



File Code: 1950-2/1920-2/2670

Date: January 29, 2003

## **Proposed Threatened and Endangered Species Amendment to the *Monongahela National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan***

### **Notice and Opportunity to Comment**

Dear Interested Citizens:

As the Monongahela National Forest (MNF) Supervisor, I am considering authorizing a non-significant amendment to the 1986 *MNF Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan)* to ensure pertinent new information for threatened, endangered, and proposed species is incorporated into existing *Forest Plan* direction, standards, and monitoring requirements. Attached for your review and comment is the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Proposed Threatened and Endangered Species Amendment to the *Forest Plan*.

#### **Background**

In recent years, new information concerning threatened and endangered species has emerged that is not specifically addressed in the 1986 *Forest Plan* or is inconsistent with existing *Forest Plan* standards (see the Preface of the EA for background information and the Purpose and Need section in Chapter I). The attached EA was written to disclose the direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts that may result from adding, deleting, revising, and/or retaining *Forest Plan* threatened and endangered species' standards and monitoring requirements.

#### **Public Involvement**

Scoping for the proposed amendment was initiated in February 2001. Since then, (a) the MNF's December 2000 Biological Assessment was revised -- primarily to respond to new information about West Virginia (WV) northern flying squirrels; (b) a December 2001 Planning Update was provided to interested parties; and (c) the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) *Biological Opinion on the Impacts of Forest Management and Other Activities to the Indiana Bat on the MNF (Biological Opinion)* was issued and distributed to interested parties (Spring 2002).

#### **Issues & Alternatives**

Many issues and alternatives were generated from the public involvement process (see Chapter I, page 7; Chapter II, pages 35-44; and Appendix F). Altogether, 21 alternatives were considered for implementation, of which, the following four alternatives were analyzed in detail. Alternative 1 is considered the preferred alternative.

1. The Proposed Action would amend the *Forest Plan* to incorporate the following information: (a) Mandatory Terms and Conditions for Indiana bats identified in the USFWS's *Biological Opinion*. (b) *Guidelines for the Identification and Management of WV Northern Flying Squirrels* found in the *Appalachian Northern Flying Squirrels' Recovery Plan (Updated)* in September 2001. (c) Revisions to *Forest Plan* standards and monitoring requirements that better articulate the MNF's on-going efforts to manage, protect, and recover threatened and endangered species.



Proposed Action descriptions are provided in Chapter I, pages 3-4 and within boxes in Chapter II, pages 2-5, 8-10, 12-14, 16, and 18-20 of the attached EA. Proposed changes to standards and monitoring requirements are listed in Chapter II, pages 3-20 and in Appendix A. Proposed land allocation changes are displayed on maps in Appendix B. The glossary in Appendix C provides definitions of terms and Appendix D contains the USFWS' March 26, 2002 *Biological Opinion*.

2. The No Action Alternative is continued implementation of the 1986 *Forest Plan*, as amended to date. Under this alternative, the *Forest Plan* would not be amended at this time. Threatened and endangered species' management and on-going and future site-specific projects would continue to be governed by existing *Forest Plan* goals, Forest-wide standards, Management Prescription (MP) allocations, and Zoological Area standards (see Appendix B for No Action Alternative maps). A summary of the No Action Alternative is provided in Chapter II, pages 2-3. Appendix E contains the MNF's current Conservation Plan for Federally Listed Threatened and Endangered Species.
3. Alternative 1 was developed to meet the purpose and need for action identified in Chapter I of the attached EA while responding to Issue #2 in Chapter I, page 8. This alternative would enhance threatened and endangered species management while (a) minimizing the long-term, adverse effects on the Forest's ability to provide vegetative diversity for wildlife (including the Indiana bat) and timber outputs in a manner consistent with Forest Plan Goals #XI for economic efficiency (*Forest Plan*, p. 39); and (b) protecting natural resources (in this case, water quality) from degradation consistent with Forest Goal #XVI (*Forest Plan*, p. 40). A description of Alternative 1 is provided in Chapter II, page 21. Proposed changes to standards and monitoring requirements are listed in Appendix A. This alternative would be the same as the Proposed Action except it would (a) permit large-scale tree felling activities within five-mile radii of Indiana bat hibernacula any time of the year; and (b) incorporate the two, optional "Conservation Recommendations" identified in the USFWS's *Biological Opinion*. Appendix A lists the standards that would be changed under Alternative 1, and Appendix B displays maps of Alternative 1.
4. Alternative 2 was developed to meet the purpose and need for action that was described in Chapter I, page 2 and address Issue #1 in Chapter I, page 8. It was designed to maximize roost tree protection and reduce potential for incidental "taking" of an Indiana bat more than any other alternative. A description of Alternative 2 is provided in Chapter II, page 22. Proposed changes to standards and monitoring requirements are listed in Appendix A. This alternative would implement the same standards as the Proposed Action except (a) it would not impose seasonal restrictions on tree felling activities within five-mile radii of Indiana bat hibernacula; (b) all land within five-mile radii of Indiana bat hibernacula would be designated as Zoological Areas where commercial tree harvesting activities would be prohibited; and (c) the USFWS' two conservation recommendations would be implemented.

Implementing the Proposed Action, Alternative 1, or Alternative 2 would be consistent with the purpose and need for action defined in Chapter I. Amending the *Forest Plan* as proposed under these action alternatives ensures the MNF *Forest Plan* meets Forest Service responsibilities for threatened, endangered, and proposed species consistent with the (1) Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973, as amended, and (2) approved recovery plans of each threatened and endangered

species found on the MNF. Implementing the No Action Alternative would violate the ESA and be inconsistent with the *Appalachian Northern Flying Squirrels' Recovery Plan (Updated)*.

### **Decision to Be Made**

The decision to be made is which *Forest Plan* standards and monitoring requirements will be changed, if any, to address new information about federally listed threatened and endangered species on the MNF, especially new Indiana bat and WV northern flying squirrel information.

### **Send Comments**

Please send your comments by **February 28, 2003**. Address them to Laura Hise, 200 Sycamore Street, Elkins, WV, 26241, or e-mail them to [lhise@fs.fed.us](mailto:lhise@fs.fed.us). Please include (1) your name and address; (2) the name of the environmental assessment; (3) specific information, along with supporting reasons, you believe we should consider before making a decision. Comments received in response to this solicitation will become a matter of public record.<sup>1</sup>

### **Obtain an Electronic Copy**

If you would like to view an electronic copy of this environmental assessment go to the MNF website at [www.fs.fed.us/r9/mnf/environmental/environmental\\_index.htm](http://www.fs.fed.us/r9/mnf/environmental/environmental_index.htm).

### **Receive the Decision Notice**

Copies of the resulting decision will be mailed to those people who have submitted comments prior to the close of the comment period and to those who request a copy.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

/s/ Clyde N. Thompson  
CLYDE N. THOMPSON  
Forest Supervisor

<sup>1</sup>Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, those who submit such comments will not have standing to appeal the subsequent decision under 36 CFR 217. Additionally, pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27(d), any person may request that a submission be withheld from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that confidentiality is granted in only very limited circumstances. The Forest Service will inform the requester of its decision regarding a request for confidentiality, and where the request is denied, the submission will be returned and the requester notified that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address.