



Forest Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Intermountain Region | Ashley National Forest

January 2024

Record of Decision

Ashley National Forest Land Management Plan

Daggett, Duchesne, Summit, Uintah, Utah, and Wasatch Counties in Utah and Sweetwater County in Wyoming



Cover images clockwise from top: Above the Lake Fork Drainage looking east toward Tungsten Pass, Mount Lovenia in foreground; participants at the Ute Indian Tribe Powwow in Fort Duchesne; Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area; Ute Mountain Fire Lookout. Photos credit: USDA Forest Service.

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Record of Decision for the Ashley National Forest Land Management Plan

The Ashley National Forest is in northeastern Utah and southwestern Wyoming on approximately 1.4 million acres of National Forest System lands in the following counties: Daggett, Duchesne, Summit, Uintah, Utah, and Wasatch Counties, Utah, and Sweetwater County, Wyoming.

Lead Agency: United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)
Forest Service

Cooperating Agencies:

Ute Indian Tribe
State of Utah, Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office
State of Wyoming, Governor's Policy Office
Daggett County, Utah
Duchesne County, Utah
Summit County, Utah
Utah County, Utah
Uintah County, Utah
Daggett Conservation District, Utah
Uintah Conservation District, Utah
Sweetwater County, Wyoming
Sweetwater Conservation District, Wyoming
Uinta Conservation District, Wyoming
Uinta County, Wyoming

Responsible Official: Susan Eickhoff, Forest Supervisor
Ashley National Forest
355 North Vernal Ave.
Vernal, UT 84078
(435) 789-1181

For more information go to <https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/ashley/landmanagement/planning>

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List of Acronyms

CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
EIS	environmental impact statement
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
ROD	record of decision
SCC	species of conservation concern
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture

Introduction

This record of decision (ROD) documents my decision and rationale for approving the Ashley National Forest Land Management Plan (Plan). The decision is consistent with the Forest Service’s 2012 Land Management Planning Rule at 36 CFR Part 219 and advances a strategic goal of the U.S. Department of Agriculture—to ensure productive and sustainable use of our National Forest System lands.¹ Objectives under this goal include contributing to the economic health of rural communities through use and access opportunities; ensuring lands and watersheds are sustainable, healthy, and productive; and mitigating wildfire risk.

The Plan addresses ecological and economic sustainability in the context of a changing climate, environmental justice, honoring tribal treaty rights and interests, and cooperation and coordination with states, counties, and other Federal agencies. The Plan fosters productive and sustainable use of the Ashley National Forest. The Plan supports increased resilience to wildfires and disturbance events, reforestation, and improved access to recreation while protecting wilderness and other sensitive areas.

Forest Setting

The Ashley National Forest is located in northeastern Utah and southwestern Wyoming and encompasses approximately 1.4 million acres in seven counties across the northern and southern slopes of the Uinta Mountains, the Wyoming Basin, and the Tavaputs Plateau (see figure 1). The Ashley National Forest is one of six national forests in Utah; it was established on July 1, 1908, when President Theodore Roosevelt signed Executive Order 884. Portions of the Ashley National Forest are in the Ute Indian Tribe and the Eastern Shoshone Tribe ancestral homelands. The Ashley National Forest adjoins the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest as well as Bureau of Land Management, tribal, state, municipal, and private lands (see figure 2).

Approximately 80 percent of the Ashley National Forest is designated either administratively or by statute to recognize areas with special, exceptional, or unique values (see table 1 and figure 3). The Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area was designated in 1968 for the purpose of the Colorado River storage project and public outdoor recreation. The High Uintas Wilderness, designated in 1984, is the wild core of the Uinta Mountains and is the largest wilderness area in the State of Utah. The Ashley Karst National Recreation and Geologic Area was designated in 2019 to conserve and protect the watershed, geological, recreational, wildlife, scenic, natural, cultural, and historic resources within that area. Inventoried roadless areas designated in 2001 on the Ashley National Forest include habitat for species dependent on large, undisturbed areas

¹ USDA Strategic Plan FY 2018–2022, <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/usda-strategic-plan-2018-2022.pdf>.

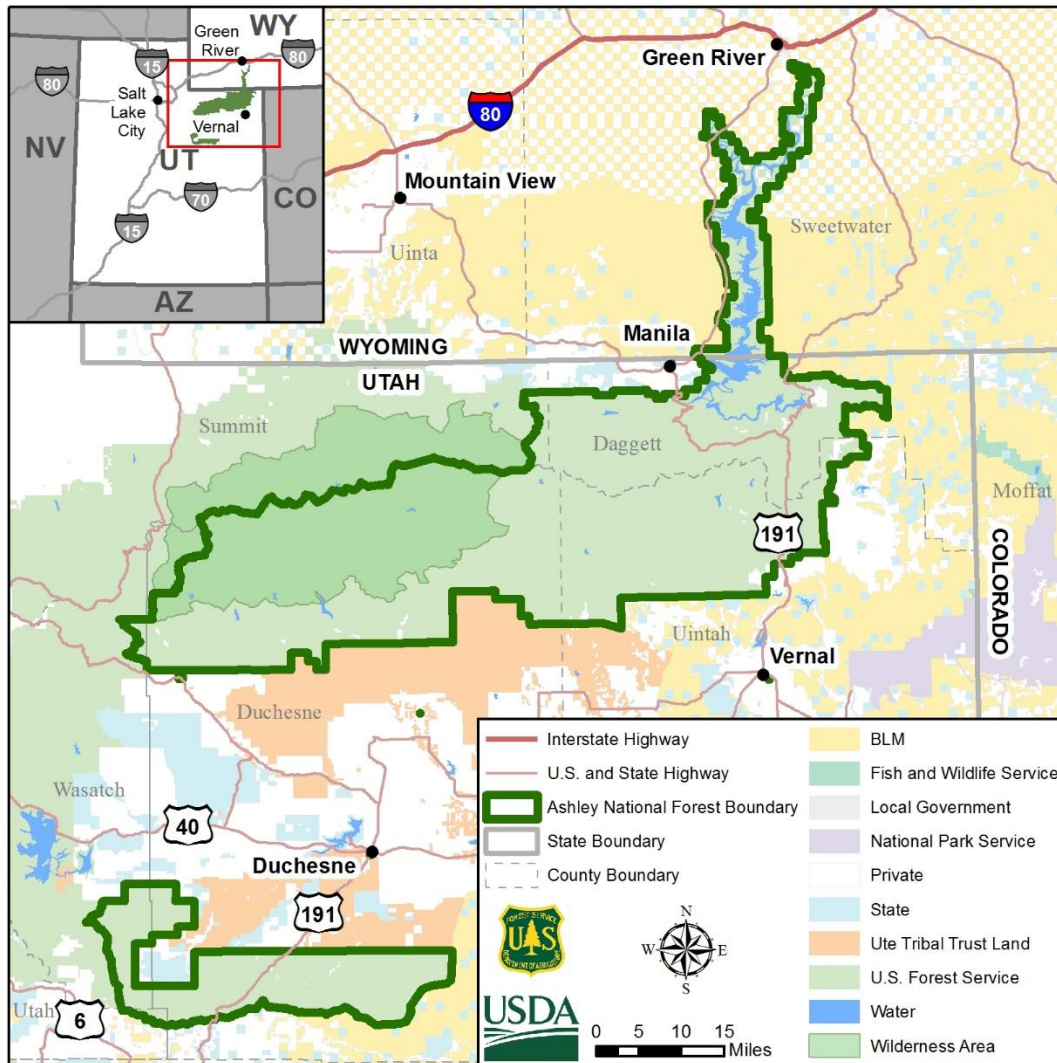


Figure 1. Location of the Ashley National Forest

of land; sources of public drinking water; high-quality or undisturbed soil, water, or air; a diversity of plant and animal communities; natural-appearing landscapes with high scenic quality; and traditional cultural properties and sacred sites.

The Ashley National Forest provides critical downstream water resources in the Colorado River Basin and groundwater for local communities, including the neighboring Ute Indian Tribe, visitors, and aquatic and terrestrial plants and animals. The Flaming Gorge Reservoir, located within the boundaries of the national forest, is a key component of the Colorado River Storage Project, which provides for long-term regulatory storage of water in the Upper Colorado River Basin. The Flaming Gorge Reservoir plays a vital sustaining role through extended periods of drought.

Lands on the Ashley National Forest support a diverse range of vegetation, wildlife, geology, multiple uses, and activities. Elevations range from 5,500 feet on the Green

River below Little Hole near Dutch John to 13,528 feet at the summit of Kings Peak (the highest point in Utah). About 70 percent of the Ashley National Forest is in the Uinta Mountains. This is the largest east-west-trending mountain range in the lower 48 states. Together with the Tavaputs Plateau, the Uinta Mountains provide a unique ecological transition zone connecting the northern and southern Rocky Mountains. A single day's drive takes visitors through life zones ranging from high desert vegetation to shrub-steppe, to aspen zones, to extensive conifer forests, and to high alpine ecosystems. The Uinta Mountains have a large lodgepole pine belt that is unique in Utah. It also has nearly 300 square miles of alpine habitat. The diversity of fish and wildlife species on the Ashley National Forest mirrors this range and variety of ecosystems and habitats.

The Ashley National Forest is located predominantly within four counties: Daggett, Duchesne, and Uintah Counties in Utah and Sweetwater County in Wyoming. Uinta County, Wyoming, is in close proximity; Utah and Wasatch Counties, Utah, contain small portions of the Ashley National Forest; and Summit County, Utah, shares a boundary with the Ashley National Forest's northern border. Local communities, particularly those adjacent to National Forest System lands, benefit from a range of goods and services provided by the Ashley National Forest that are vital to human health and well-being.

The ecosystem services the national forest provides include provisioning services such as wood products and other forest products, livestock forage, and minerals and energy; cultural services such as cultural heritage values, aesthetic values, and recreation; regulating services such as carbon sequestration and climate, water, and air regulation; and supporting services such as the underlying natural processes that sustain ecosystems and enable the production of all other ecosystem services. Typical uses and activities that support local communities and provide jobs include land- and water-based recreation (such as camping, hiking, boating, and all-terrain vehicle, or off-highway vehicle, riding), livestock grazing, commercial timber harvest, oil and gas production, hard rock mining, firewood gathering, hunting, fishing, viewing scenery and wildlife, and visiting historic and prehistoric sites.

The Ashley National Forest provides a wealth of recreation opportunities and scenic settings for local residents and visitors from across the Nation. The diverse topography, landscapes, water features, vegetation, fish, wildlife, and history make the Ashley a valued outdoor playground. Scenery is an important part of a visitor's recreational experiences, and it adds value to their national forest experience. On the Ashley National Forest, the most popular recreation activities are sightseeing and driving for pleasure, picnicking, viewing wildlife, fishing, camping, visiting historical sites, hiking, hunting, and off-highway vehicle riding. An estimated 15 to 30 percent growth in visitation is predicted over the next 15 years on the Ashley National Forest, based on the predicted population increases and increases in nature-based recreation (Forest Service 2017a and 2017b).

Social and economic contributions are both directly through Forest Service employment, commodity revenues, and tax subsidies and indirectly through resource development, tourism, and recreational spending. Although mineral activities on the Ashley National

Forest provide limited economic contributions relative to other Forest Service program areas, mining (which includes oil and gas extraction) based on mineral extraction on all lands of all ownerships is the largest employment sector in Daggett, Duchesne, Sweetwater, and Uintah Counties. Agriculture and forest products (including timber) represent smaller portions of the economy. Livestock grazing has been part of the local economy and culture for more than a century and plays an important role in the economics and lifestyle of the local communities. Although timber harvest and fuelwood collection have been traditional uses on the Ashley National Forest, their economic contribution has not been as significant as other national forest uses.

Need to Change

Over 30 years have passed since the regional forester approved the Ashley National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Service 1986), referred to as the 1986 Plan; since then, it has been amended 29 times. The last 35 years have yielded new scientific information and understanding and changes in economic, social, and ecological conditions, resulting in a shift in management emphasis from outputs to outcomes. A complete revision of the 1986 Plan is needed to (1) meet the legal requirements of the National Forest Management Act and provisions of the 2012 Planning Rule and (2) address the need for change in management direction.

There is a need

1. to manage for resilient ecosystems and watersheds and to protect and restore terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems and non-forest communities;
2. to improve tribal relationships and partnerships, manage cultural resources and areas of tribal importance, and provide for subsistence and other cultural activities;
3. for economic resiliency—meeting the needs of local communities and economies while providing ecosystem services that contribute to the quality of life and sense of place for both present and future generations;
4. for sustainable recreation—balancing recreation use with maintaining ecological integrity, addressing population increases and aging populations, and addressing shifts in the types of preferred recreation; and
5. to manage traditional uses and multiple uses—to recognize and protect historic and contemporary cultural uses while maintaining the long-term health and productivity of the land.

The notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) was published in the Federal Register on September 10, 2019. A 60-day comment period was held from September 10 through November 8, 2019. The comment period provided an opportunity for the public to review the preliminary need for change document and provide input for refinement.

Engagement with Indian Tribes, State and Local Governments, Other Federal Agencies, and the Public

Our public participation efforts ensured engagement and collaboration with Indian tribes, state and local governments, other Federal agencies, and the public throughout the multi-year plan revision process beginning in 2016. This provided transparency, understanding of the planning process, and regular dialogue among different groups and resulted in a Plan that is responsive to state and local governments, other Federal agencies, Indian tribes, and the public. We will continue to work with these groups to reach our goals over the life of the Plan.

Key formal milestones for engagement include:

- July 22, 2016: Notice of initiating the assessment phase of plan revision
- September 10, 2019: Federal Register notice of intent to prepare an EIS
- November 19, 2021: Federal Register notice of availability of the draft plan and draft EIS

The 2012 planning rule (36 CFR § 219.4(b)) requires the review of the planning and land use policies of other Federal agencies, state and local governments, and Indian tribes. This review includes (1) consideration of the objectives of these entities as expressed in their plans and policies, (2) the compatibility and interrelated impacts of these plans and policies, (3) opportunities for the plan to address the impacts identified or contribute to joint objectives, and (4) opportunities to resolve or reduce conflicts, within the context of developing the plan's desired conditions or objectives.

