



Harney County Restoration Collaborative Meeting Notes Tuesday July 25th, 2017

ESD Meeting Room, Burns OR and Tour of Rattlesnake Project Stands

In attendance: Dave Hannibal - Grayback Forestry, Mel Hall – geospatial mapper, Phil Jenkins – Iron Triangle, Zach Williams– Iron Triangle, Tim Boyce – fuels planner (ECDR), Shaun McConner – silviculture USFS, Kerry Kemp – TNC, Zach Mize – SWCD tech, Ben Cate – HDP, Scott Frost – silviculturalist ECRD, Calla Hagle – Burns Paiute Tribe Josh Bracken – our tech (SWCD), Talon Case – SWCD tech, Jack Southworth – facilitator

Introductions

Jack – Question of the day: is a second look at commercial entry into rattlesnake project area warranted?

Updates from anyone at the meeting:

Deadline for comments on the Flat Project is 30 days from June 21st. (so July 21st)

Susan Jane Brown, open house on Thursday July 20th for the BMFP

Proposal from Rattlesnake Project Subcommittee

Kerry – summary of committee meeting yesterday (Scott Frost, Tom Segal, Tim Boyce, Zach Williams, Shaun McConner)

Project area has lots of insect issues – best way to get merchantable timber out would be to use farm bill CE (categorical exclusion) to treat up to 3000 acres (max). Cherry pick best timber value of what's out there. Prioritize management areas that aren't too far gone (old growth stands). Also prioritize commercial value (east part has some Douglas fir, maybe worth more). Transition what was historically pine dominated stands and are now mixed conifer back to pine dominated by taking Doug fir out (which has higher market value). Farm bill CE would be faster to get boots on the ground as opposed to tradition method (EA, EIS). Committee decided that beyond those 3000 acres there probably wouldn't be much merchantable timber left (in 2-3 years when EA/EIS is done it may be rotten). The EA may be better to use strategically focused prescribed fire (without a lot of additional work) also focus on special habitats for EA (aspen, riparian, etc.)

There was a discussion on trees 21+ in. but that requires a forest service plan amendment and you can't do a UFSF plan amendment with Farm bill CE so we cannot cut 21+ trees.

Zach – added that they talked about basal area prescriptions. If you want a 30-50, then don't put in 50-80. The prescription needs to be what they want in the contract. Maybe don't need as many skips (if there are lots of 'skips' surrounding).

Tim- Where does this fall into the priority of burning if the Farm bill CE works? Does what we get done with the Farm Bill CE go to the back of the list of projects? Tim thinks yes it should because there are other areas that may be more 'bang for the buck' to save before it ends up looking like rattlesnake does now if it was already treated in some manner through the CE.

Tim– let’s not sell this as restoration. Let’s call it what it is, commercial take of damaged trees to prevent bug outbreak spread.

Tom Segal – Split out CE work from the other restoration work. (go forward with EA on the rest of project). Could be some value on blue stain stuff. Prioritize unique habitats for EA(aspen, riparian, ect.)

Kerry – 21+ trees, would they be worth going back after with the EA if it gets approved?

Phil – How many (%) of dead/dying trees over 21”

Scott - maybe 10-20% mortality.

Phil on overall idea of using Farm bill CE – seems like a good idea to get things done quickly.

Mel – Says she’s neutral, GIS, but doesn’t know much about forestry

Some said that they like the concept – with a new forest plan (maybe worth waiting) to cut over 21” trees. He cringes when we talk about putting this into the back log of burning. He looks at what we’ve been doing in the past, what we’re planning to do, and what is already in back log. Will it really ever get done? We need to push forward and change public perspective on the amount of fire on the forest.

Tom- 3,000 acres out of 30,000 isn’t a big deal. Let’s go forward with it.

Jack- likes that going with a CE is great because it can make some more resilient forest faster. (3000 acres to do now) the other 27,000 can be started later when the EA goes through.

Tim – maybe it goes to back log if treated through the CE, but we could potentially do a managed wildfire after it is treated if there is an incidental start in the future.

Josh asks – what bug problems are there? Invasives?

Kerry – western pine beetle, fir engraver, white pine butterfly outbreak in years past (which left trees in a weakened state),

Scott – no invasives, but there were compounding things that weakened tree defenses & now it’s a large outbreak of different bugs

Last fire was 1910, & the density of trees (competition) leads to weakened defense systems & the prolonged drought along with pine butterfly outbreak left trees vulnerable.

Mel – Does cold decrease bugs? You have harsh winters around here. Does water strengthen trees?

Scott – Yes, but this winter was not normal, there was more snow than usual. There has been a trend of less water and longer/drier summers.

Shaun – it takes really extreme temps to regulate bugs (like -40). Not that cold here.

Calla- what value is there for 21+ in. trees? If those do die, it might not be a bad thing (snags). Is there a way for addressing slash piles? Could slash be habitat for bugs (increase problems)

Scott – mortality will be way more than enough to meet snag standards.

Tim – there will be a slash treatment plan. May be piling, may be piling on road (burn within several years) so it shouldn't be a lingering problem for increasing beetle habitat.

