



Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative Landscape Planning Collaboration Committee Steeple Rock Rigdon Draft EA Comment

Dear Middle Fork Ranger District,

The Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative (SWFC) Landscape Planning Collaboration Committee (LPCC) would like to register its support for the Steeple Rock Rigdon (SRR) Draft Environmental Analysis proposed action. The LPCC was borne out of the Rigdon Collaboration Committee (RCC), which has worked closely with the Forest Service on this project since 2016, including numerous field tours and meetings.

In 2019, RCC helped to develop the Rigdon Landscape Analysis (RLA). The RLA identified important values on the Rigdon landscape, and led to Zones of Agreement (ZOA's), consensus-based recommendations for the Forest Service's Rigdon projects. This EA showcases an approach that meets the ZOA's goals of improving ecosystem, economy, and social wellbeing by:

- Restoring historical open forest conditions through variable density thinning on over 3,000 acres of densely covered managed stands under 80 years of age
- Increasing aquatic habitat diversity and watershed health in over 1,000 acres of riparian areas, including floodplain restoration and improving aquatic organism passage, as well as by managing dispersed camping along waterways
- Returning to a frequent fire low-intensity regime through prescribed fire
- Promoting social and economic opportunities by sustainably and responsibly harvesting 40 million board feet of timber and creating stewardship opportunities that would inject much needed capital into our local economies
- Meadow restoration which supports the goal of restoring diverse vegetation types

Projects such as SRR are instrumental in remedying the wildfire crisis. Shaded fuel breaks and strategic harvest are crucial for community protection in eastern Lane County. To achieve a fire-resilient and biodiverse landscape, the LPCC firmly supports the inclusion of burn blocks in the project. We know that forest thinning and prescribed burning are the most effective tools for this goal. The LPCC urges the Forest Service to ensure all prescribed fire treatments are completed, using every resource at their disposal.

Thank you sincerely for your dedication to this project. SWFC looks forward to its timely implementation and continuing cooperation with the Forest Service.

Sincerely,

/s/ *Dustin Rymph*

Coordinator

Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative

SWFC Steering Committee on behalf of the Landscape Planning Collaboration Committee:

David Chamberlain

Professor, University of Oregon

Sue Cathcart

Willamette Mountain Mercantile

Kathy Holston

Previous Oakridge Mayor

D'Lynn Williams

Previous Westfir Mayor

Craig Marcus

Professor, Oregon State University

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Bryan Cutchen (Advisory)

Oakridge Mayor

Dov Weinman (Advisory)

Middle Fork Willamette Watershed
Council

Rigdon Landscape Restoration Project

Landscape Zones of Agreement

The overall conditions of the Rigdon landscape have changed in a profound way in the past 150 years due to fire suppression and resource utilization. These changes have reduced resiliency, and the extent, diversity of habitat and, ecosystem structure of forests (especially in the Dry Mixed Conifer forest type), meadows, and riparian areas. The Rigdon Collaboration Committee (RCC) has come together to provide recommendations to the Middle Fork Ranger District in order to develop a restoration blueprint to restore biodiversity and resiliency in the Rigdon area.

Rigdon Collaboration Committee Landscape Goals:

We believe that past, more open and grassy forest conditions that were maintained by the historical frequent fire regime will be more resilient to the effects of wildfire and insect outbreaks in the face of a warming climate. We also recognize that restoring historical conditions on every acre will not be possible because of current human uses and other multiple use goals, and that many artificial structures such as roads, trails, campgrounds, and administrative sites (such as quarries, etc.) will still be needed to facilitate social uses and management needs. A more detailed discussion of the rationale behind these goals can be found in the associated Background Document.

- Landscape conditions should be restored in order to provide for diverse habitats, structure of streams and vegetation, wildlife, and landscape resilience in the face of wildfire and a warming climate.
- Vegetation and wildlife habitat should be restored to previous, more open conditions in the Dry Mixed Conifer where the vegetation structure, species abundance, forest density, and/or the fire regime have been altered.
- Streams and waterways should be maintained or restored to a condition where natural processes and function provide the habitat and water quality conditions necessary for all native species and life stages.
- Landscape management should take into consideration economic opportunities and social and cultural values, such as recreation access, scenic views, healthy, abundant wildlife, community safety, and overall quality of life.
- We acknowledge that it is important to evaluate the carbon impacts of our management decisions in the Rigdon area. We encourage the USFS to consider the effects of proposed management on carbon storage, and to consider the role of forests in storing carbon to help the state of Oregon achieve its carbon emissions reduction and offset goals, consistent with maintenance of a resilient ecosystem.