Beginning in 2018, the planning team reviewed tribal, county, and state resource management plans for consistency with the proposed Plan. Consistency review findings were tracked by resource topic, and review findings were discussed at interdisciplinary team meetings. Where appropriate, edits were made to the Plan. Following the release of the draft EIS and draft Plan, the Forest Service updated the list of plans for review to include the most recent plans and incorporate plans noted in public comments for review. The review of other agency plans is discussed in the final EIS, Appendix E, Compatibility of Plan with Other Agency Plans.

Indian Tribes

The Ashley National Forest consulted with federally recognized tribes throughout the planning process. Formal and informal consultation with the Ute Indian Tribe has helped shape the content of the plan direction. The Forest Service has met with the Ute Indian Tribe Business Committee and the Ute Indian Tribe Cultural Rights and Protection Director to discuss plan components related to both the areas of tribal importance and cultural and historic resources. From late 2021 to now, between draft and final EIS, the forest supervisor met with the Business Committee nine times.

In response to the October 17th, 2023 letter from the Ute Indian Tribe, the Forest Service acknowledges the aspirations set forth in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) and is committed to continuing to foster cooperation, collaboration, and consultation in implementing the Ashley National Forest Revised Land Management Plan. Specific plan components related to that commitment can be found in management direction related to Areas of Tribal Importance in both Chapter 2 Forestwide Direction and Chapter 4 Monitoring as well as Appendix 3 Potential Management Approaches, Strategies, and Coordination for Working and Coordinating with Tribes, Partners, and Cooperators.

The Ute Tribe/Ashley National Forest Planning Task Force, established in March 2021, meets monthly. In the more than 20 meetings of the Task Force since its inception, the focus has been on coordination, collaboration, and consultation on shared stewardship and ongoing and upcoming programs, projects, activities, or permits. The Task Force includes Forest and Tribal resource staff from various disciplines. In addition, a quarterly newsletter, initiated in 2020, is shared with the Ute Tribe and the Eastern Shoshone Tribe to keep them informed of current project status.

The Ute Indian Tribe's comments during scoping and on the draft EIS focused on their unique interest in the Ashley National Forest; a portion of the Ashley National Forest is in the ancestral homelands of the Eastern Shoshone Tribe and the Ute Indian Tribe as well as within the historic Uintah and Ouray Reservation boundary. These lands are significant for tribal identity and cultural traditions. Access to culturally significant plants, traditional resources, and ceremonial locations is an important component of tribal identity. Issues brought up in comments include travel management, wildland fire management, watershed protection and water supply, and tribal reliance on multiple uses (oil and gas, firewood, other forest products, etc.) as well as ecosystem services and environmental justice concerns, including clean air.

The Plan emphasizes the need to recognize treaty rights and tribal interests, including ceremonial uses of the Forest and forest resources by tribal members. The Forest Service intends to continue consultation with the Ute Indian Tribe across the entire Forest. The Plan is responsive to tribal concerns and emphasizes the need for enhanced consultation, collaboration, and coordination between the Ashley National Forest and the Ute Indian Tribe. Under the Plan, the Forest will partner with the Ute Indian Tribe to manage Areas of Tribal Importance through early engagement and developing projects together; regular meetings with the Ute Indian Tribe Business Committee; the staff-to-staff interactions of the Planning Task Force; and consultation on shared stewardship and programs, projects, activities, and permits.

The Forest Service reviewed the following wildlife and vegetation resource management plans developed and/or signed by the Ute Indian Tribe: Tribal Management Plan on Hookless Cactus (2015), Conservation Strategy for the Yellow-Billed Cuckoo (2016), Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Ordinance (2013), and the multi-agency Conservation Agreement on Cutthroat Trout (2016). Refer to Appendix E, Compatibility of Plan with

Other Agency Plans, for additional information on these resource plans and Plan compatibility.

The Eastern Shoshone Tribe was given opportunities to consult on the Plan and draft EIS but did not provide substantial feedback. The Forest intends to continue to consult with the Eastern Shoshone Tribe on lands in Wyoming and on the north slope of the Uinta Mountains.

State and Local Governments and Other Federal Agencies

The Ashley National Forest worked directly with state and local governments, other Federal agencies, and Indian tribes throughout the planning process. Interested governments and government agencies were invited to become cooperating agencies with the Ashley National Forest. In response, fourteen governments or agencies requested cooperating agency status (these are indicated with an asterisk in the list below).

- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- State of Utah, Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office*
- State of Wyoming, Governor's Policy Office*
- Utah State Historic Preservation Office
- Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office
- Daggett County, Utah*
- Duchesne County, Utah*
- Summit County, Utah*
- Utah County, Utah*
- Uintah County, Utah*
- Daggett Conservation District, Utah*
- Uintah Conservation District, Utah*
- Sweetwater County, Wyoming*
- Sweetwater Conservation District, Wyoming*
- Uinta Conservation District, Wyoming*
- Uinta County, Wyoming*
- Ute Indian Tribe*

Engagement with cooperating agencies helped inform the participants of the planning progress, provided an opportunity for greater understanding and feedback, and allowed participants to hear from a broad range of other agency and government participants.

Cooperating agency meetings have occurred throughout the assessment and planning process, starting in 2016. Meetings included 15 formal meetings with cooperating agencies to review comments on the preliminary need for change, wilderness report, wild and scenic rivers report, and the proposed land management plan. The planning team has also met with cooperating agencies, upon request, to review comments on a preliminary draft of the proposed Plan and EIS.

Counties, state agencies, tribes, and other Federal agencies suggested plan components, requested additional information be included in the Plan, requested additional analysis, and supported or opposed alternatives. Following release of the draft EIS in 2021, additional coordination meetings were held to discuss comments on the draft Plan and analysis. Meetings included “deep dive” conversations to address key issues of concern, which included livestock grazing and bighorn sheep management direction for inclusion in the preferred alternative. Many plan components support collaboration or coordination with tribal governments, states, counties, other Federal agencies, other entities, and the public. These plan components are designed to foster a viable “all lands approach” to management of the natural resources across the Forest and surrounding landscapes. Although not every suggestion or request was accommodated, plan components were modified, information was added to the Plan, and analysis was added to the final EIS in response to comments from tribes, state and local governments, and other Federal agencies. Tribal and agency letters are available for review in Appendix H of the final EIS.

The cooperators were also asked to provide their land use plans for a review of compatibility with the Plan. The results of this review are available in Appendix E of the final EIS. This review found the Plan largely compatible with the land use plans of other governments at the level of desired conditions, objectives, and goals.

The Ashley National Forest will continue to strive for constructive partnerships with other agency and government officials through ongoing engagement, cooperating agency agreements, regular briefings, and shared stewardship.

Public Involvement

The Forest Service provided public involvement opportunities from the initiation of the assessment phase in 2016 through the draft EIS public comment period in 2022. In addition to general input on the plan revision, specific input was also requested for wilderness inventory findings and wild and scenic river suitability findings. Workshops enlisted input from participants on goals and strategies the Forest Service might consider carrying into the early drafts of the proposed Plan for issues determined to be public priorities: timber products, rangeland health and livestock grazing management, water and fisheries, recreation, and socioeconomic contributions.

The 90-day draft EIS comment period (November 19, 2021, through February 17, 2022) provided an opportunity for the public to review the documents and provide comments and suggested content changes. Engagement for the draft EIS included public webinars (three virtual webinars with up to 30 virtual attendees in December and January 2021),

staffed information tables at community events such as the Duchesne County Farm Bureau/Duchesne County Beef Expo (January 2022), and presentations at community meetings, such as the Vernal Chamber of Commerce. Cooperating agency engagement included four virtual webinars (between December 2021 and April 2022) and in-person/virtual meetings with cooperating agencies to discuss comments submitted on the draft EIS in June 2022. At the Ute Tribe/Ashley National Forest Planning Task Force meetings in January 2022 and January 2023 discussions focused on the tribe's comments and comment response and resolution.

During the comment period, a total of 191 comment letters were received. Comment letters were received from representatives of 29 organizations, and the remainder were received from individuals with no affiliation noted. The interdisciplinary planning team reviewed the public comments and used the input to adjust the analysis in the draft EIS and inform decisions about preferred management. Comments were focused on the following concerns: social and economic sustainability; livestock grazing; fire and vegetation management; recreation, including management areas and the recreation opportunity spectrum; and watershed, aquatic, and riparian ecosystems and fisheries.

See the final EIS, Chapter 1, for additional details on public involvement. Issue statements (summaries of the public comments) on the draft EIS along with the Forest Service responses are in Appendix H.

On April 19, 2023, the U.S. Forest Service published the legal notice starting the 60-day opportunity to object to the revised Land Management Plan and the Regional Forester's list of species of conservation concern for the Ashley National Forest in the *Vernal Express* (newspaper of record) and the revised Land Management Plan, final Environmental Impact Statement, and draft Record of Decision were made available for review on the project website. The objection filing period ended June 20, 2023. The Forest Service received objections from 15 individuals or organizations.

Decision and Rationale for the Decision

Nature of the Decision

The purpose of this land management plan is to guide future projects, practices, and uses to ensure sustainable multiple-use management on the Ashley National Forest over the next 15 years. A land management plan establishes goals, desired conditions, objectives, standards, guidelines, and land suitability to ensure the coordination of multiple uses (e.g., outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife and fish, wilderness) and the sustained yield of products and services.

This land management plan does not authorize projects or activities, commit the Forest Service to take action, or dictate internal operations (such as personnel matters, law enforcement, budget, or organizational changes). Management direction will be implemented through site-specific activities that must be consistent with the land management plan (36 CFR 219.15).

This land management plan does not address leasing availability. Oil and gas leasing availability in the plan area has already been analyzed in the Western Uintah Basin Oil and Gas Leasing EIS and Decision. I have reviewed this availability decision and determined it is consistent with the plan components of the revised Plan. Under this revised land management plan, oil and gas leasing and development would continue as set forth in the Western Uintah Basin Oil and Gas Leasing EIS and Decision until superseded by a new availability analysis.

Decision

In reaching a decision on this Plan, I reviewed the environmental analysis disclosed in the final EIS, the planning record, and comments from our state and local government partners, Indian tribes, other Federal agencies, and the public. I also considered how this Plan meets the identified needs for change and the requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule, 36 CFR 219.

Based on this review, I have selected Alternative B Modified as my decision, as described in the final EIS and the accompanying Ashley National Forest Land Management Plan. This selected alternative uses Alternative B from the draft EIS as a starting point, with modifications in response to public comments, and draws on features of other alternatives. It addresses the need for change identified during the assessment phase and meets the requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule. This decision is responsive to tribes, cooperating agencies, and the public and is based upon the more than 35 years of knowledge gained from implementation and amendment of the 1986 Plan.

My role as the decision maker is to put forth a Plan that provides for long-term sustainability (ecological, economic, and social) and considers the full range of public interests and affected communities. I, along with my staff, have engaged with communities, partners, Indian tribes, cooperators, and others who care about this national forest. We appreciate the respectful manner with which people have interacted with our team and with others who hold different views. We are also keenly aware there is no way to satisfy all interests, nor is there a way to bridge all the differences between all of the interested parties. The common desire is for a Plan that recognizes and protects what people care about now and into the future.

I also wished to develop a Plan that reflects the knowledge gained through decades of management experience across the national forest and the evolution of our social and ecological scientific understandings.

Key Elements of the Decision

Key elements of the selected alternative are:

1. Forestwide and designated and management area plan components that meet the requirements of the 2012 planning rule, providing for social, economic, and ecological sustainability; diversity of plant and animal communities; terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems connectivity; and multiple uses within the inherent capability of the Ashley National Forest.

2. Plan components that maintain the forest's ecological integrity and resilience to key stressors such as climate change.
3. Fire and fuels management direction that emphasizes active vegetation management around highly valued resources or assets while recognizing the role that wildfire can play in moving toward resilient ecological conditions.
4. Plan land allocations that include backcountry recreation management areas, general recreation management areas, destination recreation management areas, and eligible and suitable wild and scenic rivers. Plan land allocations do not include any additional recommended wilderness areas.
5. Plan objectives that reflect a mix of resource enhancement that is moving toward forested vegetation desired conditions; sustainable timber and wood products volume; hazardous fuel treatment; road, trail, and facility maintenance; and new recreation facilities.
6. A monitoring program that provides feedback for the planning cycle by testing assumptions, tracking relevant conditions over time, measuring management effectiveness, and evaluating effects of management practices, forming a basis for continual improvement and adaptive management.
7. An estimate of the long-term sustained yield and projected timber sale quantity. The sustained yield limit is estimated to be an average annual volume of 21,446 hundred cubic feet (CCF). The timber suitability analysis used in plan development identified about 109,819 acres on the national forest suitable for timber production.

Rationale for the Decision

Based upon my review of all alternatives, I have selected Alternative B, as modified in response to comments, as the Plan. I believe Alternative B Modified provides for a wide array of multiple uses; promotes long-term ecosystem sustainability, providing habitat for plant and animal species; recognizes the unique role and perspectives of tribal partners and our cooperating agencies; protects the existing character of areas that contain special, exceptional, or unique values; and provides sound scientific guidance with appropriate management flexibility for managing these lands into the future. Since July 2016, the Ashley National Forest has worked closely with our cooperating state, local, and tribal government cooperating agencies, as well as with other Federal agencies and the general public. The Plan is the result of that collaboration and includes perspectives and language developed by a broad range of forest users and interested parties.

As further explained below, Alternative B Modified includes a range of nonmotorized to motorized plan land allocations within designated areas and management areas encompassing backcountry, general, and destination recreation areas, historic management areas, and eligible and suitable wild and scenic rivers. The selected alternative includes direction to provide for unique ecological conditions and provides for uses that support local communities, such as wood products, forage for livestock, municipal water supplies, and recreation uses, while protecting the clean air, clean water, spectacular scenery, and cultural heritage of the area. The mix of opportunities available

for primitive recreation and nonmotorized recreation experiences versus less primitive and more mechanized or motorized recreation experiences is consistent with the current travel plan.

I carefully considered the requirements of the National Forest Management Act. This alternative reflects the best overall balance between multiple uses and maintaining the long-term health and productivity of the land. I also took into consideration the best available science when making my decision.

An explanation of my decision rationale is organized below by the five areas that were identified as needing to change.

1. Resilient Ecosystems and Watersheds

The plan provides for an active vegetation management strategy to support the maintenance and improvement of resilient ecosystems and watersheds. Active vegetation management also provides social and economic benefits, such as enhancing the diversity of recreational experiences and contributing to a sustainable production of timber. Although active vegetation management may have more potential for short- or near-term environmental effects and social conflicts, I am confident that forestwide plan components will guide management of these areas and are sufficient to mitigate and minimize the potential for both short- or long-term adverse environmental effects.

