



Decision Notice

Morgan Nesbit Forest Resiliency Project

U.S. Forest Service

Wallowa Valley Ranger District & Hells Canyon National Recreation Area, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Wallowa County, Oregon

This Decision Notice describes my decision and rationale for the Morgan Nesbit Forest Resiliency Project located within the Wallowa Valley Ranger District and Hells Canyon National Recreation Area on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest in Wallowa County, Oregon. This decision incorporates all information in the Morgan Nesbit Forest Resiliency Project Final Environmental Assessment and appendices and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), as well as information included in the project record.

Decision and Rationale

I have read the Morgan Nesbit Environmental Assessment and reviewed the supporting analysis and documentation in the project record. I have considered the comments submitted during public engagements, legal notices, and scoping and objection periods. My decision is based on a thorough review of the project record including all relevant scientific information and resource effects analysis.

I have decided to authorize a modified version of the proposed action described in the Proposed Action section of the Final Environmental Assessment (EA pages 10-19, and shown below in Table 1), this proposed action includes minor modifications identified during scoping, environmental analysis, comment consideration, objection review, and review of legal and regulatory compliance. The activities authorized include project design criteria (Appendix A), monitoring (Appendix B), and spatial locations displayed in maps included in Appendix C.

Summary of Changes to the Proposed Action following the 2023 scoping period

During the initial scoping period commentors highlighted several topics that the interdisciplinary team considered and ultimately recommended minor changes to the proposed action and/or design criteria to better meet the purpose and need. These changes include:

- Winter recreation access and snowplowing – Design criteria limiting log hauling on the 3900 road to maintain winter recreation access on groomed snowmobile trails were developed following the scoping period. No hauling or snow plowing is allowed on 3900 road from late December to early March.
- Wildlife connectivity – Wildlife corridor mapping and proposed thinning units were revised after the scoping period to meet the wildlife connectivity corridor requirements. This reduced the acres of commercial (4,000 acres) and non-commercial (2,200 acres) thinning treatments across the project area to meet the needs of wildlife and their habitats.
- Removal of trees greater than 21 inches at breast height (DBH). Following the scoping period, the proposal to remove trees greater than 21 inches DBH was removed from the proposed action due to reversal of the Eastside Screens amendment.
- Road decommissioning and storage, culverts, and temporary roads – Following the scoping period, 3.4 miles of road storage and 17.4 miles of road decommissioning was included in the proposed action to address watershed function. Additional culvert replacements (5) and removals (18) were identified and included in the proposed action to address watershed function. The length of temporary roads needed to implement the proposed treatments was reduced from 23.3 to 18 miles.

- New wildlife and botanical species were listed under the Endangered Species Act since the scoping period, including whitebark pine and wolverine. The EA and environmental analysis have been updated to reflect these new listings.

Summary of Changes to the Proposed Action following the 2024 Draft EA comment period

Consideration of comments and environmental analysis following the Draft EA comment period led to several minor changes to the proposed action and the Final EA. These changes include:

- Project design criteria for thinning treatments in RHCAs was updated to reduce potential impacts to aquatic species and habitats. This resulted in a reduction of fuel break treatment in RHCAs by 214 acres; 61 acres of RHCA treatment was changed from commercial to noncommercial thinning; and implementation of noncommercial thinning within 25 ft of streams was modified. See project design criteria listed in Appendix A.
- Revised mapping of landslide prone areas resulted in a reduction of 19 acres of proposed thinning treatments to avoid landslide prone areas.
- Summaries of effects by resource area were provided in the Final EA to assist the reader. The Draft EA incorporated effects analysis by reference.
- Table 2, which describes the historic range of variability, and the existing conditions was updated to reflect a data error in the Draft EA.

Summary of Changes to the Proposed Action following the 2025 Final EA, FONSI and Draft Decision objection period

Following the publication of the Final EA, FONSI, and Draft Decision Notice, a pre-decisional administrative review process was completed following the regulations at 36 CFR 218. Objections were submitted by six entities, and an objection resolution meeting was held with all objectors on July 14, 2025. Subsequent meetings with objectors occurred in July and August, as well as during January 2026. Additionally, new direction for travel management planning was issued by the Pacific Northwest Regional Forester on June 25, 2025.

