

Description of the Proposed Action
for
Granite Meadows

McCall and New Meadows Ranger Districts
Payette National Forest

Adams, Valley, and Idaho County

[October 2018](#)



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Introduction

The Granite Meadows Project is located in Adams, Valley, and Idaho Counties, north of New Meadows, Idaho and North and West of McCall, Idaho in: T18N, R2E; T19 N, R2 E; T19N, R3E ; T20N, R1E; T20N, R1W; T20N, R2E; T20N, R3E; T21N, R1E; T21N, R1W; T21N, R2E, Boise Meridian (Figure 1).

The Granite Meadows project area is located within Management Areas (MA) 6 (Goose Creek/Hazard Creek), MA 5 (Middle Little Salmon River), MA 7 (Payette Lakes), MA 4 (Rapid River) and MA 9 (Lake Creek/French Creek) (USDA Forest Service, 2003). The project area includes parts of the Patrick Butte, French Creek and Rapid River Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs) as well as the Bruin Mountain Research Natural Area (RNA). Proposed treatments include timber harvest, thinning, prescribed fire, road treatments, watershed treatments, and recreation improvements.

There are approximately 70,000 acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands within the project area. The project area also includes State of Idaho and private land (approximately 7,000 and 6,000 acres, respectively). The Wyden Amendment (Public Law 105-277, Section 323 as amended by Public Law 111-11 Section 3001 or 4001) authorizes the Forest Service to enter into cooperative agreements with willing Federal, Tribal, State, and local governments, private and nonprofit entities, and private landowners to benefit resources within watersheds on NFS lands. Cooperative agreements to conduct activities on non-NFS lands would be for the following purposes:

- Protection, restoration, and enhancement of fish and wildlife habitat and other resources,
- Reduction of risk for natural disaster where public safety is threatened, or
- A combination of both.

This project is based in part on recommendations provided by the Payette Forest Coalition (PFC). The PFC is a collaborative group formed under the *Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009* (PL 111-11) and whose recommendations are structured to meet the intent of the *Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Act* (CFLRA). The PFC members represent stakeholders from a broad range of interests including; conservation groups, timber industry, recreational groups, and state and county government. The purpose of the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) is to encourage the collaborative, science-based ecosystem restoration of priority forest landscapes. The project is consistent with Adams County Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan (2012) and Valley County WUI Wildfire Mitigation Plan (2004) and recent appendices.

Purpose and Need

The Granite Meadows project is a landscape-scale effort to improve conditions across multiple resource areas. The desired conditions for this project are based upon the Payette National Forest Plan (USDA Forest Service 2003), and the Watershed Condition Framework (USDA Forest Service 2011). The need for the project is based on the difference between the existing and desired conditions (see Appendix 1).

The purpose of and need for Granite Meadows Project includes:

- Moving vegetation toward the desired conditions defined in the Forest Plan and the most recent science addressing restoration and management of wildlife habitat, with an emphasis on addressing the need to:
 - Reduce the risk of uncharacteristic and undesirable wildland fire, with an emphasis on restoring and maintaining desirable plant community attributes including fuel levels, fire regimes, and other ecological processes.

- Move forested vegetation toward the desired vegetative conditions by:
 - returning fire to the ecosystem, where appropriate;
 - promoting the development of large tree forest structures mixed with a mosaic of size classes;
 - improving growth, maintaining and promoting seral species composition (*e.g.* quaking aspen, whitebark pine, western larch, ponderosa pine, and Douglas-fir), and
 - increasing resiliency to insects, disease, and fire.
- Maintain and promote dry, lower elevation, large tree, and old forest characteristics for the associated wildlife species with a focus on the processes, function, patch size, and diversity of forested habitats.
- Enhance habitat components that support sustainable elk populations consistent with the Forest Plan.
- Maintain or restore a representative, resilient and redundant network of habitats for Forest sensitive species (*e.g.*, white-headed woodpecker, northern goshawk, wolverine, boreal owl etc.).
- Manage vegetation to achieve authorized recreation resource objectives in the Roaded Recreation Management Prescription Category portion of the project. Where possible or required due to other law regulation or policy, vegetation management activities should also be designed to aid in fuels, vegetation, and wildlife management objectives.
- Supporting the development of fire-adapted rural communities to address the need to:
 - Create fuel conditions that provide firefighters a higher probability of successfully suppressing fire in the wildland urban interface by reducing potential fire behavior near values at risk (*e.g.*, homes, communication towers, and power lines) and primary ingress/egress routes, essential to firefighter access and the public.
 - Create conditions where local landowners are potentially less reliant on suppression forces.
- Providing for an efficient NFS transportation network and address the need to reduce road-related negative effects to resources with a focus on:
 - Identifying the minimum road system needed for safe and efficient travel and for administration, utilization, and protection of NFS lands.
 - Maintaining and rehabilitate roads and trails.
 - Decommissioning unneeded roads.
 - Identifying opportunities to reduce road-related degrading effects to help achieve other resource objectives such as riparian function, elk security, and fish habitat.
- Moving all subwatersheds within the project area toward the desired conditions for soil, water, riparian, and aquatic resources (SWRA) as described in the Forest Plan and the Watershed Condition Framework (WCF; USDA 2011) and address the need to:
 - Reduce sedimentation and other road related impacts across the project area, and restore

