

CHAPTER 1 – PURPOSE AND NEED

Document Structure

The Forest Service has prepared this Draft Environmental Impact Statement in compliance with the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations. This Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) discloses the direct, indirect and cumulative environmental impacts that would result from the proposed action and alternatives. The document is organized into four chapters:

1. **Chapter 1. Purpose and Need for Action:** This chapter briefly describes the proposed action, the need for that action and other purposes to be achieved by the proposal. This section also details how the Forest Service informed the public of the proposed action and how the public responded.
2. **Chapter 2. Alternatives, including the Proposed Action:** This chapter provides a detailed description of the Agency’s proposed action as well as alternative actions that were developed in response to comments raised by the public during scoping. The end of the chapter includes a summary table comparing the proposed action and alternatives with respect to their environmental impacts.
3. **Chapter 3. Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences:** This chapter describes the environmental impacts of the proposed action and alternatives.
4. **Chapter 4. Consultation and Coordination:** This chapter provides a list of preparers and agencies consulted during the development of the environmental impact statement.
5. **Appendices:** The appendices provide more detailed information to support the analyses presented in the environmental impact statement.

Additional documentation, including more detailed analyses of project-area resources, may be found in the project planning record located at High Sierra Ranger District, 29688 Auberry Road, Prather, CA 93651.

Background

Over the past few decades, the availability and capability of motor vehicles, particularly off-highway vehicles (OHVs) and sport utility vehicles (SUVs) has increased tremendously. Nationally, the number of OHV users has climbed sevenfold in the past 30 years, from approximately 5 million in 1972 to 36 million in 2000. California is experiencing the highest level of OHV use of any State in the Nation. There were 786,914 all terrain vehicles (ATVs) and OHV motorcycles registered in 2004, up 330 percent since 1980. Recent trends of annual sales of ATVs and OHV motorcycles in California were the highest in the U.S. Four-wheel drive vehicle sales in California also increased by 1500 percent to 3,046,866 from 1989 to 2002.

Unmanaged OHV use has resulted in unplanned roads and trails, erosion, watershed and habitat degradation and impacts to cultural resource sites. Compaction and erosion are the primary effects of OHV use on soils. Riparian areas and aquatic dependent species are particularly vulnerable to OHV use. Unmanaged recreation, including impacts from OHVs, is one of “Four Key Threats Facing the Nation’s Forests and Grasslands (USDA-FS June 2004).”

On August 11, 2003, the Pacific Southwest Region of the Forest Service entered into a Memorandum of Intent (MOI) with the California Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Commission and the Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Division of the California

Department of Parks and Recreation. That MOI set in motion a region-wide effort to “Designate OHV roads, trails and any specifically defined open areas for motor vehicles on maps of the 19 National Forests in California by 2007.”

On November 9, 2005, the Forest Service published final travel management regulations in the Federal Register (FR Vol. 70, No. 216-Nov. 9, 2005, pp 68264-68291). This final Travel Management Rule requires designation of those roads, trails and areas that are open to motor vehicle use on National Forests. Only roads, trails and areas that are part of a National Forest Transportation System (NFTS) may be designated for motorized use. Designations are made by class of vehicle and, if appropriate, by time of year. The final rule prohibits the use of motor vehicles off designated NFTS roads, NFTS trails and areas, as well as use of motor vehicles on roads and trails that are not specifically designated for public use.

On some National Forest System (NFS) lands, long managed as open to cross-country motor vehicle travel, repeated use has resulted in unplanned, unauthorized, roads and trails. Motorized routes created through open use are defined as unauthorized routes per the Travel Management Rule 36 CFR 212. These routes developed without environmental analysis or public involvement and do not have the same status as NFTS roads and NFTS trails included in the NFTS. Nevertheless, some unauthorized routes are well-sited, provide excellent opportunities for outdoor recreation by motorized and non-motorized users and would enhance the NFTS. Other unauthorized routes are poorly located and cause unacceptable impacts. In order for an unauthorized route to be designated, it must first be added to the NFTS.

In 2005, the Sierra National Forest (SNF) completed an inventory of unauthorized routes on NFS lands as described in the NOI and identified approximately 550 miles of unauthorized routes. The SNF then used an interdisciplinary process to conduct travel analysis that included working with the public to identify proposals for changes to the existing Sierra NFTS. In accordance with the Travel Management Rule, following a decision on this environmental analysis, the SNF will publish a Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM) identifying all Sierra NFTS roads, trails and areas that are designated for motor vehicle use. Parking one vehicle length off of the NFTS will be allowed unless otherwise prohibited. The MVUM shall specify the classes of vehicles and the times of year for which use is designated. Unauthorized routes not included in this DEIS are not precluded from future consideration for addition to the NFTS and inclusion in a MVUM. Future decisions associated with changes to the MVUM and the NFTS may trigger the need for additional environmental analysis, public involvement and documentation.

