

Project would restore Sheep Creek forests to historic composition

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STARKEY — Clues from the past may soon dictate what the Sheep Creek area south of Starkey will look like in the future.

The U.S. Forest Service’s La Grande Ranger District is proposing the Sheep Creek Vegetation Management Project to restore the 30,000-acre Sheep Creek area, 22 air miles southwest of La Grande, to what it looked like at least 180 years ago before Oregon Trail pioneers began traveling through Northeast Oregon.

The Forest Service wants to restore the vegetation and timber makeup of the Sheep Creek area to what it was long ago when its forests were more resilient to drought, fire and insect infestations because the trees were best suited for the area.

“The stands are out of balance. We want to restore the forests’ compositions to what they were when they were the most resilient to disturbances,” said Lucas Glick, a silviculturist with the La Grande Ranger District.

Sites for restoration work include Sheep Creek’s lower mountain zone, which receives less precipitation than other areas in the zone

and is more prone to fire. More than a century ago, ponderosa pine and western larch filled the zone. The species were ideal because they are drought and fire resistant.

Much of the ponderosa pine and western larch is gone today because of disturbances, which included logging activity. Douglas fir, lodgepole pine and grand fir now grow in large numbers in the lower mountain zone as a result. These trees are far less drought and fire resistant than ponderosa pine and western larch, which means the zone’s stands are much more vulnerable than they were at least 180 years ago.

Ponderosa pine and western larch no longer grow in the zone in great numbers because the other species are outcompeting them for space. One reason is ponderosa pine and western larch are not shade tolerant. This means young ponderosa pine and western larch do not do well when growing under larger Douglas fir, lodgepole pine and grand fir.

The Sheep Creek project plan calls for controlled burns, logging and noncommercial thinning to create space for ponderosa pine and western larch.

The situation is similar



Photo contributed by the U.S. Forest Service

Large ponderosa pine trees once dominated the lower mountain zone in the Sheep Creek area near Starkey. U.S. Forest Service’s La Grande Ranger District is proposing a project to restore ponderosa pine and western larch to the 30,000-acre Sheep Creek area. The trees are more fire and drought resistant than the tree species that have taken over the area.

in other zones of the Sheep Creek area, where the best suited trees are now hard to find after being lost to disturbances and losing the competition for space to other trees not as well suited for the environment. Glick said treatments of prescribed burning, commercial logging and noncommercial thinning will allow species of trees best suited

for the zone to reestablish.

“We want to promote and maintain the forest composition, which was there before the disturbances,” Glick said.

Large ponderosa pine stumps in the lower mountain zone and old photos are among the evidence the Forest Service used to determine the original composition of the Sheep Creek

zones.

The Forest Service’s proposed Sheep Creek treatments call for about 3,000 acres of commercial timber harvest and 9,000 acres of noncommercial thinning, including follow-up treatments, such as post-harvest understory removal, piling and burning. In addition, 9,500 acres of prescribed burning of natural fuels is

proposed across 12 burn blocks.

Additional information on the project is available at www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=57625 or by contacting District Ranger Bill Gamble at 541-962-8582 or email bill.gamble@usda.gov.

The Forest Service now is accepting written comments on the proposed Sheep Creek Vegetation Management Project. Comments can be sent via email to comments-pacificnorthwest-wallowa-whitman-la-grande@usda.gov, or hard copies can be mailed to Bill Gamble, District Ranger, La Grande Ranger District, 3502 Highway 30, La Grande 97850.

People who have concerns about the plan must submit their comments by March 16 if they want their comments to be taken into consideration for possible revisions to the current draft of the plan. A revised draft of the plan will be released later by the Forest Service, after which people will have 30 days to submit written comments.

The current draft of the propose Sheep Creek Vegetation Management Project is available for review at La Grande Ranger District office, 3502 Highway 30, La Grande.

Forecast for Pendleton Area

