

Group urges smaller logging sales

Published: February 9, 2007

By JAYSON JACOBY

jjacoby@bakercityherald.com

An environmental group based in La Grande is urging the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest to trim the size of a proposed timber sale near Unity that would rank as one of the larger logging projects on the forest since 1990.

The Hells Canyon Preservation Council also suggests the Wallowa-Whitman study in more detail how the Mile 9 project might affect the environment.

Larry McLaud, the Preservation Council's ecosystem conservation coordinator, [wrote in an e-mail](#) to Whitman District Ranger Ken Anderson that because the Mile 9 project "has the potential of having a significant impact to the environment," the Wallowa-Whitman should write an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

Wallowa-Whitman officials have instead outlined the Mile 9 project in an Environmental Assessment (EA) — a document which, though not as detailed as an EIS, is quite lengthy at 273 pages.

Anderson said Thursday that he does not think the Wallowa-Whitman needs to complete an EIS for the Mile 9 project to comply with the federal National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). That's the 1969 law which requires agencies to study how the possible environmental effects of sorts of activities, including logging, on public land.

The Wallowa-Whitman's schedule for Mile 9 includes selling a pair of timber sales, one this year and one in 2008, totaling 12 million board-feet.

That's almost half as much timber as the 2.3-million-acre Wallowa-Whitman sold during the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, 2006.

The Mile 9 project encompasses 19,000 acres along the South Fork of the Burnt River, about seven air miles from Unity.

The Wallowa-Whitman finished the EA late last year and accepted comments from the public through Jan. 18.

In the comments he e-mailed to Anderson, McLaud wrote that "building roads and harvesting timber have had detrimental effects on this project area in (the) past and continuing these activities are likely to retard recovery in the future."

Wallowa-Whitman officials agree with the first part of McLaud's claim.

In fact, officials say, the Mile 9 project is designed to fix some of the problems that past timber sales caused.

In those previous sales — including 11 between 1980 and 1995 — the Wallowa-Whitman allowed loggers to cut mostly the older, more valuable trees, especially ponderosa pines.

Loggers left the smaller, less valuable trees, mostly grand firs.

During the decades when the Wallowa-Whitman was removing the old-growth trees, the forest also was putting out most wildfires before the blazes got very big.

Prior to the arrival of the Forest Service and its firefighting prowess early in the 20th century, wildfires swept through the South Fork Burnt River forests every decade or so, killing the fledgling firs before they could encroach on the tall thick pines.

The Forest Service's simultaneous strategy of cutting big trees and squelching small fires created the conditions that prevail today, said Jim Gilsdorf, a Whitman Unit silviculturist who worked on the Mile 9 project.

Gilsdorf said many acres along the South Fork contain far more trees than they did in the past — particularly firs that the Forest Service has spared from their customary fiery demise.

Wallowa-Whitman officials contend these crowded forests are vulnerable to wildfires and to tree-killing insects and diseases.

The proposed solution, set out in the Mile 9 EA, is to cut some of the firs and to reintroduce flames to the forests by way of fires which Forest Service officials would ignite and control.

McLaud said he agrees with the agency that some forests are so crowded as to be unhealthy.

McLaud, in his e-mail to Anderson, writes that the logging which the Forest Service proposes for the Mile 9 project "may be appropriate" in certain places.

But McLaud contends that the Wallowa-Whitman's logging strategy for the Mile 9 project is overly broad, and that forest officials are proposing to thin forests that were quite crowded even centuries ago, before the Forest Service started putting out wildfires and cutting old-growth trees.

Those places, McLaud wrote, are mainly steep slopes that face north or east. Such areas, because they're sheltered from sunlight most of the time, tend to be wetter and cooler than south-facing slopes, and so can support denser forests.

McLaud recommends that logging "be scaled back" in 12 of the 50 areas in the Mile 9 project where the Forest Service is proposing commercial logging.

Those 12 areas total 648 acres out of 4,414 acres — 15 percent — on which the Forest Service wants to allow commercial logging.

McLaud said it might be appropriate, in some of those 12 areas, to cut some of the smallest trees, the ones that are too small to be sold to a mill.

"We think that a non-commercial thinning is a much more positive way to go about managing those stands than is commercial logging," McLaud said.

The Wallowa-Whitman is proposing non-commercial thinning on about 4,800 acres in the Mile 9 project.

Gilsdorf acknowledges that the Mile 9 area is not homogenous. Some places, especially the cooler, more moist north slopes that McLaud mentioned, can, and in the past have, supported denser forests than warmer, drier south-facing slopes, Gilsdorf said.

But Gilsdorf contends that even some of those north slopes are "overstocked" with trees compared with their pre-Forest Service condition.

According to the Mile 9 EA, non-commercial thinning in some of those areas would not meet the Forest Service's goal, which include: "increase growth on residual trees, lessen the time needed to grow large trees, increase vigor, and lessen the risk of uncharacteristic insect and disease occurrences."

Gilsdorf points out, though, that most of the commercial logging proposed in the EA — about 85 percent of the acres — would take place in warmer, drier areas.