Calla – is there concern that leaving lots of 21+ trees will be source of future outbreak?

Scott – not really. Usually western pine beetle is in small isolated places.

Jack – the reason to do the CE is to improve the health of stands that still stand a chance of surviving bug outbreak before they're too far gone.

We need to know where, when, & who? We are figuring out where, when is asap, who is likely iron triangle.

The last thing is how: what do we need in order to make this commercially viable?

Scott – showing us where we are going. We will drive through some treated sites, some untreated (4 different stands) to address their potential for commercial harvest.

In the field:

Stop 1:

Currently 160 basal area and would like to be taken down to 30-50BA. Zach and Phil seem to think it could be commercially viable because of the volume/acre even though there are a fair amount of dead/dying trees.

Dave asks why we couldn't leave a smaller tree in some instances to take a larger tree (making it more economically viable) in order to make the project happen now and actually go through. If it is on the verge of being kicked out due to it not being economically feasible wouldn't we rather add a few of the larger trees to make it commercially viable in order to make the project happen and in the long run save more trees from dying overall.

Tim mentions that a lot of the big trees when taken all the way down to 30BA tend to fall over and maybe the smaller ones will remain standing and not get blown over in the wind.

Shaun's response to that was that that could happen in some instances and the smaller tree may be released but that he has some concerns with that because there is likely some kind of genetic advantage the bigger tree has that allowed it to be the bigger/better/stronger tree (better at securing resources). But this may be a moot point because a portion of the bigger/better/stronger trees will get left and be a seed source to pass on the stronger genetics. The question remains, how many is enough of those bigger/better stronger trees is enough to leave. Overall, it felt like folks were on board with the idea of taking some larger/stronger trees if the sale was on the verge of being commercially viable.

Scott says that there are roughly 6K more acres in the project area similar to this.

Kerry – bring up spatial variability and not treating this in a park-like setting, but rather leaving clumps & openings. Shaun confirms that this is being considered. (some experiments on this are being done elsewhere) but that it is harder to implement that for the operator who may not have the silviculture background and knowledge.

Tom asks and voices some concern about whether the 30-50BA will be implemented across the entire 20K acres or just this 3K acres we are discussing. Has concerns if there will be 20k of 30-50BA, but is ok if it is just the 3K acres.

Dave asks if USFS has data on where pre-commercial thins have happened in the past
Scott replies: Don't really have that information for historical thinnings. No.

Jack thinks we need to widen the generational gap between trees in the forest. Also, hopes that timber folks can address commercial harvest and non-commercial treatment of fuels at the same time. (one swoop fell or one fell swoop). Question: Will this be one big 3K acre unit or a bunch of smaller units to make up the 3K acres?

Shaun – probably lots of smaller units due to so many dead trees / non-commercially viable areas.

Stop 2:

Drive by where we did not stop and didn't have much discussion:

Takeaway: Basal Area of 90-100 and Zach thinks that it is likely not commercially viable, just not enough left.

Stop 3:

Mixed conifer stand – lots of pine butterfly and fir engraver mortality. Over ½ overstory is fir, lots of white fir. We would prefer a Pine overstory with a fir component.

Scott: Is this small diameter fir stand commercially viable?

Phil: looks like lots of small trees, lots of white fir. It likely wouldn't carry (pay for) itself. You could treat some of these types of acres if desired, but would need better acres to carry it.

Scott: There are roughly 5K acres similar to this.

The takeaway from this site visit: Don't involve these types of mixed conifer (w/ lots of white fir) stands in the Farm Bill CE. It may not even meet the ecological goals. These types of stands will have to wait to be treated after the EA/EIS is complete.

Stop 4:

Stopped right off of the 28 rd. next to rattlesnake creek. Site has lots of Douglas fir, and is likely commercially viable.

Scott: There are maybe 180 acres of Doug fir dominated forest like this site. However, it is steep 40-65% slope.

Jack: Is it too steep?

Phil: No, it can be done but undulations in the hills make line logging very difficult.

Scott: This is currently 140 BA and we would like to take it down to 70 BA.

Phil: I would like to see it down closer to 50-60BA.

Zach: Doug fir grows fast.

Kerry: Are we considering this for the Farm bill CE? Will treating this mitigate the insect problem which is the goal?

Scott: We are hoping to prevent spruce budworm outbreak (more of a preventative treatment). We've been seeing a lot more tussock moths in the Thompson Mountain area and their cycle is normally every 7-12 years. It has been 10 years since the last outbreak.

Shaun: What is the threshold for making line-logging feasible? (board feet or acres)
I didn't hear an answer to this question.

Takeaways from the field trip:

Shaun:

- Focus on sites that are economically viable.
- Focus on stands that aren't too far gone (can actually be saved by treatment)
- block as much as possible (try to keep contiguous)
- Focus on Pine stands (older)

Next steps:

- get maps / layout / game plan more laid out and meet again once some things have moved forward.
- Scott & Dave (Dave owns a drone) – drone flyover of some of the area would be really cool. Maybe these two get in touch to coordinate that.