Land management response to current or future climate and its effects is critical to minimizing the risks of climate change impacts. Adaptation actions can vary from simple, short-term actions to more complex, long-term approaches. Many climate adaptation approaches complement current planning strategies and have been incorporated into goals, desired conditions, and other plan components. Plan components provide for ecosystems and habitat conditions for resiliency to disturbance (both natural and human caused) and the effects of climate change and widespread tree mortality. Refer to Appendix D of the final EIS for plan component crosswalks that address key threats to persistence of species, including climate change, for at-risk species, pollinators, habitat types, and aquatics.

Watershed, Aquatic, and Riparian Ecosystems

The Ashley National Forest is in the Green River drainage, a major tributary to the Colorado River. Healthy watersheds and clean water are critical resources that sustain ecosystems on the Ashley National Forest and benefit downstream communities. Climate change and other ecosystem stressors, such as drought and wildfire, are negatively affecting watershed, aquatic, and riparian ecosystems on the Ashley National Forest.

Protecting water quantity and quality, the timing of flows, and watersheds is critical to sustaining ecosystem functions of the Ashley National Forest and providing water resources for visitors, communities in the surrounding areas, and aquatic and terrestrial plants and wildlife. The Flaming Gorge Reservoir is one of several critical water storage reservoirs on the Ashley National Forest that are part of the Central Utah Project, a Federal water resources development project that diverts water via a system of reservoirs,

tunnels, aqueducts, and other control features to provide water for irrigation, municipal and industrial uses with secondary benefits for aquatic habitat, open water recreation, and flood control.

My decision addresses the condition of aquatic and riparian resources by incorporating desired conditions and other plan components designed to protect water quality and to maintain or restore water resources. It incorporates the concept of riparian management zones as areas managed to benefit aquatic, wetland, and riparian habitats. The Plan draws from the Forest Service's Watershed Condition Framework (Forest Service 2011) as a tool to help assess aquatic and terrestrial conditions and identify watersheds for integrated restoration activities.

Terrestrial Vegetation

Ecosystem stressors, such as uncharacteristic wildfires, invasive species, and warming temperatures due to climate change, may degrade or impair ecological integrity and have pushed vegetation composition and structure and associated ecosystem function outside the natural range of variation for some terrestrial vegetation ecosystems on the Ashley National Forest. My decision addresses this condition by incorporating desired conditions and other plan components for the individual types of terrestrial ecosystems that occur. These plan components strive to promote landscapes resilient to fire-related disturbances by restoring vegetation composition and structure to within the natural range of variation and implementing vegetation treatments and other restoration projects.

Specifically, my decision incorporates plan direction that restores vegetation composition and structure by emphasizing active vegetation management. Vegetation treatments will occur on up to 32,000 acres annually for multiple objectives, including forest resiliency, sustainable timber production, improving vegetation conditions to maintain or move toward desired conditions, and fire and fuels management. Terrestrial vegetation plan components are designed to maintain or restore ecological function, vegetation integrity, and resilience to ensure diversity and persistence of plants, wildlife, and their habitats and to provide ecological sustainability. Additionally, multiple plan components would reduce the potential for habitat degradation by emphasizing the maintenance of key ecological and habitat conditions that provide essential habitat characteristics for native species, habitat connectivity, vegetation diversity, and ecological integrity and resilience.

Fire and Fuels Management

The Plan provides for active fire management that strives to balance the natural role of fire while minimizing negative impacts on watershed health, wildlife habitat, highly valued resources or assets, and air quality. Plan direction supports using a coordinated risk management approach, which helps to promote landscapes resilient to fire-related disturbances and prepares for and executes a safe, effective, and efficient response to fire. The Plan includes goals on working with partners to strategically focus fuels and forest health treatments at an appropriate pace and scale needed to restore forest health and resilience, aligning with Forest Service direction on confronting the wildfire crisis

through use of collaborative strategies such as shared stewardship agreements (Forest Service 2022c).

Based on the historical disturbance regimes, the Forest Service would use wildland fire and other vegetation treatments to improve or maintain desired vegetation conditions during the life of the Plan on 6,600 to 32,000 acres per year (FW-OB-FIRE-01). Use of natural ignitions for resource objectives would be encouraged, where conditions permit, on 10 percent of the ignitions over 10 years. Specific management is proposed for highly valued resources or assets to protect these values and to provide flexibility to manage changing resources over the life of the Plan.

2. Tribal Relationships and Cultural Resources

A portion of the Ashley National Forest is in the ancestral homelands of the Ute Indian Tribe and the Eastern Shoshone Tribe. These lands remain significant for tribal identity and cultural traditions. Cultural and historic resources on the Ashley National Forest represent the processes and events important to the identity and history of local communities and Native American tribes and contain a wealth of information regarding social and ecological conditions and changes through time. The selected alternative addresses strategies and coordination as follows:

- The Plan provides management direction for areas of tribal importance that focuses on the importance of the integrity and interconnectivity of cultural landscapes, sacred sites, traditional cultural properties, and other culturally significant areas in order to provide tangible links to historically rooted beliefs, customs, and practices of tribal members.
- Ashley National Forest staff will hold regular meetings with the Ute Indian Tribe's Tribal Historic Preservation Officer to consult, coordinate, and collaborate on long-term strategies and plans for the preservation, protection, and management of cultural resources on the Ashley National Forest.
- The Plan provides management direction to avoid, minimize, or mitigate adverse effects to important cultural or historic resources through enhanced public understanding and increased awareness.
- The Plan addresses working with the Ute Tribal/Ashley National Forest Planning Task Force to collaborate and consult on shared stewardship and ongoing and upcoming programs, projects, activities, or permits. The Task Force includes Forest and tribal resource staff from various disciplines.
- The Plan encourages the Ashley National Forest to seek opportunities to work collaboratively to accomplish restoration and management efforts and to work toward sustainable practices and to incorporate tribal perspectives, needs, and concerns, as well as traditional ecological knowledge, into project design and decisions, as appropriate.
- The Plan focuses on reducing risk from wildfire to communities and infrastructure, including prioritization of appropriate hazardous fuels treatments. In addition, the

Plan establishes the expectation of engagement with affected communities to support fire resilience.

3. Economic Resiliency

The Plan addresses economic resiliency, which supports local communities and economies, and includes management direction to sustain the multiple uses of its renewable resources and maintain the many ecosystem services the national forest provides. The Plan supports a wide variety of local community benefits, such as access to public lands for recreation, hunting, fishing and inspiration, and products such as wood and forage, all of which contribute to local quality of life. The Forest's healthy ecosystems provide a full range of goods and services that are vital to human health, financial sustainability, and well-being. Ecosystem services include benefits from all the uses that people traditionally have relied on—livestock forage, recreation, mineral extraction, and timber—as well as less obvious or apparent benefits, such as clean air and water and carbon sequestration.

Plan components related to social and economic issues relevant to specific resources are addressed in relevant resource sections of the Plan. Management approaches to incorporate coordination with local communities during implementation of management actions would reduce the risk of impacts on all communities, including minority and low-income populations. The Plan contributes to social and economic sustainability in the following ways:

- The Plan provides for management actions expected to support approximately 587 jobs and \$25.4 million in labor income in the local economy.
- The Plan supports recreational use of the national forest. There are an estimated 470,000 recreation visits to the Ashley National Forest annually based on National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) Program data (Forest Service 2017b); 41 percent of these visits originate outside the local area. The level of recreation has increased over time; based on NVUM data, from 2012 to 2017 total visits increased by approximately 60 percent. The expenditures of nonlocal visitors to the Ashley National Forest support approximately 78 jobs and \$2.4 million in labor income annually. Local visitors contribute an additional 34 jobs and \$1.1 million in labor income.
- The Plan supports livestock grazing, an important economic and cultural use of the national forest. Up to 124 jobs and \$2.1 million in labor income is expected to be directly or indirectly supported by grazing on the Ashley National Forest.
- The Plan supports the timber harvesting program, which will contribute 24 jobs and \$1.4 million in labor income to the region's economy. Labor income estimates include saw timber and removal of poles, posts, and fuelwood harvested for commercial use.

4. Sustainable Recreation

The Plan supports the increasing demand for recreation opportunities and contributes to the recreation economy. Plan components address recreation settings and opportunities, visitor education and interpretation, scenic resources, and access (transportation infrastructure for roads and trails). The Plan establishes objectives for increasing and enhancing recreational opportunities and establishes recreation management areas.

- Recreation management direction includes desired conditions for infrastructure to support recreation while considering other resource values. The Plan includes management direction to meet the increasing demand for recreation opportunities, provide for a variety of recreation and tourism opportunities, and support a diverse set of users and local communities.
- Three recreation management areas will be established to support different recreation opportunities: destination recreation management areas to meet increased demands for recreation near local communities and to benefit local economies; backcountry recreation management areas that provide large, undeveloped landscapes suitable for dispersed recreation use; and general recreation management areas that allow for a range of recreational uses, including motorized and nonmotorized use, along with other multiple uses.
- The selected alternative would balance developed recreation opportunities and settings with opportunities for backcountry activities to address increases in demands for both developed and dispersed recreation opportunities that provide for a broad and diverse range of year-round activities.

5. Traditional Uses and Multiple Uses

The Plan includes management direction for traditional uses and multiple uses, addressing both historic and contemporary cultural uses while maintaining the long-term health and productivity of the land. The Plan supports local communities and economies and includes management direction to sustain the multiple uses of its renewable resources. The multiple uses of the Ashley National Forest contribute to local, regional, and national economies. The Plan includes forestwide direction for areas of tribal importance and management of uses such as mineral development, livestock grazing, timber and woodland products use, and fuelwood collection, including:

- Landscape vegetation communities are linked to areas of tribal importance. The Ute Indian Tribe considers the vegetation to be important as a part of the cultural landscape, with special importance given to those areas on the original Uintah and Ouray Reservation. Locations with native species that are used for ceremonial or ritual purposes have cultural value and meaning beyond the individual plants.
- Areas and resources of tribal importance include medicine trees, brush fences, rock art, wickiups (conical pole structures), burials, sun dance locations, mountain peaks, and prehistoric archaeological sites. Areas of tribal importance tie to the landscape and the viewshed and include scenic, audible, and visual components of the environment.

- An estimated production of total wood products, which includes sawtimber and non-sawtimber, similar to or above current levels with an objective for an average annual projected wood sale quantity plus salvage of 11,762 CCF. This includes 3,800 CCF (1.145 MBF) of both commercial timber and other wood products and 7,956 CCF of salvage, including personal use fuelwood.
- Fuelwood represents the dominant use of wood products on the national forest; this provides important value to those who use this wood to heat their homes. Numerous commercial fuelwood operations and several sawmills process timber in the economic analysis area
- Forestwide plan components guide permitted livestock grazing on the national forest. Desired conditions recognize that grazing allotments contribute to a supply of livestock forage that supports local ranching operation sustainability and the economy of the local community while maintaining or moving toward ecological desired conditions.
- Forestwide plan components guide the national forest's energy and mineral development, in consideration of other resource values. Natural gas and oil as well as stone, sand, and other materials are removed from the national forest. The mineral program provides limited economic contributions relative to other Forest Service program areas, but on average these jobs pay relatively well.

Components of the Decision

Preliminary Administrative Recommendations

The Plan provides for an integrated set of plan components that are identified forestwide as well as within particular designated areas and management areas (see table 1 and figure 3). Each of these areas has management direction specific to individual parcels of land within the Forest that represents a management emphasis for that parcel of land. The area direction includes desired conditions, standards, guidelines, and suitability of certain uses within that management area.

Table 1. Designated and Management Area Acres and Percent Allocation

Area Category	Area Name	Acres or Linear Miles	Percent
Designated	Ashley Karst National Recreation and Geologic Area	173,475 acres	13%
Designated	Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area	207,363 acres	15%
Designated	High Uintas Wilderness	274,014 acres ¹	20%
Designated	Sheep Creek Canyon Geologic Area	3,600 acres	< 1%
Designated	Flaming Gorge-Uintas Scenic Byway	97 miles	--
Designated	Dinosaur Diamond Scenic Byway	512 miles	--
Designated	Flaming Gorge-Green River Basin Scenic Byway	150 miles	--
Designated	Inventoried Roadless Areas	794,590 acres	57%
Designated	Research natural areas (seven areas)	7,700 acres total	< 1%
Designated	Little Hole National Recreation Trail	7 miles	--

Area Category	Area Name	Acres or Linear Miles	Percent
Management	Backcountry recreation management areas	404,200 acres	29%
Management	Destination recreation management areas	29,000 acres	2%
Management	General recreation management area	670,000 acres	48%
Management	Eligible and suitable wild and scenic rivers: Green River Upper Uinta River	13 miles 40 miles	--
Management	Historic management areas	1,156 total	< 1%
--	Forest acres (total)	1,384,132	

1 Total acres for the High Uintas Wilderness is 456,705; a portion of this is on the adjoining Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest.

Recommended Wilderness

The 2012 Planning Rule directs the responsible official to “inventory and evaluate lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System” (36 CFR 219.7(2)(v)). There is no obligation to recommend acres for wilderness to Congress. I have decided to not include any recommended wilderness in the Plan. My decision is based on the need to balance the multiple use management of the Ashley National Forest as well as my consideration of comments received on the draft EIS.

I find that the existing designated areas on roughly 80 percent of the NFS lands on the Ashley National Forest provide significant opportunities and conservation of resources. The designated areas and management areas identified in the Plan provide primitive recreation opportunities and protections. Backcountry recreation management areas have limited motorized opportunities, and inventoried roadless areas across large, undeveloped landscapes are available for dispersed recreation use. The High Uintas Wilderness, at 456,705 acres total, is the largest wilderness area in the State of Utah. Sixty percent of the High Uintas Wilderness, 274,014 acres, is on the Ashley, with the remainder on the adjoining Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest. The portion of the High Uintas on the Ashley comprises 20 percent of the national forest. See table 1 and figure 3.

