



Management Direction for the Ansel Adams, John Muir and Dinkey Lakes Wildernesses

Volume 1, Executive Summary, Chapters 1 - 9

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This document is the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) that analyzes the effects of proposed amendments to the Land and Resource Management Plans (LRMP) for the Sierra and Inyo National Forests with respect to management direction for the Ansel Adams, John Muir, and Dinkey Lakes Wildernesses and replacement of the existing wilderness management plans.

In November of 1997, the Sierra, Inyo and Sequoia National Forest Supervisors released a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) that covered the Ansel Adams, John Muir, Dinkey Lakes and Monarch Wildernesses. After almost one year of public review and receiving over 2000 comment letters, the three Forest Supervisors decided to issue a Revised Draft Environmental Impact Statement (RDEIS). In April 2000, portions of the Sequoia National Forest were designated as a National Monument. A portion of the Monarch Wilderness is encompassed by the monument designation. Because of this the Monarch Wilderness and the Sequoia National Forest are no longer a part of this analysis process.

The RDEIS was released for review in August 2000 and received about 1700 comment letters. With the review of comments submitted and completion of additional field analysis, this document represents the final analysis of the possible alternatives for the management of these wildernesses.

Proposed Action

The proposed action is to replace existing management direction in the LRMPs with new management direction for the Ansel Adams, John Muir, and Dinkey Lakes Wildernesses. This direction would address issues associated with visitor use, commercial activities, and resource conditions.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of the proposed action is to amend the two Forest's LRMPs. The need for this action is based on the following:

1. Ensure consistency and reduce redundancy with Forest Service policy.
2. Meet Forest Plan direction.
3. Ensure the management direction meets the intent of the California Wilderness Act of 1984 (Public Law 98-425, September 28, 1984).
4. Provide consistent Forest Plan management direction to all three wildernesses.
5. Ensure that the concerns of the involved Indian Tribes are considered and addressed as needed.

6. Provide a change to management direction associated with visitor use, commercial activities and recreation stock forage.

Decision To Be Made

The decision to be made is whether or not to adopt new management direction specific to the Ansel Adams, John Muir, and Dinkey Lakes Wildernesses. The respective Forest Supervisors will be the responsible officials for these Forest Plan amendments. The decision will be documented in a Record of Decision, which will relate the specific selections made regarding management direction and wilderness policy.

Public Involvement

Public involvement for the RDEIS was conducted through a process of informing the public of work in progress. The agency provided the public with information that was being used to formulate alternatives. Efforts were made to link this information to comments received on the DEIS and other public involvement efforts. Newsletters were published in May and September of 1999 and April 2000. Public meetings were held in Bishop and Clovis in June 1999, to discuss the process for conducting a needs assessment and discuss data collection strategy for that field season. Public meetings were also held in January and February 2000 throughout California to share work in progress. After the release of the RDEIS in August 2000, several more public meetings were held to inform the public on content of the RDEIS. Public hearings on the RDEIS were also held in several California cities. An independent Content Analysis Team provided an unbiased review of the comments and presented them to the Interdisciplinary Team for response.

Issues

Scoping and public comments to the DEIS and RDEIS led the Forest Supervisors to identifying the following items as significant issues:

Social Conditions

A history of public use and enjoyment, and numerous popular destinations characterize the planning area. Since restrictions on access began in the 1970s, the public has generally accepted visitor management practices, including trailhead quotas and site-specific closures; however, the continued addition of management controls and regulations over time has resulted in a feeling by some of loss of visitor freedom.

Wilderness management requires managing for social values, as well as the ecological, historical and scientific characteristics. The public has various viewpoints on social values and interpretations on what, how, or if social values should be managed at all. Some believe trying to manage for these values is “social engineering”, while others believe management actions are too weak. Conflicts arise amongst user groups, including hikers and stock user, outfitted and non-outfitted groups, large groups and individuals.

Specific topics addressed under this item in the document include “zoning”, capacity, quotas, crowding, campsites, and day use.

Resource Conditions

When not managed carefully, human activities can adversely affect resource conditions, including vegetation, soil conditions, water quality and wildlife habitat. Law and policy require the Forest Service to protect soil and water quality and to manage vegetation and aquatic habitat to protect and provide for fish and wildlife. There is disagreement on what is an acceptable level of resource impacts and as to what protection measures are adequate to assure suitable and sufficient terrestrial and aquatic habitat, as well as protecting soil and water quality.

Items described in the FEIS under this topic are campfire restrictions, setbacks from water, campsites, user-created trails, cross-country party size, and recreational packstock grazing management.

