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NEZ PERCE NATIONAL FOREST EXISTING CONDITIONS

This document has been prepared to provide context for the Nez Perce National Forest Proposed Land Management Plan. It specifically focuses on existing conditions at the time the Proposed Plan was written (2006). These brief descriptions of the current situation can be compared with desired conditions included in the Proposed Land management Plan.

For ease of reference, this document incorporates the same numbering system as used in the Proposed Plan. **Please note that existing conditions have not been written for every section included in the document.**

1.3 Ecosystem Integrity and Sustainability Existing Conditions

1.3.1 Forest Vegetation

Vegetation

In general, across all landform settings, shade intolerant species (i.e. ponderosa pine, western larch and Douglas-fir) are found less often than desired, while shade tolerant species (i.e. grand fir and subalpine fir) are more abundant than desired. Smaller size classes are usually less abundant than desired, while the middle size class is often more common than desired. This reflects 60 years of highly effective fire suppression that has not been replaced by other disturbance factors such as timber harvest, prescribed fire or wildland fire use.

1.3.1.2 Breaklands Setting: [Map EC 1.3.1.2](#) - 775,690 acres

Succession without disturbance has allowed grand fir to establish and mature on these sites. Medium-sized trees are below desired levels. The largest size class is above desired levels, likely on the north aspects, as the dry southerly aspects were characteristically large, open grown forests.

1.3.1.3 Uplands Setting: [Map EC 1.3.1.3](#) - 475,396 acres

Shade-tolerant species, primarily grand fir, are above desired conditions. Shade-intolerant species, such as ponderosa pine and western larch, have much less coverage than desired. The middle size class is above desired levels, while other size classes are near the lower end of desired ranges.

1.3.1.4 Subalpine Setting: [Map EC 1.3.1.4](#) - 857,595 acres

Species composition is within desired ranges, with the exception of western larch. Middle and large size classes are overrepresented. Seedling/sapling and pole size classes are below desired levels.

1.3.2 Grassland and Shrubland Vegetation

On the breaklands, most non-forest sites have been invaded by weeds, most commonly cheat grass; however, other annual grasses and invasive weeds are present. The disturbed area covers over half of this vegetation type. (See section 1.3.5, Invasive Weeds, for more detailed weed conditions.) Some historic grasslands have also converted to shrublands due to lack of fire.

On the uplands, grasslands are primarily riparian meadows dominated by sedges or grassy balds dominated by mountain grassland species.

In subalpine settings alder, menziesia, dwarf subalpine shrubs, grassy balds and riparian meadows are the most common types.

1.3.3 Rare Plants

Rare plants are found across the Nez Perce National Forest. They can be grouped by habitat needs into about 12 groups: mesic conifer, ponderosa pine savannah/grassland, forested riparian, canyon riparian, mid- to high-elevation seral, grand fir mosaic, cool meadows, cold cedar/grand fir/subalpine fir, basalt outcrops in dry forest, subalpine parkland, and seral grand fir.

Cooperative partnerships with the state of Idaho and Nez Perce Tribe have contributed to understanding and conservation of rare plants on the Forest.

1.3.4 Terrestrial Wildlife Habitat

1.3.4.1 Terrestrial Habitat

Forest-wide

Roughly 70% of the Nez Perce National Forest is roadless or designated wilderness, where insects and disease, and to some extent fire, play out their natural roles.

Habitat composition and patch sizes are inconsistent with historic availability and distribution, reducing diversity. Habitat patches on warm and dry aspects are larger because of climax tree encroachment, whereas cooler and wetter sites lack a diversity of tree size and age classes.

Timber harvest and fuelwood removal along open roads has reduced the amount of large, standing dead and down wood, and live trees with decay.

Winter range forage and browse plants, which depend on periodic disturbance, have declined or become decadent. Spring season burning has resulted in some winter range improvements; however, spring burning is inconsistent with natural disturbance processes and frequencies.

Invasive plants have become established and spread along the road and trail network and into some habitats. They are transported primarily by vehicles, domestic and wild animals, and the wind.

Invasive weeds have reduced the quality of available habitat by out-competing native plant communities where growing conditions are favorable to invasive species.