Travel Management on the Sierra National Forest

The SNF currently manages and maintains approximately 2,530 miles of NFTS roads, including 19 primitive roads managed as motorized trails (98 miles). The current NFTS includes all SNF managed roads, including those closed year round. Roads may be closed year round for a variety of reasons including: protect facilities; maintain integrity of the developed recreation program; reduce adverse effects on various natural, cultural or other resources; reduce maintenance costs; or minimize safety concerns.

Some closed roads are put in a maintenance level 1 (ML1) storage category due to the fact they are unnecessary except as intermittent, short term project roads. These roads are closed to all traffic and are maintained to protect the investment in the road and to protect adjacent natural or cultural resources. When a ML1 road becomes necessary for project access, it is temporarily restored for the required traffic and usually returned to the ML1 storage category after use.

Some NFTS roads have been permanently decommissioned because it has been determined to not be needed for foreseeable future. This decommissioned roads are not included part of NFTS.

The NFTS was developed over many decades to meet a variety needs. Timber management, fuel treatment, access to private inholdings, fire control, utility management, special uses and recreation and harvesting of special forest products are among the many opportunities afforded by the NFTS. The NFTS is managed and maintained to various road standards, ranging from paved roads to primitive (roughly graded high clearance) roads, depending on the type of access necessary. The current NFTS provides a diverse range of opportunities for most motorized recreation and various vehicle types.

Motorized areas are also included in the current NFTS. The SNF currently manages 59 motorized use areas (totaling 125 acres) where motor vehicle use is allowed. Management activities (health and safety and resource protection) are implemented primarily for resource protection rather than user convenience. An area may be as small as a single pullout or a dispersed campsite or as large space for parking several large equestrian trailers. These areas do not get daily maintenance, but require more labor intensive trash collection because trash collection bins are typically not present (See Appendix K - Maps).

The NFTS is displayed on the Forest Transportation Atlas¹. Details concerning the management of individual roads and trails are maintained in the SNF infrastructure database (INFRA). In 2002, the SNF examined previous records (maintenance plans, maintenance expenditures, existing road and trail atlases, forest maps, etc.) to capture the entire NFTS and transferred the necessary information into INFRA and verified the Forest Transportation Atlas. Roads or trails that had no record of being mapped or maintained for a specific use were not included in the NFTS.

Since then, adjustments to the Forest Transportation Atlas and INFRA database have been made to account for NFTS roads that were either newly constructed or overlooked in the 2002 effort. The current Forest Transportation Atlas identifies the existing NFTS and the management of objectives for each transportation facility. The NFTS changes depending on resource needs and management concerns.

This proposal is just one project among many in the long term goal of managing the transportation system in a sustainable and cost effective manner. Previous decisions have reduced the number of miles of NFTS roads available for motorized use and established seasonal restrictions to protect resources and infrastructure investment. This has been accomplished through forest planning, vegetation management projects, watershed restoration projects, fuel treatment projects, trail construction projects, trail management decisions, landscape analysis, watershed analysis and the Roads Analysis Process (RAP). All of these efforts have contributed to sustainable management of the SNFTS.

Ongoing efforts include: (1) efforts to reduce the impacts associated with non-system (unauthorized) routes and (2) efforts to address impacts associated with the current NFTS. Implementation of this decision and subsequent designation of motorized trails through publication of the first MVUM are only one step in the overall management of the SNF NFTS.

Project Location

The project is located on the Sierra National Forest (SNF) in Fresno, Mariposa and Madera Counties, California (See Figure 2). The project area includes all Sierra National Forest System lands with the exception of designated wilderness and special areas identified in the LRMP (e.g. the Kings River Special Management Area, research natural areas) (USDA-FS 1991: 4.3.19).

¹ A display of the system of roads, trails and airfields of an administrative unit

Maps

One map for each alternative can be found in Appendix K. In the electronic version of Appendix K (on CD and on the Web at <http://www.fs.us.fed/r5/sierra/projects/ohy>), these maps have a zoom feature to aid the reader in discerning details. Also, Appendix L includes a crosswalk of each proposed route and area to its corresponding USGS quadrangle map.

