

# Timber, grazing and elk are stressed in USFS plan

A land management plan that calls for increased timber and grazing production while maintaining areas for elk habitat and semi-wilderness recreation is being proposed by the U.S. Forest Service for the Heppner Unit of the Umatilla National Forest.

The Forest Service's "preferred alternative" for the 271,155-acre Heppner Unit is included in a draft environmental statement available for public review at the Heppner Ranger Station. Public comment on the proposal is sought prior to a Feb. 19 deadline, after which final deliberations will be made on the Heppner Unit's long-term use.

A total of five alternative plans were drafted by the Forest Service during the preliminary planning process. The alternatives ranged from a proposal to designate the Unit's six RARE II roadless areas (Texas Butte, Hell's Half Acre, Potamus Basin, Skookum, Kelly Prairie and Baloney Basin) as wilderness areas closed to logging and development, to a "no action-no change" alternative, in which the entire Unit would be managed with increased timber and livestock grazing production as its chief objectives.

The Forest Service's preferred alternative takes a middle-of-the-road approach, attempting to balance the interests of "amenity" oriented hunters and recreationists with the interests of the "commodity" oriented forest users—loggers, mill operators and livestock grazers.

## Elk first, timber second in Type-3 area

Under the preferred alternative—Alternative E—just over 90,000 acres in the Unit's northeastern prairie land and in the Baloney Basin area, would be designated a type-3 land management allocation, in which timber harvesting or grazing would be allowed only when "elk habitat could be maintained or enhanced." The type-3 designation also requires that habitat be maintained for other old growth-dependent wildlife species.

An additional 12,000 acres in the Skookum and Potamus areas are designated type 3-a under the preferred alternative, meaning that the same consideration is given to maintaining elk habitat as called for in type 3, but more restrictions are placed on road use and development. According to the draft statement, "none of the future roads in the Skookum area and only a small portion of the roads in the Potamus area would remain open for general public use following logging activities."

## Type-25 semi-remote

Some 24,200 acres in the Texas Butte, Madison Butte and Hell's Half Acre areas are earmarked for a type-25

management allocation, in which timber could be logged only to the extent that elk habitat could be maintained or enhanced, and that old-growth be maintained for other dependent species. The type-25 designation varies from 3-a in the use of roads by the public. All of the roads to be constructed in the Hell's Half Acre area and most of the roads in the Texas Butte area would be closed to public motor traffic during specific periods of the year. These closed roads may be opened periodically to allow the public access to firewood, mushroom or berry picking and other seasonal activities, including snowmobiling.

## Timber production king in Type-6 area

But the largest portion of land under the preferred alternative would be allocated type-6, in which logging and grazing are considered the primary values. The objective for managing the 144,518 acres included in the type-6 allocation calls for optimizing "wood fiber production on commercial Forest lands" and obtaining optimum forage output for domestic grazing animals. While "maximizing commodity output" is stressed, allocation 6 still requires that Streamside Management Units to protect aquatic life be maintained, and that the Heppner Unit's visual quality objectives be met. Type-6 also calls for retaining some old growth areas, and managing elk habitat to the extent possible "without reducing wood fiber yield."

## Elk population will remain high

Under the type 3, 3-a and 25 designations, "what we're saying is that commodity production is important, but elk is king," commented District Ranger Ben Seminoe. The more than 126,000 acres included in allocations 3, 3-a and 25—nearly half of the Unit's total acreage—"would be greatly constrained for what you can do with timber production," he said.

The current summer elk population supported by the Heppner Unit is estimated at 4,440—one of the largest in any single unit in the National Forest system. Under the preferred alternative, summer habitat would be provided for an estimated 3,963 elk—a reduction of 477 animals. Under the "no-change", commodity-oriented alternative, the elk population would dip to 2,591, and under the RARE II-styled wilderness alternative, the elk herd would increase to an estimated 4,879, according to Forest Service estimates.

Seminoe noted that Oregon Fish and Game biologists have set 3,621 as the optimum number of elk to be maintained on the Heppner Unit. This

means that under the preferred alternative, the Heppner Unit's elk population would exceed the Oregon Fish and Game objective by 342 animals, even though there will be a reduction in herd size.

## Allowable cut to rise

The estimated annual programmed timber harvest, or allowable cut, is expected to rise to 39.3 million board feet under the preferred alternative, up slightly from the current rate of 38.5 million.

