

**BALTIMORE VEGETATIVE
MANAGEMENT PROJECT**

***RECORD OF DECISION
AND
FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT***

**USDA Forest Service
Ottawa National Forest
Ontonagon & Bergland Ranger Districts**



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1.0 Introduction

This Record of Decision (ROD) and accompanying Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) documents my selection of the site specific management activities for the Baltimore Vegetative Management Project (VMP); it is not a general management plan for the area. These activities will implement the Ottawa National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan).

My decision is based on the analysis of effects documented in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for this project, documentation in the Project File Record, and other relevant or new information related to this project.

1.1 DECISIONS TO BE MADE

With this Record of Decision, I am deciding on:

- Selection and site specific location of appropriate vegetative management practices, if any. Included in the decision would be silvicultural prescriptions necessary for the sustained harvest and regeneration of timber resources, riparian improvement and protection, and associated actions common to all action alternatives.
- Selection and site specific location of appropriate transportation system management, if any. Included in this decision would be whether or not to expand the Gauthier Gravel Pit, move the gate on FR 710, and construct, reconstruct, maintain, decommission, or close roads.
- The amount, type, and location of watershed improvement projects, if any.
- The amount, type, and location of wildlife habitat improvement projects, if any.
- The amount, type, and location of dispersed recreation improvement projects, if any.
- The amount, type, and location of treatment necessary to attempt to control or eradicate invasive, exotic, noxious, and weedy plant species, if any.

Document Preview

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- 2.0 Purpose and Need for Action
- 3.0 Summary of Alternatives Considered
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- Whether or not site specific monitoring requirements would be needed to assure actions common to all action alternatives are correctly implemented and effective.

As noted in the EIS, the deciding official can decide to:

- 1) Select all or parts of the Proposed Action.
- 2) Choose an alternative, or parts of an alternative, to the Proposed Action within the range of effects analyzed.
- 3) Reject all action alternatives and select the No Action Alternative.
- 4) Defer any/all activities until another time.

2.0 Purpose and Need for Action

2.1 NEED FOR ACTION

The Need for Action is developed from reviewing the difference between the existing condition and the desired future condition (DFC) of resources within the project area relative to the management objectives of the Forest Plan.

The Forest Plan describes a desired future condition and sets broad goals and objectives for the management of the Ottawa National Forest (ONF). This information is translated into detailed management directions and DFCs that apply either Forestwide or to specific Management Areas (MAs) across the Forest. Management Areas (MAs) are subdivisions of the Forest, each with a specific desired future condition. The project area contains four Management Areas - 1.1, 8.1, 9.2, and 9.3 (see Map B in Appendix 1).

The purpose of proposing activities in the Baltimore project area is derived from Forest Plan direction and any disparity between the existing and desired resource conditions, which forms the basis of a need for management action. Following are the primary purposes and needs behind the proposed activities:

- Promote and maintain processes that would enhance natural species diversity while providing a supply of wood products for regional and local needs to help support a stable economic base within the market area
- Maintain and enhance habitat conditions that sustain viable populations of a variety of fish and wildlife species and enhance watershed conditions
- Maintain a road system that allows for management of National Forest System lands and provides for public access while meeting other resource needs
- Provide recreational opportunities to meet the public's needs

- Provide for Public Health and Safety

3.0 Summary of Alternatives Considered

In deciding which management practices to implement in the Selected Action, I considered three "action" alternatives and the "No Action" alternative in detail (EIS, p.2-4 to 2-11). These four alternatives provide a range of alternatives that sharply defined the issues. Major issues raised through internal and external comments included the following:

- 1) Aspen Management
- 2) Balance of Softwood Component
- 3) Temporary Openings Exceeding 40 Acres

A description of these issues can be found in Section 2.2.2, p. 2-2 & 2-3 of the EIS.

Other resource concerns raised through internal and external comments include the following:

- Invasive Plant Species
- Vegetative Management Along the North Country Trail (NCT)
- Road Use Through Private Land

A description of these concerns can be found in Section 2.2.3, p. 2-3 & 2-4 of the EIS.

In addition, three other alternatives were considered, but not analyzed in detail (EIS, p.2-18 & 19).

The action alternatives considered for this project were based on the Forest Plan goals, objectives, standards and guidelines, and management area direction with consideration of both public and internal (ONF) concerns.

The action alternatives proposed were developed by an interdisciplinary team (ID team) comprised of Forest Service personnel.

These alternatives were intended to specifically address the disparities between the current conditions within the project area and the desired future conditions for MA 1.1, as articulated in the Forest Plan (Pages IV-103 to IV-111), as well as the concerns raised during scoping in association with the Purpose and Need for this project.

The following discussion summarizes the alternatives considered in detail. Chapter 2.0 of the EIS contains a complete description of the alternatives and the process used to identify them.

3.1 ALTERNATIVE 1: NO ACTION

This alternative was developed in response to NEPA requirements for a No Action Alternative and serves as a baseline for comparison to the action alternatives.

This alternative proposes no new ground disturbing activities. Current activities such as dispersed recreation use and annual road maintenance would continue. No new road construction, reconstruction, or decommissioning would occur as a result of this project. No timber harvest would occur on National Forest System lands as a result of this project. Natural occurrences and processes would continue to occur. Stands within the project area classified with an old growth management objective would remain at approximately 614 acres, all within MA 1.1. No recreation, wildlife, or watershed habitat improvement or enhancement projects would occur on National Forest System lands as a result of this project. No treatment of the glossy buckthorn infestation would occur as a result of this project.

3.2 ALTERNATIVE 2: MODIFIED PROPOSED ACTION

This alternative reflects the proposal presented in the July 8, 2002 scoping letter, with the exception of the proposed fish habitat enhancement project, proposed old growth classification, and refinements to acres proposed for timber harvest. These proposals are no longer being carried forward for reasons described in Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study section of the EIS (p .2-18 & 19).

Alternative 2 includes the following multi-resource activities:

- Clearcutting of approximately 1120 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types, approximately 10 acres of conifer type, and approximately 30 acres of hardwood type (these would be silvicultural clearcuts with no residual trees);
- Clearcutting with residual trees of approximately 615 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types and approximately 110 acres of conifer type;
- Clearcutting of approximately 5 acres of conifer type followed by conifer planting;
- Thinning of approximately 755 acres of northern hardwood types and approximately 45 acres of aspen type;
- Shelterwood cutting of approximately 180 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types and approximately 110 acres of northern hardwood type, all followed by conifer planting;
- Removal cutting of approximately 85 acres of northern hardwood type;
- Selection cutting (uneven-aged management) of approximately 90 acres of northern hardwood types and approximately 10 acres of conifer type; and
- Site preparation for natural regeneration of aspen would be conducted in stands harvested for the regeneration of aspen, where needed.

