

# FAQs/Questions and Answers

## Pacific Northwest Region – Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest

### Wolverine Fire Area Information – Entiat Ranger District, November 2015

#### 1. What is closing?

On the Entiat Ranger District, Entiat River Road was closed just past Silver Falls due to hazards associated with the Duncan Fire in 2014. The BAER team re-examined the area in fall 2015 and found minimal recovery and with additional burning as a result of the Wolverine Fire, the road will remain closed. Due to the increased danger of flooding, Silver Falls, Fox Creek, and Lake Creek campgrounds will also close. In several high-burn areas, the fire burned all the way down to both sides of the river increasing the likelihood of flooding and woody debris in the river. There are existing wood jams in the river above Cottonwood Campground that could move downstream after heavy rains and get caught at the bridge at Cottonwood Campground forming a debris dam. Therefore that bridge also will be temporarily closed.

#### 2. How will you determine when the area is reasonably safe for public access?

The area closure will continue to be assessed and as conditions and the associated risk change, the closure will be lifted. Risks are evaluated based on guidelines in the Forest Service Manual. Risks are considered unacceptable when determinations of high to very high risk are made. When human life or safety is threatened even intermediate risks are considered unacceptable.

Under the Wolverine BAER Plan, high to very high risks to forest user safety were identified due to the probability of flooding, debris flows, avalanches, rock and tree fall, etc., combined with risks immediately downstream of the wildfire where road crossings and other areas were deemed at an enhanced risk due to flooding and debris flow potential. These types of high risk situations are deemed an emergency such that NEPA is not required to continue the closure.

Installation of an ALERT weather station and additional streamflow gages will provide new access to real-time observations of precipitation and runoff in the upper Entiat Valley and allow for better flood warning coordination with the National Weather Service, Chelan County, and Forest Service.

#### 3. In the past wildfires did not result in a long-term area closure. Why are closures now required?

Each wildfire is unique and the degree of damage depends upon intensity, location, timing, and several other factors. Wildfires may burn hotter due to drought, presence of dead and dying trees, and higher quantities of on-the-ground fuels. When the level of public risk is considered unacceptable, an area closure is implemented so that the public will not be in harm's way. Closures are more common nationally than they were in the past because we have better capabilities to assess risk. Once we are aware of the danger, we cannot ignore it.

#### 4. Can you open the area during periods of clear weather?

Even during seasons in which most of the area can expect stable weather consistently, we see a fair number of rain events. The upper Entiat valley has more storms in June and July than other areas. We could not expose an employee to liability by making a



for the greatest good

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daily call on whether the area was safe to open when weather prediction and communication of imminent danger is so difficult in this area.

### 5. Can you assure us that you will reopen the roads in 3-4 years?

The BAER team estimates that recovery will occur in 3-5 years, but we will assess the risk annually so that the closures can be lifted as soon as possible. NEPA is not required to reopen roads that are already in our system. Our budget for road maintenance is relatively low compared to the many miles of roads we have, but reopening these roads would be one of our priorities given that the Entiat District has very little recreation opportunities under the current closures. The district will engage with the public to help set the priorities for reopening roads.

### 6. Where there is little natural vegetation regrowth, why not use seeding or other slope stabilization treatments?

Emergency hillslope treatments to stabilize soils at high risk of accelerated erosion include seeding and straw/wood mulching. They are most effective when slopes are less than 40% and a large percentage of the watershed needs to be treated to have a measureable difference. Within the Wolverine Fire, the majority of slopes are too steep or the area of the watershed that can be effectively treated is too small and the treatments will not necessarily reduce potentially damaging post fire flows. Therefore these treatments are not recommended.

Installation of wattles or contour felling could help to stabilize the slopes, but the amount of standing dead snags in the area and rocky steep slopes would place the crews at far too high a risk to complete the work. Furthermore, Forest Service and other research have demonstrated that the effectiveness is minimal.

Despite high fire intensity, soil burn severity was more often than not deemed low in the Wolverine area. Sampling of post-fire soil burn severity and effective ground cover revealed the presence and abundance of near surface intact fine roots. Seeds, fungi, rhizomes, and pliable roots just below the surface hint that the natural recovery of these sites may be potentially rapid (i.e., with 1 or 2 growing seasons). Hence it is believed that natural recovery of effective ground cover is the most efficient and cost-effective approach to emergency stabilization and minimizes exposure of crews to safety hazards.

### 7. What about long-term plans?

We will be looking at recreation in total on the Entiat Ranger District with an objective of reducing risk to public safety in the floodplain corridor. The risk of flooding and debris flows in the current campgrounds was relatively high even before the area burned. We need to look at relocating campsites and perhaps the road so that they are further from the river and not at the base of alluvial fans. .