Analysis Units

To aid the reader in navigating the document and locating written analysis for specific additions or changes to the NFTS, the SNF divided the project area into ten analysis units. These analysis units were delineated into place based settings generally based on geographic areas where similar types of motorized recreation uses are known to occur. They are organized both here and in the document from north to south. Ranger district abbreviations are Bass Lake (BL) and High Sierra (HS) (See Table 3 and Figure 3). Please see the introduction to Chapter 3 for descriptions and acreage of each analysis unit.

Table 3. Analysis Unit Abbreviations

Ranger District	Analysis Unit	Abbreviation
Bass Lake	South Fork Merced	SFM
	Westfall	WES
	Globe	GLO
	Gaggs	GAG
	Mammoth	MAM
High Sierra	Stump Springs-Big Creek	SSB
	East of Kaiser Pass	EKP
	Jose-Chawanakee	JCH
	Tamarack-Dinkey	TAD
	Dinkey-Kings	DNK

Figure 1. Areas Where Motorized Cross-country Travel is Currently Prohibited

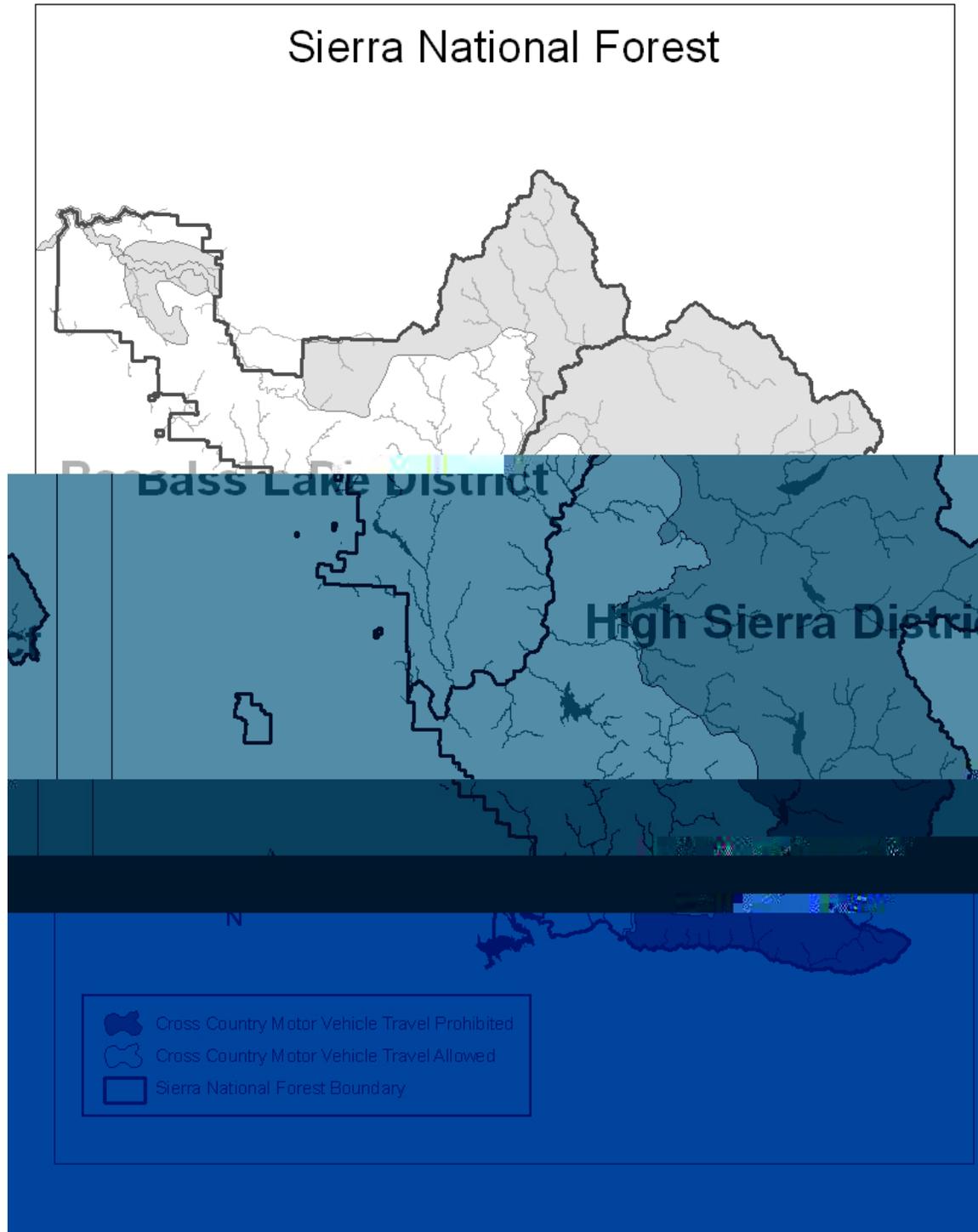


Figure 2. Vicinity Map

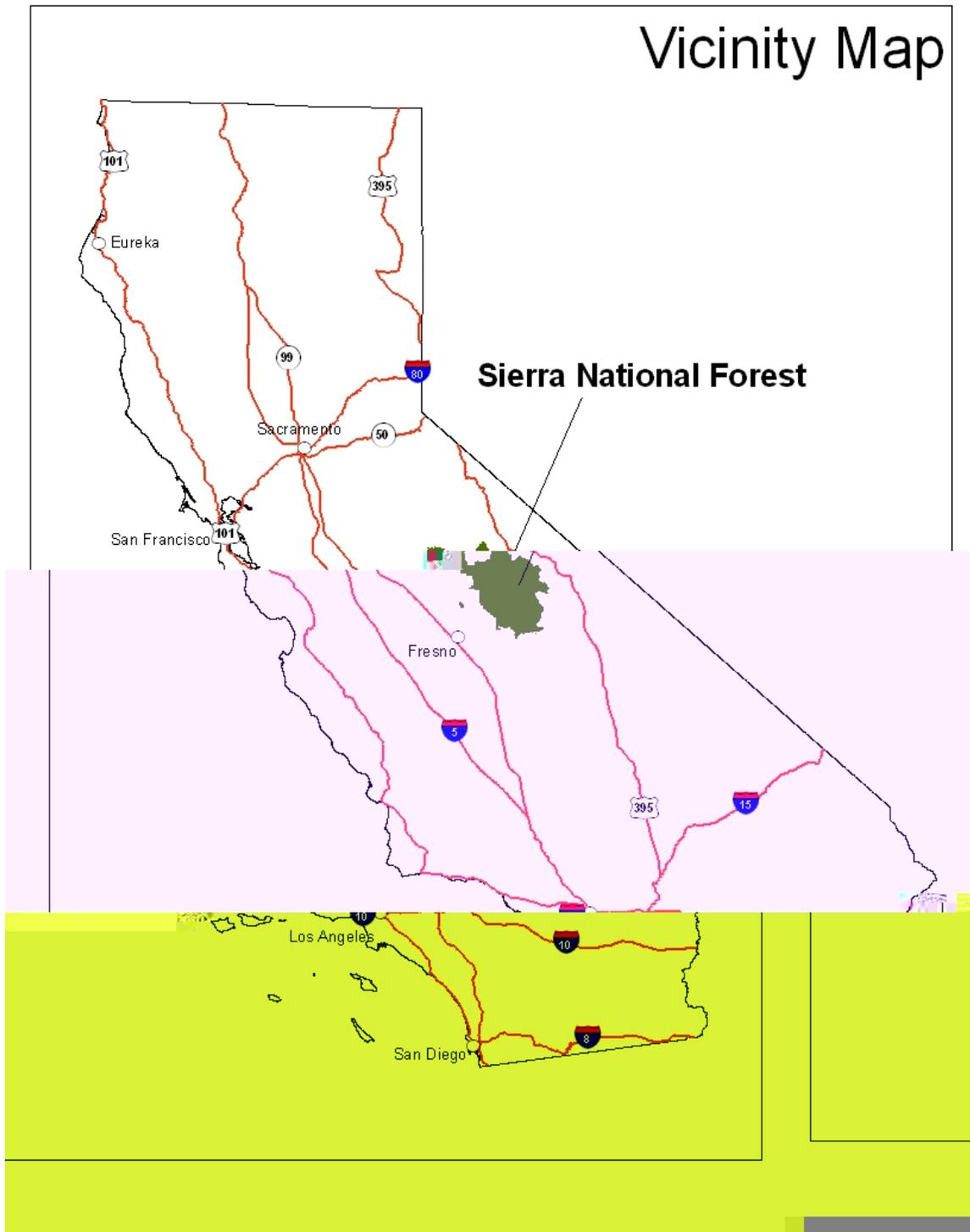
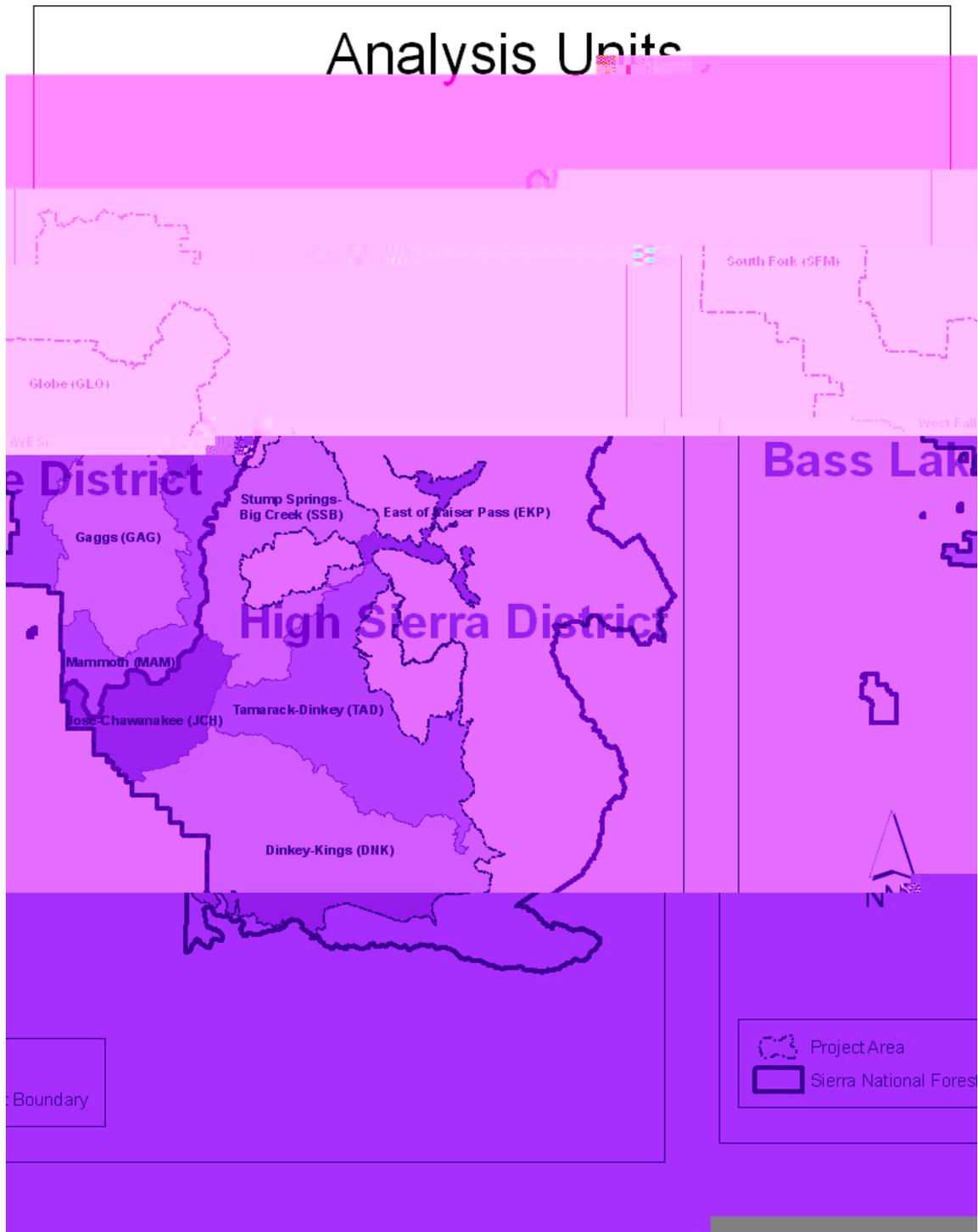


