

**DRAFT FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
DWORSHAK PROJECT VEGETATION MANAGEMENT
AHTAHKA, IDAHO
2015**

1. INTRODUCTION/PROPOSED ACTION

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Walla Walla District (Corps), proposes to implement vegetation management projects identified in the Dworshak Five Year Vegetation Management Plan (FY 2015-2020) (VMP) to address two primary needs on lands surrounding the Dworshak Dam and Reservoir (Project): 1) Ecosystem Health/Restoration, and 2) Elk Habitat Maintenance/Creation. Four categories of projects have been identified in the VMP to manage vegetation to address the two primary needs: 1) General Forest Health, 2) Ecosystem Restoration, 3) Elk Habitat Enhancement, and 4) Vegetation Planting/Seeding and Plant Protection.

The proposed action would treat Project vegetation in accordance with ecosystem management principles to improve forest health and elk habitat, while maintaining protection of important resources and adhering to federal land management regulations. A project specific approach was used to evaluate the vegetation management activities that are proposed from 2015-2020.

The VMP was developed by Dworshak Project and Walla Walla District Natural Resource Management (NRM) staff to provide direction for vegetation management from FY2015-2020. This EA evaluates twenty VMP projects, and associated alternatives, to guide vegetation management for public benefits while protecting natural resources.

2. PURPOSE AND NEED

The Corps proposes to manage vegetation on Corps managed federal lands at the Dworshak Project from FY 2015-2020 for authorized purposes, using ecosystem management principles to address general ecosystem health/restoration concerns and to maintain/create elk habitat. The VMP, an addition to the Dworshak Operational Management Plan (OMP), focuses on projects to address the following two primary needs on Project lands:

- **General Forest Health.** Unhealthy forest stands are present in some areas due to root rot, insect infestations, storm blowdown, overstocking, and related issues. Some forest stands exhibit a considerable departure from the historical range of variability with respect to species composition, stand density, stand structure, age, and fire regime. Wildfire, a natural ecosystem disturbance process, has been virtually eliminated from the landscape over the past 95 years due to effective suppression efforts, resulting in unnatural stand conditions, making many forest stands more susceptible to insect and disease problems and

reduced habitat for many organisms. There is a need to treat vegetation with insect and disease caused mortality to restore healthy forest conditions in these areas.

- **Elk Habitat Enhancement.** The original goals and objectives developed for the Dworshak Elk Mitigation Area, one of the land classifications designated in the Dworshak Master Plan, recommend optimum elk habitat consisting of 60% openings and 40% cover. Many of the mitigation areas treated in the 1970s and 1980s to create openings with forage have moved successional away from openings to forest cover, resulting in a less than optimum opening/cover ratio. Many existing openings within the Dworshak Elk Mitigation Area are not producing adequate winter elk forage due primarily to herbivory of young plants by ungulates, lagomorphs, and rodents, as well as harsh winter conditions reducing forage abundance and quality. Planting/seeding and protection of browse plant species is needed to improve elk forage.

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

The alternatives were developed by combining proposed projects from the VMP, the Dworshak Master Plan, and applicable environmental laws and regulations. Individual project proposals in the VMP were developed by Dworshak and District NRM staff to be implemented during the FY 2015-2020 time period. The EA evaluates the potential project specific environmental impacts of these actions, with similar projects being grouped together by objective to develop the alternatives. The following four alternatives have been identified for the Project by combining proposed projects from the VMP:

- **Alternative 1 (No Action Alternative):** Projects involving timber harvest, planting/seeding, or plant protection would not occur.
- **Alternative 2 (General Ecosystem Health/Restoration Emphasis):** Proposed action would focus on proposed VMP projects that would address general ecosystem health/restoration concerns.
- **Alternative 3 (Elk Habitat Maintenance/Creation Emphasis):** Proposed action would focus on proposed VMP projects that address elk habitat maintenance/creation concerns.
- **Alternative 4 (Combined-Preferred Alternative):** Proposed action would focus on proposed VMP projects that would address general ecosystem health/restoration and elk habitat maintenance/creation concerns.

Alternative 1, the No Action Alternative prescribed by the Council of Environmental Quality to serve as the baseline against which all other alternatives are analyzed, was carried forward for detailed analysis. Alternatives 2 and 3 were rejected from detailed analysis as they failed to meet the purpose and need and conflict with other land/natural resource goals/requirements. Alternative 4 best meets the purpose and need and was carried forward as the Preferred Alternative for detailed analysis.

Vegetation management projects identified in the VMP must not conflict with other land or natural resources management program goals/requirements (e.g., recreation, pest management, etc.).

4. ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

The Preferred Alternative and the No Action Alternative were analyzed for potential effects to the following resources: Geology/Soils, Hydrology/Limnology, Air Quality, Vegetation, Wildlife, Fisheries, Threatened and Endangered Species, Cultural Resources, Recreation, Aesthetics, Socioeconomics, and Climate Change. Pertinent conservation measures, both impact minimization measures (IMMs) and best management practices (BMPs), would be fully implemented for all specific VMP projects, as appropriate, to minimize environmental impacts.

The Corps also considered the cumulative effects of the proposed action along with other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions in the Dworshak Project area. Numerous landowners from other federal, state, local, private, and tribal entities have owned and managed lands in the Project vicinity and will continue to do so in the future. The Corps analyzed the cumulative effects of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions across these ownerships on Air Quality, Vegetation, Aesthetics, Wildlife, and Socioeconomics because these resources were determined to be notable for their importance to the area and their potential for cumulative impacts.

Environmental analysis and effects of the Preferred Alternative and the No Action Alternative, including cumulative effects, are detailed in Section 3 of the EA. The analysis concluded there may be some short-term detrimental impacts to some resources (Geology/Soils, Air Quality, Recreation, Aesthetics) from the Preferred Alternative, but overall long-term effects on all analyzed resources would be insignificant or beneficial. The potential effects of the proposed action, when combined with the effects of past, present and reasonably foreseeable future actions, is not expected to result in significant effects to the resources identified above.

5. PUBLIC COMMENT/INVOLVEMENT

Agency and public involvement supporting the development of vegetation management projects has been ongoing since 2008, when public scoping meetings were held during the development of the Dworshak Public Use Plan, a preliminary document developed prior to the recently completed Dworshak Master Plan. .

The EA and draft FONSI have been made available to individuals, businesses, organizations and agencies for a 30-day review and comment period from August 28 to September 27, 2015. Upon conclusion of the review period, the District will consider comments received and move forward in the NEPA process with the signing of the FONSI, if applicable, or to the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement if deemed necessary. The District sent a letter on August 24, 2015 to the Nez Perce Tribe offering Government to Government consultation.

6. COMPLIANCE WITH OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

See Section 4.0 of the EA for a discussion of compliance with other laws and regulations. The proposed action complies with other federal laws and applicable regulations.

7. CONCLUSION/FINDING

Having reviewed the Dworshak Project Vegetation Management EA, I find the document provides sufficient discussions on the purpose and need for the proposed action, alternatives, the environmental impacts of the proposed action and alternatives, and a listing of agencies and persons consulted. I have taken into consideration the technical aspects of the project, best scientific information available and public comments received. These documents provide sufficient evidence and analysis to meet the District's requirements pursuant to the National Environmental Policy. Based on this information, I find that implementation of the proposed action would not result in significant impacts on the quality of the human environment and that an environmental impact statement is not required and the Corps may proceed with the proposed action, subject to funding and agency discretion.

Timothy R. Vail
Lieutenant Colonel, Corps of Engineers
District Commander

Date