riparian vegetation and floodplain function.

- Improve fish habitat connectivity and hydrologic function with culvert replacements.
- Implementing site-specific streambank and wetland restoration activities where stream channels, wetlands, or riparian areas are in a degraded condition.
- Managing recreation use with a focus on improving soil and water conditions, improving trail systems, addressing unauthorized trails, improving infrastructure, minimizing the potential for user conflict and addressing risk to forest users. There is a need to effectively manage areas experiencing detrimental impacts from dispersed or unauthorized recreation.
- Contributing to the economic vitality of the communities adjacent to the Payette National Forest.

Proposed Action

Vegetative Treatments

Vegetative treatments include commercial and non-commercial thinning, prescribed fire, and associated actions.

Approximately 75,000 acres of vegetative and fuel treatments in the project area are proposed. This includes treatments designed to mitigate fire risk and restore ecosystem function and processes. Treatment locations and acreages are based on best available information and are subject to change upon further ground verification. Treatments could occur within the outer portions of some riparian conservation areas (RCAs) where necessary to meet the Purpose and Need; RCA treatments would incorporate mitigation measures to address potential effects to soil, water, riparian, and aquatic resources.

Commercial Treatments

Approximately 25,000 acres of mechanical commercial vegetative treatments are proposed (Figure 2). A variety of silvicultural systems ([Helms 1998](#)) including both intermediate treatments (e.g. commercial thin, sanitation/salvage cutting, improvement cutting) and regeneration treatments (e.g. shelterwood with reserves & patch cuts with reserves) would be used depending on stand conditions and species composition.

Harvested trees would generally be removed with the limbs and tops attached (*i.e.*, whole tree yarding logging method). Where not needed to meet coarse woody debris requirements, limbs and tops of harvested trees may be used as biomass, or other products, where practical. Where appropriate and needed, non-commercial trees would be cut to meet long term stand objectives, reduce ladder fuels and promote desired advanced regeneration where necessary.

Harvest systems may include ground-based, skyline, and helicopter. Generally, harvest systems and skidding equipment (*e.g.* feller buncher, rubber tired skidder) would be used on slopes up to 35 percent slope, with some exceptions for these operations on steeper slopes with suitable site conditions. Hand-falling and cable-yarding systems (*e.g.* jammer, skyline) would typically be used on slopes greater than 35 percent slope. Helicopter systems may be used where ground based or cable-yarding systems are not feasible. Tethered logging is proposed on slopes up to 70 percent in the Goose Creek area or other suited area to be determined. Existing skid trails, roads and landings would be reused when available and new skid trails and temporary roads would be authorized where necessary. In general, all skid trails, temporary roads and landings would be obliterated and re-contoured after project completion.

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The primary target for commercial treatments are accessible stands where removal of commercial sized trees would aid in achieving one or more of the following:

- Maintaining or restoring the desired vegetative conditions at the landscape scale
- Meeting WUI objectives (e.g. supports the development of fire-adapted rural communities and/or reduces the risk of uncharacteristic and undesirable wildland fire)
- Meeting recreation objectives, such as improving skier experience and safety at Brundage

Non-Commercial Thinning

Non-Commercial Thinning (NCT) – approximately 75,000 acres. NCT would be an option in all areas targeted for prescribed fire (Figure 3). This would consist of trees generally less than ten inches DBH. Thinned material (slash) would be lopped and scattered, mechanically removed, hand piled, machine piled on landings, and/or burned (pile or broadcast) to reduce fuel loadings. Mastication may be used within plantations and within ½ mile of structures.

