

Background

In February 2005, The City of The Dalles requested that the Barlow Ranger District provide management to improve and protect forest health on its lands within and adjacent to The Dalles Municipal Watershed in an effort to be proactive in its recognized obligation to protect water quality as identified in the 1972 Memorandum of Understanding with the City and the Mt. Hood National Forest. As part of this, and in connection with the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, the district convened a collaborative group to assist with recommendations for the watershed.

In 2006, there was consensus from the collaborative representatives on creating defensible space around The Dalles Municipal Watershed. The recommendation as written by the collaborative representatives is stated below:

Develop and maintain defensible space around the perimeter of the Watershed and along designated interior roads; continued maintenance of this space is critical. The perimeter roads recommended for treatment include 1720, 1700, 1700-660, 1700-662, and 1720-193. The interior roads recommended for treatment include 1721, 1720-170, 1720-011, 1720-191, 1720-192, 1720-196, 1720-197, and portions of 1720-190. Work along perimeter roads should be planned to minimize potential adverse impacts to wildlife and scenic values (Recommendation #7).

Proposed Fuelbreak

The Barlow Ranger District proposes to establish a fuelbreak along roads surrounding the perimeter of The Dalles Municipal Watershed within Mt. Hood National Forest boundary, including two interior roads as an added defensible location for fire suppression operations. Fuelbreaks are constructed in strategic areas along roadsides and ridgetops to provide firefighters with improved access to suppress unwanted wildfires and to manage prescribed burns more safely. The fuelbreak would reduce the likelihood that a wildfire ignited along travel routes would spread into the watershed and be a risk to water quality.

The Dalles Municipal Watershed runs from the top of Mill Creek Butte to the mouth of the Mill Creek River, where it enters the Columbia River in The Dalles, OR. This proposal only addresses that portion of the watershed that is located on National Forest System lands within the Barlow Ranger District on the Mt. Hood National Forest. Perimeter roads are proposed for the fuelbreak treatment and include portions of 1700, 1700-150, 1700-151, 1700-160, 1700-161, 1700-662, 1720, and 1720-193. There are three interior roads included: 1721, 1721-013, 1720-190, and 1720-192. The legal land description for the project area is primarily T1S and T2S, R10E and R11E, Willamette Meridian. Please see attached map.

The process for developing the fuelbreak would be to remove excess surface, ladder and canopy fuels by mechanical- or hand-treated methods. Fuel in this context is forest material that is flammable and capable of carrying a fire. A reduction in fuels can be done through the thinning or removal of trees to increase space between individual crowns (reducing canopy); pruning or removal of lower branches, mistletoe brooms, shrubs, small trees (ladder fuels); removal of ground accumulation of limbs, branches and downed logs; and/or the removal of tree needles, cones, or other surface duff around the base of large trees (ladder and surface fuels). Reducing these fuels limits the ability of a fire from reaching the crowns of the trees. Fires within the trees crowns increase fire rate and spread which can be more difficult to suppress. After treatment, the

area identified for the fuelbreak would be more open, meaning more space between trees, less brush and understory and minimal downed wood.

Approximately 1,500 acres would be treated for the proposed fuelbreak. Funding for this proposal would be generated from selling merchantable material on approximately 700 acres of this project. The width of the fuelbreak would vary based on the proximity of the road system to trails, streams, topographic breaks, natural features, existing plantations and land allocations including Late Successional Reserves, Research Natural Areas and Proposed National Recreational Areas.

No new permanent road construction would be necessary. There may be a need to build some short temporary roads that would be decommissioned after project completion. All landings and skid roads associated with commercial harvest would be rehabilitated.

Long-term maintenance would be critical to this project. It is expected that vegetation would return at varying rates, which would facilitate a staggered maintenance program. Most of the maintenance would include brush removal. Triggers would be established to determine when an area was ready for future treatment (e.g. when grass or trees get to a certain height). Prescribed burning and pile burning would be included as part of the maintenance plan. The Forest Service would work closely with the City of The Dalles on long-term maintenance.

Forest Plan Amendments

There are several site-specific amendments that may be proposed as a result of the proposed action in order to be consistent with the Mt. Hood Forest Plan. The Forest Plan was not developed to accommodate a fuelbreak within this area. Site-specific amendments are an acceptable method to address changing needs on the Forest.

Plantation Thinning

The collaborative group reached consensus on thinning plantations as part of their overall recommendations (Recommendation #14). The group agreed that the fuelbreak was the priority; however, "other work [could] occur concurrently to the extent that it does not detract from completion of this project." The proposal includes treating existing plantations as a whole, rather than limit the treatment to a pre-defined buffer width. From an implementation standpoint treating the existing plantations as whole stands would eliminate the need for a second entry and reduce secondary costs.

In some areas (such as Forest Road 1721) the fuelbreak is designed to incorporate existing plantations, including shelterwood units, instead of following the road in order to avoid treatment within the LSR. Also, the road layout meanders along topographic features including multiple stream crossings and is not advantageous from a defensible standpoint. Instead of using the meandering road, a more direct fuelbreak was designed that utilized existing plantations and shelterwood plantations. Based on this new design, the resources needed to maintain the shaded fuelbreak would be reduced, including cost. Utilizing existing plantations would also limit the projects to previously disturbed ground.

Riparian Areas

Impacts to riparian areas were considered in the design of the fuelbreak. The fuelbreak was moved from the 1700-660 road to the North Section Line Trail, to avoid implementing the project within the North Fork Mill Creek riparian area. The layout along the 1721 road reduced the amount of area that would be treated alongside the road and within the tributaries and mainstem of South Fork Mill Creek and Alder Creek.

There was a consensus recommendation among collaborative representatives that there would be no-touch riparian buffers for any activity (Recommendation #10). Treatment of riparian stands within the fuelbreak corridor and within 50 feet of the stream would be limited to hand treatment or left untreated completely.

Roads

The proposal discloses that there may be the need for temporary roads. At this time, temporary roads are not anticipated, other than possibly a short segment to get from a road to a landing. The proposal would be updated if this need changed.

Variable Density Thinning

Root disease pockets are common in areas around the watershed. The fuelbreak would consist of areas treated with thinning at variable densities, with areas of openings where existing mortality from root disease does not allow for many trees to be retained. This would avoid long-term maintenance of fuel buildup along roads where root disease is at its worst.