Figure 3. Map of Analysis Units



Purpose and Need

The following needs have been identified for this proposal:

1. **There is a need for regulation of unmanaged cross-country motor vehicle travel by the public.** The proliferation of unplanned, unauthorized, non-sustainable roads, trails and areas created by cross-country travel adversely impacts the environment. The 2005 Travel Management Rule, 36 CFR Section 212. Subpart B, provides for a system of NFTS roads, NFTS trails and areas on National Forest System lands that are designated for motor vehicle use. After roads, trails and areas are designated, motor vehicle use off designated roads and trails and outside designated areas is prohibited by 36 CFR 261.13. Subpart B is intended to prevent resource damage caused by unmanaged motor vehicle use by the public. In accordance with National direction, implementation of Subpart B of the Travel Management Rule for the Sierra National Forest is scheduled for completion in 2009.
2. **There is a need for limited changes to the SNF NFTS to:**
 - a. **Provide motor vehicle access to dispersed recreation opportunities (camping, hunting, fishing, hiking, horseback riding, etc.).** A substantial portion of known dispersed recreation activities are not typically located directly adjacent to NFTS roads or NFTS motorized trails. Some dispersed recreation activities depend on foot or horseback access and some depend on motor vehicle access. Those activities accessed by motor vehicles are typically accessed by short spurs that have been created primarily by the passage of motor vehicles. Many such unauthorized 'user-created' routes are not currently part of the NFTS. Without adding them to the NFTS and designating them on a MVUM, the regulatory changes noted above would make continued use of such routes illegal and would preclude access by the public to many dispersed recreation activities.
 - b. **Provide a diversity of motorized recreation opportunities (4X4 vehicles, motorcycles, ATVs, SUVs, passenger vehicles, etc.).** It is Forest Service policy to provide a diversity of road and trail opportunities for experiencing a variety of environments and modes of travel consistent with the National Forest recreation role and land capability (FSM 2353.03(2)). Implementation of Subpart B of the Travel Management Rule will severely reduce acres and miles of motorized recreation opportunities relative to current levels. As a result, there is a need to consider limited changes to the NFTS.
 - c. **Resolve the conflict between Forest Service National policy regarding motorized use on Maintenance Level 1 roads (ML1) and the Sierra Forest Plan (LRMP); and prevent resource damage and reduce administrative cost on ML 1 and 2 roads where motor vehicle use is allowed.** Forest Service National policy (FSH 7700.59 62.32) states:

"ML 1 roads have been placed in storage between intermittent uses. Appropriate traffic management strategies are 'prohibit' and 'eliminate' all traffic. These roads are not shown on motor vehicle use maps."

Standard and Guideline 17 in the LRMP (USDA-FS 1991) states:

"Open all Maintenance Level 1 and 2 roads for OHV use unless designated as closed." Some ML 1 roads and a few ML 2 roads have been identified as not

being suitable for continued motor vehicle use. Suitability includes value of motorized recreation opportunity, natural resource concerns and administrative cost considerations. Appendix A, and the project record describes the specific resource concerns for NFTS roads.

- d. **Reduce user conflict at developed recreation sites.** Concern has been raised by the public regarding the use of motorized recreation vehicles (e.g. OHVs) within developed campgrounds and developed recreation sites. Roads within these sites are ML 3 or ML 4 per Forest Service policy. The user conflict of mixing family camping activities with motorized recreation activities at these sites results in adversely affecting those campers in these developed recreation sites. Appendix A and the project record describes the specific NFTS roads addressed.

In making any limited changes to the NFTS, the SNF will be considering criteria contained in Subpart B of the Travel Management Rule, which includes the following:

- A. Impacts to natural and cultural resources.
- B. Public safety.
- C. Access to public and private lands.
- D. Availability of resources for maintenance and administration of roads, trails and areas that would arise if the uses under consideration are designated.
- E. Minimizing damage to soil, watershed, vegetation and other forest resources.
- F. Minimizing harassment of wildlife and significant disruption of wildlife habitat.
- G. Minimizing conflicts between motor vehicles and existing or proposed recreational uses of NFS lands or neighboring Federal lands.
- H. Minimizing conflicts among different classes of motor vehicle uses of NFS lands or neighboring Federal lands.
- I. Compatibility of motor vehicle use with existing conditions in populated areas, taking into account sound, emissions and other factors.

When making any limited changes to NFTS roads, the SNF will also consider the following:

1. Speed, volume, composition and distribution of traffic on roads.
2. Compatibility of vehicle class with road geometry and road surfacing.
3. Maintaining valid existing rights of use and access (rights-of-way).

Proposed Action

See Chapter 2, Alternative 2, for an explanation of why mileage totals for additions to the NFTS have changed since publication of the Notice of Intent in September 2007.

1. Prohibition of motor vehicle travel off designated NFTS roads, NFTS trails and areas by the public, except as allowed by permit or other authorization.
2. **Additions to the NFTS:** Based on the stated purpose and need for action and as a result of the recent travel analysis process, the SNF proposes to add 6 miles of existing unauthorized routes to the NFTS roads and add 40 miles to the NFTS trails. Added trails and areas would include a proposed season of use.