The proposed clearcut treatments would create fifteen (15) temporary openings greater than 40 acres in size, ranging from approximately 50 to 175 acres, with an average size of approximately 105 acres (refer to EIS, Figure 3.1.4, p. 3-10). Other activities would involve:

- Reconstruction of existing upland grass/forb openings (approximately 135 acres total), and mowing certain Forest System Roads (approximately 15 miles total);
- Creating snags and future large woody debris in some of the treated aspen stands (approximately one tree per ten acres of treated area);
- Hand-cutting small patches (approximately 0.25 acre) of tag alder to improve grouse and woodcock habitat (approximately 30 acres total);
- Approximately 1.1 miles of new system road construction;
- Approximately 10.1 miles of system road reconstruction;
- Approximately 43.1 miles of system road maintenance;
- Approximately 2.4 miles (total) of temporary road construction;
- Approximately 26.9 miles of existing roads would be decommissioned. These roads are no longer needed for long-term access and management of forest resources;
- Approximately 1.5 miles of existing roads would be retained as unclassified;
- An existing gravel pit known as the Gauthier Gravel Pit would be expanded by approximately 5 acres to access an existing gravel deposit to provide material for road system needs;
- Reconstruction of one vehicle crossing on Lathrop Creek - FR 715. This would involve replacement of the existing culvert with a larger one;
- Decommissioning two crossing sites on Lathrop Creek. This would involve the

removal of an existing wooden bridge at one of the crossings;

- Improvement, rehabilitation, and/or erosion control work would be done at stream crossing sites utilized in this alternative as needed. This would involve contouring, seeding, and stabilization of the approach slopes, and diverting run-off water away from the stream to minimize sediment delivery into the stream;
- Hardening, improving, or developing some dispersed recreation parking and camping sites adjacent to Forest System Roads 710, 730, and 733 to meet current and expected demand, and address soil rutting;
- Hardening and improving a parking site in conjunction with converting approximately 300 feet of an existing unclassified road to a trail near the junction of the East and Middle Branches of the Ontonagon River; and
- Relocating a portion of existing Snowmobile Trail #3 that is currently located in the U.S. Highway 45 right-of-way.

3.3 ALTERNATIVE 3: EVEN-AGED EMPHASIS (ASPEN)

In response to Issue #1, several of the aspen stands identified in the proposed action for a shelterwood treatment with conifer planting (180 acres), were proposed for clearcut treatment to regenerate aspen types under this alternative (120 of those acres). Another difference is the amount of aspen and aspen-fir types that are proposed for treatment and regeneration under this alternative, which is also in response to Issue #1.

Alternative 3 includes the same activities as Alternative 2, except where noted below:

- Clearcutting of approximately 2,110 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types, approximately 80 acres of conifer type, and approximately 55 acres of hardwood

- type (these would be silvicultural clearcuts with no residual trees);
- Clearcutting with residual trees of approximately 1,375 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types and approximately 50 acres of conifer type;
 - Clearcutting of approximately 5 acres of conifer type followed by conifer planting;
 - Clearcutting with residual trees of approximately 20 acres of conifer type followed by conifer planting;
 - Improvement cutting of approximately 1,025 acres of northern hardwood types and approximately 55 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types;
 - Improvement cutting of approximately 170 acres of northern hardwood types along with regenerating approximately 110 additional acres of mature/over mature aspen inclusions (> 1 acre each in size) interspersed within some of these northern hardwood types;
 - Selection cutting (uneven-aged management) of approximately 310 acres of northern hardwood types;
 - Shelterwood cutting of approximately 65 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types (next to or near U.S. Highway 45), approximately 115 acres of conifer types, and approximately 20 acres of northern hardwood type, all followed by conifer planting; and
 - Non-commercial treatment through shelterwood cutting by hand felling some of the trees on approximately 15 acres of white pine type, followed by conifer planting.
- aspen types to maintain and regenerate the aspen type;
- Approximately 1.4 miles of new system road construction;
 - Approximately 16.0 miles of system road reconstruction;
 - Approximately 67.2 miles of system road maintenance;
 - Approximately 6.5 miles (total) of temporary road construction;
 - Approximately 26.9 miles of existing roads would be decommissioned;
 - Approximately 1.5 miles of existing roads would be retained as unclassified; and
 - Treat the entire 300-plus acre infestation of the non-native shrub glossy buckthorn on National Forest System lands. Treatment to kill the woody stems would involve girdling all stems over 1.75 inches in diameter and burning smaller stems with a flame torch.

3.4 ALTERNATIVE 4: TEMPORARY OPENINGS LESS THAN 40 ACRES IN SIZE WITH EMPHASIS ON SOFTWOOD COMPONENT

This alternative, in response to Issue #2 and Issue #3, emphasizes vegetative management to promote a better balance of the conifer component in the project area, and to not create any temporary openings greater than 40 acres in size, while still maintaining the aspen component within the Desired Future Condition.

Alternative 4 includes the same activities as Alternative 3, except where noted below:

- The proposed clearcut treatments would create 28 temporary openings greater than 40 acres in size, ranging from approximately 41 to 324 acres, with an average size of approximately 110 acres (refer to EIS, Figure 3.1.6, p. 3-16). Other activities would involve:
- Non-commercial treatment through clearcutting by hand felling or girdling trees on approximately 40 acres of

- Clearcutting of approximately 1,070 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types, approximately 45 acres of conifer type, and approximately 55 acres of hardwood type (these would be pure silvicultural clearcuts with no residual trees);

- Clearcutting with residual trees of approximately 575 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types and approximately 10 acres of conifer type;
- Clearcutting of approximately 15 acres of aspen-fir type and approximately 5 acres of conifer type, all followed by conifer planting;
- Removal cutting of approximately 875 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types and approximately 25 acres of conifer types;
- Improvement cutting of approximately 565 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types (which includes clearcutting of approximately 10 acres within an existing aspen type to maintain an inclusion of aspen within the treated and converted stand), approximately 45 acres of conifer types, and approximately 1520 acres of hardwood types;
- Improvement cutting of approximately 60 acres of northern hardwood type along with regenerating approximately 40 acres of mature/over mature aspen inclusions (> 1 acre each in size) interspersed within some of the northern hardwood types;
- Shelterwood cutting of approximately 505 acres of aspen types, approximately 140 acres of conifer types, and approximately 20 acres of northern hardwood type, all followed by conifer planting;
- Non-commercial treatment through clearcutting by hand felling or girdling trees on approximately 10 acres of aspen types to maintain and regenerate the aspen type;
- This alternative proposes planting white pine, white spruce, or hemlock within some of the riparian influence areas. Actual acres planted in one area could range from less than one acre to as high as 40 acres. Cumulatively, approximately 170 acres may be planted. No harvesting activity is proposed for these areas; and
- Treat 55 acres (the infestation centers) of the non-native shrub glossy buckthorn

infestation on National Forest System lands. Treatment to kill the woody stems would involve the same type of activities as described for Alternative 3.

4.0 Decision

Based on the analysis in the EIS, the Errata Sheet and new information received, and the associated Project File Record for the Baltimore VMP, it is my decision to implement Alternative 3 (identified as the Forest Service Preferred Alternative in the abstract and cover letter for the EIS) as described in Section 3.3 of this document, with the following exceptions and addition of two proposals analyzed under Alternatives 2 and/or 4:

Exceptions

- Not treating the glossy buckthorn at this time;
- Not relocating a portion of Snowmobile Trail #3 as part of this decision.

Additions

- Manage stands adjacent to the North Country Trail (NCT) so as to meet the Visual Quality Objective (VQO) along the NCT;
- Conifer planting within some of the riparian influence areas.

It is estimated that conducting vegetative management adjacent to the NCT to meet the VQO will reduce overall treatment acres by approximately 55 acres.

All elements of my decision have been analyzed in detail and are based on the Baltimore EIS, Appendices, additional information discussed in the Errata Sheet, and the supporting Project File Record.

4.1 SUMMARY OF THE DECISION

The following summary of the various management practices included in the Selected Action is organized following the Decisions To Be Made as described in Section

1.1 of this document, and Section 1.4 of the EIS (p.1-9). Maps in Appendix 1 display the location of these activities.