Areas recommended for wilderness in Alternatives B and C are inventoried roadless areas and, under the revised Plan, are also allocated as backcountry recreation management areas, both of which provide protections for remote, primitive, and natural values. I have determined that recommended wilderness designation could result in user conflicts due to existing multiple uses on these lands. Land allocations identified in Alternative B Modified would enable some level of vegetation management for the purposes of fuel reduction, watershed protection, and habitat enhancement while continuing to provide protection for air quality, water quality, and ecosystem resiliency for future generations. Recommended wilderness is also not compatible with our cooperating agencies’ resource management plans.

Wild and Scenic Rivers

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (PL 90-542), created by Congress in 1968, was developed to preserve rivers with outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values in

a free-flowing condition for the enjoyment of present and future generations. This act was amended in 1975 (PL 93-621).

In the Ashley National Forest, two rivers are recommended as suitable (Forest Service 2008; Forest Service GIS 2020):

- Green River below the Flaming Gorge Dam (13 miles, scenic classification)
- Upper Uinta River including Gilbert Creek, Center Fork, and Painter Draw (40 miles, wild classification)

This recommendation is a preliminary administrative recommendation that will receive further review and possible modification by the Chief of the Forest Service, Secretary of Agriculture, or the President of the United States. Congress has reserved the authority to make final decisions on designation of rivers as part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. Since the 2008 suitability study, Congress has taken no action on the two rivers determined to be suitable for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. To date, it has not designated any rivers in the Ashley National Forest as components of the System.

As part of this plan revision, the Forest Service completed its draft wild and scenic rivers eligibility study and report in May 2019 (Forest Service 2019) and released the final eligibility report in December 2022 (Forest Service 2022a, 2022b). As allowed by the planning directives, the eligibility study was conducted for only the named rivers on a standard U.S. Geological Survey 7.5-minute quadrangle map that had not previously been studied for eligibility. Table 2 lists eligibility determinations for the rivers evaluated as part of the 2019 study.

Table 2. Streams found to be eligible in the wild and scenic river eligibility study (2019)

Stream Name	Length (miles)	Outstandingly Remarkable Value	Preliminary Classification
Dowd Creek	3.1	cultural or historic	recreational
Honslinger Creek	2.3	cultural or historic	recreational
North Skull Creek	1.8	cultural or historic	wild
Spring Creek	6.8	cultural or historic	recreational

The Forest Service performed a wild and scenic river suitability study based on its wild and scenic rivers eligibility study and report in 2021. Of the four eligible segments evaluated in the suitability study, none were determined to be suitable for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System as it was determined that other Federal laws governing management of cultural resources are more appropriate for the protection of the identified outstandingly remarkable value in the absence of other outstandingly remarkable values along the segment. Under the National Historic Preservation Act and in consultation with the tribes, the Forest Service is adequately able to provide for protection of the cultural or historic resources. The wild and scenic river suitability study (Appendix F in the final EIS) followed the direction in Forest Service Handbook 1909.12, chapter 80, sections 83.2, Objective of the Suitability Study, and 83.21, Criteria for Determining Suitability.

Requirements of the Planning Rule

The Plan has been prepared in compliance with the Forest Service's 2012 Land Management Planning Rule at 36 CFR Part 219. The Plan meets the specific rule requirements at sections 219.8 through 219.12, as follows.

219.8 Sustainability

I have reviewed the Plan and determined that it provides plan components for social, economic, and ecological sustainability within the inherent capability of the Ashley National Forest.

Ecological Sustainability

The Plan provides ecological sustainability by including plan components that address the ecosystem integrity of air, soil, and water, and riparian areas. The Plan includes plan components that address the composition, structure, function, and connectivity of vegetation types. The Plan also includes management direction focused on non-forest vegetation types, such as alpine, desert shrub, sagebrush, and rare and unique habitats.

Fire management strives to balance the natural role of fire while minimizing the impacts on watershed health, wildlife habitat, highly valued resources or assets, and air quality. Plan components promote vegetation and landscape conditions that reflect the natural range of variation and are resilient in the face of future stressors and threats such as fire and climate change.

Social and Economic Sustainability

The Plan contributes to the social and economic sustainability of local communities and the public. Plan direction to maintain ecosystems will result in the provision of a full range of goods and services that are vital to human health, financial sustainability, and well-being. Ecosystem services include benefits from all the uses of the Ashley National Forest that people traditionally have relied on—such as livestock forage, recreation, mineral extraction, timber harvesting, and benefits important to tribal identity and cultural traditions, including culturally significant plants and traditional resources—as well as less obvious or apparent benefits, such as clean air and water and carbon sequestration.

Forestwide plan components guide the Ashley's contributions to social and economic sustainability, with an emphasis on recreational opportunities, livestock grazing, forest products, partnerships and coordination, cultural resources and uses, areas of tribal importance, and research and education. Desired conditions speak to managing the Forest by working closely with cooperating agencies, tribes, Federal, state, and county governments, universities, local schools, nongovernmental organizations, and private landowners to achieve joint management goals.

The multiple uses of the Ashley National Forest contribute to local, regional, and national economies. Desired conditions and objectives enhance or maintain the multiple uses and ecosystem services provided by the Forest. The benefits to people (i.e., the goods and

services provided) include carbon sequestration and climate regulation; forest products such as wood products and huckleberries; water quality and quantity and flood control; clean air; outdoor recreation; scenery; fish and wildlife (i.e., habitat for these species); cultural heritage values, inspiration, spiritual values, and solitude; hunting, trapping, fishing, and wildlife viewing; and research and education. Several critical water storage reservoirs on the Ashley are part of the Central Utah Project, a Federal water resources development project that diverts water via a system of reservoirs, tunnels, aqueducts, and other control features to provide water for irrigation, municipal, and industrial uses with secondary benefits for aquatic habitat, open water recreation, and flood control.

219.9 Diversity of plant and animal communities

The 2012 Planning Rule requires the Forest Service to include plan components to “maintain or restore” (1) “the ecological integrity of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems and watersheds in the plan area” and (2) “the diversity of ecosystems and habitat types throughout the plan area.” It also requires plans be based on a complementary ecosystem and species-specific approach; this approach is also referred to as the coarse-filter/fine-filter approach.

The Plan provides for the diversity of plants and animals and provides for ecological integrity by supporting the recovery of the 8 threatened, endangered, proposed (3 terrestrial, 4 aquatic, and 1 plant species) and the persistence of 24 species of conservation concern² (6 wildlife, 1 fish, and 17 plant species) through plan components that promote the necessary habitat conditions and minimize threats and stressors (see the Watershed, Aquatic, and Riparian Ecosystems, Terrestrial Vegetation, and Wildlife sections in the Plan and also Appendix D, Persistence Analysis for At-Risk Species, in the final EIS).

The Plan includes a complementary ecosystem and species-specific approach to contribute to the diversity of plant and animal communities and the long-term persistence of native species. The coarse-filter plan components are designed to maintain or restore ecological conditions for ecosystem integrity and biological diversity in the Ashley National Forest. Fine-filter plan components are designed to provide for additional specific habitat needs for native plant and animal species when those needs are not met through the coarse-filter plan components. Plan direction that is considered fine filter, that is species-specific, for at-risk species is included when needed (see also Appendix D, Persistence Analysis, in the final EIS).

I have reviewed the ecosystem plan components and species-specific plan components for at-risk species. In accordance with 36 CFR 219.9(b)(1), I find that the Plan will provide the ecological conditions necessary to maintain persistence of species of conservation concern within the plan area.

² This list can be accessed on the Intermountain Region webpage:
<https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r4/landmanagement/planning/?cid=fseprd944994>

219.10 Multiple use

The Plan provides integrated resource management for multiple uses (219.10(a)) by including plan components at the forestwide level and the designated and management area scale that establish suitability for a variety of compatible uses. The Plan emphasizes working closely with partner agencies, Indian tribes, Federal, state, and county governments, universities, permittees, nongovernmental organizations, and private landowners to achieve joint management goals. The Plan provides for multiple uses by

- providing clean water and water quantity, as well as improving watershed conditions where needed, through plan components that support aquatic ecosystem integrity, limit potential negative impacts to these resources, and support important ecological and social services such as productive soils, plant and animal diversity, wildlife habitat, and water supplies (see the Watershed, Aquatic, and Riparian Ecosystems section in the Plan);
- recognizing and protecting historical, cultural, and tribal uses associated with the Ashley (see the Areas of Tribal Importance and the Cultural and Historic Resources sections in the Plan);
- providing rangeland for livestock grazing to support livelihoods while also supporting ecological integrity of rangelands and riparian management zones (see the Livestock Grazing section in the Plan);
- providing a supply of forest products in a sustainable manner, which in turn supports local economies and communities, through plan components that establish suitability and guide the harvesting of timber from National Forest System lands (see the Timber section in the Plan);
- providing opportunities for the development of mineral resources, where appropriate (see the Energy and Minerals and the Geologic Resources and Hazards sections in the Plan);
- including plan components that guide the management of infrastructure (see the two Transportation Infrastructure sections and the Facilities section in the Plan);
- providing economically, socially, and ecologically sustainable recreation opportunities through an array of plan components that support a variety of recreation uses. Recreation opportunities also consider tourism, ecosystem integrity and capacity, recreation access, and changes in local demographics (see the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum, Transportation Infrastructure (roads and trails), Designated Areas, and Management Areas sections in the Plan);
- providing opportunities for wildlife viewing, hunting, and fishing along with associated cultural and socioeconomic benefits (see the Watershed, Aquatic, and Riparian Ecosystems and the Wildlife sections in the Plan);
- including plan components that establish desired scenic integrity objectives (see the Scenic Resources section in the Plan);

- including plan components that emphasize consolidated land ownership and improved access to National Forest System lands (see the Land Status and Ownership section and the two Transportation Infrastructure sections in the Plan); and
- maintaining the wilderness character of the existing designated wilderness area and protecting the free-flowing nature and outstandingly remarkable values of two eligible and suitable wild and scenic rivers (see the Designated Areas and Management Areas sections in the Plan).

219.11 Timber requirements based on the National Forest Management Act

The Plan identifies lands suited and not suited for timber production (36 CFR 219.7(c)(2)(vii) and 219.11). The lands suitable for timber production and the role of timber harvest in meeting ecosystem management and social and economic objectives have changed since the 1986 Plan was developed. The revised Plan presents new plan components for lands suitable for timber production and for timber harvest. These plan components will facilitate an active vegetation management program that meets both ecosystem and socioeconomic objectives.

Lands suitable for timber production were determined following 36 CFR 219.11(a) and Forest Service Handbook direction (1909.12 chap. 61). First, lands are identified that may be suitable for timber production and are legally available and technically feasible for harvest (forested lands with no potential for irreversible soil or watershed damage and where regeneration can be ensured). Then, identification of lands that are suited and not suited for timber production is based on compatibility with desired conditions and objectives stated in the Plan (plan components). In lands suitable for timber production, active vegetation management and a regular flow of timber products is expected to occur. Unless prohibited by other plan components, timber harvest may occur on lands unsuitable for timber production to meet other resource objectives.

Under the Plan, about 109,819 acres (approximately 8 percent of the Ashley National Forest) are suitable for timber production, with the remaining approximately 1,268,654 acres not suitable for timber production.

Maximum Quantity of Timber

The Plan also identifies the maximum quantity of timber that may be removed from the plan area (36 CFR 219.7 and 219.11 (d)(6)). Based on Forest Service Handbook direction (1909.12 chap. 64.3), this maximum is termed the sustained yield limit and is the volume of timber that could be produced in perpetuity on lands that may be suitable for timber production. The timber suitability analysis used in plan development identified 109,819 acres on the national forest that may be suitable for timber production. The calculation of the sustained yield limit is not limited by plan desired conditions, other plan components, or the national forest's fiscal and organizational capabilities. The sustained yield limit is estimated to be an average annual volume of 21,446 hundred cubic feet (CCF). This volume represents the biological capability for the land base on which it was calculated and is the upper limit of timber harvest, meeting applicable utilization standards, that

could be offered. It is unconstrained by budgets, assumptions, or land management plan desired conditions. Actual sale levels depend on any number of factors, including fiscal capability of the planning unit, timber market conditions, constraints on timber harvest in the plan, and project-level analyses.

219.12 Monitoring

I have reviewed and determined that the Plan provides adequate monitoring to inform the progress of meeting plan goals, objectives, and desired conditions; these are all included in Chapter 4 of the Plan. The monitoring plan addresses what I believe to be the most critical components that inform management and is within the financial and technical capability of the Forest Service. Every monitoring question links to one or more of the desired conditions, objectives, standards, or guidelines. However, not every plan component has a corresponding monitoring question.

The monitoring plan was designed to be cost effective and can be implemented during rising or falling budget cycles. Incorporating monitoring data from other agencies and partners will help ensure that the Ashley National Forest's program is more independent and objective than relying solely on Forest staff that often have other program priority work.

This monitoring program is not intended to depict all monitoring, inventorying, and data-gathering activities undertaken on the national forest, nor is it intended to limit monitoring to just the questions and indicators listed. Consideration and coordination with broader-scale monitoring strategies adopted by the regional forester, multi-party monitoring collaboration, and cooperation with state and private forestry or research stations will increase efficiencies and help track changing conditions beyond the national forest boundaries. In addition, project and activity monitoring may be used to gather information for the plan monitoring program if it will provide relevant information to inform adaptive management.

Response to Public Comments

The 90-day draft EIS comment period (November 19, 2021, through February 17, 2022) provided an opportunity for the public to review the draft Plan and draft EIS and provide comments and suggested edits to the content. During the comment period, a total of 191 comment letters were received. Comment letters were received from representatives from 29 organizations, and the remainder were received from individuals with no affiliation noted. Of the letters received, 90 were classified as unique letters. Key areas of concern included livestock grazing; terrestrial and aquatic wildlife and plants; watersheds, aquatic, and riparian ecosystems; social and economic sustainability and environmental justice; terrestrial species; and recommended wilderness.

Counties, state agencies, tribes, and other Federal agencies suggested plan components, requested additional information in the Plan, requested additional analysis, and supported or opposed alternatives. Following release of the draft EIS in 2021, additional coordination meetings were held to discuss comments on the draft Plan and analysis.

Meetings addressed key issues of concern, including livestock grazing and bighorn sheep management direction. Plan components were modified, information was added to the Plan, and analysis was added to the final EIS in response to comments from the public, tribes, state and local governments, and other Federal agencies. Tribal and agency letters are available for review in Appendix H of the final EIS. A number of plan components, both goals and management approaches, support collaboration or coordination with tribal governments, states, counties, other Federal agencies, other entities, and the public. These plan components are designed to foster a viable “all lands approach” to management of the natural resources across the Forest and surrounding landscapes.

