Response to ISRP comments of Fiscal Year 2003 Project Proposals

Project ID: 32010

Project Name: Lookout Mountain Road Decommissioning

Sponsor: Dept. of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, Vale District Office, Baker Field Office

Short Description: Decommission a portion of the Sisley Creek and Fox Creek roads totaling approximately two and one-half miles of road. This decommissioning will result in a reduction of sediment, enhancement of riparian vegetation, and reduce the number of stream and spring crossings in the project area.

Below is the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) response to the ISRP comments. The ISRP comments are in italics, with the BLM response following each comment.

A response is needed that clarifies and justifies the priority of this project in the watershed, including providing a better portrayal of benefits to fish.

The BLM has collected background data that was used to determine that this project was a priority for restoration. Proper Functioning Condition (PFC) surveys have been conducted on Sisley Creek, Fox Creek, and Hibbard Creek (the Fox Creek road is within the riparian area of both Fox Creek and Hibbard Creek). These PFC surveys identify road related problems including increased sedimentation, limiting channel sinuosity, and raw banks and bare soil areas at road/stream crossings. In addition to the road related problems, the PFC surveys also indicated a lack of vegetation along portions of the streams within the project area.

This project will remove and restore road/stream crossings on fish-bearing streams. Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) have verified redband trout within both Sisley and Fox Creek. Redband trout, which are listed as a sensitive species by the BLM, are located in the project area. Native redband trout have been genetically verified in the watershed.

Benefits to fish from the completion of this project will eliminate a constant source of sediment. The majority of the road that will be decommissioned is located within the riparian areas of Sisley, Fox, and Hibbard Creeks. Sediment is being introduced into the streams where the roads cross streams and springs in the project area, as well as from the fact that portions of the road parallel the streams in the riparian area. Road related sediment is introduced into the streams during high flows which originate every spring. This introduction of fine sediment occurs during the time period when eggs are in the gravels or as emergence occurs. Eggs and young smolts are especially vulnerable to sediment during this early life stage. Excessive sediment can also fill pool habitat, which results in degraded aquatic habitat.

Decommissioning of these roads, along with the planned planting and seeding of native vegetation in the project area will increase aquatic and riparian habitat by reducing sedimentation, establishing native vegetation on bare soil areas, and increasing shade to the streams, which may reduce stream temperatures. Decommissioning the roads can also increase available water during low flows by removing and restoring stream and spring crossings. The increased vegetation will increase the water holding capacity of these headwater streams, allowing for release later in the year when low flows are of greatest concern.

In addition to the on site benefits, this project would also result in reduced sediment being transported to lower portions of the watershed. There is currently private land restoration being conducted on Fox Creek downstream of the project area. Riparian fencing and planting has been ongoing and the landowners are currently applying for restoration funds through the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB).

This project will result in immediate on the ground benefits to aquatic and riparian habitat within the project area. These roads will not just be blocked from future access as some road decommissioning projects entail, but the subgrade will actually be subsoiled to reduce the compaction and reduce subsurface flow interception. Stream and spring crossings will be removed and restored to their natural channel gradient, channel sinuosity will be restored where roads are encroaching into the stream channel, and native vegetation will be restored along the streambanks at all road/stream crossings as well as on the entire two and a half miles of subsoiled roadbed. After work is completed, roads will be blocked using rock, logs, and/or tank traps and monitored numerous times annually to ensure that vehicle access has been restricted until vegetation is well established and prevents vehicle travel naturally.

The proposal and presentation appeared to refer only to the Lookout Mountain EIS and best professional judgment as the basis for this being in a priority area for restoration.

The BLM manages land within the Baker Resource Area under the direction of the Baker Resource Management Plan (RMP) Record of Decision (RMP, 1989). Ten riparian areas were identified in the RMP for riparian habitat recovery. Fox Creek and Sisley Creek were included in the ten areas identified to have habitat recovery implementation. The RMP states that management actions will be designed to restore natural riparian functions (RMP pg. 17, 1989), which is the main objective of the proposed project.

Further justification of the Lookout Mountain area as a priority for restoration includes the Hibbard Creek area identified as the number two watershed management priority for the Baker Resource Area (RMP pg. 34, 1989). Hibbard Creek was identified as an intensively managed area, which states that: Watershed management plans, either individually or as a Coordinated Plan, will be developed and work will be done primarily for the benefit of watersheds and/or soils (RMP pg. 32, 1989).