- 1) *Selection and site specific location of appropriate vegetative management practices, if any. Included in the decision would be silvicultural prescriptions necessary for the sustained harvest and regeneration of timber resources, riparian improvement and protection, and associated actions common to all action alternatives.*

The Selected Action will treat approximately 5510 acres through commercial timber harvest, producing an estimated 52.2 million board feet of timber products. In addition, the Selected Action will treat approximately 15 acres through non-commercial timber treatment activities. The silvicultural prescriptions for these treatments are summarized below in Table 4.1. See Map D in Appendix 1 for site-specific locations of these vegetative management activities.

Table 4.1. Treatment Summary

Treatment Activity	Acres
Clearcut	2230
Clearcut w/residual trees	1405
Clearcut & plant conifer	5
Clearcut w/residual trees & plant conifer	20
Shelterwood cut & plant conifer	209
Improvement cut	1066
Improvement cut w/inclusions of aspen clearcut	280
Individual tree selection	310
Total Treatment Acres:	5525

The Selected Action will result in the creation of 28 temporary openings greater than 40 acres in size. These temporary openings will range in size from 41-324 acres, with an average size of 110 acres. This is the maximum amount that will occur under the Selected Action. However, management of stands adjacent to the NCT will be managed in accordance with VQO. In addition to this, buffers will be incorporated along protected features (streams, ephemeral drainages,

vernal ponds, seeps, etc.) as identified in the design criteria table for riparian management (refer to Table 2-1 in Appendix 2). For these reasons, it is possible that some of the greater-than-40-acre openings identified would be less than 40 acres after these areas are identified during sale layout.

- 2) *Selection and site specific location of appropriate transportation system management, if any. Included in this decision would be whether or not to expand the Gauthier Gravel Pit, move the gate on FR 710, and construct, reconstruct, maintain, decommission, or close roads.*

Road construction, reconstruction, maintenance, and temporary road construction have been identified as being necessary to accomplish the treatments listed above in Table 4.1. In addition, several existing roads or segments of roads have been identified as being no longer needed for long-term access and management of forest resources and therefore, will be decommissioned and no longer used or retained as part of the Forest transportation system. Road decommissioning will involve treatment of existing and potential soil erosion problems by removing culverts and crossing structures where needed.

There are also nine short segments of existing roads, currently used for access to recreational leases or private property, no longer needed for long-term access and management of forest resources by the Forest Service. To allow continued access for these purposes, these roads will be retained as unclassified roads.

All other existing roads that are not receiving reconstruction, maintenance, or use under the Selected Action will be retained or classified as Forest System Roads.

In addition to roads that are currently closed by an earthen berm or gate, all roads that are constructed, reconstructed, or decommissioned, and the majority of roads receiving maintenance or that remain unclassified, will also be closed to passenger vehicle use by an earthen berm or gate upon completion of harvest activities. In accordance

with Forestwide Standard and Guidelines, temporary roads will be planned and constructed to be revegetated (Forest Plan, page IV-57).

Table 4.2 lists the amount of these activities that will occur. See Map G in Appendix 1 for site-specific locations of these transportation management activities.

Table 4.2. Summary of Transportation Management Activities

Management Activity	Miles
Road construction	1.4
Road reconstruction	16.0
Road maintenance	67.2
System roads not needed for Selected Action activities	31.6
Total system roads:	116.2
Open to passenger vehicles	14.7
Closed to passenger vehicles	101.5
Unclassified roads	1.5
Temporary road construction	6.5
Road decommissioning	26.9
Number of berms needed	22
Number of gates needed	2

In addition to the above transportation management activities, the gate on Forest Road (FR) 710 will be moved back to its old location near the west line of Section 22 in T49N R39W (approximately 300 feet east of U.S. Highway 45). Expansion of the Gauthier Gravel Pit, as analyzed in the EIS, will also occur.

3) *The amount, type, and location of watershed improvement projects, if any.*

Besides several other creek or intermittent drain crossings that will be eliminated through the decommissioning of roads, specific

watershed improvement projects will involve the decommissioning of two existing road crossings on Lathrop Creek (located on FR 710 & Rte. No. 0514216), and the reconstruction of one crossing on Lathrop Creek (located on FR 715). Appropriate permits from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) will be obtained prior to the reconstruction of stream crossings or the installation of culverts, where necessary.

Another watershed improvement project that will be implemented as part of the Selected Action involves conifer planting within some of the riparian influence areas. Actual acres planted in any given area will range from less than one acre to as high as 40 acres, depending on the site. Cumulatively, a maximum of 170 acres will be planted under this activity. No harvesting activity will take place in these areas.

See Maps G and I in Appendix 1 for site-specific locations of these watershed improvement activities.

4) *The amount, type, and location of wildlife habitat improvement projects, if any.*

Specific wildlife habitat improvement projects in the Selected Action will include:

- Reconstruction of existing upland grass/forb openings;
- Mowing certain Forest System Roads;
- Creating snags and future large woody debris in some of the treated aspen stands (approximately one tree per ten acres of treated area);
- Hand-cutting small patches of tag alder (approximately 0.25 acre each in size); and
- Non-commercial clearcut treatments for the regeneration and maintenance of aspen habitat by hand felling or girdling trees in three separate aspen stands.

Table 4.3 below lists the amount of these activities that will occur. See Map I in

Appendix 1 for site-specific locations of these wildlife habitat improvement activities.

Table 4.3. Summary of Wildlife Habitat Improvement Activities

Management Activity	Amount
Opening reconstruction (total acres treated)	135
Road mowing (total miles)	15
Snags/large woody debris (total number of girdled trees)	209
Alder cutting (number of ¼-acre openings)	118
<i>Total acres treated for Alder</i>	<i>30</i>
Non-commercial aspen treatment (total acres treated)	40

5) *The amount, type, and location of dispersed recreation improvement projects, if any.*

The recreation management activities included in the Selected Action will involve:

- Hardening, improving, or developing a total of 23 dispersed recreation parking and camping sites adjacent to Forest System Roads 710, 730, and 733; and
- Hardening and improving a parking site in conjunction with decommissioning and converting approximately 300 feet of an existing unclassified road to a trail near the confluence of the East and West Branches of the Ontonagon River.

Relocating a portion of Snowmobile Trail #3 is not included in this decision, but could be included in a future decision.

See Map I in Appendix 1 for site-specific locations of these recreation management activities.

6) *The amount, type, and location of treatment necessary to attempt to control or eradicate invasive, exotic, noxious, and weedy plant species, if any.*

The Selected Action does not include any treatment for invasive, exotic, noxious, or weedy plant species. Reason(s) for this are discussed below in Section 5.2.1 and in Appendix I (Response to Public Comments).

7) *Whether or not site specific monitoring requirements would be needed to assure actions common to all action alternatives are correctly implemented and effective.*

Besides the monitoring discussed in the EIS (p. 2-20), the Selected Action includes monitoring required by the Forest Plan, Forest Service Handbooks, Michigan Best Management Practices, and NFMA requirements. Design Criteria discussed in Appendix 2 will be followed when implementing the Selected Action.

The activities in the Selected Action could begin as early as 2004.

5.0 Rationale for the Decision

Both the scoping letter and the EIS discussed the purposes and needs for this project. Key criteria I based my decision on were how well an alternative achieved the purposes and needs for this project, and how well an alternative addressed public and internal issues and concerns.

From the responses I received during scoping and on the EIS, some of the respondents indicated they did not believe there should be any active management of National Forest System lands, there was too much emphasis on aspen management, or they were totally against clearcutting for aspen. There was also a concern regarding the potential conflict of dual-use of roads between winter harvesting operations and snowmobile use.