Rigdon Collaboration Committee Landscape Restoration Zones of Agreement:**Vegetation**

The Rigdon Collaboration Committee recommends the following actions to restore vegetation:

- Return forest stands which exhibit a change in density and species abundance due to cessation of historical fire regime to their historical, more open conditions. Treatments should place stands on a trajectory for resilience to climate change to the extent possible, consistent with desired future conditions and other social, economic, and legal considerations.
- Re-establish the historical frequent, low intensity fire regime where appropriate by letting natural fires burn under acceptable conditions, and by managed ignitions, when and where needed to achieve resource objectives.
- Actively control and/or eradicate non-native and invasive vegetation by manual, incendiary, prohibitory, or chemical means as needed and appropriate for site conditions and adjacent resources.
- Return non-forest vegetation types, such as meadows and savannas, to their historical abundance and distribution.
- Re-establish plant species that have declined over the past 150 years due to a change in the fire regime or disease, such as native bunchgrasses, Oregon white oak, ponderosa pine, sugar pine, and knobcone pine, to their historical abundance and distribution.
- Restore the diversity and resilience of vegetation and forest structure in plantations where intensive management has created unnaturally dense and/or uniform stands.

Wildlife

The Rigdon landscape includes numerous wildlife species ranging from invertebrates, to reptiles, amphibians, birds, and mammals. Because of the large number of wildlife species that exist within the project area, it is not practical to only address the needs of individual species or suites of species. Ecologically functional habitats provide the necessary components for maintaining robust wildlife populations. And wildlife occurrence is strongly tied to habitat types and the seral condition within those habitat types. Therefore, wildlife needs will be captured by addressing seral conditions within the major plant series occurring in the project area.

The Rigdon Collaboration Committee recommends the following actions to benefit wildlife:

- Consider the plant series and appropriate associated habitat types for each stand and how habitat types fit with the surrounding plant communities to guide management recommendations.
- When warranted, treat forests to increase fire resiliency, minimize competition, insect infestation, disease, and hazardous fuels.
- Create a pine and oak plant series in appropriate zones and in order to manage for the ponderosa pine and Oregon white oak habitat type.
- Prevent early seral forests from progressing into mid-seral closed canopy forests that enter the stem exclusion stage, limiting management options.

- Ex/ Maintain existing open seral habitat and create open seral habitat where appropriate.
[similar type statements for other seral stage recommendations]
- Consider successional restoration (i.e., complete removal of trees) in mid-seral closed canopy forests that are not suitable for thinning, variable density thinning, or other silvicultural practices.
- Where appropriate, convert mid-seral closed canopy forests into mid-seral open canopy forests when pine and oak are prominent stand components.
- Manage ecologically functional mid-seral open canopy forests using appropriate techniques to encourage their progression into late-seral open canopy forests.
- Manage late-seral closed canopy forests that favor mixed conifer forest communities to maintain the character and functionality of these forests for late seral associated species.
- Manage late-seral open canopy and late seral closed canopy forests, that contain old growth pine and oak habitat, as late seral open canopy forests that favor a pine and oak plant series.
- Promote habitat connectivity among wildlife populations for population dispersal and genetic flow by maintaining and/or creating suitable habitat corridors between similar, suitable habitats.

Water

The Rigdon Collaboration Committee recommends the following actions to restore stream and aquatic habitat:

- Increase aquatic habitat diversity.
- Maintain/restore healthy riparian areas.
- Maintain/restore aquatic habitat for songbirds, beaver / terrestrial species dependent on aquatic ecosystems.
- Maintain/restore healthy, functioning floodplains where landforms allow (e.g., alluvial valleys, confluence areas, unconfined valleys).
- Provide sufficient woody material in streams for habitat and water storage.
- Provide adequate aquatic passage through man-made infrastructure (e.g., remove barriers).
- Maintain/restore resilient, functioning ecosystems for current and future climate change effects.
- Supply sufficient habitat for large numbers of native and migrating fish species.
- Store and treat roads to reduce human dumping and artificial sediment inputs.

Human Uses

The Rigdon Collaboration Committee recommends the following actions to benefit human uses:

- Ensure a range of economic and social opportunities in the project area including but not limited to the following:
 - Stewardship contracting that generates retained receipts that can be used to implement restoration projects and benefit local communities;
 - Increased trail access, signage, development of multi-use trails, and road to trail conversion;
 - Timber harvest, small diameter wood harvest, and firewood;

- Special forest products harvest and traditional cultural utilization of resources;
 - Sustainable recreation use such as hunting, camping, horseback riding, hiking, mountain biking, nature study (botany, butterflies, birding), photography, and mushrooming; and
 - Water quality and quantity utilized by communities and residents for drinking water, recreation, and fish.
- Provide opportunities for social and economic benefits by contracting and hiring from surrounding communities first (including but not limited to jobs involving reintroducing and managing fire, pre-commercial thinning, habitat restoration, eco-tourism, and recreation).
- Balance ecological and cultural objectives while developing economically viable projects. This includes balancing recreation use, timber harvest, and the road network with water quality and wildlife habitat needs.
- Educate the public about the Rigdon landscape restoration project needs, and the water quality, forest health, recreation, and other community benefits and opportunities the project may yield.
- Reduce or eliminate human use impacts from dispersed camping and other uses and management, such as roads and logging, on water quality and sustainable recreation uses, through user education and enforcement of regulations.
- Recognize the potential of forests address the impacts of climate change through carbon storage, and balance this potential with project goals of restoring and maintaining a resilient ecosystem.
- Recognize the health and quality of life benefits local communities, residents, and visitors experience from a healthy, functioning ecosystem.