As mentioned in the original project description, this project is actually within two subbasins. Sisley Creek flows into the Burnt subbasin, and Fox and Hibbard Creek flow into the Lower Middle Snake Subbasin. The two roads to be decommissioned were included in this one project proposal because of their close proximity to each other and the fact that decommissioning both roads at the same time would result in savings due to reduced contracting, administration, and monitoring costs.

Both of the draft subbasin summaries for this area identify this type of project as a priority. The draft Burnt Subbasin Summary (BSS) identified habitat degradation as one of the most pervasive threats to biodiversity. Riparian habitats serve as the interface between aquatic and terrestrial species and have a direct effect on in-stream habitat features such as temperature, stability, and sediment (BSS pg. 27). The BSS identified loss of quality habitat and a loss of connectedness as the over-riding limiting factors to fish and wildlife production in the Burnt subbasin (BSS pg. 35). In the existing goals, objectives, and strategies section of the BSS, the BLM identified objectives such as enhancing riparian condition, reducing stream sedimentation, and improving water quality (BSS pg. 57,58). Strategies to accomplish these objectives included riparian planting, revegetating streambanks, identifying and fixing road related sources of sediments by closing or restricting access to roads not needed for management, and determining the source of the problem and correcting if possible, which is exactly what this project proposes to do.

The draft Lower Middle Snake Subbasin Summary (LMSSS) describes similar problems as the BSS. The LMSSS points out that generally, habitat conditions in the subbasin are poor for native fish. Poor quality habitat, reduced quantity of habitat, and isolation of populations in fragmented habitat reduces the viability of many species (LMSSS pg. 32). This project would not only improve habitat that has been identified as at a less than desired condition by BLM PFC surveys, but would also reduce fragmentation of habitat by removing and restoring stream and spring crossings.

The LMSSS states that fragmentation of fish habitat is an overriding problem in the subbasin and that temperature is also a substantial habitat constraint in tributary habitats (LMSSS pg. 58). However, stream temperatures taken by BLM in Fox Creek and Sisley Creek in 2001 below the project area did not exceed the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (ODEQ) criteria of 64^0 Fahrenheit for the 7-day average maximum temperature. The 7-day maximum temperature of 64^0 Fahrenheit or higher is what is required to be listed on the ODEQ 303(d) list for temperature. The 7-day maximum temperature recorded on Sisley Creek in 2001 was 63.3^0 Fahrenheit, while the 7-day maximum temperature recorded at Fox Creek was 61.0^0 Fahrenheit. These stream temperatures point out that while there are identified problems in the project area, cool water is available for aquatic life throughout the year. This source of cold water from headwater streams points to another reason to restore and protect this area, which is to ensure that this cold water will continue to be provided to the project area and downstream systems.

Limiting factors in the Lower Middle Snake Subbasin again mention degraded riparian habitat as the main limiting factor in tributary habitats, and high road densities are also mentioned as a potentially limiting factor (LMSSS pg. 66 and 72). Specific immediate or critical needs defined within the Lower Middle Snake Subbasin for Fisheries/Aquatic needs include the following (LMSSS pg. 114-115):

Replace or remove passage problems,
Restore, protect, and create riparian, wetland and floodplain areas within the subbasin,
Restore in-stream habitat,
Reduce stream temperature, sediment and embeddedness levels to levels meeting appropriate state standards,
Reduce road impacts to aquatic resources,
Address streambank instability issues.

All of the above mentioned critical needs would be addressed by this project proposal within the project area.

As seen by the above information, this project proposal will address identified needs in the watershed and is also identified in several documents as a priority, including the two draft Subbasin Summaries and the BLM Resource Management Plan. The proposed project would provide direct on-the-ground benefits to fisheries, aquatic habitat, and riparian habitat. These benefits would be accomplished by reducing the number of stream crossings, decommissioning roads within riparian areas, and establishing native vegetation which would result in increased shade to fish-bearing streams and a noticeable decrease in sedimentation.

References Cited:

Oregon Department of Environmental Quality. 1998. Oregon's Final 1998 Water Quality Limited Streams – 303(d) List. Portland, Oregon.
http://www.deq.state.or.us/

Draft Lower Middle Snake Subbasin Summary. 2001. Prepared for the Northwest Power Planning Council.
http://www.cbfwf.org/

Draft Burnt Subbasin Summary. 2001. Prepared for the Northwest Power Planning Council.
http://www.cbfwf.org/

U. S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management. 1989. Baker Resource Management Plan Record of Decision.