Habitats for wide-ranging carnivores are largely intact in undeveloped locations such as roadless areas and wilderness.

Breaklands

Increased densities of grand fir and Douglas-fir have reduced the availability of habitat for many species associated with open-grown ponderosa pine habitat types. This change in vegetation has also affected overall habitat diversity.

The availability and recruitment of western larch snags is at a low level.

Shallow soils on southerly aspects limit the production of high quality forage and browse for big game.

Uplands

Mature, older and secure habitats have been reduced or degraded in highly roaded portions of the Forest.

Subalpine

Large amounts of whitebark pine have been lost due to blister rust, mountain pine beetle, and the lack of wildland fire. This has reduced habitat for species associated with whitebark pine habitat.

Younger forest habitat is in short supply for species that prefer early seral habitat conditions.

1.3.4.2 Wildlife Security

Map EC 1.3.4.2 Existing Wildlife Habitat Security Conditions

Forest-wide

Motorized access has reduced some habitat effectiveness and security through habitat loss, animal displacement, and making animals more vulnerable to hunting, poaching, and trapping. Some Forest roads are currently closed either year-round or seasonally to provide security for wildlife. Motorized vehicle influence in unroaded areas is present but is limited to specific routes. Open roads allow for the removal of standing dead and down material important to many wildlife species dependent on these habitat components. Motorized use is limited in winter ranges, but has increased on the road and trail system and at higher elevations.

Overall, year-round wildlife habitat security is low to very low in Forest subwatersheds that contain highly-roaded and intensively-managed landscapes. Year-round habitat security is generally moderate to high in subwatersheds that contain large amounts of wilderness and roadless areas. Motorized routes that border or pass through unroaded areas have some influence on habitat security within these areas. Table EC 1.3.4.2 lists the number of sub-watersheds and their relative security status.

Table EC 1.3.4.2 Existing Habitat Security Conditions

Security Category (Percent of the watershed outside the influence of motorized routes)	Number of Subwatersheds
High = > 70%	38
Moderate = 50-70%	27
Low = 25-50%	19
Very Low = < 25%	39

1.3.5 Invasive Weeds

Map EC 1.3.5 Existing Invasive Weed Conditions

Invasive weeds have become established and are spreading across susceptible landscapes unimpeded by land ownership boundaries, in forested and non-forested landform settings. Native plant species have been displaced, reducing the capability of habitats to support wildlife and livestock. Invasive weed establishment has affected fire frequency, altered soil properties, and threatened rare plant species through competition. Currently, all watersheds contain weed populations at various levels of infestation.

Table EC 1.3.5 Existing Invasive Weed Conditions

Conservation Themes and Priorities	Number of Watersheds
Conserve	4
Restore	29

1.3.6 Soil Productivity

The majority of soils on the Nez Perce National Forest are in natural condition. Fire suppression work, mining activities, temporary road construction, mechanized slash disposal, timber harvest and other activities have reduced soil productivity in places. Soil compaction, displacement or puddling is a concern on portions of lands affected by severe wildfires, mining or ground-based harvest. In some areas severe wildfires have resulted in soil erosion and nutrient loss or changes in nutrient availability. The risk of landslides is increased by roads that are poorly designed or located on unstable ground. Snags and coarse woody debris are reduced on some sites and overabundant on others.

1.3.7 Watersheds and Aquatic Ecosystems

Map EC 1.3.7 Conserve and Restore Watershed Classifications

Currently there are 69 conserve-designated subwatersheds (55%); however, a small percentage (<10%) may have needed restoration and have a high priority for restore-type management actions.

Currently, there are 55 restore-designated subwatersheds (45%). These subwatersheds do not meet water quality or fish habitat desired conditions.

1.4 Cultural, Social and Economic Existing Conditions

1.4.1 Designated Wilderness

The Nez Perce National Forest manages a total of 877,000 acres of designated wilderness. The Forest administers the Gospel-Hump Wilderness and portions of the Selway-Bitterroot and Frank Church-River of No Return Wildernesses. An additional 60,000 acres of the Hells Canyon Wilderness located within the Nez Perce National Forest is administered by the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

Visitor use is considered moderate to low compared to other units in the National Wilderness Preservation System. Resource and social impacts are expected to increase near trailheads where use increases, particularly those access points popular with visitors from growing urban areas like Spokane or Coeur d'Alene to the north; Missoula, Montana, to the east; and Boise, Idaho, to the south.

