

STEMILT BASIN & SCOUT-A-VISTA FUELS REDUCTION PROJECTS

Introduction

Chelan County Natural Resource Department (NRD) is implementing an ongoing program to increase community resilience to wildfires. The agency coordinates and facilitates the Stemilt Partnership, which is a collaboration between agencies, interest groups, and local stakeholders that focuses on protecting the natural resource, wildlife, and recreational values in the project area. The County has convened several landowner and agency meetings to educate and gather support for restoration, forest health, and fuels reduction projects on private and state lands. The proposed fuels reduction work is part of a larger landscape-scale forest restoration and wildfire hazard reduction effort in the Stemilt-Squilchuck watershed.

Chelan County NRD proposes to implement hazardous fuels treatments to reduce the intensity of wildfires that may occur and to provide areas along Upper Wheeler Road and along the edges of the Forest Ridge subdivision where fire fighters may more safely manage a wildfire (Projects). According to the Chelan County Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan (NHMP), the proposed Projects are within a “very high wildfire risk” area of southeast Chelan County that has a history of frequent wildfire occurrence (**Figure 1**). There are many residences and infrastructure at risk in this area. Reducing hazardous fuels in the treatment areas would strategically decrease the potential spread of wildfire in and near the project area.

The Chelan County NRD has applied to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) through the Washington State Emergency Management Division (EMD) for grants under FEMA’s Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). Washington State EMD is the direct recipient for the grant, and Chelan County NRD is the subrecipient. The HMGP is authorized by Section 404 of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act. The FEMA HMGP Grant program would fund 75 percent of the cost of the Projects and the remaining 25 percent of project costs would come from non-federal funds. Funds would be administered through the Washington State EMD, and the Projects would be administered by Chelan County NRD.

What are the Projects?

The purpose of the proposed HMGP Projects is to protect people and property by reducing the risk of wildfire-related hazards within the Stemilt and Squilchuck sub-basins near Wenatchee, Washington. The projects would implement hazardous fuels reduction work along Upper Wheeler Road and near the Forest Ridge neighborhood on the Mission Ridge and Scout-A-Vista properties (**Figure 2**). Hazardous fuels reduction includes thinning, removing ladder fuels, reducing flammable vegetation, and replacing flammable vegetation with fire-resistant vegetation. The purpose of fuels reduction projects is to provide a break in the canopy that can force a fire to the ground where it can be more easily managed by fire crews. While some untreated forests would remain in the area, hazardous fuels reduction in the treatment areas may contribute to containment efforts, reducing the intensity and extent of wildfires, which ultimately reduces risks to people living near the treatment areas.

Why is an Environmental Assessment Required?

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires federal agencies to review impacts on the natural and human environment prior to undertaking a federal action (funding the project) and to inform decision-making. The Environmental Assessment (EA) will be prepared per DHS Instruction 023-01 and FEMA Instruction 108-01-1, which implement NEPA.

What is an Environmental Assessment?

An EA is completed to determine environmental impacts of project alternatives and to see if the project requires further in-depth analysis. The EA describes the existing environment, explains the environmental effects of the project and alternative actions, and identifies mitigation measures to avoid significant impacts on the human or natural environment. The EA may conclude that the project does not significantly impact the environment or may require more detailed analysis through preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement.

One EA is being prepared to cover both the Stemilt Basin and Scout-A-Vista Fuels Reduction Projects.

What Key Issues are Associated with this Project?

- ▶ According to the Chelan County Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan (NHMP), the treatment areas are within a “very high wildfire risk” area of southeast Chelan County (**Figure 1**) that has a history of frequent wildfire occurrence. The NHMP identifies the top wildfire mitigation priority as reducing the risk of wildfire hazards and damage through wildfire prevention and mitigation activities, including thinning to reduce hazardous fuel loads and lower the risk of catastrophic fire. The objective would be to restore the more natural regime of smaller, high-frequency, low-intensity fires.
- ▶ The Upper Wheeler Road treatment area approximately follows the ridgeline between the Squilchuck and Stemilt sub-basins. This is a strategic location to implement a fuels buffer because wildfires often pause at the top of ridges giving fire crews a bit more time to work on containing a fire. Because there are no vegetation maintenance requirements along primitive roads rights-of-way, such as Upper Wheeler Road, the vegetation is currently dense and does not provide a break where a crown fire might be forced to the ground. Historically, a buffer of thinned forest was maintained near the boundary of Section 19, which contains the Mission Ridge Treatment Area, but it has since grown in and would not provide any benefit to slowing wildfire spread.
- ▶ The Scout-A-Vista treatment area is heavily forested with tree densities far above optimum levels for managing wildfires and forest health. High tree densities in the area are contributing to tree mortality and increased disease. This area is also steeply sloped, which can increase fire risk.
- ▶ Recent large-scale wildfires have threatened the project area vicinity and resulted in evacuation orders and property damage. The 2012 Wenatchee Complex fire burned up to the ridge separating Squilchuck from Mission Creek. This fire would have been catastrophic if the fire had not been slowed significantly by thinning treatments that were implemented by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) in previous years on the ridge between the Squilchuck drainage and Mission Creek. That ridge is similar in topography to the ridge in the proposed project area that separates Squilchuck Valley from Stemilt Basin along Upper Wheeler Road.