NCT would be completed for one or more of the following objectives:

- Improve wildlife habitat conditions by increasing the low canopy cover class where needed
- Increase tree vigor and growth rates
- Improve stand resiliency to natural disturbance
- Improve tree vigor, wildlife habitat, reduce canopy bulk density, &/or reduce susceptibility to insects or disease of concern.
- To meet recreation objectives (e.g. ski run safety/enhancement at Brundage).
- Maintain/promote early seral species, especially whitebark pine, western larch, and aspen.
- Reduce density-related competition
- Reduce the likelihood of extreme fire behavior in thinned tree stands
- Increase potential for firefighter and public safety through reduced fire intensity, if given a wildfire.

Primary target acres for NCT consist of stands within ½ mile of structures; plantations; high-use recreation areas where vegetation management would maintain or enhance recreation objectives; areas with forest health concerns due to insect and disease; areas with undesirable competition to early seral species; areas where density related stress/mortality is undesirable; and/or roadside treatments to improve ingress and egress routes.

Prescribed Fire

Approximately 75,000 acres would be treated with prescribed fire over the next 20 years (Figure 3) to restore vegetation and fuel conditions, improve wildlife habitat, and promote the development of fire-adapted communities. Approximately 500 to 10,000 acres of fire would be applied annually.

A mosaic application of fire would be re-introduced to approximately 75 percent of primary target acres, and 50 percent of secondary target acres.

- Primary target acres include stands with historically high fire frequencies and lower severities (grasslands under 6,500 feet elevation and stands dominated by seral species such as ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, and western larch (PVGs 1-6)).
- Secondary target acres include stands with historically moderate to longer fire frequency and mixed to high severities stands comprised of both seral and non-seral species (PVGs 7-11).

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Maintenance burning (burning after initial application of fire) would occur as necessary (e.g. as often as 5-20 years in fire regimes with historically frequent fire return intervals) years to maintain desired conditions. Prescribed burning operations would occur any time of year when conditions permit, typically spring (April, May, June) and fall (August, September, October). Ignitions within some RCAs would occur with mitigation measures to address potential effects to soil, water, riparian, and aquatic resources. Prescribed fire may be applied prior to commercial activities.

Associated Actions

A number of activities associated with implementing these vegetative and fuel treatments are necessary. These include:

Commercial Harvest-Related Road Maintenance and Use - Road maintenance includes road surface blading, ditch cleaning, installation of drainage features (e.g., rolling dips), hardening soft spots, replacing culverts, realignment of short road segments to minimize resource impacts, and removing roadside brush to improve visibility and safety for hauling forest products.

Temporary Roads - Authorized roads needed to complete vegetation treatments that are identified during sale layout, approved by the Forest Service prior to construction, and decommissioned after project use.

Rock Pits - Existing and proposed rock pits will be used within the project area to provide road gravel, pit-run, and/or riprap.

Brush Disposal - After thinning, slash reduction would include pile burning, hand piling and burning, lop and scatter, mastication, broadcast/underburning, and removal.

Site Preparation - After the harvest activities are completed and prior to planting in proposed areas, site preparation may be completed either by prescribed burning or hand scalping. This would be completed to reduce competition to seedlings from brush and grass.

Planting - Planting of native seedlings on proposed regeneration treatments would be completed as necessary to meet desired stocking levels. The species mix would depend on elevation and site conditions.

Whitebark Pine Planting – Rust resilient seedlings may be planted on peaks and ridges where whitebark pine is present.

Treatments on Private and State Lands within the Project Area

Through Wyden Authority agreements between the US Forest Service, willing private landowners, county governments, and Idaho Department of Lands (i.e., those identified within the project area boundary), treatments would include non-commercial thinning, prescribed fire, brush disposal, planting and seeding of native vegetation, watershed improvements (e.g., culvert replacements and stream stabilization), and road repair. Mutual agreements would seek to:

- Reduce the risk of uncharacteristic and undesirable wildland fire
- Promote more resilient forests
- Promote fire-adapted communities
- Improve watershed conditions

Actions proposed as part of this project would comply with all laws applicable to management of State and Private land. Agreements under the Wyden Authority would not restrict or exclude these land owners from

managing or implementing other additional activities on their lands. Funding for activities outside the scope or purpose authorized under the Wyden Authority would have to be funded by other sources.