1.4.2 Designated and Eligible Wild, Scenic and Recreation Rivers

Map EC 1.4.2 Designated and Eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers

The Nez Perce National Forest 1987 Plan recommended a total of 376 miles of river segments to be considered for addition to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. These river segments are considered to possess unique, rare or exemplary values, or outstandingly remarkable values.

14.3 Research Natural Areas

The 1987 Forest Plan identified candidate research natural areas that contained the forest, non-forest and aquatic types assigned by the Forest Service Region 1, or Northern Region, guide. All of the candidate research natural areas have been established. The Research Natural Areas of the Northern Region: Status and Needs Assessment (October 1996) identifies the forest, herbaceous, and aquatic types that are typical on the Nez Perce National Forest. It also identifies the types that are not currently represented in research natural areas, and assigns them as targets for additional research natural area establishment. For the Nez Perce, those types are displayed on Table EC 1.4.3.

Table EC 1.4.3 Recommended Changes in Research Natural Areas

Class	Type	Setting	Status
Forest and Woodland	<i>Pinus contorta</i> / <i>Vaccinium scoparium</i>		Unfilled from 1987 plan
	<i>Abies grandis</i> / <i>Adiantum pedatum</i>		Add, partially filled by No Business Creek Research Natural Area
	<i>Abies lasiocarpa</i> / <i>Coptis occidentalis</i>		Add, partially filled by No Business Creek Research Natural Area
	<i>Pseudotsuga menziesii</i> / <i>Vaccinium caespitosum</i>		Add, partially filled by No Business Creek Research Natural Area
Herbaceous Vegetation	<i>Deschampsia caespitosa</i>		Add (tentative)
	<i>Festuca idahoensis</i> / <i>Symphoricarpos albus</i>		Add (tentative)
	<i>Agropyron spicatum</i> / <i>Opuntia polyacantha</i>		Add (tentative)

1.4.4 Areas Recommended for Wilderness Designation

There are approximately 877,000 acres of designated wilderness administered by the Nez Perce National Forest (excluding the Hells Canyon Wilderness administered by the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest).

The 2003 Wilderness Needs Assessment for Forest Service Region 1 (the Northern Region) identified ecosections on National Forest System lands that are underrepresented (less than 5% total acres) in the region. Designated wilderness acres generally represent the Idaho Batholith Ecosection. Forty-six percent of the acres of the Idaho Batholith Ecosection are currently in designated wilderness in Region 1; therefore, it is not underrepresented.

1.4.5 Road Management

The system roads on the Forest are important facilities that provide access for the public and forest management activities. The average appropriated budget for planning, construction and maintenance of the approximately 3873 miles of road on the Nez Perce National Forest is roughly \$948,000 (fiscal years 2002/2003/2004). The annual maintenance need to meet road management objectives is \$6,185,000 based on condition surveys. Current funding completes just 9% of needed annual maintenance for the entire classified road system. Condition surveys indicate the Forest has a \$64,000,000 deferred maintenance backlog to be done. The deferred maintenance backlog will continue to increase if current funding levels remain constant or decrease.

1.4.6 Motorized and Non-Motorized Recreation Uses

On the Nez Perce National Forest 65% of roads and 33% of trails are open yearlong or seasonally to motorized uses by a variety of vehicle types. Additionally, the majority of the Forest outside of designated wilderness is open to motorized use off roads and trails year-round except in areas closed to protect wildlife, sensitive soils, some recreation sites or cultural resources. There are extensive non-motorized trail systems in the four designated wildernesses and additional opportunities outside of designated wilderness. Existing closures contribute to wildlife habitat needs for security and minimize or eliminate resource impacts.

The Forest Service published new travel regulations in November 2005. The new regulations are intended to provide sustainable access for motor vehicles, including off-highway vehicles, on national forests and grasslands. These regulations require each national forest to designate those roads, trails and areas that are open to motor vehicle use.