Equity between Commercial and Non-commercial Access

Concerns specific to the planning area include the amount, type, distribution of use, methods of obtaining access and limiting use between commercial and private users. There is disagreement on whether commercial use should be limited in the same way as the private user. Commercial operations are limited through the Special Use Permit (SUP) process and the accompanying annual operating plans. Access for commercial pack stations and mountaineering guides is regulated through service day allocations and the number of stock permitted. Other commercial users and private parties are subject to daily quotas.

There is criticism on the current Forest Service practice of a dual system of daily quotas for some commercial operators and private users versus a broad annual service day allocation to other commercial pack stations and mountain guides. Public concern has been raised that the current practice allows users to bypass the non-commercial quota and obtain access to the wilderness by purchasing commercial services.

Disagreements on how much, or even if, growth should be allowed for commercial services have been voiced. Some people maintain the Forest Service should understand the needs of the public, the commercial operators and help maintain their economic viability. Others demand the agency focus on the ecosystem health and wilderness values as outlined in the Wilderness Act. Still others feel that the health and values of the wilderness character and preservation should drive management, not the economies or need to provide for an increasing population.

Discussions on quotas for commercial use, commercial allocations, and wilderness permit issuance are found under this item in the FEIS.

Issues Mitigated in all Action Alternatives

Heritage Resources and Threatened, Endangered, Proposed and Sensitive wildlife species issues are mitigated in all action alternatives.

Issues Outside the Scope of this Analysis

Issues raised that are not considered within the scope of this FEIS party size (except for cross-country), trailhead facilities, production livestock grazing, fisheries management, non-native wildlife, education, off-highway vehicles, fire management, air quality and site-specific project decisions.

Alternative Development

In response to issues identified in Chapter 1, public scoping, comments received for the DEIS and input provided during public meetings for the RDEIS, four alternatives were developed and analyzed. Two alternatives represent each end of the spectrum for managing wilderness within the legal bounds. One of those alternatives emphasizes resource protection, while the other emphasizes visitor freedom. Another alternative (Alternative 1, the Proposed Action in the RDEIS) developed falls in between the emphasis of resource protection and visitor freedom. As required by law, the “No Action” alternative is also included. In response to public comments raised during the review of the RDEIS and some data corrections and updates, Alternative 1 was modified for inclusion in the FEIS (see Alternative 1 – Modified).

The following alternatives from the original DEIS were eliminated from further study for the reasons described with the DEIS alternative:

DEIS Alternative 2 – Emphasize Pristine Condition

Alternative 2 in the RDEIS replaced this alternative; the new alternative has nearly the same emphasis, but does not use the opportunity class system to implement it.

DEIS Alternative 3 – Emphasize Recreational Opportunities

Alternative 4 in the RDEIS replaced this alternative; the new alternative has almost the same emphasis, but does not utilize opportunity classes.

DEIS Alternative 4 – Current Use using Opportunity Classes

This alternative was not considered in the RDEIS because opportunity classes are not being used as a management system in this planning process.

DEIS Alternative 5 – Forest Service Preferred

All of the components in this alternative were covered in one of the alternatives in the RDEIS. Opportunity class was not considered since it is not being used in this planning process.

During the comment period, the Backcountry Horsemen of California (BCHC) submitted a proposed Alternative 5. This alternative was reviewed by members of the Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) and compared to the range of alternatives displayed in the RDEIS. A comparison of their proposed alternative was also made to existing Forest Manuals, Handbooks, LRMPs, laws and regulations. Through this comparison and analysis by the IDT members, it was determined that all of the elements of BCHC’s proposed Alternative 5 were either addressed in one of the FEIS’s alternatives or in existing direction.

Alternatives Considered in Detail

Alternative 1 – Modified, Forest Service Preferred Alternative

This Preferred Alternative uses strategies from both Alternatives 1 and 2 and some existing management direction from Alternative 3. Modifications suggested through public comments and some data corrections and updates were also incorporated. Three categories for managing recreation use are proposed in this alternative. The intent of these categories is to allow for different recreational characteristics in different areas of use. Categories 1 and 2 consist of large areas managed for moderate and low use levels, Category 3 consists of small confined areas of more concentrated visitor use that coincide with historical areas of high use. This approach attempts to concentrate use and impacts, manage intensively to mitigate these impacts, and manage the remaining majority of the landscape for low and moderate levels of use. This alternative maintains commercial use at current levels; however, some reductions will occur within areas where monitoring of limiting factors indicates that such action is necessary to alleviate impacts. The alternative also strives for equitable use between commercial and non-commercial users by proposing changes to commercial operations on gaining access to wilderness.