Watershed Improvement and Restoration Treatments

National Forest System Road Treatments

Approximately 35 miles of NFS roads are proposed for decommissioning (removed from the NFS) within the project area, establishing a reduced minimum road system (MRS) for safe and efficient travel and for administration, utilization, and protection of NFS lands. Decommissioned roads would receive a restoration treatment (typically obliteration). NFS road management actions proposed for this project were developed using the McCall and New Meadows Ranger District Travel Analysis recommendations. These district-wide general recommendations were completed in 2014 and 2015, respectively. The Granite Meadows interdisciplinary team (IDT) refined these broad recommendations and used project level data to develop a MRS proposed action. Fewer NFS roads would reduce maintenance costs over the long term, improve elk security habitat as outlined in Appendix E of the Forest Plan, reduce overall road density and road-related impacts to water quality and fish habitat, improve habitat for terrestrial and aquatic species, and improve long-term soil productivity.

NFS roads that are to remain on the landscape as part of the MRS would be maintained or improved to reduce sediment production. Specific changes to public access and Forest System Road maintenance levels would also be proposed and evaluated through this NEPA analysis. All NFS roads that would be closed to the public would receive an effective closure to motorized use.

Unauthorized Route Treatments

All unauthorized routes not needed for future management would also be evaluated for some level of restoration treatment as required by FSM 7734.01 and 7734.02. It is anticipated that between 50 and 75 miles would be treated. Routes would be evaluated for treatment based on existing and potential adverse impacts.

Within Brown Creek, a tributary to Hard Creek which is an Aquatic Conservation Strategy (ACS) priority subwatershed (USDA Forest Service 2003), approximately 5 miles of NFS road would be decommissioned, reducing NFS road density. NFS road decommissioning and unauthorized route restoration is designed to improve the Brown Creek drainage of the ACS priority subwatershed toward the desired condition. The Mud Creek subwatershed, a priority watershed under the WCF, would also be moved toward the desired condition by decommissioning approximately 6 miles of NFS road and additional unauthorized routes, reducing overall road density and road-related effects. Table A-8 (Appendix 2) provides specific mileage and road densities for the existing condition and proposed action for the subwatersheds and drainages in the project area.

Streambank and Wetland Restoration

Site-specific streambank and wetland restoration actions would occur in Sater Meadows, Mud Creek, or other areas across the project area where stream channels, wetlands, or riparian areas are in a degraded condition. Actions to improve stream channels, riparian habitat, and wetlands may include: streambank stabilization, minor channel re-alignment, fence reconstruction, planting native vegetation, placement of instream or streambank structures such as (but not limited to): rock, large woody debris, beaver dam analogs (BDAs), and barriers to prevent unauthorized motorized travel in sensitive areas.

Fish Passage Improvements

Five NFS road/stream crossings have been identified in the project area to improve fish passage and improve hydrologic connectivity (Figure 6). One crossing in the Round Valley Creek-Little Salmon River subwatershed, two crossings in the Sixmile Creek-Little Salmon River subwatershed, and two crossings in the Upper Goose Creek subwatershed would be replaced with appropriate structures to improve fish habitat connectivity. Crossings would be replaced as road work and project activities occur in these areas to improve fish habitat connectivity, and improve hydrologic connectivity.

Recreation Improvements

As time and funding allow, the following improvement projects may be implemented:

- Remove social use trails that contribute to the degradation of watershed and soil health; and establish these trails as system trails where appropriate.
- Convert existing road systems to a shared road/trail designation as warranted.
- Improve the Sixmile Trail, including re-routes, the establishment of tread and the construction of causeways, puncheon, waterbars, and minor bridge structures.
- Address dispersed recreation and travel management issues contributing to soil degradation and erosion by hardening sites, closing some sites, adjusting existing travel management designations, and the installation of signage that includes targeted messaging. Areas include, but are not limited to, Granite Lake, Brundage Reservoir, and Sater Meadows.
- Replace restrooms at Brundage Reservoir and Granite Lake.
- Replace the fishing platform at Brundage Reservoir.
- Repair or replace the boat ramp at Brundage Reservoir.
- Annually, from January 15th-March 31st, close portions of the Granite Mountain area to oversnow vehicle use for safety and to reduce conflicts between motorized and non-motorized recreationists.
- Annually, from November 1st through March 31st, close the Bear Basin Nordic Ski area to oversnow vehicle use for safety and to reduce conflicts between motorized and non-motorized recreationists.
- Manage roads and post signage to address public safety in areas where recreational target practice occurs (e.g., Ecks Flat).
- Improve skier experience and safety through vegetative treatments within the Brundage Mountain Resort's ski area