1.4.9 Recreation Special Uses

There are 1 recreation resort, 27 land-based hunting, 3 mountain bike/trail ride and 4 river outfitter and guide permits on the Forest. In addition to these term permits, there are up to 30 temporary noncommercial group use or recreation event permits issued annually.

1.4.10 Scenery Resources

Scenic quality and landscape settings vary from heavily roaded and managed areas to pr 310.32eefroad

properties on the Nez Perce National Forest listed on the National Registry of Historic Places.

1.4.12 Economic Contribution

The Forest Service manages roughly 63% of the lands in the north-central Idaho region comprised of Clearwater, Idaho, Latah, Lewis and Nez Perce Counties. The Nez Perce National Forest's average annual economic contribution (direct, indirect and induced) from 2002 to 2004 is approximately 1600 full- and part-time jobs and \$39.9 million in labor income to the five-county area. This is approximately 2.8% of the employment and 2.3% of the labor.

1.4.13 Timber Availability

The 1987 Forest Plan established an allowable sale quantity of 108 million board feet per year, though actual harvest levels have been much less.

1.4.14 Wildland Fire, Fuels and Air Quality

Response to wildland fire included the full range of appropriate management response, as defined in the Interagency Standards for Fire and Fire Aviation Operations. Fuel levels are managed with a combination for fire and mechanical treatments.

The Forest Plan currently allows for fire use on 58% of the Forest (approximately 1.2 million acres). Fire regime condition class indicates that much of the Nez Perce National Forest has changed from historic conditions through vegetation succession without periodic fire and some timber harvests that did not maintain historic composition and structures

Wildland urban interface is found on forest lands adjacent to communities and individual home sites and is defined in county and community wildland fire mitigation plans.

Air quality is generally very good, and there are no areas that the state has identified as non-compliant with state air quality standards. Areas of concern are the following Class I airsheds: lands within the Nez Perce Tribal Reservation, Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, Gospel-Hump Wilderness, and the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. Other concerns are local communities, Missoula, and the Bitterroot Valley.

1.4.15 Livestock Management

The proper functioning and condition of rangelands, grazing capacities and grazing management strategies and other resource management concerns influence livestock management on the Nez Perce National Forest. Currently, there are 24 active allotments containing 579,118 acres of capable and suitable lands for livestock grazing.

1.4.16 Minerals

The Nez Perce National Forest has had several locations with significant amounts of precious metals. Historic placer mining in the Elk City/Red River area is clearly evident on the landscape today. The majority of the prospecting and exploration operations occur

within the Red River and Salmon River Ranger Districts. There are no known oil and gas occurrences on the Forest. There is no potential for extensive geothermal development.

1.4.17 Lands

The Nez Perce National Forest administers, on average, 178 non-recreation special use permits annually. Special use permits authorize the occupancy and use of National Forest System lands by private individuals or companies for a wide variety of activities, such as roads, utility corridors, communication sites and other commercial uses that cannot be accommodated on private land.

1.4.18 Utilities and Communication Sites

Map EC 1.5.18 Nez Perce National Forest Electronic Sites

There are 81.5 miles of utility power lines authorized on the Forest and 14 communication sites.

1.4.19 Administrative Facilities

There are 286 administrative buildings located on the Forest. These include, but are not limited to, ranger stations, work centers, lookouts and emergency airfields located across the Forest.

1.5 Tribal Existing Conditions

1.5.1 Tribal Treaty Rights and Trust Responsibilities

Tribal members often gather traditional plants (e.g. huckleberries, camas, etc.) from sites customarily used by the Nez Perce people. The public is also able to gather forest plants, other than timber, in small quantities for personal use. The Forest occasionally permits the commercial harvest of products such as huckleberries, mushrooms, Pacific yew and decorative materials. Tribal leaders have expressed concern that the increasing non-tribal use of wild plants is negatively affecting the availability of desired plants and is displacing tribal members from traditional gathering locations.

Forest managers strive to maintain government-to-government relationships and to develop land management projects in a manner that honors treaty rights. The Nez Perce National Forest and the Tribes enter into partnerships to complete important resource management work. Stewardship contracting authority and the Tribal Forest Protection Act provide a foundation for future partnerships and improved working relationships.