Changes between Draft and Final

After carefully considering the comments received on the draft EIS, adjustments were made to plan components in all alternatives and the analyses were clarified or corrected as needed. These changes are described in the final EIS. Grammatical edits were made between the draft and final EIS for all alternatives.

Structural updates were also made to the documents. The Plan is no longer included as an appendix to the EIS and is now a stand-alone document. In addition, wildlife habitat crosswalks from the Plan (formerly attachment E) have now been removed from the Plan and added to the final EIS in Appendix D. Persistence Analysis for At-Risk Species and Plan Component Crosswalks. New appendices to the final EIS are Appendix E, Compatibility of Plan with Other Agency Plans, and Appendix H, Response to Comments.

I find that the variations in Alternative B Modified and the other alternatives are minor and are qualitatively within the spectrum of alternatives and effects discussed in the draft EIS. Modifications to Alternative B fall within the scope of analysis previously provided to the public for comment and objections. Appendix H of the final EIS includes the responses to the substantive comments received.

The Ashley National Forest released its final Land Management Plan, final EIS, and draft Record of Decision, initiating a 60-day objection filing period on April 17, 2023. More information is found in the Administrative Review section.

The following is a summary of the key changes to the final EIS and the selected alternative, B Modified, as reflected in the Plan. Note that changes made to the documents based on objections are detailed in the Administrative Review section.

Air Quality: Updated language on emissions control strategies has been incorporated in the guideline FW-GD-AIR-01.

Watershed and Aquatic Ecosystems: Objective FW-OB-WATER-01 was updated from “improve the condition class” to “complete all essential projects.” A management approach converted to guideline FW-GD-WATER-03 for developing project-specific best management practices where needed to protect water quality and aquatics.

Fisheries and Aquatic Ecosystems: A guideline was added (FW-GD-FISH-05) that states “Sufficient habitat should be provided to maintain viable native and desirable nonnative fish and amphibian species.”

Riparian Ecosystems: FW-RMZ-DC-01 has added language that riparian areas connect upland, riparian, and aquatic habitats and provide corridors for movement of aquatic and terrestrial species. The desired condition FW-DC-RMZ-03 in the draft plan is now guideline FW-GD-RMZ-05, which was revised to better describe the riparian management zone dimensions. Guideline FW-GD-RMZ-06 was added which states “Vegetation management activities may occur in RMZs if they are designed to maintain or enhance desired riparian and aquatic conditions. Activities that cause soil compaction or soil erosion within RMZs should be avoided, minimized, or mitigated.”

Appendix 2. Watershed Condition Framework: Added the term Watershed Condition Framework priority watersheds. Removed the terms "properly-functioning, functioning at risk, non-functioning." Watershed condition classes in the framework now referenced as: Class 1 (good), Class 2 (fair), or Class 3 (poor).

Forest Vegetation: A factual correction was made to acres of treatment from 1,500 to 2,400 acres in objective FW-OB-CONIF-01, which now reads “Complete forested vegetation management treatments, such as timber harvest, planned ignitions, thinning, and planting, every year on an average of 2,400 acres annually . . .”

Fire and Highly Valued Resources or Assets: Objective FW-OB-FIRE-03 is now guideline FW-GD-FIRE-04. Two indicators for MON-FIRE-02 were added to monitor FW-FIRE-OBJ-01 and 02. A goal (previously only in Alternative D) was added to promote collaboration to increase the percentage of fire-resilient landscapes around highly valued resources or assets (see FW-GO-HVRA-02).

Adapting to Climate Change: Goal FW-GO-CLIM-01 was clarified and now reads, in part: “Consider and incorporate climate adaptation strategies, approaches, and tactics in the development and design of projects and activities for resource management on the Ashley National Forest...”

Carbon Storage and Sequestration: A desired condition was added (FW-DC-CARBON-02) related to rangeland carbon stocks.

Wildlife and special status species

- **Bighorn sheep:** Management direction for bighorn sheep was updated; see plan wildlife guidelines (FW-GD-WILDL-09 and 10) and goal (FW-GO-WILDL-03). Modifications include updated direction to minimize the risk of contact between domestic sheep and bighorn sheep and focusing on collaboration with state agencies, in part through use of memorandums of understanding.
- **Sage grouse:** A guideline (FW-GD-WILDL-11) was added stating, “Management actions should avoid degradation of occupied sage-grouse habitat,” with specific dates to avoid disturbances and compensatory mitigation.

- **Native bumble bees:** A guideline was added to restrict the use of commercial apiaries if there is a threat of pathogen transfer from commercial apiaries to native bumble bees (see FW-GD-WILDL-12).
- **Migratory birds:** A guideline was added to evaluate effects of ground-disturbing and vegetation management activities on birds of conservation concern identified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and, as practical, mitigate activities to lessen impacts to birds of conservation concern identified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (see FW-GD-WILDL-14).
- **Wildlife corridors:** A management approach that directs evaluation of the effects of ground-disturbing and vegetation management activities to migrating ungulates and connective habitat was changed to a guideline, and the following language was added to the guideline: “and as practical, mitigate activities to lessen the impact to migrating ungulates” (see FW-GD-WILDL-15).

Social and Economic Sustainability: A goal (FW-GO-SOCEC-01) was revised to include developing a common understanding with partners of the important socioeconomic contributions, “particularly in environmental justice communities where residents are more vulnerable to shifts in social and economic conditions.” A monitoring question (MON-SOCEC-02) and indicator were added to monitor the extent to which the Ashley National Forest is “contributing to social and economic sustainability for local populations of environmental justice concern, including Native American tribes.”

Areas of Tribal Importance: Three goals were added to the Plan (FW-GO-TRIBE-01 to 03). The first goal focuses on collaboration with the Ute Indian Tribe to facilitate solutions to issues that are important to the Tribe, including water resources, and public access to NFS lands via roads on tribal lands. Goal 02 outlines regular meetings with the Ute Indian Tribe at the staff and leadership level so that the tribal perspectives, needs, concerns, and traditional ecological knowledge are better understood and integrated into project design and decisions when appropriate. Goal 03 focuses on developing a better understanding by law enforcement officers, forest protection officers, and resource specialists of reserved Native American treaty rights related to hunting, fishing, and gathering on the Ashley National Forest. A management approach under Working and Coordinating with Tribes, Partners, and Cooperators (11) was added to “Develop a government-to-government tribal consultation agreement or protocol with the Ute Indian Tribe to enhance coordination and collaboration on projects within areas of tribal interest.”

Timber: Clarifying language was added to the introduction on timber harvest and timber production; language was added to a desired condition related to harvests for timber production and for purposes other than timber production (see FW-DC-TIMB-02). Annual timber sale harvest objectives (FW-OB-TIMB-01 and 02) were clarified, and a footnote was added that states in part: “Estimates of timber outputs may be larger or smaller on an annual basis if legal authorities, management efficiencies, or unanticipated constraints change in the future.” Goal 01 in the draft Plan was changed to a desired condition (FW-DC-TIMB-04).

Livestock Grazing: Livestock grazing management direction was edited to provide for additional site-specific flexibility (see guidelines FW-GD-GRAZ-01 and 02).

Energy and Minerals: Goals in the Plan were changed to desired conditions (FW-DC-MINL-10 through 12).

Geologic Resources and Hazards: Goals 03 and 04 in the Plan were changed to desired conditions (FW-DC-GEOL-07 and 08).

Recreation: The summer recreation opportunity spectrum acres were updated. Primitive acres are now 276,400 (from 286,700), and semiprimitive acres increased to 362,300 (from 351,900 acres), as indicated in the table 3.

Table 3. Recreation opportunity spectrum acres for alternatives A, B, and B modified

Resource	Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative B Modified
ROS Primitive (acres)	276,400	286,700	276,400
ROS Semiprimitive Nonmotorized (acres)	369,600	351,900	362,300
ROS Semiprimitive Motorized (acres)	282,700	289,000	289,000
ROS Roaded Natural (acres)	437,100	438,200	438,200
ROS Rural (acres)	10,600	10,600	10,600

Scenic integrity objectives were updated as follows: acres of very high scenic integrity were reduced by approximately 10,000 acres, and acres of moderate and low scenic integrity were increased. These changes are a result of not carrying forward recommended wilderness as a management area.

Lands Special Uses: The Central Utah Project is now discussed in the introduction to this section. A guideline (FW-GD-LANDSU-03) and a goal (FW-GO-LANDSU-03) were added to address lands withdrawn for Bureau of Reclamation purposes. A management approach (#12 under *Working and Coordinating with Tribes, Partners, and Cooperators*) addresses coordination of management on withdrawn lands. A map of the Central Utah Project withdrawn areas was added to the Plan.

Area Direction: This section of the Plan, previously titled Management Areas, was subdivided into Designated Areas and Management Areas. Additional information on suitability and designated area stand-alone management plans was added to the introduction. Other changes to the Area Management section of the Plan include:

- High Uintas Wilderness—Suitability plan components were added related to timber production and harvest and new road construction.
- Ashley Karst National Recreation and Geologic Area—A sentence was added to standard (DA-ST-ASKRGA-02): “Existing roads and trails may be rerouted to protect resources from degradation or to protect public safety.”
- Sheep Creek Canyon Geologic Area—A suitability plan component related to livestock use was added (DA-SUIT-SCCGA-01).

- The National Recreation Trail section was added to the Plan with two desired conditions (DA-DC- NRTRAIL -01 and 02) for the Little Hole National Recreation Trail.
- Research Natural Areas—Suitability plan components related to livestock use and timber production were added (DA-SUIT-RNA-01 and 02).
- Recommended wilderness—No recommended wilderness was carried forward under Alternative B Modified. These areas are now allocated as backcountry recreation management areas and remain designated as inventoried roadless areas.
- Eligible and Suitable Wild and Scenic Rivers—This is management area direction since the U.S. Congress would need to act on recommendations before these would be considered designated areas. A guideline in the draft Plan is now a standard (MA-ST-WSR-01).
- Historic Ranger Stations—Information was added about the ranger and guard stations in this management area (see table 19 in the Plan).

Monitoring Program: This chapter of the Plan was revised to include more information on adaptive management. The monitoring table was divided into multiple tables by resource and monitoring questions, and indicators are now numbered. The plan components being monitored for each question were added. Monitoring questions and indicators were reworded, most notably in the watershed- and groundwater-dependent ecosystems section, the social and economic sustainability section, and fire section with two additional indicators (02 and 03) for question MON-FIRE-01. Aspen are included as a Focal Species for monitoring.

Alternative C: Notable changes between Alternative C in the draft EIS and Alternative C in the final EIS are summarized below:

- **Forest vegetation**—The objective for average annual vegetation management treatments was updated from 1,000 acres (800 acres in the second decade) to an average of 1,800 acres annually (1,600 acres in the second decade). A factual correction was made to Alternative B Modified and the other alternatives were corrected accordingly.
- **Wildlife**—The approach for minimizing the risk of contact between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep or domestic goats was updated by focusing on collaboration with the State of Utah.

Alternative D: Notable changes between Alternative D in the draft EIS and Alternative D in the final EIS are summarized below:

- **Forest vegetation**—The objective for average annual vegetation management treatments was updated to 1,600 acres (1,300 acres in the second decade) to an average of 2,500 acres annually (1,300 acres in the second decade).
- **Livestock grazing**—Added livestock grazing guidelines that focus on development of site- and species-specific annual indicators and described grazing management

strategies at the allotment management plan level using annual monitoring indicators and multi-year vegetation trend data to determine if allotments are meeting desired conditions.

- **Wildlife**—Revised the domestic sheep and goat grazing guidelines to utilize closed or vacant allotments or forage reserves outside of bighorn sheep core herd home range when permitting new allotments for domestic sheep or goats.

Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered three other alternatives, which are discussed below. Alternative B Modified is the environmentally preferred alternative. A more detailed comparison of these alternatives can be found in Chapter 2 and Appendix B of the final EIS.

Alternatives Analyzed in Detail

The range of alternatives developed and presented is based on an evaluation of the information gathered from public and internal comments and the purpose and need. While all alternatives provide a wide range of ecosystem services and multiple uses, some give greater emphasis to selected resources based on the theme of the alternative and the response to the focus topics identified in the need for change.

The Forest Service developed the plan alternatives based on the Ashley National Forest assessment (Forest Service 2017); the need for change; desired conditions; implementation and monitoring of the 1986 Plan; public, agency, and tribal input; and comments received during the public scoping period. The alternatives represent a range of possible management options from which to choose. Each alternative emphasizes specific land and resource uses and deemphasizes other uses in response to the issues used for alternative development. Some components may vary between alternatives to address the issues identified during scoping; the description of the alternatives provides specific details. I considered only those alternatives that met both the purpose and need for change and created a reasonable range of outputs, costs, management requirements, and effects from which to choose.

In addition to the no-action Alternative A, also referred to as the 1986 Plan in this document, and the proposed action (B), which was modified based on public and internal comments, two additional alternatives (C and D) were developed based on the identified issues. The alternatives span the range of forest management practices and uses of available resources. The primary difference among alternatives is the acres of management areas (including recreation management areas and additional areas recommended for wilderness), suitable acres for timber production, and objectives for active management (such as fuels treatment, managing natural, unplanned ignitions, acres treated about highly valued resources and assets). The four alternatives analyzed in detail are: Alternative A (the 1986 Plan); Alternative B Modified (the revised Plan), which provides for healthy ecological function, recreation, and diverse ecosystem services;

Alternative C, which emphasizes preservation of the natural setting and the use of passive management; and Alternative D, which has the fewest restrictions on resource use.

The Forest Service has provided a full suite of plan components for Alternative B Modified in the Plan. A limited number of plan components and acres assigned to management areas vary by alternative. A summary of key differences between alternatives is included in the narrative below and in the tables provided in the Comparison of Alternatives section in Chapter 2 of the final EIS.