3. **Motorized Open Area Additions:** The Sierra National Forest proposes to add one motorized use area, totaling 6 acres.
4. **Changes to the NFTS:** Based on the stated purpose and need for action, the Sierra National Forest proposes to change the season of use on approximately 753 miles of existing NFTS roads and prohibit motorized use on 204 miles of existing NFTS roads unless allowed by permit or other authorization. It also would convert 91 miles of NFTS roads to NFTS trails. [See internet, <http://www.fs.us.fed/r5/sierra/projects/ohv> and Appendix A Proposed Changes to Existing NFTS roads, for complete tables]
5. **Non-significant Forest Plan Amendment** to allow two of the proposed route additions to the NFTS (0.77 miles) to be designated within the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) class Semi-Primitive, Non-Motorized area as defined in the Forest Plan (LRMP).

Decision Framework

The responsible official will decide whether to adopt and implement the proposed action, an alternative to the proposed action or take no action to prohibit cross-country motor vehicle travel by the public off the designated system and make limited changes to the Sierra NFTS.

Responsible Official

The Forest Supervisor for the Sierra National Forest will be the deciding official. The Forest Supervisor will sign the Record of Decision.

Principle Laws and Regulations that Influence the Scope of this EIS

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) requires that all major Federal actions significantly affecting the human environment be analyzed to determine the magnitude and intensity of those impacts and that the results be shared with the public and the public given opportunity to comment. The regulations implementing NEPA further require that to the fullest extent possible, agencies shall prepare environmental impact statements concurrently with and integrated with environmental analyses and related surveys and studies required by the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and other environmental review laws and executive orders. Principle among these are the Multiple Use and Sustained Yield Act of 1960, the National Forest Management Act of 1976 as expressed through the SNF LRMP, the Clean Air Act of 1955, the Clean Water Act of 1948 and the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974.

Travel Management Rule (36 CFR 212, 251, 261 and 295)

The SNF Travel Management EIS is designed specifically to implement the requirements of the November 5, 2005, Rule for Travel Management, Subpart B.

Public Involvement

The interdisciplinary team relied on public involvement to ensure that a full range of alternatives, representing a broad array of perspectives, would be analyzed in this DEIS. Public involvement occurred during three key periods. First during the public collaboration process that began in 2006, second during the 80-day public scoping period for the Notice of Intent (NOI) and third during meetings with public groups to explore issues they raised during scoping.

In the spring of 2006, the SNF held several public meetings to provide information regarding motorized use in the SNF. Meetings were held in Clovis on March 24, 2006; Oakhurst on March 26, 2006; and Mariposa March 29, 2006.

Most public comments centered on suggestions to change allowed vehicle class on identified NFTS roads. The Forest Service responded by evaluating the current road system for opportunities to increase vehicle access by changing some of the intended uses and proposing some combined use roads. These comments and others (to allow motor vehicle use on currently used but not designated routes) were incorporated by the Forest Service interdisciplinary team in the development of the proposed action for the Notice of Intent.

80-day Public Scoping Period for the Notice of Intent

In September, 2007, the Forest Service completed the “Proposed Action and Notice of Intent to Prepare an Environmental Impact Statement” based on comments from the meetings held in the spring of 2006 and internal scoping of resource specialists. The public comment period began on September 14, 2007. In response to requests from the public to extend the comment period, the comment period was extended twice and ended December 3, 2007. Initially, a copy of the proposed action was sent to approximately 200 interested parties and posted on the SNF website. Four hundred additional copies of the proposed action were distributed at public meetings and by public requests. Approximately 800 people attended 5 informational public meetings (Mariposa, Oakhurst, Prather, Clovis and Yosemite National Park) and two all day workshops (Clovis and Oakhurst) that allowed them to interact with SNF employees on the proposed action. The SNF also responded to requests for informational meetings at specific clubs or organizations. In addition to receiving written comments, the SNF accepted comments electronically. Approximately 10,000 comments on the proposed action were received during scoping.

Public Meetings

Four public meetings were held with the objective of educating the public about the Travel Management Rule and introducing the proposed action. They were held from 6pm to 9pm at the following locations:

Mariposa	Sept 24, 2007 at the Best Western 4999 State Highway 49
Clovis	Sept 26, 2007 at the SNF Headquarters, 1600 Tollhouse Road
Prather	Sept 27, 2007 at the Auberry Middle School
Oakhurst	Oct 2, 2007 at the Oakhurst Community Center, Road 425B

Two all day workshops were offered to provide individualized assistance for the public to assist in their ability to submit site specific comments. These were held from 9am to 5pm at the following locations:

Saturday, October 20th	Saturday, October 27th
Oak Creek Intermediate School 40094 Indian Springs Road Oakhurst, CA 93644	Sierra National Forest 1600 Tollhouse Road Clovis, CA 93611

Additional drop-in workshops and presentations were also held at the following locations:

- North Fork Ranger Station, North Fork - Tuesday, November 27, 5pm–8pm
- High Sierra Ranger Station, Prather - Wednesday, November 28, 5pm-8pm
- Sierra National Forest Headquarters - Thursday, November 29, 5pm-8pm

Merced Sierra Club Meeting - November 15, 6pm-8pm

Yosemite National Park - November 30, 6pm-8pm

Consultation with interested individuals organizations and tribes is ongoing.

