peckii populations (MB). Jackpot burning (JPB) and hand piling and burning (HP) will be used in some of the restoration treatments to reduce fuel concentrations. The final map and table in the enclosed package show the proposed restoration project units, acres, and treatments. Please send me your comments and concerns on these proposed projects along with your comments on the Ninemile Fuels Reduction Project. Any comments that you already submitted concerning these projects during the earlier scoping will be considered, as these restoration projects will be done under regular NEPA guidelines, not under HFRA. I consider these restoration projects as outside the scope of an HFRA project. I intend to sign one or more separate decisions covering the restoration proposals this spring.

Sincerely,

RICHARD RAGAN  
District Ranger

krm:enclosures