Elements Common to All Alternatives

All alternatives considered in the final EIS adhere to the principles of multiple use and the sustained yield of goods and services required by the Multiple-Use and Sustained-Yield Act as described at 36 CFR 219.1 (b)). All the alternatives are designed to:

- meet law, regulation, and policy;
- contribute to ecological, social, and economic sustainability;
- conserve soil and water resources and not allow significant or permanent impairment of the productivity of the land.
- maintain air quality that meets or exceeds applicable Federal, State, and local standards and regulations.
- protect cultural resources;
- provide sustainable levels of products and services;
- provide integrated direction as included in the plan components;
- include the following designated areas: the High Uintas Wilderness; Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area; Ashley Karst National Recreation and Geologic Area; Sheep Creek Canyon Geologic Area; research natural areas; national scenic trails; and national scenic byways; and
- manage all inventoried roadless areas consistent with the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (Roadless Rule).

Elements Common to Alternatives B Modified, C, and D

The revised Plan alternatives, B Modified, C, and D, also referred to as action alternatives, are designed to be consistent with the 2012 Planning Rule and associated directives and to emphasize adaptive management and the use of best available scientific information. All action alternatives would:

- meet the purpose and need for change and address one or more significant issues;
- protect the outstandingly remarkable values of eligible and suitable wild and scenic rivers;
- provide the ecological conditions to support the persistence of species of conservation concern;

- maintain a sustainable level of goods and services to help support local and regional populations, tribes, and environmental justice communities, including wilderness, fish and wildlife, recreation opportunities and access, timber, energy resources, livestock forage, and infrastructure, as determined by resource-specific desired condition; and
- provide for ecosystem services that add to the quality of life and sense of place of both present and future generations, including aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems, clean air and water, aesthetic values, cultural heritage values, and recreation opportunities.

Alternatives

Alternative A

Alternative A, the no-action alternative, reflects management under the 1986 Plan, as amended, and provides the basis for comparing alternatives with current management and levels of output. Council on Environmental Quality regulations (40 CFR 1502.14(d)) require that a no-action alternative be analyzed in every EIS. This alternative would not recommend any new management areas; no changes would occur to the Plan in response to issues raised, and it would not adjust management in response to the requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule.

Alternative B Modified

Alternative B Modified is the proposed action for the draft Plan that was developed in response to public involvement efforts that began in 2016 and was subsequently modified based upon comments received during scoping and through engagement with cooperating agencies. This alternative emphasizes moving toward desired conditions while providing a balance of ecological, social, and economic sustainability. Plan objectives reflect a mix of resource enhancement, moving toward forested vegetation desired conditions; timber and wood products volume, hazardous fuel treatment; road, trail, and facility maintenance; and new recreation facilities. Alternative B Modified does not propose recommended wilderness areas, and it includes three recreation management areas. Under this alternative, about 109,819 acres (approximately 8 percent of the national forest) are suitable for timber production and would be compatible with the desired conditions and objectives established by the Plan.

Under Alternative B Modified the following would occur:

- Complete forested vegetation management treatments, such as timber harvest, planned ignitions, thinning, and planting, every year on an average of 2,400 acres.
- Use the full range of fuel reduction methods, to include wildland fire and other vegetation treatments, on up to 32,000 acres per year.
- Fire management would strive to balance the natural role of fire while minimizing the negative impacts on watershed health, wildlife habitat, highly valued resources

or assets, and air quality. Use of natural ignitions for resource objectives would be encouraged, where conditions permit, on 10 percent of the ignitions over 10 years.

- Specific management would be proposed for highly valued resources or assets, including critical water resources, to protect these values and to provide flexibility to manage changing resources over the life of the Plan while working closely with partners, the Ute Indian Tribe, state and local governments, and other Federal agencies.
- Site- and species-specific annual indicators such as stubble height and utilization criteria would be developed in grazing allotment planning. In the absence of updated planning or an approved allotment management plan, operators would follow utilization levels for forestwide management (50 percent) as well as 4-inch stubble height guidelines to provide criteria to help meet desired conditions for terrestrial vegetation. Annual monitoring indicators, as well as multi-year vegetation trend data, would be used to determine if allotments are meeting desired conditions.
- Support the maintenance and improvement of resilient ecosystems and watersheds to support wildlife diversity. It would provide ecological conditions to maintain persistence of each species of conservation concern and common and abundant species within the plan area.
- Two rivers are recommended as suitable for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System (Forest Service 2008), the Green River below the Flaming Gorge Dam (13 miles, scenic classification) and the Upper Uinta River including Gilbert Creek, Center Fork, and Painter Draw (40 miles, wild classification).
- A complementary ecosystem and species-specific approach would be used to contribute to the diversity of plant and animal communities and the long-term persistence of native species. The ecosystem plan components would be designed to maintain or restore ecological conditions for ecosystem integrity and biological diversity in the Ashley National Forest. Species-specific plan components would be designed to provide for additional, specific habitat needs for native animal species when those needs are not met through the coarse-filter plan components.
- Specifically, for bighorn sheep, establishing new domestic sheep or goat allotments may be authorized when the Ashley National Forest in cooperation with the State of Utah and grazing permittees can develop a site-specific memorandum of understanding to mitigate the threat of pathogen transfer and reduce or eliminate bighorn sheep contact with domestic sheep or domestic goat allotments. In addition, Alternative B Modified would provide options if a domestic sheep or goat grazing permit is voluntarily waived without preference, if which case authorized use of the allotment should work towards minimizing risk to bighorn sheep by one or more of the following methods: (1) mitigate the threat of pathogen transfer between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep and domestic goats consistent with the most current Utah Bighorn Sheep Statewide Management Plan, (2) mitigate the threat of pathogen transfer between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep and domestic goats in accordance with new site-specific memorandum of understanding, or (3) work with

the State of Utah to remove or translocate bighorn sheep. A goal (FW-GO-WILDL-03) was added to collaboratively work with the State of Utah to minimize the risk of contact between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep or domestic goats.

Alternative C

Alternative C emphasizes preservation of the natural setting and the use of passive management (i.e., reliance on natural processes for changes to vegetation structure) to move toward desired conditions for vegetation and fire management. Features of Alternative C in relationship to the significant issues identified above include:

- Four areas (a total of 50,200 acres) would be managed for wilderness characteristics as recommended wilderness areas.
- Six rivers are recommended as suitable for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System: the Green River below the Flaming Gorge Dam (13 miles, scenic classification), the Upper Uinta River including Gilbert Creek, Center Fork, and Painter Draw (40 miles, wild classification) (Forest Service 2008), and four additional segments, Dowd Creek, Honslinger Creek, North Skull Creek, and Spring Creek.
- A new research natural area (Gilbert Bench) would be added.
- The focus of fuels management would be on the use of natural processes, including the use of wildland fire to move toward desired fire regimes, with 20 percent of natural, unplanned ignitions managed to meet resource objectives.
- Fewer acres would be proposed for active vegetation management (i.e., using the manipulation of vegetation through silvicultural and forest management practices to meet objectives) due to additional designated areas with limitations on timber harvest and fewer vegetation management projects that could contribute to timber yields compared with the other alternatives.
- Forage for livestock would be limited to a level of 40 percent utilization and a stubble height of 4 inches.
- Additional and more stringent plan direction would be included for the separation of bighorn sheep from domestic sheep; new domestic sheep or goat allotments would not be permitted unless separation from bighorn sheep is demonstrated, and in addition, when domestic sheep or goat grazing permits are voluntarily waived without preference, and if the allotment does not provide separation from bighorn sheep, the allotments would be closed to provide separation between domestic sheep and domestic goats and bighorn sheep. A goal (FW-GO-WILDL-03) was added to collaboratively work with the State of Utah to minimize the risk of contact between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep or domestic goats.

Alternative D

This alternative has the fewest restrictions on resource use. The focus under this alternative would be on accomplishing desired conditions by shared funding and

cooperation with partners. Features of Alternative D in relationship to the significant issues identified above include:

- Increased motorized access and developed recreation opportunities would be emphasized; objectives across management areas would emphasize increased roads, trails, and recreation infrastructure.
- More areas would be included in moderate or low scenic integrity objectives with a slightly altered scenic character, following the emphasis on a more developed recreation setting.
- No additional recommended wilderness areas are included.
- Two rivers are recommended as suitable (Forest Service 2008), the Green River below the Flaming Gorge Dam (13 miles, scenic classification) and the Upper Uinta River including Gilbert Creek, Center Fork, and Painter Draw (40 miles, wild classification).
- More acres would be treated, up to 40,000 acres per year, through mechanical and prescribed fire fuels treatments, with 5 percent of natural, unplanned ignitions managed to meet resource objectives.
- Restrictions on timber harvest would be fewer, with the most acres suitable for timber production and the greatest harvest volume; vegetation management under Alternative D would support the highest level of treatment per acre over the life of the Plan.
- For livestock grazing, forage utilization and stubble height under Alternative D would be determined based on site-specific conditions to meet desired conditions, as under Alternative A.
- Management for wildlife would emphasize support for wildlife habitat while limiting the impacts on other land uses; no additional restrictions would be in place for managing bighorn sheep. Guideline (FW-GD-WILDL-10) was added: Utilize closed, vacant allotments, or forage reserves outside of bighorn sheep core herd home range when permitting new allotments for domestic sheep or goats. A goal (FW-GO-WILDL-03) was added to collaboratively work with the State of Utah to minimize the risk of contact between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep or domestic goats.

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study

Federal agencies are required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to rigorously explore and objectively evaluate all reasonable alternatives and to briefly discuss the reasons for eliminating any alternatives that were not developed in detail (40 CFR 1502.14). Public comments received during scoping provided suggestions for alternative methods for achieving the purpose of and need for action. Some of these alternatives are outside the scope of revising the Plan; already decided by higher law, regulation, or policy; duplicative of the alternatives considered in detail; or determined to

have components that would cause unnecessary environmental harm. Therefore, several alternatives were considered but dismissed from detailed consideration for reasons summarized in Chapter 2 of the final EIS.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

NEPA regulations require agencies to specify the alternative or alternatives that are environmentally preferable (40 CFR 1505.2(b)). Forest Service NEPA regulations define the environmentally preferable alternative as “the alternative that will best promote the national environmental policy as expressed in NEPA’s section 101. Ordinarily, the environmentally preferable alternative is that which causes the least harm to the biological and physical environment; it is also the alternative which best protects and preserves historic, cultural, and natural resources” (36 CFR 220.3).

I find, based upon the laws and regulations guiding National Forest System management, that Alternative B Modified is the environmentally preferred alternative. When compared to the other alternatives, it best contributes to ecological, social, and economic sustainability. Alternative B Modified helps advance desired conditions for the Ashley National Forest by establishing vegetation management to promote ecosystem resiliency and reduce the risk of catastrophic fires on the landscape, by promoting habitat connectivity and restoration across the forest, by continuing to provide and promote socioeconomic development, by maintaining cultural and historic uses of the national forest, and by providing for future outdoor recreational activities and uses by diverse populations.

Best Available Scientific Information

The 2012 Planning Rule (§219.6(a)(3) and 219.14(a)(4)) requires the responsible official to document how the best available scientific information was used to inform the assessment, the Plan, and the monitoring program. Such documentation must identify what information was determined to be the best available scientific information, explain the basis for that determination, and explain how the information was applied to the issues considered.

The Ashley National Forest interdisciplinary team utilized professional expertise to determine best available information to inform the assessment, the Plan, and the monitoring program. The foundation from which the plan components were developed for the revised Plan was the expertise of the planning team members, who have extensive experience working on the Forest. This interdisciplinary team of resource professionals compiled and evaluated the relevant information for the assessment of the Forest (Forest Service 2017) and the best available scientific information and analyses contained therein. From this foundation, the interdisciplinary team used and updated the best available scientific information to develop the proposed action (September 2019), the alternatives, and the analysis and comparison of alternatives in the draft EIS (November 2021). This information includes material that was readily available from public sources (libraries, research institutions, scientific journals, and online literature). It also includes

information obtained from other sources, such as participation and attendance at scientific conferences, scientific knowledge from local experts, findings from ongoing research projects, workshops and collaborations, professional knowledge and experience, and information received during public participation periods.

Resource specialists considered what is most accurate, reliable, and relevant in their use of the best available scientific information. The best available scientific information includes the publications listed in the literature cited or reference sections of the Ashley National Forest's assessment and draft EIS as well as any additional information that was used, updated, and/or included in the final EIS, Plan, or the planning record prior to the record of decision. The final EIS provides documentation of how the best available scientific information was used to inform planning, the plan components, and other plan content, including the plan monitoring program (36 CFR 219.3). The reference sections of the final EIS and Plan include the best available scientific information used to inform planning but may also include science that is discussed in order to address opposing science, as required by NEPA. Additionally, the Forest may have incorporated some portions of the documents referenced but not others, as indicated in individual sections of the final EIS. Cooperation between county, state, and Federal agencies and tribes contributed to the best available scientific information.

A formal review of the references recommended in public comments was completed to document decision making used to determine if the suggested literature should be considered best available science. This spreadsheet is available in the project record.

For all these reasons, based on my review of the final EIS, the Plan, and the planning record, I have determined that the most accurate and reliable scientific information available that is relevant to the issues considered in this plan revision has been used to inform the planning process and has been applied to the issues considered in the revision, as required by 36 CFR 219.3.

Findings Required by Other Laws

The Forest Service manages the Ashley National Forest in conformance with many laws and regulations. I have considered the statutes specific to individual resources as described in the final EIS, and I find that this decision meets our obligations to the current statutory duties of the Forest Service. Following are summaries of how the revised land management plan addresses the relevant laws and regulations.

American Indian Religious Freedom Act

Federal agencies must make a good faith effort to understand how Indian religious practices may come into conflict with other Forest uses and consider any adverse impacts on these practices in their decision making.

The Duchesne/Roosevelt Ranger District is within the bounds of the original Uintah and Ouray Reservation. Numerous sections of the original reservation lands have been removed from tribal ownership through congressional acts, but the Ute Indian Tribe still

maintains a cultural and legal connection to these lands. The original reservation lands are an area of tribal importance to the Ute Indian Tribe. The original reservation lands are also within “Indian Country” as defined in 18 USC 1151, and the Ute Indian Tribe maintains rights on these lands as specified by law and Federal court decisions. The original Uintah and Ouray Reservation is defined by the legal survey of the Uintah Special Meridian. Because the entire Ashley National Forest is within the ancestral lands of the Ute Indian Tribe, areas of tribal importance are not limited to those lands within the reservation boundary.