Several other respondents addressed the aspen and early successional habitat resource on the landscape. These commenters detailed their interest in regenerating and maintaining, to the extent possible, the current or even higher levels of aspen on National Forest System lands within the project area.

Other items of consideration raised both internally and externally included the balance of the softwood component in the project area, temporary openings exceeding 40 acres, invasive plant species, vegetative management along the NCT, and road use through private land (Refer to EIS, Sections 2.2.2 and 2.2.3, pages 2-2 to 2-4, and Section 2.9, pages 2-18 & 19).

As a result of these comments and concerns, I worked very closely with the interdisciplinary team in addressing the issues and other resource concerns through the development and analysis of alternatives. After reviewing the analysis of the alternatives, I have determined it is inappropriate to select Alternative 1 (No Action) for implementation. Although Alternative 1 would address concerns of commenters that did not believe there should be any active management of National Forest System lands, it does not respond to the Purpose and Need for Action or the objectives of my decision. Alternative 1 would not move the project area toward Forest Plan desired conditions and would not work towards meeting Management Area goals.

I have determined that Alternative 3 (hereafter referred to as Selected Action), with the exceptions and additions noted above in Section 4.0, will best meet the most important objectives of my decision (the purposes and needs for this project) in concert with public and agency comments. (Rationale for not selecting Alternatives 2 or 4 is discussed below in the subsequent sections.) The most important objectives were to:

- Promote and maintain processes that would enhance natural species diversity while providing a supply of wood products for regional and local needs to help support a stable economic base within the market area;

- Maintain and enhance habitat conditions that sustain viable populations of a variety of fish and wildlife species and enhance watershed conditions;
- Maintain a road system that allows for management of National Forest System lands and provides for public access while meeting other resource needs;
- Provide recreational opportunities to meet the public's needs; and
- Provide for public health and safety.

The following discussion of my decision rationale describes the objectives, issues, and factors I considered in making my selection of which action alternative to implement. The discussion is organized by the objectives listed above, which are the primary Purposes and Needs for Action.

5.1 PROMOTE AND MAINTAIN PROCESSES THAT WOULD ENHANCE NATURAL SPECIES DIVERSITY WHILE PROVIDING A SUPPLY OF WOOD PRODUCTS FOR REGIONAL AND LOCAL NEEDS TO HELP SUPPORT A STABLE ECONOMIC BASE WITHIN THE MARKET AREA

I have determined that the Selected Action will best meet the need to improve the quality and growth of some of the second-growth hardwood stands, regenerate and maintain aspen-dominated stands for sustained yield over time, and provide even-aged wildlife habitat, and will work best toward attaining the desired future condition (DFC) for MA 1.1 as described in the Forest Plan (p. IV-103 to IV-106).

The Selected Action balances the need to manage for aspen (Issue #1) with the need to provide for a variety of vegetative community types by taking advantage of specific opportunities to convert some of the existing aspen types to other forest types, mainly conifer (Issue #2).

I have also determined that the Selected Action best addresses the need to provide a supply of wood products for regional and local needs to help support a stable economic base (refer to EIS, Table 3.2.1, p. 3-25).

5.1.1 Selected Action

The Baltimore project area contains a large portion of MA 1.1 on the Forest (35%) and currently contains the largest portions of contiguous aspen ecosystem on the Forest (EIS, p. 1-6). Nearly half (44%) of the aspen in MA 1.1 of the project area is over 60 years old, and more than half of this is greater than 70 years old (EIS, p. 3-2).

The earliest survey work for the Lake States, which was conducted by the General Land Office (GLO), began in the 1800s. This work involved the survey and establishment of townships, sections, and various section corners, but other items such as tree species present and important points about the soils and landscape were also recorded. Subsequent surveys in regards to the timber base were conducted in 1947, and we continue to survey and update the timber base information yet today.

These survey records indicate that as far back as the 1800s (pre-European settlement), aspen has been a component in the project area, and it was quite prevalent here during the 1947 surveys and is still present here today. In order to meet other goals including the social value of aspen as upland game habitat, the Forest Plan directs maintenance of a larger percentage of aspen than was the historic case. This, along with several other factors such as soils (refer to EIS, Section 3.1.3.6, p. 3-22), is a good indicator that this is a suitable area for aspen management and if we wish to manage for aspen habitat on the Ottawa National Forest, this is one of the areas to consider.

A recent article related to the amount and quality of aspen on the Ottawa indicates that "...opportunities still exist to regenerate many of these stands but time is quickly slipping away. The older aspen is falling out and the opportunity to regenerate the aspen habitats will soon be lost" (Michigan Forester, Fall

2001). The article also indicates "According to Forest Service FIA reports, during the past 20 years, aspen-birch forests in the UP have decreased by 20%" (Michigan Forester, Fall 2001).

The findings of these recent field reviews are very similar to the information contained in the Great Lakes Assessment (GLA). According to the GLA, aspen and aspen-birch forest types have been steadily decreasing in Michigan since the 1930s. Over a 58-year period in Michigan (1935 to 1993), aspen-birch acreage has declined by 37%. The GLA also indicates that "aspen's future in the northern Lake States depends on continued harvesting of mature stands to promote sucker regrowth..." and "As we see in the long-term trends, intensive management/disturbance will be required to maintain or expand aspen area" (Cleland, Leefers, and Dickman, 2001).

Because of the factors described above and the analysis disclosed in the EIS, I have determined that the Selected Action best responds to Issue #1 and will regenerate and maintain the greatest amount of this rapidly declining and mature or overmature aspen component on the Forest, and the project area provides the best opportunity to do so. Implementing the Selected Action in this area also provides the best opportunity to maintain the greatest amount of even-aged wildlife habitat in both the project area and MA 1.1 Forestwide.

The Selected Action will do the most to help to offset the predictable future loss of nearly 2,700 acres of aspen forest type that is on unsuitable ground for timber production in the project area alone. In addition to this unsuitable acreage, there are approximately 5,600 acres of aspen type on unsuitable ground in the other portions of MA 1.1 on the Forest, which are also likely to be lost (refer to Table 5.1).

Table 5.1. Long-term Percentage of Aspen Type in MA 1.1 Forestwide Due to Loss of Aspen Type on Unsuitable Ground in MA 1.1 of the Project Area, and on Unsuitable Ground in MA 1.1 Forestwide.

Alternative	Result of Aspen Loss in MA 1.1 of Project Area	Result of Aspen Loss in MA 1.1 Forestwide
1	53%	46%
2	53%	46%
3	54%	47%
4	51%	44%

Note: The percentages above assume that every remaining suitable acre of aspen type in MA 1.1 would be treated in the future, which is probably an unrealistic assumption because of various access constraints, riparian area exclusions, or current Forest Plan limits on even-aged management adjacent to classified old growth. Any remaining suitable aspen stands, or parts of stands, that are not treated to regenerate aspen in the future would cause these percentages to drop even further. This is because these untreated areas are also likely to succeed to other forest types.

By regenerating and maintaining many of the aspen stands in the project area, the Selected Action responds to Issue #1 and will provide the opportunities for future treatments to address the current aspen age-class imbalance. It will also provide more options of the timber resource if the Forest’s management goals and objectives should change in the future.

Although regenerating and maintaining aspen was an important objective in my decision, the Selected Action does incorporate management in regards to Issue #2. By treating some of the existing aspen stands for conversion to other forest types, mainly conifer, the Selected Action will help to meet other management area or Forestwide objectives such as enhancing species diversity, increasing the amount of long-rotation conifer, or meeting visual quality objectives (VQOs). Some of the selected stands for conversion were determined to have low densities of aspen for

adequate aspen regeneration, or are now becoming dominated by more conifer or hardwood than aspen and as such, provided the opportunity to respond to Issue #2 and work towards meeting these other objectives.