During the pre-decisional administrative review process changes to the proposed action were made to address objectors concerns and to conform to new direction issued by the Pacific Northwest Regional Forester. These changes are as follows:

- The proposal to top or girdle trees greater than 21 inches in diameter at breast height was analyzed in detail in the silviculture and wildlife specialist's reports. This proposal has been removed from the proposed action based on the limited scope of the treatment and information provided during the objection review period. Commercial thinning treatments will only cut trees less than 21 inches in diameter, except for hazard trees felled for safety purposes.
- On June 25, 2025 Pacific Northwest Regional Forester Jaqueline Buchanan issued direction to all Region 6 Line Officers titled, "Interim Guidance for Travel Management Proposals and Decisions." This direction suspended the incorporation of travel management proposals into NEPA projects and deferred travel management decision making until further notice. Based on this direction, the proposal to decommission 17.4 miles of road and place 3.4 miles of road into storage has been removed from the proposed action. No changes to the transportation system and motorized public access will change with this decision. Culvert removals and replacements prescribed on stored and open roads are still included in the decision; however, 2 culverts originally proposed for removal are now proposed for replacement because the roads they exist on will no longer be decommissioned. These culverts are on the 3925015 and 3925025 roads.

- Select units proposed for commercial thinning will be modified to allow for only non-commercial thinning treatment. These units include: 372, 354B, RHCA 354B, 330, 027, 313, 303, 288, 252, 253, 097, 097a, 405, and 416.
- Treatments in aspen stands will retain live conifers greater than 100 years old to the extent feasible.
- Proposed commercial thinning treatments within the outer portions of Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCA) will be modified to only allow a non-commercial thinning treatment consistent with the project design criteria found in Appendix A.
- Proposed non-commercial thinning treatment which exists within Management Area 15 – Old Growth Preservation, will be modified to not include non-commercial thinning and only allow for application of prescribed fire.

This Decision Notice is based on my review of the Morgan Nesbit Forest Resiliency Project EA, specialist reports, associated scientific literature, and consideration of comments made during the 2023 scoping period, the 2024 Draft Morgan Nesbit Forest Resiliency Project EA comment period, and the review of objections submitted during the administrative review process. I have found that the purpose and need and proposed activities are or will be consistent with all applicable laws (EA page 40-52) and the appropriate land management plans (EA page 24-25 and Appendix F). Specifically, the proposed activities are consistent with the 1990 Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Land Resource and Management Plan and are compatible with the 2003 Hells Canyon National Recreation Area Comprehensive Management Plan and Public Law 94-199, and the 1993 Imnaha Wild and Scenic River Plan (see Appendix F). Required consultations under the Endangered Species Act, Magnuson-Stevens Act/Essential Fish Habitat, and National Historic Preservation Act are complete and the documentation of consistency with those laws and others are in the Final Environmental Assessment and project record.

I am selecting the modified proposed action because it best meets the purpose and need for action while addressing the needs of other resources through the application of carefully considered design criteria. The modified proposed action is consistent with all applicable laws and regulations and is not likely to have significant effects on the environment and would not need to be evaluated in an environmental impact statement. The modified proposed action meets the purpose and need by:

- Modifying forest composition and structure to reduce stand density, promote desirable drought and fire tolerant species, and promoting late old structure forest stands.
- Reducing the risk of negative impacts from stand replacing wildfires, reducing fuel loading and reintroducing prescribed fire, and protecting property.
- Restoring watershed function and aquatic habitats by addressing aquatic organism passage at road/stream crossings and enhancing meadow and aspen habitats.
- Providing wood fiber and employment opportunities to support local economies.
- Addressing landscape vulnerability to disturbances from fires, insects, disease, and flooding.

Proposed Actions and Design Criteria

The proposed actions to be implemented are shown in Table 1. and in maps located in Appendix C of the Final EA. Additionally, the Final EA includes design criteria listed in Appendix A and monitoring listed in Appendix B will be implemented in conjunction with the proposed actions.