Regardless of which alternative is chosen, the Forest Service is required to consult with tribes when management activities may affect tribal interests, treaty rights, and/or cultural sites and cultural use. Desired conditions for areas of tribal importance for all action alternatives of the land management plan aim to provide continued protection of areas of tribal importance, as follows:

- Cultural landscapes, sacred sites, traditional cultural properties, areas of tribal importance, and other culturally significant areas and resources retain integrity and interconnectivity to provide tangible links to historically rooted beliefs, customs, and practices of tribal members.
- Tribal members have access to sacred sites and important cultural landscapes on the Ashley National Forest for effective exercise of cultural, religious, and ceremonial traditions to sustain tribal practices, cultural integrity, social cohesion, and economic well-being.
- Ashley National Forest resources, such as plants, animals, and minerals that are significant to the cultural and ceremonial practices of tribal members, are healthy, managed for sustainability, and accessible to support reserved Native American treaty rights related to hunting, fishing, and gathering.

No negative effects on American Indian social, economic, or subsistence rights are anticipated as a result of the land management plan revision; instead, beneficial effects from increased collaboration are anticipated. Therefore, I find the land management plan is compliant with this act.

Archaeological Resources Protection Act

This act provides protection to archaeological resources found on public lands and Indian lands of the United States. The legislation provides civil and criminal penalties for those who remove or damage archaeological resources in violation of the prohibitions contained in the act. The act prohibits the removal of archaeological resources on public lands or Indian lands without first obtaining a permit from the affected Federal land manager or tribe and requires Federal agencies to develop plans to survey lands under their management to determine the nature and extent of archaeological and cultural resources.

The land management plan is strategic and programmatic in nature, providing guidance and direction to future site-specific projects and activities. Compliance with section 106

of the National Historic Preservation Act and 36 CFR 800 regulations requires assessments to document the presence of historic properties within the area of potential effect for any site-specific activities and also to meet the intent of this act. The Forest will also continue to consult with tribes during site-specific management activities that may impact cultural sites and cultural use. The plan components in the land management plan include provisions that take into consideration American Indian rights and interests and the need to protect cultural resources. Therefore, I find the land management plan is compliant with this Act.

Clean Air Act

In accordance with the Clean Air Act of 1990 and the Organic Administration Act of 1897, the Forest Service has the responsibility to protect the air, land, and water resources from the impacts of air pollutants produced within the boundaries of National Forest System lands and to work with states to protect air resources from degradation associated with the impacts of air pollution emitted outside of National Forest System lands. Chapter 3, Air Quality, in the final EIS addresses and discloses potential impacts from management direction in the Plan, including the potential use of prescribed burning in areas available for timber harvest occur on up to 893 acres annually; additional acres may be burned for fuel mitigation purposes or for achievement of other resource objectives.

The Plan includes desired conditions and strategies for maintaining air quality, compliance with Federal and State air management plans and monitoring questions for gathering information. At the scale of a programmatic plan such as this, the overall level of activities proposed under this decision is not anticipated to degrade air quality or violate State implementation plans; this finding is supported by information in the final EIS. Conformity determinations and more detailed air quality impact analyses will be made at subsequent levels of planning and analysis where emissions can be more accurately quantified and reasonably forecasted and local impacts can be assessed. Therefore, I find the land management plan to be in compliance with the Clean Air Act.

Clean Water Act

The Clean Water Act (33 U. S. C. § 1251 et seq.) establishes the basic structure for regulating discharges of pollutants into the waters of the United States and regulating quality standards for surface waters.

Implementing this land management plan is expected to maintain or improve water quality and satisfy all state water quality requirements. This finding is based on direction contained in the land management plan, the application of “best management practices” specifically designed to protect water quality, and the discussions of water quality and beneficial uses addressed in Chapter 3, Watersheds and Aquatic and Riparian Ecosystems, of the final EIS. Management direction protecting water quality can be found in many locations throughout the land management plan. Project-level analysis required for land management plan implementation will be required to demonstrate compliance with the Clean Water Act. I find that the land management plan is compliant with this act.

Climate Change

Executive Order 14008 (Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad) addresses the need to build resilience against the impacts of climate change that are already manifest and will continue to intensify according to current trajectories. Land management response to current or future climate and its effects is critical to minimizing the risks of climate change impacts. Adaptation actions can vary from simple, short-term actions to more complex, long-term approaches. Many climate adaptation approaches complement current planning strategies and have been incorporated into land management goals, desired conditions, and other plan components.

The Plan includes the goal to consider and incorporate climate adaptation strategies, approaches, and tactics in the development and design of projects and activities for resource management on the Ashley National Forest. The Forest Service will continue to collaboratively partner, learn, and incorporate effective science-based solutions. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is in compliance with this executive order.

Endangered Species Act

The purpose of the Endangered Species Act is to provide for the conservation of endangered species by conserving the ecosystems these species rely on. Section 7(a)(1) of the Act requires Federal agencies to carry out programs for the conservation of listed species. In addition, the Endangered Species Act requires Federal agencies to ensure that any agency action does not jeopardize the continued existence of the species (Endangered Species Act, section 7(a)(2)). The act also requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Forest Service to base their biological opinion and subsequent agency action, respectively, on the use of the best scientific and commercially available information (916 U.S.C. 1536(a)(2)).

The Ashley National Forest staff notified the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of the land management plan revision process in February 2021. The agencies met to discuss federally listed threatened and endangered species and species proposed for Federal listing to be considered for further evaluation throughout the land management plan revision process in June 2022. The Forest subsequently received the finalized list of proposed, threatened, and endangered species to address in the biological assessment.

In accordance with Section 7(c) of the Endangered Species Act, the Forest Service prepared a biological assessment to assess the effects of implementing the Ashley National Forest Land Management Plan on eight federally listed threatened, endangered, or proposed species (three terrestrial, four aquatic, and one plant species) or designated critical habitats identified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as known to occur on the Ashley National Forest or that have potential habitat on the Forest (USDA 2023a). Note that the only federally listed threatened, endangered, or proposed species known to exist on the Ashley National Forest is the plant species Ute ladies'-tresses. The four endangered fish are not on the Forest or suspected to be on the Forest but are included because of potential downstream effects. The lynx and wolverine are rare visitors to the

Forest, but habitat exists. There have been no occurrences of Mexican spotted owl on the Forest, but limited habitat exists. The biological assessment determined that the proposed action *may affect but is not likely to adversely affect* Ute ladies'-tresses, Canada lynx, and Mexican spotted owl; is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of wolverine; and would have *no effect* on the four fish species.

The Forest received concurrence from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the Biological Assessment of threatened and endangered species January 19, 2023 (USFWS 2023), as follows: “The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concurs with your determination that the proposed action *may affect, and is not likely to adversely affect* Canada lynx, Mexican spotted owl, Ute ladies-tresses, wolverine. The proposed action is expected to be insignificant and discountable.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced the listing of the distinct population segment of the North American wolverine in the contiguous United States as threatened on November 30, 2023, which became effective on January 2, 2024. The Forest Service requested the conference concurrence for wolverine on the Biological Assessment for the Plan to be transferred over to an informal consultation concurrence for a determination of “may affect, not likely to adversely affect” the wolverine (USDA 2023b). The USFWS confirmed “conference concurrence ‘rolled over’ to a concurrence under Section 7 of the Act” on January 19, 2024 (USFWS 2024).

The revised land management plan includes desired conditions, standards, guidelines, and objectives and provides broad management direction that meets the Forest Service’s responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act Section 7(a)(1). These plan components comply with the requirements of the act and the associated recovery plan for federally listed species. For these reasons, I find this land management plan to be in compliance with the requirements of the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

Environmental Justice

Executive Order 12898 (Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations) addresses environmental justice populations, or minority and low-income populations. These populations are present in the areas surrounding the Forest. The Cites of Duchesne and Vernal, Utah, and the City of Green River, Wyoming, were identified as communities for further environmental justice analysis based on the total population below the poverty level and the minority population, respectively.

Executive Order 13990 (Protecting Public Health and the Environment and Restoring Science to Tackle the Climate Crisis) which declared the Administration’s policy to listen to the science; to improve public health and protect our environment; to ensure access to clean air and water; to reduce greenhouse gas emissions; to bolster resilience to the impacts of climate change; and to prioritize both environmental justice and the creation of the well-paying union jobs necessary to deliver on these goals.

All alternatives considered in the final EIS would contribute to social and economic sustainability by providing benefits to environmental justice communities, improving quality of life, and providing opportunities for income and jobs. The Forest would continue to provide for traditional, cultural, and spiritual values that are of particular interest to Native American tribes. Social and economic sustainability are integrated throughout many of the resource areas, where they contribute to the ecosystem services and multiple uses that sustain communities and economies.

A goal in the Plan (FW-GO-SOCEC-01) is to work together with interested local agencies, partner organizations, and the public to promote a common understanding of locations and activities that provide important socioeconomic contributions, particularly for environmental justice communities where residents are more vulnerable to shifts in social and economic conditions; to identify potential projects that may enhance community benefits; and to identify mitigation measures that may address adverse impacts on the resources. A monitoring question in the Plan (MON-SOC-EC-02) will look at: “To what extent is the Ashley National Forest contributing to social and economic sustainability for local populations of environmental justice concern, including Native American tribes?” The indicator is the number of projects with substantial involvement or potential positive impacts on environmental justice populations.

No populations in the plan area would experience significant adverse human health impacts or environmental effects due to management actions proposed under any of the alternatives considered. The Plan includes innovative approaches to overcoming barriers, working collaboratively with communities, maintaining traditional uses, providing recreational access for all, and providing key ecosystem services that local communities rely on such as clean water and air. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is in compliance with this executive order.

Federal Land Policy and Management Act

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act allows for the granting of easements across National Forest System lands. The land management plan is strategic and programmatic in nature. It provides guidance and direction to future site-specific projects and activities. The land management plan does not create, authorize, or execute any site-specific activity, although it does provide for the consideration of granting easements and rights-of-way. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is consistent with this act.

Invasive Species

Executive Order 13751, which amends Executive Order 13112, directs Federal agencies to prevent the introduction of invasive species; to detect and respond rapidly to and control populations of such species in a cost-effective and environmentally sound manner; to monitor invasive species populations accurately and reliably; to provide for restoration of native species and habitat conditions in ecosystems that have been invaded; to conduct research on invasive species and develop technologies to prevent introduction; to provide for environmentally sound control of invasive species; and to promote public education on invasive species and the means to address them. All of these actions are

subject to the availability of appropriations to support this work. Forest Service Manual 2900, Invasive Species Management, sets forth Forest Service policy, responsibilities, and direction for the prevention, detection, control, and restoration of effects from aquatic and terrestrial invasive species (categorized as vertebrates, invertebrates, plants, and pathogens).

The land management plan is strategic and programmatic in nature, providing program-level guidance and direction for future site-specific projects and activities. The land management plan does not create, authorize, or execute any ground-disturbing activity, although it does provide for the consideration of certain types of activities that may have the potential to affect the dispersal of invasive species. The land management plan includes forestwide desired conditions, objectives, and management approaches that stress the use of best management practices to limit the introduction of new species and limit the spread of existing populations due to management activities. Additionally, other direction provides protection of watershed, soil, riparian, and aquatic conditions in ways that will reduce management-related disturbances that might introduce new populations or increase existing ones. The plan monitoring program includes indicators associated with invasive plant species and the effectiveness of treatments. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is compliant with this Executive Order.

Migratory Bird Treaty Act

Executive Order 13186, Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds, was issued in furtherance of the purposes of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Acts, the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the NEPA. This order requires including the effects of Federal actions on migratory birds as a part of the environmental analysis process. On December 8, 2008, the Forest Service signed a memorandum of understanding with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to complement the executive order (USDI-USFWS, 2008), and the Forest Service agreed to incorporate migratory bird habitat and population objectives and recommendations into the agency planning process, in cooperation with other governments, state and Federal agencies, and non-Federal partners, and to strive to protect, restore, enhance, and manage the habitat of migratory birds and prevent the further loss or degradation of remaining habitats on National Forest System lands. The Council for the Conservation of Migratory Birds was established in 2009 by the Secretary of the Interior to oversee Executive Order 13186. More than 20 Federal agencies, including the Forest Service, currently participate in and have representation on the Council for the Conservation of Migratory Birds.

The land management plan includes forestwide direction related to key stressors for migratory birds and their habitats, including direction to maintain or improve Forest resilience, composition, and structure. The Plan includes a guideline (FW-GD-WILDL-14) that states “Prior to ground-disturbing or vegetation management activities, the Forest Service should evaluate the beneficial and adverse effects of the action to birds of conservation concern identified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and, as practical, mitigate activities to lessen the impact to those species.” Future site-specific activities or

projects with the potential to impact migratory bird habitat will be analyzed with site-specific analysis under the NEPA process and will comply with land management plan direction. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is compliant with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and Executive Order 13186.

Multiple-Use Sustained Yield Act

The Forest Service manages National Forest System lands to sustain the multiple use of its renewable resources in perpetuity while maintaining the long-term health and productivity of the land. Resources are managed through a combination of approaches and concepts for the benefit of human communities and natural resources. As demonstrated in the final EIS and as required by the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960 (16 U.S.C. 528-531), the land management plan guides sustainable and integrated management of Forest resources in the context of the broader landscape, giving due consideration to the relative values of the various resources in particular areas. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is compliant with the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act.

National Environmental Policy Act

The NEPA requires that Federal agencies prepare detailed statements on proposed actions that may significantly affect the quality of the human environment. The act's requirement is designed to serve two major functions:

- to provide decision makers with a detailed accounting of the likely environmental effects of proposed actions prior to adoption, and
- to inform the public of, and allow comment on, such efforts.

The Forest Service has developed, gathered, and reviewed an extensive amount of information in the final EIS regarding the potential effects of each of the alternatives considered. This information expands and refines the data, analyses, and public input described in the NEPA documents associated with the draft Plan and draft EIS. My decision also considers the large amount of public input, including public meetings, comments received during scoping on the proposed Plan (60-day comment period), and comments received during the 90-day comment period for the draft EIS.

All substantive comments, written and oral, made in regard to the draft EIS have been summarized and responded to in Appendix H of the final EIS. During the course of this effort, the public involvement has led to changes in the analysis and the alternatives. I find that the environmental analysis and public involvement process the final EIS is based on complies with each of the major elements of the requirements set forth by the Council on Environmental Quality regulations for implementing the NEPA (40 CFR 1500–1508). My conclusion is supported by the following findings:

- The final EIS considered a broad range of reasonable alternatives. The four alternatives considered in detail in the final EIS cover a broad range of possible

management allocations based on revision topics identified through public involvement and scoping.