To further help address Issue #2, other vegetative treatments in the Selected Action will include clearcutting and planting conifer and clearcutting with residual trees and planting conifer in balsam fir-spruce-aspen-birch forest types. These treatments will also help to enhance species diversity in regards to the conifer component within MA 1.1 of the project area.

5.1.2 Alternative 2

I have determined that Alternative 2 does less in responding to Issue #1 because it would regenerate and maintain less of the aspen component than the Selected Action and as a result, Alternative 2 would leave several of the rapidly declining aspen stands untreated and more susceptible for conversion to other forest types through succession. Many of these aspen stands are at or beyond their normal rotation age and their viability is rapidly decreasing. Because many of these stands are already in the process of converting to other forest types, leaving these stands untreated increases the risk of successfully regenerating these stands to aspen in the future. It would also leave fewer options for future management of the timber resource as the mature and overmature aspen dissipates from these untreated stands.

In conjunction with the predictable loss of aspen types on unsuitable ground, additional losses of these untreated aspen stands would result in a further decrease in the aspen type in both the project area and across the Forest, and would further lessen this alternative’s ability to effectively respond to Issue #1. As described previously, such a decrease would have a recognizable impact on the Forest because the project area contains the bulk of MA 1.1 on the Forest and currently contains the largest portions of contiguous aspen ecosystem on the Forest.

When compared to the Selected Action, Alternative 2 would result in a higher net

increase in the softwood forest type in the project area and may address Issue #2 slightly better than Alternative 3 as proposed (refer to EIS, Table 3.1.1, p. 3-5). However, I found this minor difference between the two alternatives to be obscured in light of their more prevalent differences in responding to Issue #1, and the amount or acreage of aspen type that would likely be lost in the long-term if Alternative 2 was implemented. This minor difference in the way these alternatives respond to Issue #2 will likely be satisfied or surpassed by my decision to include the riparian influence area planting project as part of the Selected Action.

Of the action alternatives, Alternative 2 would do the least to meet the objective of providing a supply of wood products for regional and local needs to help support a stable economic base. It would also result in the lowest social and economic benefits of all action alternatives (refer to EIS, Table 3.2.1, p. 3-25).

5.1.3 Alternative 4

Because of its emphasis on the softwood component and to not create any temporary openings greater than 40 acres in size, Alternative 4 would best respond to Issue #2 and Issue #3, but would do so at the expense of responding the least to Issue #1. This is because Alternative 4 would regenerate and maintain the least amount of the aspen component of all action alternatives and would result in the greatest amount of aspen being converted to other forest types (refer to EIS, Table 3.1.1, p. 3-4). As a result, this alternative would maintain the least amount of even-aged wildlife habitat and as such, does less overall at meeting the project's purpose and need when compared to the Selected Action.

I have determined that such a substantial reduction in the aspen component that would result from Alternative 4 would be undesirable. In addition, opportunities for future treatments to address the current aspen age-class imbalance would be less under Alternative 4, as would the available options for future management of the timber resource.

When compared to the Selected Action, Alternative 4 would do less to meet the

objective of providing a supply of wood products for regional and local needs to help support a stable economic base. It would also result in lower social and economic benefits than the Selected Action (refer to EIS, Table 3.2.1, p. 3-25).

5.2 MAINTAIN AND ENHANCE HABITAT CONDITIONS THAT SUSTAIN VIABLE POPULATIONS OF A VARIETY OF FISH AND WILDLIFE SPECIES AND ENHANCE WATERSHED CONDITIONS

I have determined that the Selected Action, with the inclusion of the riparian influence area planting project, will best meet the project's purpose and need and will do the most toward attaining Forestwide Goals and meeting the Standards and Guidelines and Management Area Direction described in the Forest Plan. In addition, the Selected Action provides resource managers with more options for future management of wildlife habitat and the timber resource.

5.2.1 Selected Action

The Selected Action will best respond to Issue #1 and Forestwide Management Goals by maintaining a moderate to high amount of aspen type to provide a sustained level of early successional and even-aged habitat for white-tailed deer, ruffed grouse, and other game and non-game wildlife species dependent on such habitat. By providing the most early seral habitat of all action alternatives, the Selected Action will also meet Management Area Direction to provide and maintain the potential conditions for moderate to high populations of these species.

In response to Issue #1 and to meet Management Area Direction to maintain the desired levels of moderate to high amounts of aspen type and a sustained level of early successional and even-aged habitat, the Selected Action will result in 28 temporary openings greater than 40 acres in size. These temporary openings will, however, result in less edge and less habitat fragmentation than

if the same amount of habitat was maintained by not creating temporary openings over 40 acres in size.

I have determined, and received concurrence from the Regional Forester, that creating temporary openings greater than 40 acres in size does not respond to Issue #3, but is necessary to maintain the desired levels of aspen type and early successional habitat in MA 1.1. This is necessary because of the abundance of mature and overmature aspen stands that currently exist in the project area that are rapidly declining and at an increased risk of being lost to other forest types. Many of these aspen stands are infected with "white trunk rot" and have received repeated defoliation from forest tent caterpillars over the last few years (EIS, p. 1-6). Because of this, the growth and vigor of the aspen has been compromised and in a short time, much of the mature aspen may be too decadent for economical harvest and regeneration of these stands may not be viable. According to Elk et al. (1998), it is critical that aspen suckers have physiologically vigorous parent tree root systems and plenty of light. Elk et al. (1998) also indicates that since the response to suckering is related to the health of the tree, delaying treatment may adversely affect the suckering response.

Treating these mature and overmature aspen stands in one entry, which means creating temporary openings greater than 40 acres in size, will not only improve the economic efficiency of treating these stands, it will also result in fewer effects on other resources. Treating the same amount of aspen with multiple entries that kept temporary openings less than 40 acres in size would lengthen the time needed to restore or revegetate temporary roads, skid trails, and landings. This is because multiple entries into the same general area would require using some of the same roads and may require the use of the same skids trails, landings, or stream crossings, or the creation of additional ones. Entering the same area multiple times over a short time period also increases the amount and decreases the duration of disturbance to wildlife.

By converting some of the existing aspen types to other forest types (mainly conifer) through treatment, the Selected Action incorporates response to Issue #2 and Forestwide Management Goals for thermal cover, and will help to improve the variety of habitat conditions for both game and non-game wildlife species faster than if these stands were left to natural succession.

My decision to include the riparian influence area planting project in the Selected Action will also help to respond to Issue #2 and will enhance watershed conditions for the long term. Planting long-lived conifers in these areas helps to meet the Forestwide Standards and Guidelines to enhance the beneficial values of floodplains and wetlands and will help to minimize the risk of flood loss and restore and preserve floodplain values. It will also add to the variety of habitat conditions present in the project area for both game and non-game wildlife species by increasing the presence of conifer.

Other parts of the Selected Action that will help to enhance watershed conditions are tied to management of the transportation system. By closing and decommissioning roads, decreasing the number of road stream crossings, decreasing roads in steep lands adjacent to streams, decreasing roads in wetlands, and reshaping roads to reduce erosion, the transportation system in the Selected Action will improve watershed conditions and help to enhance habitat for fish and other aquatic animals (refer to EIS, Table 3.6.2, p. 3-69).