The following Native American groups were contacted: Big Sandy Rancheria, Cold Springs Rancheria, North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians, Picayune Rancheria of Chukchansi Indians, American Indian Council of Mariposa County (Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation), Dunlap Band of Mono Indians and the North Fork Mono Tribe.

The public specifically commented on which unauthorized routes they requested for addition to the NFTS or opposed for addition to the NFTS. They included:

- 994 unauthorized routes (totaling 280 miles) were requested for addition to the NFTS
- 130 unauthorized routes (totaling 52 miles) were opposed for addition to the NFTS

Issues

Comments from the public and other agencies were used to formulate issues concerning the proposed action. An issue is defined as a matter of public concern regarding the proposed action and its environmental impacts. The Forest Service separated the issues into two groups: significant and non-significant. Significant issues were defined as those directly or indirectly caused by implementing the proposed action. Non-significant issues were identified as those (1) outside the scope of the proposed action; (2) already decided by law, regulation, Forest Plan (LRMP) or other higher level decision; (3) irrelevant to the decision to be made; or (4) conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence. The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) NEPA regulations explain this delineation in Sec. 1501.7, "...identify and eliminate from detailed study the issues which are not significant or which have been covered by prior environmental review (Sec. 1506.3)..." A list of non-significant issues and reasons why they were found non-significant may be found at the High Sierra Ranger District, Sierra National Forest in the project record.

The Sierra National Forest identified the following significant issues during scoping:

1. Issue: Impacts to Motorized Access

Discussion: There is concern that the proposed action does not provide adequate motorized access to routes and other recreational use areas and would not provide a variety of types of motorized recreational experiences. Public comments indicate that motorized access would be prohibited in areas including dispersed campsites, vistas, picnic areas, OHV staging and off-loading areas, equestrian parking areas, hang gliding, fishing and rock climbing areas which have been enjoyed by the public for many years. It is perceived that the proposed action does not provide enough opportunities specifically for motorcycles and ATVs or for loops and technical areas (hill climbs, rock crawling, etc.) and this limits the variety of recreational experiences the public desires. Some commenters have historic ties to certain locations that would not be accessible in the proposed action. Some people also voiced concerns that motorized access from their private property onto National Forest System lands would be prohibited, which they feel would affect their enjoyment of their property.

2. Issue: Motorized Use and Ownership Conflicts

Discussion: There is concern that the number of miles of routes open under the proposed action, as well as the location of some of those routes would result in conflicts between motorized and non-motorized users and conflicts between different types of motorized users (4X4, ATV,

motorcycle). Some members of the public believe that concentrating motorized use to designated routes and areas would cause overcrowding of those areas which could increase conflicts, leading to an overall degradation of the recreational experience. Some comments indicated that there would be conflicts with private property owners once the use of certain routes near private property increases due to this concentration of users.

3. Issue: Impacts to Natural and Cultural Resources

Discussion: There is concern that the proposed action would result in impacts to natural and cultural resources. Habitat degradation, soil erosion, spread of noxious weeds and crushing of plants were mentioned as impacts to vegetation. Habitat degradation and noise disturbance were cited as impacts to wildlife habitat. Loss of groundcover, soil erosion and sedimentation into streams, especially related to trails crossing streams, were noted to impact water quality and aquatic habitat. Some concerns were expressed for motorized use in specific areas with cultural resource values. Concern was also articulated over impacts to air quality resulting from the operation of ATVs and motorcycles.

4. Issue: Impacts to Non-Motorized Recreational Experiences

Discussion: There is concern that the motorized access allowed in the proposed action would impact both the availability of opportunities and the quality of non-motorized recreation. This was particularly important to hikers, hunters and anglers. Everyone who expressed this concern mentioned the impacts of vehicle noise and trail dust on their experience. Hunters and anglers noted that easy access increases the pressure on fish and wildlife. This can reduce hunting and fishing success and/or the size of the animals present. Anglers were concerned that motorized access into certain areas could result in trail erosion and sedimentation of prime fisheries streams, reducing the viability of the populations found there.