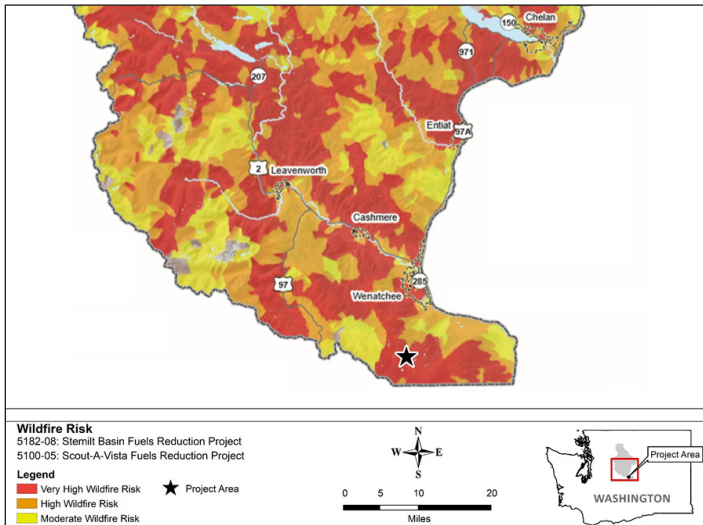


Figure 1: Residential Development Interspersed with Forest Vegetation

Alternatives Considered

NEPA requires that a range of reasonable alternatives addressing the purpose and need for the Projects be evaluated. The no action alternative is included as a comparison with the other action alternative options.

Proposed Action

The proposed action would implement fuels reduction work in three treatment areas to reduce the spread of wildfire: (1) approximately 100 acres of land located along the Upper Wheeler Road (Wheeler Road) and an optional 49 acres if funding allows, (2) approximately 75 acres of land south of Squilchuck State Park (Mission Ridge/Forest Ridge), and (3) approximately 29 acres of land within the southern portion of the Scout-A-Vista property west of the Forest Ridge subdivision (**Figure 2**). Prior to the FEMA-funded fuels reduction work within the Mission Ridge treatment area, the County would implement a commercial thin to remove larger trees and open up the canopy. The commercial thin would not be FEMA-funded, but it will be considered in the EA as a connected action.

Work within Section 16 of the Upper Wheeler Road treatment area would require heavy equipment such as feller bunchers, harvesters, or skidders. Cut trees would be collected into slash piles and burned. Vegetation in Section 20 of the Upper Wheeler Road treatment area would either be masticated or cut with chainsaws and chipped and spread thinly over the treatment area. It is unlikely that cut material would need to be burned in Section 20.

Vegetation in the Mission Ridge treatment area would generally be cut by ground crews with hand tools such as chainsaws because the steep slopes generally make the use of mechanical equipment difficult. Mechanical masticators may be used in flatter areas of the Mission Ridge area if feasible. Slash (cut vegetation) would be hand piled and burned.

Work on the Scout-A-Vista treatment area would be conducted primarily by ground crews using hand tools because of the steep slopes in the treatment area. Cut material would be piled into small piles and burned.

Avoidance and minimization measures would be incorporated into the Projects to limit the potential for adverse impacts to resources, such as surface waters and wildlife. The Projects would only remove trees up to 14 inches in diameter. All burning would follow state and local regulations about smoke and air quality. Fuels reduction work on the three treatment areas would occur over a period of 12 months. The Upper Wheeler Road and Mission Ridge treatment areas would become part of a landscape-scale fuels reduction and maintenance program managed by the County. An operation and maintenance plan would be developed for Scout-A-Vista and signed by the Scout-A-Vista landowner prior to the start of the work.

No Action Alternative

The no action alternative is included to describe potential future conditions if no action is taken to reduce wildfire hazards. Under this alternative, no FEMA-funded work would be conducted to reduce wildfire hazards within the Stenilt and Squilchuck sub-basins. Existing conditions would remain the same, including the high risk of wildfire hazards, threatening the Forest Ridge Neighborhood and other nearby residences and infrastructure with the associated potential for loss of life and property.

Opportunities for Public Comment

The public will have two opportunities to provide comments on the Projects. The first occurs during this scoping phase where the public is invited to comment on the scope of the EA, the proposed action, potential alternatives, and key issues to consider in the EA. Following publication of the draft EA, there will be a 30-day comment period. The public will be invited to provide input on the information and analyses in the draft EA.

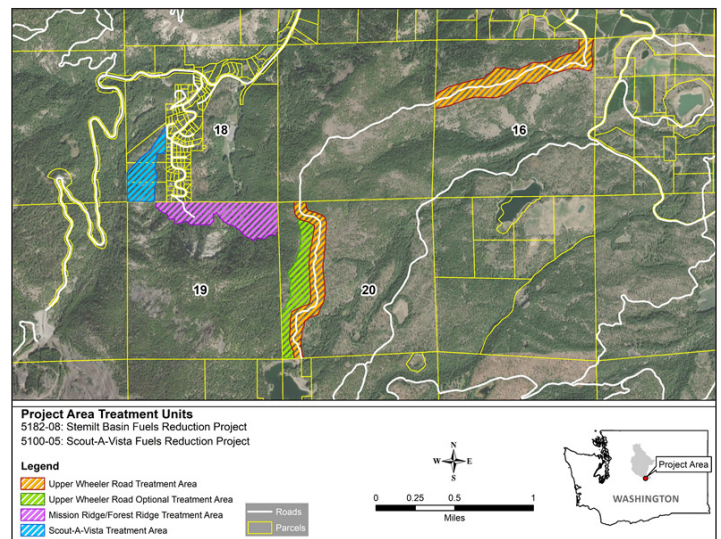


Figure 2: Stenilt and Scout-A-Vista Treatment Areas

For more information about the Stenilt Basin Fuels Reduction Project, contact:

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Comments should be made in writing and sent to:

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