The Selected Action also includes the retention of over 600 acres of classified old growth stands along the Baltimore River and some of its tributaries. Retaining these stands as old growth will not only enhance the variety of habitat conditions for both game and non-game species of wildlife, but will also help to preserve the beneficial values of floodplains and wetlands given the location of these stands.

The Selected Action will not include any treatment for glossy buckthorn. Given new information in Fall 2003 showing a much larger extent of the infestation (10 to 20 times what

was thought previously), the proposed mechanical treatment would not be appropriate and would not meet the identified need (refer to Section 2.2.3.1, p. 2-3 of the EIS) to control this infestation from further spread. The proposed girdling would amount to a spot-treatment of about 10% of the infested area in Alternative 3, or less than 2% in Alternative 4, within the middle of the large infestation, rather than suppression of the majority of the infestation. The proposed girdling would not decrease the overall infestation area. It would provide some suppression in the treatment area as well as a test of girdling as a control method.

Since we know now that the infestation is widespread, and not restricted mainly to roadsides, a way to meet the identified need would be to treat the infestation's leading edges and satellite populations. This would be a containment strategy to keep the overall infestation area from getting larger, a strategy to use until an effective means of eradicating the central buckthorn population could be found. Treating the edges and satellite populations would mean a separate environmental (NEPA) analysis. Because, in light of the new information, the proposed mechanical buckthorn treatment would not meet the identified need, it was dropped from the Baltimore VMP. Refer to Appendix I (Response to Public Comments) for further discussion on this topic.

5.2.2 Alternative 2

Alternative 2 would result in lower sustained levels of early successional and even-aged habitat for species dependent on such habitat because it does less than the Selected Action in responding to Issue #1. These lower levels of early successional and even-aged habitat would result in reduced potential conditions for moderate to high populations of these species.

In the long run, the amount of coniferous thermal cover available under Alternative 2 would be very similar to the Selected Action, but Alternative 2 would ultimately result in a less desirable balance of the desired habitat conditions for the forest types in MA 1.1.

In addition to the aspen types on unsuitable ground that will likely convert to other forest types, leaving several of the aspen stands untreated is likely to further reduce and potentially fragment the remaining aspen component. By not treating these aspen stands, Alternative 2 does less in responding to Issue #1 and would result in the least amount of early seral habitat and the greatest amounts of both mature open and closed habitat of all action alternatives.

In regards to the transportation system, Alternative 2 would involve less construction, reconstruction, and maintenance of desired Forest System Roads and less reconstruction and maintenance of stream crossings. Alternative 2 would also result in less miles of road being closed to passenger vehicles. As a result, I have determined that Alternative 2 would do less overall to address transportation needs and enhance watershed conditions.

5.2.3 Alternative 4

Alternative 4 would provide considerably lower sustained levels of early successional and even-aged aspen habitat than the Selected Action and as a result, does far less in responding to Issue #1. With this reduction in early successional habitat, the potential conditions for moderate to high populations of white-tailed deer, grouse, and other game and non-game wildlife species dependent on such habitat would also be lower than that maintained by the Selected Action. Alternative 4 would, however, respond to Issue #2 by treating many of the existing aspen stands for conversion to a conifer forest type. Converting these stands would increase the conifer component in both the project and management area and has the potential to provide increased amounts of coniferous thermal cover for white-tailed deer and other wildlife species. However, Alternative 4 would accomplish this by considerably reducing the aspen component in contrast with Issue #1. But as discussed above, an increase in conifer types is expected to occur naturally in the project area and in the long term Alternative 4 would not provide much benefit over the Selected Action.

Alternative 4 would also convert some of the existing aspen stands to a hardwood forest type. Because the hardwood component in MA 1.1 is already at the upper end of the desired range in both the project area and Forestwide, converting additional aspen types to a hardwood type would cumulatively result in a less desirable balance of the desired habitat conditions for the forest types in MA 1.1.

As mentioned above in Section 5.1.1, the Great Lakes Assessment indicates that aspen-birch forest types have been steadily decreasing in Michigan since the 1930s. Because the Forest is already likely to lose the aspen types that are on unsuitable ground as they succeed to other forest types, purposefully converting several aspen types in an area that contains the largest portions of contiguous aspen ecosystem on the Forest would only further this decline and would have the potential to fragment what aspen habitat remains.

By keeping temporary openings less than 40 acres, Alternative 4 responds to Issue #3, but would result in the greatest amount of edge of all action alternatives. Keeping temporary openings less than 40 acres would also result in scattered patches of the mature, overmature, and rapidly declining aspen stands remaining. Because many of these aspen stands are beyond their normal rotation age, these remaining patches of aspen are at an increased risk for continued rapid decline and conversion to other forest types. Therefore, leaving these untreated patches is likely to result in further losses and potential fragmentation of the remaining aspen habitat, which would be in contrast to Issue #1.

Alternative 4 included the riparian influence area planting project and would involve the same transportation system as the Selected Action.

5.3 MAINTAIN A ROAD SYSTEM THAT ALLOWS FOR MANAGEMENT OF NATIONAL FOREST SYSTEM LANDS AND PROVIDES FOR PUBLIC ACCESS WHILE MEETING OTHER RESOURCE NEEDS

In accordance with one of the Forestwide Management Goals (Forest Plan, page IV-4), the transportation system analysis for the Baltimore VMP focused on providing, for the long-term, a network of roads that will minimize the total amount of road needed through transportation planning conducted within an integrated resource management process. The scoping letter and EIS also noted that the transportation system should provide the most cost efficient and lowest impact transportation system needed to meet the objectives for MA 1.1 and Forest Plan goals (Forest Plan, pages IV-2 through IV-5).

After considering all the factors involved with transportation system management, I have determined that in addition to enhancing watershed conditions as discussed above in Section 5.2.1, the transportation system management in the Selected Action will best maintain a road system that provides the most efficient and lowest impact transportation system needed to manage the National Forest System lands in the project area.

5.3.1 Selected Action

The transportation management in the Selected Action will do the most to meet the goals, objectives, and needs identified in this section. It will also do the most to provide for public access and to meet other resource needs and concerns, and will help to achieve the long-term transportation plan for the project area in a shorter timeframe than Alternative 2 for the following reasons:

- It will provide for maintenance and reconstruction on the greatest amount of Forest System Roads needing such work;

- It will construct the additional Forest System Roads needed to effectively manage the project area now and in the future, and that segment needed to avoid access across private property;
- It will implement the expansion of the Gauthier Gravel Pit necessary to provide material for current and long-term road system needs;
- It will move the gate on FR 710 back to its old location to help alleviate rutting and resource damage being caused by passenger vehicle use on this road;
- It will close and decommission roads, road segments, and stream crossings identified as no longer being needed for long-term access and management of forest resources; and
- It will provide for continued access to certain parts of the project area by retaining short segments of existing unclassified roads that are currently being used to access recreational leases or private property.

Table 4.2 above and Map G in Appendix 1 show the amount and location of these activities that will occur.

By decommissioning roads, road segments, and stream crossings, the Selected Action will minimize the total amount of roads and stream crossings needed to effectively manage the project area now and in the future. This will also reduce the existing road density in MA 1.1 of the project area from 3.6 miles/sq. mile to 2.9 miles/sq. mile.

5.3.2 Alternative 2

The transportation management proposed under Alternative 2 would more slowly attain the goals, objectives, and long-term transportation needs because it proposes to treat less of the project area at this time than the Selected Action (refer to EIS, Table 2.7.3, p. 2-13).

For these reasons I determined that Alternative 2 would do less to remedy certain resource and public concerns, and would ultimately do less to help enhance the quality of roads for

public access or improve overall watershed conditions.