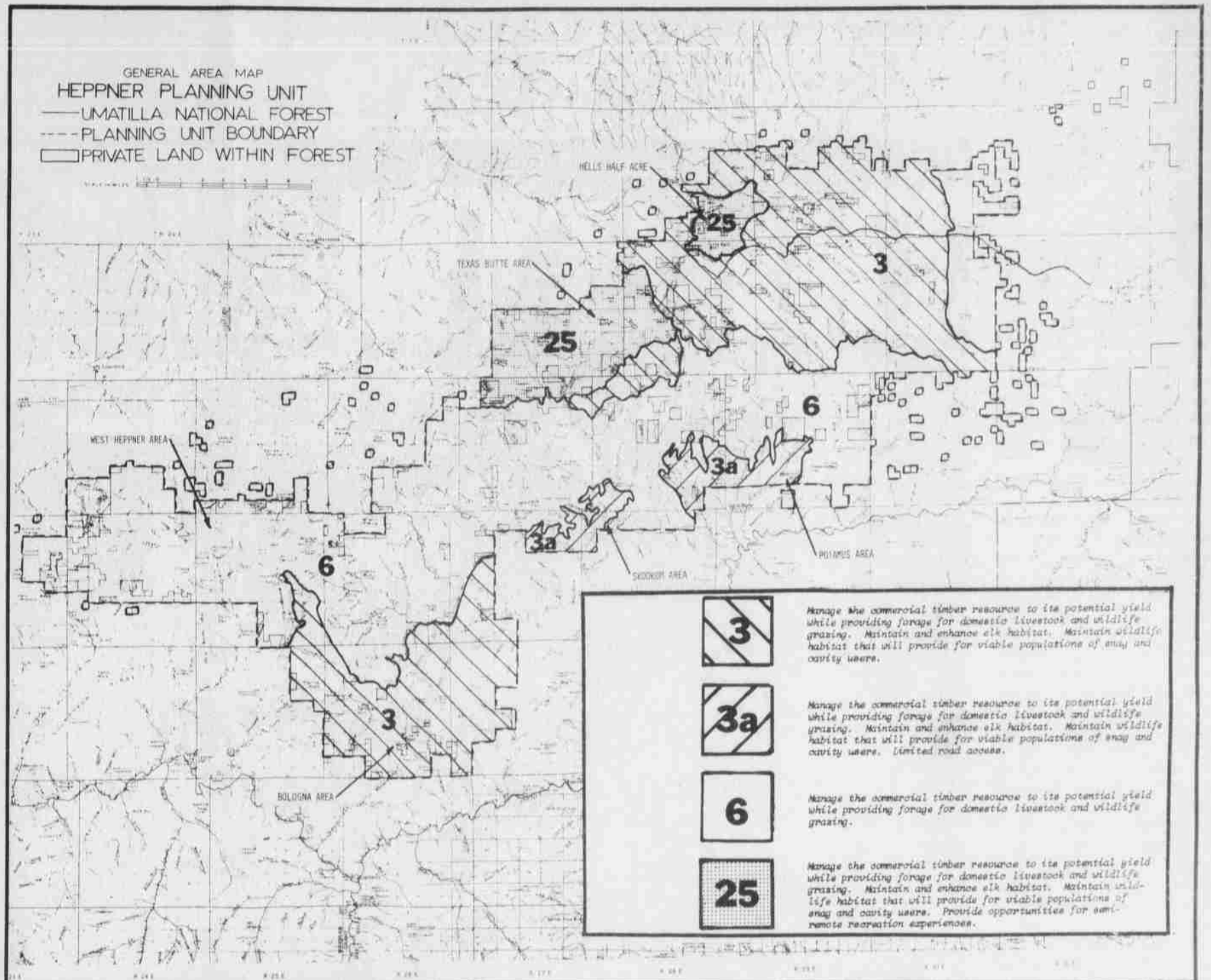
Domestic livestock grazing would also increase slightly under the preferred alternative, up to 16,400 AUM's (animal unit months) from the current level of 15,700 AUM's.

## off-road rules modified under new plan

The preferred alternative would also modify current off-road vehicle use regulations for the Heppner Unit. The type-25 areas at Texas Butte and Hell's Half Acre would be closed to off-road use, except for snowmobiles. Snowmobile use would be closed from three days prior to the start of elk season to the end of the hunting period. Some areas adjacent to the type-25 areas will be closed to all motor vehicles from three days prior to the opening of elk season until the end of the season. The road to Madison Butte lookout would remain open to the public.

## No wilderness areas

The draft environmental statement notes that the preferred alternative



- 3** Manage the commercial timber resource to its potential yield while providing forage for domestic livestock and wildlife grazing. Maintain and enhance elk habitat. Maintain wildlife habitat that will provide for viable populations of snag and cavity users.
- 3a** Manage the commercial timber resource to its potential yield while providing forage for domestic livestock and wildlife grazing. Maintain and enhance elk habitat. Maintain wildlife habitat that will provide for viable populations of snag and cavity users. Limited road access.
- 6** Manage the commercial timber resource to its potential yield while providing forage for domestic livestock and wildlife grazing.
- 25** Manage the commercial timber resource to its potential yield while providing forage for domestic livestock and wildlife grazing. Maintain and enhance elk habitat. Maintain wildlife habitat that will provide for viable populations of snag and cavity users. Provide opportunities for semi-wilderness recreation experiences.

allocates absolutely no acreage to activities that prohibit road construction or timber harvest. According to the draft statement, "all roadless

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