Based on concerns raised during public comment on the RDEIS, Alternative 1 - Modified displays changes made to the following topics: campfire closures, campsite conditions, standards and guidelines for social and resource conditions, the wilderness permit system, trailhead quotas, user-created trails, and recreational packstock grazing.

Alternative 1, RDEIS Proposed Action

The proposed action establishes three categories for managing recreation use to allow for different recreational characteristics. This approach attempts to concentrate use and impacts, but manages the majority of the landscape for low and moderate levels of use. This alternative also maintains commercial use at current levels; however, it proposes restrictions on commercial operators that will provide for equitable use between commercial and non-commercial users.

Alternative 2

Alternative 2 emphasizes preserving the ecological integrity of the wilderness while providing for high opportunities of solitude for recreation users. The entire planning area will be managed consistently with regard to use levels and impacts. Natural conditions and processes will dominate and the landscape will appear to be untrammled by human activities. This alternative provides for reductions in allocations to commercial users, one management scheme across the planning area, campfire restrictions, some trails designated as hiker only, and reductions in the following: trailhead quotas, available campsite locations, and allowable party size for cross-country travel.

Alternative 3, No Action

The No Action alternative would continue existing policy and direction. The current Forest Plans for the two Forests would continue to provide wilderness direction. The existing plans for the John Muir Wilderness and the Minarets Wilderness Plan would continue to provide the

direction where not superseded by the respective Forest Plan.

Alternative 4

This alternative proposes wilderness management that would maximize recreational uses to the extent allowable under the Wilderness Act. Recreational uses will be maintained at levels that recognize historic traditions. Use and growth will be accommodated in ways compatible with wilderness character and natural resource values. Minimal restrictions and controls will be in place to allow for unconfined types of recreation. This recreation will take place in areas designated as trailed and trail-less. Human activity will be apparent in both the social and ecological environment.

Affected Environment

Location and Setting

The Ansel Adams, John Muir, and Dinkey Lakes Wildernesses are located in the central and southern Sierra Nevada. The entire planning area covers 840,581 acres extending from Lone Pine in the south to Highway 120 in the north.

Ansel Adams Wilderness: This wilderness was originally established as the Minarets Wilderness in 1964. The California Wilderness Act of 1984 enlarged the area by 119,000 acres and renamed the area to Ansel Adams Wilderness. The area is located on the Inyo and Sierra National Forests with a small portion (808 acres) located in Devils Postpile National Monument (not included in this analysis). There are 230,238 acres within the Ansel Adams Wilderness, with 78,775 acres on the Inyo NF and 151,483 acres on the Sierra NF.

The Ansel Adams Wilderness extends from Highway 120 in the north to Lake Thomas A. Edison to the south. Elevations range from 3,500 feet to 13,157 feet at Mt. Ritter. There are a number of streams and lakes, which form the headwaters of the North and Middle Forks of the San Joaquin River

John Muir Wilderness: Established in 1964 by the original Wilderness Act and enlarged by 81,000 acres by the 1984 California Wilderness Act, the John Muir is one of the most heavily visited wildernesses in the National Wilderness Preservation System. There are 580,323 acres within the John Muir Wilderness, 228,366 acres on the Inyo NF and 351,957 acres on the Sierra NF.

From Mammoth Lakes in the north, the John Muir Wilderness forks around the Sequoia/Kings Canyon Wilderness, and extends some 100 miles to the south with its southern most boundaries just west of Lone Pine, CA. Elevations range from 4,000 feet to just below the Mt. Whitney summit (14,497 feet). There are numerous peaks over 12,000 feet. Deep canyons, lofty peaks and meadows along the numerous lakes and streams characterize this wilderness. The South and Middle Fork of the San Joaquin River, the North Fork of the Kings River and many creeks flowing into the Owens Valley originate here.

Dinkey Lakes Wilderness: The California Wilderness Act of 1984 established this area as wilderness. It encompasses 30,000 acres of National Forest land that lies entirely on the Sierra National Forest. Dinkey Lakes Wilderness is located immediately west of the John Muir Wilderness and is separated from it by the Dusy-Ershim Off-Highway Vehicle Route. Elevations range from 8,200 feet adjacent to Courtright Reservoir to 10,619 feet at Three Sisters Peak. There are 16 lakes clustered in the west central portion of the area.