Table 1 Proposed Actions

Commercial Thinning	Slopes <30% (acres)	Slopes >30% (acres)	Total Acres
Commercial	10,031	1,448	11,479
Commercial w/patch cuts	1,231	217	1,448

Commercial Thinning	Slopes <30% (acres)	Slopes >30% (acres)	Total Acres
Irregular Shelterwood	427	14	441
Total Commercial Thinning Treatments			13,368
Noncommercial Thinning	Mechanical Thinning (acres)	Hand Thinning (acres)	Total Acres
Noncommercial	1,279	1,609	2,888
Noncommercial in RHCAs	245	367	612
Shaded Fuel Breaks	2,285	1,711	3,396
Shaded Fuel Breaks in RHCAs	91	580	671
Total Noncommercial Thinning Treatments			7,567
Other Treatments			Total Acres
Aspen Enhancement			264
Meadow Enhancement			129
Prescribed Fire			74,840
Transportation			Total Miles
Temporary Road Construction			18
Road Maintenance			367
Road Decommissioning			0
Road Storage			0
Culverts			Total Culverts
Culvert Replacement			18
Culvert Removal			16

Summary of Public Involvement

Since 2020, the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest has been seeking input from interested parties, Tribes, agencies, and persons to inform management needs within the Morgan Nesbit Forest Resiliency Project Area. That input combined with goals and objectives of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Management Plan and Hells Canyon Comprehensive Management Plan, as well as current conditions of the landscape, have informed the interdisciplinary team in the development of the purpose and need and proposed action. The project was first published on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions in 2020. A pre-scoping period was initiated in March of 2021 which included a story map and web-based public engagement exercise where the public was invited to share input about interests and management strategies for the project area.

Field trips during 2021, 2022, and 2023 occurred with a wide variety of interested parties, state and county governments, and federally recognized tribes. The public was provided the opportunity to comment on the "Notice of Proposed Action" during a 30-day formal scoping period initiated on March 1, 2023. The district hosted an open house on March 15, 2023, in Enterprise, Oregon. The Forest received ninety-two comment letters during this period, and each were considered by the interdisciplinary team.

The Forest published a draft Environmental Assessment and 30-day comment period in November of 2024 and hosted a public open house in Enterprise, Oregon on November 20, 2024. The Forest received 38 comment letters in response to our request for comment on the Draft EA. Commentors included environmental and industry organizations, state and county governments, federally recognized Indian Tribes, and members of the public. Commentors focused on a range of topics including forest health and disturbances (fire and insects and disease), fuels management, fish and wildlife and associated habitats, watershed function, roads and transportation systems, recreation, climate and carbon, forest products

and local economics, and others. I carefully considered each of these comments, summarized in Appendix E, and the need for action while developing the final modified proposed action. Issues in the EA summarize some of the topics highlighted by commentors and considered by the interdisciplinary team.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

The Final EA contains a section that addresses findings required by other laws and regulations on pages 42-56.

Implementation

I intend to implement this decision beginning in 2026.

Administrative Review and Objection Opportunities

This action was subject to the pre-decisional administrative review process outlined in Title 36 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 218, Subparts A and B. The 45-day objection period for the draft decision notice began on May 7, 2025, with a legal notice published in the East Oregonian.

Objections were accepted only from individuals and entities who submitted timely, specific written comments regarding a proposed project or activity subject to the above regulations during any designated opportunity for public comment, per the regulations at 36 CFR 218.5(a). Additional eligibility is established in 36 CFR 218.5(b) through (f). Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted timely, specific, written comments regarding the proposed project unless they are based on new information arising after designated opportunities for comment. A connection to previous comments must be demonstrated in the objection.

The Forest received six objections, and all were determined to be eligible. Objectors included: Wallowa County, American Forest Resources Council, Greater Hells Canyon Council, Oregon Wild, Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project, and one member of the public. An objection resolution meeting was held with all objectors on July 14, 2025, and subsequent phone calls were held between the responsible official and each objecting party between July 21, 2025, and August 11, 2025. Wallowa County withdrew its objection on September 3, 2025, prior to the end of the objection resolution period on September 8, 2025. Wallowa County withdrew its objection based on the removal of all proposed road decommissioning and road storage treatments from the project. No other objections were withdrawn prior to the end of the objection resolution period.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision, contact:

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