5.3.3 Alternative 4

The Selected Action and Alternative 4 would involve the same transportation system management. As a result, Alternative 4 would be equal to the Selected Action because the transportation system for Alternative 4 is the same.

5.4 PROVIDE RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES TO MEET THE PUBLIC'S NEEDS

The EIS indicated that this project was designed to move the area from the existing condition toward the DFC by maintaining or enhancing existing recreation opportunities while protecting resources (page 1-8). In regards to the NCT, the Forest Plan directs us to manage the NCT in accordance with the requirements and management policies found in the Comprehensive Plan for Management and Use dated September 1982, prepared by the National Park Service, and to manage it under visual management system Sensitivity Level I (Forest Plan, p. IV-27).

Because the Selected Action will incorporate management along the NCT so as to meet the VQO of Partial Retention in the foreground and Modification in the middleground and background, I have determined that all of the action alternatives include the same recreation management and therefore, there are no longer any differences between them.

My decision to incorporate into the Selected Action management along the NCT that will meet the VQO consistent with the direction given in the Forest Plan will alleviate potential effects to visuals as viewed from the NCT or any of the Wild and Scenic Rivers. This should also address concerns in regards to the NCT that some commenters expressed in their comments on the EIS.

5.5 PROVIDE FOR PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY

Within the project area a portion of Snowmobile Trail #3 is located within the U.S. Highway 45 right-of-way. This creates a situation where snowmobile traffic must parallel the highway and as such, snowmobile headlights are directed at oncoming vehicular traffic. To meet the need of providing for public safety, the Forest Service proposed to re-route the portion of the trail that parallels the highway.

I have decided to defer a decision on the relocation of this section of Snowmobile Trail #3 at this time; however, the decision to relocate the trail may be undertaken in the future.

6.0 Public Involvement

Public involvement has been extensive throughout the planning and analysis process leading to this ROD/FEIS. Public comment and participation was obtained during the various stages of development of this project.

6.1 TRIBAL ORGANIZATIONS (INCLUDING GLIFWC), VARIOUS FEDERAL, STATE, COUNTY, AND LOCAL AGENCIES

Various federal and state agencies and tribal governments were contacted or consulted with during scoping and/or during the EIS 45-day comment period. These included, but were not limited to, the U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR). The scoping letter and EIS were sent to tribal organizations such as the Lac Vieux Desert (LVD) Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community (KBIC), the Sokaogon Chippewa Community Mole Lake Band, and the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission

(GLIFWC). Questions or comments regarding this project were received from the LVD Band of Lake Superior Chippewa and KBIC.

7.0 Findings Required by Other Laws

7.1 CONSISTENCY WITH THE FOREST PLAN (16 USC 1604(i))

The Ottawa NF is currently in the process of Forest Plan Revision. On November 10, 2003 the President signed the Department of the Interior and Related Agencies FY04 Appropriations Act, H.R. 2691, P.L. 108-108. Section 320 of the Appropriations Act states as follows:

Prior to October 1, 2004, the Secretary of Agriculture shall not be considered in violation of subparagraph 6(f) (5) (A) of the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 (16 U.S.C. 1604 (f) (5) (A) solely because more than 15 years have passed without revision of the plan for a unit of the National Forest System. Nothing in this section exempts the Secretary from any other requirement of the Forest Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act (16 U.S.C. 1600 et seq.) or any other law: Provided, That if the Secretary is not acting expeditiously and in good faith, within the funding available, to revise a plan for a unit of the National Forest System, this section shall be void with respect to such plan and a court of proper jurisdiction may order completion of the plan on an accelerated basis.

I find that my decision to implement the Selected Action is consistent with the goals and objectives, standards and guidelines, and Management Area goals and accompanying standards and guidelines outlined in the Ottawa's Forest Plan.

Implementation of the Selected Action will result in the creation of temporary openings greater than 40 acres in size. I have determined, based on the effects analysis disclosed in the EIS, that there is an overall net public benefit from these openings. The Forest Plan (p. IV-87) limits the size of temporary openings to 40 acres or less unless a 60-day public notice period and review by the Regional Forester are done. As such, the Ottawa National Forest has conducted a 60-day public notice period (concurrent with the 45-day comment period for the EIS) and the Regional Forester has reviewed the EIS (letter dated November 17, 2003 in the project file).

7.2 **CONSISTENCY WITH EXISTING LAWS**

My decision is consistent with Federal, State, and local laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. Some of the key ones include the following:

7.2.1 **National Forest Management Act (NFMA)**

I find that the Selected Action complies with the Management Requirements at 16 USC 1600 et seq., which include:

Vegetative Manipulation

All proposals that involve vegetative manipulation of tree cover for any purpose must comply with the seven requirements listed below. Based upon my review of the Baltimore VMP EIS, BE, BA, and supporting project file, I find that the prescribed management practices in the Selected Action comply with these requirements and are consistent with the management area prescriptions described in the Ottawa's Forest Plan.

1) Be best suited to the goals stated in the Forest Plan (16 USC 1604 (i)).

Some of these goals are stated and referenced in the EIS within Chapters 1 and 3. Based upon review of pertinent information from the EIS, IDT field review, and the supporting project file, I have determined that the Selected

Action is best suited to meet these goals while responding to public concerns.

2) Adequately restock the lands within 5 years after final harvest (16 USC 1604 (g)(3)(E)(ii)).

Based on the silviculturist's review of the stands proposed for timber harvesting in the Selected Action, and the review of reforestation records and regeneration success demonstrated on similar sites, I have determined that the technology and knowledge exists to adequately restock the lands within five years after final harvest.

3) Not to be chosen primarily because they will give the greatest dollar return (16 USC 1604 (g)(3)(E)(iv)).

The decision is based on a variety of reasons as discussed earlier in this decision, not solely on economics.

4) Be chosen after considering potential effects on residual trees and adjacent stands (16 USC 1604 (g)(3)(B)).

In this decision I considered the effects on residual trees and adjacent stands as discussed in Chapter 3 of the EIS. I considered the impacts of reducing the tree density along with the need to provide wildlife and fisheries habitat and watershed benefits, and determined, based on the analysis disclosed in the EIS, BE, and supporting project file, that the Selected Action provides the best balance of management practices to meet all resources values.

5) Be selected to avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and to ensure conservation of soil and water resources (16 USC 1604 (g)(3)(C)).

By adhering to Forestwide Standards and Guidelines and site-specific design criteria, the Selected Action will avoid impairment of site productivity and ensure conservation of soil and water resources. During the analysis, any areas of concern that were identified for treatment were noted by the ID team (which included a soil scientist, a fisheries biologist, and an aquatic ecologist/hydrologist) and were evaluated in the field and determined to meet

the objective of avoiding impairment of site productivity. This determination is supported by the disclosures in Chapters 2 and 3 of the EIS, and the application of Best Management Practices to prevent the loss of soil.

Documentation of the effects of the Selected Action to site productivity and soil and water resources are contained in Chapter 3 of the EIS. The Selected Action includes design criteria and ELTP guidelines (EIS, p. 2-16 to 2-18, Appendix C Tables C-1 and C-2 and ROD Appendix 2), and rehabilitation activities (EIS, p. 2-7 and 2-11), all designed to benefit or protect soil and water resources.