Climate

The Sierra Nevada has a Mediterranean climate. It is characterized by hot, dry summers and cool, moist winters. Winter precipitation varies considerably from year to year. Most of the planning area is under snow from approximately November to May, and in heavy snow years, much of the area remains snow covered well into July and August. Droughts lasting 3-5 years have not been uncommon over the past few centuries. Severe droughts have occurred in the late 1890s, the mid-1920s, the early 1960s, the mid 1970s and the late 1980s-early 1990s.

Environmental Consequences

Soils – Generally, implementation of regional soil quality standards and Best Management Practices (BMPs) for protection of water quality is expected to maintain longterm soil quality and productivity. However each alternative proposes a range of management activities and allowable uses that could impact soil to varying degrees.

Alternatives 1 and 1 – Modified provide a strong degree of protection and also concentrate use so that areas can be managed more effectively to minimize soil impacts. Alternative 2 provides fewer measures to concentrate impacts than Alternatives 1 and 1 – Modified, and therefore may result in more moderate impacts to soils over a larger area. Moderate impacts are less likely to exceed regional soil quality standards. All three alternatives have measures to improve the current situation and reduce existing impacts as well as providing consistent direction to help prevent future impacts. Similar management direction is not included in Alternatives 3 and 4. Alternative 4 has the lowest degree of protection for soils and poses the greatest risk for impacting certain soil communities and high use areas.

Water Resources - Overall, Alternative 2 provides the greatest degree of protection and the least amount of risk to water quality. It does have the potential to disperse use and impacts associated with use into areas not previously affected. Alternatives 1 and 1 – Modified also provide a strong degree of protection and they concentrate use so that areas can be managed more effectively to minimize water quality impacts. All three alternatives have measures to improve the current situation and reduce existing impacts as well as to provide consistent direction to help prevent future impacts. Similar management direction is not included in Alternatives 3 and 4. Alternative 4 has the least degree of protection and poses the greatest risk of impacting water quality.

Wildlife and Vegetation – The greatest degree of protection for wildlife and vegetation is provided in Alternative 2. Alternatives 1 and 1 – Modified attempt to manage use to reduce detrimental human/wildlife encounters. Alternative 4 has the least degree of protection. However, no alternative is expected to lead to loss of habitat or species viability for any of the species of concern in the wildernesses.

Recreation – All alternatives allow for limited entry on overnight visitor use. Camping experiences will vary in each alternative with the highest levels of quality for wilderness experiences throughout the planning area found in Alternative 2. Alternative 1 offers areas for high levels of recreation use contained in 5% of the land base. Alternative 1 – Modified contains this area to 3% of the land base. Containing use and impacts associated with use will provide for greater overall protection of resources across the planning area than any of the other alternatives. This is because research shows that impacts occur even with low levels of use. In Alternative 2, where use will be dispersed by capping it similarly all over, impacts may spread to areas that would not be affected under Alternatives 1 and 1 – Modified. The lowest relative degree of wilderness quality and experience would be found with Alternative 4. This alternative would provide the highest degree of visitor freedom.

Camping closures in effect by Forest Order will continue in all alternatives. Maximum party size remains the same in all alternatives with the exception of cross-country party size being reduced to 8 people/8 head of stock in Alternative 2. Provisions for possible future party-size reductions exist in Alternative 1 – Modified. Commercial use will continue in all alternatives; however, commercial users will have a daily ceiling of the number of clients they may take into the backcountry in Alternatives 1, 1 – Modified, and 2. Commercial operators would have lower service day allocations in Alternative 2 and higher service day allocations in Alternative 4. All users (commercial and non-commercial) would compete for the same quota in Alternative 2. In all alternatives, visitor use impacts will continue.

Facilities – An inventory of trails with their assigned service (maintenance) levels can be found in Appendix C. An inventory of all administrative sites and structures can be found in Appendix K. Adequate surveys to determine the historical significance of structures that are located in the planning area are on going.

Heritage Resources - There is limited information available regarding heritage resources within the wilderness; however, use of trails, campsites, campfires and waste disposal result in cumulative impacts to these resources. Alternatives 1 and 1 – Modified would result in higher level of protection for cultural resources. Alternative 2 could potentially result in lower levels of cultural resource protection in that it may disperse use to areas not previously affected. Continued degradation of cultural resources would occur in Alternatives 3 and 4 with the possibility of degradation accelerating in Alternative 4.

Contemporary Native American Uses – Cultural integrity of the landscape of traditional cultural properties may be negatively affected in all alternatives. There will be ongoing tribal consultation requirements. A Programmatic Agreement has been developed that will help the Forests employ appropriate management practices to eliminate or reduce adverse effects to specific historic and prehistoric sites.