- 6) Be selected to provide the desired effects on water quality and quantity, wildlife, regeneration of desired tree species, forage production, recreation uses, aesthetic values, and other resource yields (16 USC 1604 (g)(3)(E)(iii), (i), and 1604 (g)(3)(A)).**

The Selected Action provides the desired effect on the above mentioned resources and protects beneficial uses. By using logging systems and layout that minimize ground disturbance, implementing buffers to all streams by category, and applying Best Management Practices to all activities, all harvest units are designed to maintain the ecological function of adjacent riparian types. The Standards and Guidelines contained in the Forest Plan are designed to provide the desired effects of management practices on other resource values.

- 7) Be practical in terms of transportation and harvesting requirements and total costs of preparation, logging, and administration (16 USC 1604 (g)(3)(A)).**

The transportation system management selected for implementation under this decision will utilize the lowest level of construction, reconstruction, and maintenance required to meet project needs and protect the soil and water resources. The transportation system management in the Selected Action will be used to facilitate timber harvest, and access to the project area was designed to utilize existing roads to access treatment areas to the extent possible. Economic analysis conducted in the EIS considered the costs of sale

preparation, logging, and administration. Total revenues for all action alternatives exceeded total costs of project implementation (EIS, Table 3.2.1, p. 3-25, and Tables D-1 and D-2, Appendix D).

Suitability for Timber Production (16 USC 1604(k))

I have determined that the treatment activities in the Selected Action will result in harvest on lands suitable for timber production. All sites proposed for timber harvesting in the Selected Action are designated as suitable for timber production and have been inventoried on the ground. Based upon a review of on-the-ground inventories, all of these sites have been determined to meet suitability pursuant to the requirements set forth in this section.

Clearcutting and Even-aged management (16 USC (g)(3)(F))

As noted in the Forest Plan (p. VI C-7), some forest types can be regenerated by more than one silvicultural system and/or harvest method, but other types can not. Since a management area typically contains several forest types and forest type diversity is desirable within a management area, more than one silvicultural system or harvest method may be used within a management area.

I have determined that where prescribed, even-aged management (clearcutting and shelterwood) is the appropriate silvicultural system to be used for the desired forest types as described in the Forest Plan (p. VI C-7 through VI C-14).

Clearcutting is optimum (16 USC 1604 (g)(3)(F)(i))

The Forest Plan indicates that the clearcut harvest cutting method favors the establishment and development of shade-intolerant species such as aspen (p. VI C-5). It also states that clearcutting is the most effective method to obtain desirable natural regeneration of types such as aspen (p. VI C-6). Therefore, I find that where prescribed, clearcutting is the optimum method to

regenerate the desired forest type and achieve resource objectives.

My decision to use clearcutting as the optimum method to manage these even-aged forest types was not based solely on maximum economic return.

7.2.2 Endangered Species Act (ESA) (16 USC 1531 et seq.)

As required by the ESA, a Biological Assessment (BA) (located in the project file) has been prepared addressing the potential impacts to threatened or endangered (T&E) species utilizing the project area or for those which potential habitat exists in the project area. The BA has been revised to reflect the decision made on the Selected Action; however, none of the determinations have changed.

The determination in the BA concluded that all alternatives would have no effect on lynx and Kirtland's warbler. The determination in the BA concluded that Alternative 3 (Selected Action) may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect the gray wolf or bald eagle. In a letter dated September 8, 2003 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concurred with these may affect determinations.

7.2.3 National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA)

Section 106 of the NHPA guides the management of heritage resources on the National Forests. The Ottawa National Forest meets the requirements of Section 106 of the NHPA through a program designed to inventory lands that may be affected by any project meeting the definition of "federal undertaking" (NHPA Section 301(7)).

Site-specific heritage resource surveys have been conducted throughout the project area. Measures outlined under the guidelines of the Memorandum of Agreement between the ONF and Michigan State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) (regulations at 36 CFR 800.2c(1)), protect the integrity of any discovered heritage resources within the project area from any adverse effects. Sites found during these surveys or those

discovered during project implementation will be delineated in the field and avoided during potential ground disturbing activities.

7.2.4 Executive Order (EO) 12898 (Environmental Justice)

My decision is consistent with this Order because this project sought and incorporated public involvement and no impacts to minority or low-income populations were identified during scoping or effects assessment. My decision for this project will not have a discernible effect on minorities, Native American Indians, women, or the civil rights of any United States citizen.

7.2.5 Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (CWA) and State Water Quality Standards

All actions will be in compliance with the CWA and State Water Quality Standards. The analysis indicates that implementation of the Selected Action will not result in any adverse effects on the hydrologic system within the bounds of analysis. The analysis also indicates that combined and cumulative effects of the Selected Action will not degrade water quality with respect to sediment and will not result in changed flow characteristics, stream channels, or fish habitat.

Appropriate permits from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) will be obtained prior to implementation of certain transportation system projects, such as culvert installations, where necessary.

7.2.6 Wild and Scenic Rivers

The project area contains portions of Management Areas (MAs) 8.1 and 9.2, which correspond to Designated Wild and Scenic River and Study River corridors on the Ottawa National Forest (refer to EIS, Section 3.10, p. 3-95 & 96). MA 8.1 applies to designated rivers and MA 9.2 applies to study rivers.

The Selected Action contains no harvest activity within any of the Designated Wild and Scenic River or Study River corridors in the project area. The only activity in the Selected

Action that will occur within a Wild and Scenic River corridor is related to management of the transportation system and road decommissioning. Analysis indicates, however, the effects from this will be beneficial due to a reduction in road miles, intermittent stream crossings, and sources of sediment contribution.

For these reasons and after reviewing the analysis of effects, I determined that implementation of the Selected Action will not result in any unreasonable diminishment of water quality, free-flowing conditions, or the Outstandingly Remarkable Values for which these rivers were designated or are being studied. Because there are no water resource projects within these corridors, there was no need to conduct a Section 7 determination for this project.

8.0 Environmentally Preferred Alternative

I find that the Selected Action is the environmentally preferred alternative because it will maintain and enhance habitat conditions that sustain viable populations of a variety of fish and wildlife species and will enhance watershed conditions. The Selected Action best addresses concerns over the rapidly declining aspen component for both the short- and long-term while taking advantage of other opportunities to enhance natural species diversity and improve overall forest health and growth conditions within the project area. It does this while still providing for the needs of other resources because it also best addresses the needs identified for management of the transportation system, management of watershed and riparian health and function, and management of recreational resources and opportunities.

9.0 Appeal Provisions and Project Implementation

This Decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.7. A written notice of appeal must be submitted within 45 days starting the day after the date the notice of this Decision is published in the newspaper of record: *Ironwood Daily Globe*, Ironwood, Michigan. Appeals must be submitted in writing to:

ATTN: Appeals Deciding Officer, Robert Lueckel
c/o USDA Forest Service, Eastern Regional Office
Gas Light Building, Suite 700
Milwaukee, WI 53202-4616

The Notice of Appeal may alternatively be faxed to:

414-944-3963
Attn: Appeals Deciding Officer
USDA Forest Service, Eastern Regional Office

Appeals shall meet content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14. Detailed records of the environmental analysis for this project are available for public review at:

Ontonagon Ranger District
1209 Rockland Rd.
Ontonagon, MI 49953

For further information on this Decision contact John Strasser, Interdisciplinary Team Leader, Ontonagon Ranger District, (906) 884-2411, or Bruce Prud'homme, District Ranger, Ontonagon Ranger District, (906) 884-2411.

If no appeal is received, implementation of this Decision may occur on, but not before, five (5) business days from the close of the appeal-filing period. If an appeal is received, implementation may not occur for 15 days following the date of appeal disposition.



BRUCE PRUD'HOMME
District Ranger
Ontonagon Ranger District



Date