- The final EIS reflects consideration of cumulative effects of the alternatives by evaluating past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions in the plan area, including Federal, state, tribal, and private lands. The environmental effects analysis estimates the potential effects of timber activities and timber-associated activities. The analysis of effects to wildlife was based on the assumption that these activities would take place with management constraints to ensure habitat availability at certain thresholds. Moreover, although non-Federal lands are outside the scope of this decision, effects from their management have been thoroughly considered and coordinated, to the extent practicable, in the final EIS.
- The final EIS uses scientific integrity to support the conclusions made. The decision here does not authorize timber sales or any other specific activity on the Forest. Site-specific decisions will be made on projects in compliance with the NEPA, the Endangered Species Act, and other environmental laws following applicable public involvement and appeal procedures.

National Forest Management Act

The National Forest Management Act requires the development, maintenance, amendment, and revision of land management plans for each unit of the National Forest System. These land management plans help create a dynamic management system so an interdisciplinary approach to achieve integrated consideration of physical, biological, economic, and other sciences will be applied to all future actions on the unit. Under the act, the Forest Service is to ensure coordination of the multiple uses and sustained yield of products and services of the National Forest System.

The National Forest Management Act requires the Secretary of Agriculture to promulgate regulations for developing and maintaining land management plans. On April 9, 2012, the Department of Agriculture issued a final planning rule for National Forest System land management planning (36 CFR Part 219; refer to the Federal Register at 77 FR 68, pp. 21162–21276).

As discussed in detail in the Requirements of the Planning Rule section of this document, my review of the planning process, the final EIS, and the information provided in the record of decision indicate that the final Plan and its preparation meet requirements for revising plans under the provisions of the 2012 Planning Rule and are compliant with the National Forest Management Act.

National Historic Preservation Act

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires each Federal agency to take into account the effects of its actions on historic properties prior to approving expenditure of Federal funds on an undertaking or prior to issuing any license; section 110 of the act outlines Federal agency responsibility to establish and maintain a preservation program for the identification, evaluation, and nomination of cultural

resources to the National Register of Historic Places and the protection of historic properties.

The land management plan is a programmatic-level planning effort that does not directly authorize any ground-disturbing activities or projects. The land management plan includes desired conditions, goals, objectives, standards, guidelines, management strategies, and monitoring requirements for managing and protecting cultural resources listed in or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Site-specific projects that are undertaken as a result of the direction in the land management plan will comply with laws and regulations that ensure the protection of heritage resources. Significant cultural resources will be identified, protected, and monitored in compliance with the act. Any consultation that will occur for proposed activities will be coordinated with the Utah and Wyoming State Historic Preservation Offices and the Ute Tribal Historic Preservation Officer as appropriate. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is in compliance with this act.

National Trails System Act

The National Trails System Act of 1968, as amended, calls for establishing trails for people of all ages, interests, skills, and physical abilities. The act establishes four classes of trails: national scenic trails, national historic trails, national recreation trails, and side and connecting trails. The Forest has one designated national recreation trail, the Little Hole National Recreation Trail, designated in 1979 by the Secretary of Agriculture. The land management plan provides for the nature and purposes of the Little Hole National Recreation Trail, in accordance with the programmatic requirements of the National Trails System Act, as amended, and the management plan for the Green River below the dam (Forest Service 1996). Updates to the management plan for the Green River below the dam (which includes management direction for the Little Hole National Trail) will be determined upon approval of the land management plan. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is in compliance with this Act.

Roadless Area Conservation Rule

Management direction for inventoried roadless areas is compliant with the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (36 CFR 294 Subpart B, published at 66 FR 3244–3273). The 2001 Roadless Conservation Rule includes a prohibition on road construction and road reconstruction in inventoried roadless areas and prohibitions on timber cutting, sale, or removal in these areas except under certain circumstances. The land management plan is a programmatic-level planning effort and does not directly authorize any road construction or reconstruction or timber removal. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is compliant with the Roadless Area Conservation Rule.

Travel Management Rule

The final rule on travel management, titled Travel Management; Designated Routes and Areas for Motor Vehicle Use (commonly referred to as the 2005 Travel Management

Rule), implements provisions of Executive Orders 11644 and 11989 to address the use of off-road motor vehicles on Federal lands. Regulations implementing this rule are found at 36 CFR Part 212. The portion of the rule pertaining to motor vehicle use is subpart B; the portion of the rule pertaining to motorized over-snow vehicle use is subpart C, which was updated in January 2015. The executive order's "minimization criteria" specify:

In designating National Forest System trails and areas on National Forest System lands, the responsible official shall consider effects on the following with the objective of minimizing.

1. damage to soil, watershed, vegetation, and other Forest resources;
2. harassment of wildlife and significant disruption of wildlife habitats;
3. conflicts between motor vehicle use and existing or proposed recreation uses of National Forest System lands or neighboring Federal lands; and
4. conflicts among different classes of motor vehicle uses of National Forest System lands or neighboring Federal lands.

The responsible official shall also consider

5. compatibility of motor vehicle use with existing conditions in populated areas, taking into account sound, emissions, and other factors (36 CFR 212.55(b) and specific criteria for designation of trails and areas).

Prior to this plan revision, the Forest designated specific roads, areas, and trails for the use of motor vehicles (which includes off-road vehicles) that are displayed on the motorized vehicle use maps required by 36 CFR 212 subpart B. The Forest also has completed subpart C through amendment 24 to the 1986 Plan, and this is displayed in the Forest's Over-Snow Vehicle Use Map as required by 36 CFR 212 subpart C. This programmatic plan decision does not authorize additional motor vehicle use or prohibit existing motor vehicles uses; therefore, these maps remain unchanged.

The 2009 Motorized Travel Plan for Ashley National Forest (Forest Service 2009) designated the location of routes open to public motorized use, the class of vehicle appropriate for each route, and the timing of use, for example seasonal restrictions. The Plan designated 1,458 miles of open roads and 185 miles of open motorized trails. Each route was assigned a system number and shown on a motor vehicle use map. The 2015 Travel Analysis Report (Forest Service 2015) identified the minimum road system for safe and efficient travel on the Forest. This report tiered to the 2009 motorized travel plan and identified 11 miles of National Forest System roads as likely not needed; these system roads may be analyzed for future decommissioning or trail conversion.

The Plan includes objectives for improving or maintaining roads and trails. The objective (MA-OB-RMAGENL-03) includes the two off-highway vehicle loop routes that were identified in the 2009 Motorized Travel Plan that have not yet been completed. Determinations about which roads and trails will be open or closed to specific types of motorized and nonmotorized uses are not addressed at the plan level; however, the Plan

may provide context and guidance for future travel management decisions. Therefore, I find that this land management plan is in compliance with the Travel Management Rule.

Wetlands and Floodplains

Executive Orders 11990 (Protection of Wetlands) and 11988 (Floodplain Management) require Federal agencies to avoid, to the extent possible, short- and long-term effects resulting from the modification or destruction of wetlands and the occupancy and modification of floodplains. Forestwide standards and guidelines are provided for soil, water, wetlands, and riparian areas to minimize effects to wetlands and floodplains. They incorporate the best management practices of the Forest Service Soil and Water Conservation Handbook. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is compliant with these executive orders.

Wild and Scenic Rivers Act

This act establishes a National Wild and Scenic Rivers System with three classifications of rivers: wild, scenic, and recreational. The purpose of the act is to protect the designated rivers “for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations” and to preserve the rivers’ free-flowing condition, water quality, and outstandingly remarkable values.

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act requires an evaluation of eligible wild, scenic, or recreational rivers in land management planning. The Forest Service completed its final wild and scenic rivers eligibility study and report in October 2022 (Forest Service 2022a). Four creeks were determined to be eligible. The Forest Service performed a wild and scenic river suitability study based on the wild and scenic rivers eligibility study and report. The wild and scenic river suitability study followed the direction in Forest Service Handbook 1909.12, chapter 80, sections 83.2, Objective of the Suitability Study, and 83.21, Criteria for Determining Suitability. The purpose of the suitability phase is to determine whether eligible rivers are suitable for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System, in accordance with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Suitability considerations include the environmental and economic consequences of designation and the manageability of a river if Congress were to designate it. Forest Service Handbook 1909.12, chapter 80, section 83.2e identifies the various criteria that the Forest Service uses to determine suitability.

Of the four eligible segments evaluated in the suitability study, none were determined to be suitable for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System in the preliminary suitability determination. The suitability study and report are included as appendix F of the final EIS. Suitability determinations made in a NEPA document are draft until the decision record for the NEPA document is signed. Management area direction in the land management plan provides protection for the water quality, free-flowing conditions, and outstandingly remarkable values identified for the rivers found to be eligible and suitable. River segments that were determined eligible but are not suitable for recommendation for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, are no longer afforded agency protection as potential wild and scenic rivers and rivers will continue to be managed by

other underlying direction in the Plan. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is compliant with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Wilderness Act

The Wilderness Act of 1964 established a National Wilderness Preservation System to be administered in such a manner as to leave these areas unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness. It provides the statutory definition of wilderness, how areas are assessed for addition to the wilderness preservation system, and management requirements for congressionally designated areas.

The land management plan provides direction for designated wilderness through goals, desired conditions, standards, guidelines, and suitability that preserves the wilderness character of designated wilderness. Therefore, I find that this land management plan is compliant with this act.

Plan Implementation

Existing Authorizations

Resource plans (examples are designated area management plans and travel management plans) developed by the Ashley National Forest that apply to the resources or land areas within the planning area must be consistent with the plan components. Resource plans developed prior to this plan decision will be evaluated for consistency with the Plan and updated as soon as practicable.

Authorizations for occupancy and use made before this plan approval may proceed unchanged until time of reauthorization. At time of reauthorization, all permits, contracts, and other authorizing instruments must be made consistent with the Plan, subject to existing valid rights, as provided at 36 CFR 219.15(d).

Plan components applicable to livestock grazing will be incorporated through permit modification(s), reissuance of existing term permits, issuance of new term grazing permits, or as allotment management plan revisions and sufficiency reviews occur. Monitoring data will be used to prioritize management for both allotments and stream reaches. It is expected that all allotments will be managed under the plan direction within the first decade.

Project and Activity Consistency

As required by National Forest Management Act and the 2012 Planning Rule, subject to valid existing or statutory rights, all projects and activities authorized by the Forest Service after approval of this Plan must be consistent with the applicable plan components (16 U.S.C. 1604(i)) as described at 36 CFR 219.15. Previously approved and ongoing projects and activities are not required to meet the direction of the revised Plan and will remain consistent with the direction in the 1986 Plan, as amended.

All project or activity approval documents made after the effective date of the Plan will describe how the project or activity is consistent with the applicable components of the Plan. When a proposed project or activity would not be consistent with the applicable plan components, the responsible official shall take one of the following steps, subject to valid existing or statutory rights:

1. modify the proposed project or activity to make it consistent with the applicable plan components;
2. reject the proposal or terminate the project or activity;
3. amend the Plan so that the project or activity will be consistent with the Plan as amended; or
4. amend the Plan contemporaneously with the approval of the project or activity so that the project or activity will be consistent with the Plan as amended. This amendment may be limited to apply only to the project or activity.

Maintaining the Plan

A land management plan is an integral part of an adaptive management cycle, including assessment, plan revision or amendment, and monitoring. This adaptive management cycle enables the national forest to identify and respond to changing conditions, changing public desires, and new information, such as that obtained through research and scientific findings. The plan monitoring program is an integral part of this adaptive management cycle, consisting of monitoring questions and indicators (see Chapter 4 of the Plan for additional information about the monitoring plan).

A land management plan may be amended at any time based on a preliminary identification of the need to change the Plan, which may be based on a new assessment, plan monitoring, or other documentation of new information, changed conditions, or changed circumstances. The amendment and administrative change process is described at 36 CFR 219.17(b)(2) of the 2012 Planning Rule.

The Effective Date of the Plan

This land management plan becomes effective 30 calendar days after publication of the notice of its approval in the Federal Register (36 CFR 219.17(a)).

Administrative Review

This decision to approve the revised land management plan for the Ashley National Forest was subject to the pre-decisional objection process pursuant to 36 CFR Part 219 Subpart B. A 60-day objection period on the draft record of decision, land management plan, and final EIS ran concurrently with an objection period for the Regional Forester's species of conservation concern. The objection period was initiated on April 17, 2023, with the publication of the notice of the opportunity to object in the newspaper of record (the Vernal Express).

The Forest Service received 15 eligible objections, two of which were for species of conservation concern. Interested parties and objectors attended an in-person meeting (with virtual attendance as an option) on August 28, 2023, in Vernal, Utah to discuss objection issues. On November 14, 2023, the Deputy Regional Forester for the Intermountain Region issued a written response to the objection issues on the land management plan. On November 17, 2023, the Deputy Chief for National Forest System, the reviewing officer for species of conservation concern, issued a written response. These written responses³ outline the rationale for each response and contained instructions to the responsible official as appropriate. The written response is the final decision by the U.S. Department of Agriculture regarding the objections.

The Regional Forester found that the final environmental impact statement, land management plan, draft record of decision, and associated planning record sufficiently addressed most issues raised through objection. She also found the land management plan revision documents follow current law, regulation, and policy. For those issues that required additional clarification or modifications, the reviewing officer issued instructions to the Ashley National Forest. These instructions remedied any concerns over potential violations of law, regulation, or policy raised during the objection period and are detailed here.

Modifications Made in Response to Instructions

As instructed by the reviewing officers, modifications to the final EIS, land management plan, and to the planning record have been completed as indicated below. The instructions are organized by topic and include a summary of the issue, the reviewing officer's conclusion if needed to provide additional background on the instructions, the instruction, and a response with how the instruction was followed and where changes were made to documents. Some instructions required review of new information, others required clarifications in the final EIS or modifications to plan components. In addition to instructions, the reviewing officer recommended other clarifications be completed; summarized below. All modifications fall within the effects considered across the range of alternatives and are responsive to issues identified in previous comment periods and during objections.

Recreation

Winter Recreation Opportunity Spectrum Instructions

Issue summary: The Plan does not include a winter recreation opportunity spectrum map. Objectors assert that the lack of a winter recreation opportunity spectrum map results in the Plan not providing sufficient context or guidance for future winter travel

³ The reviewing officers' objection response letters can be accessed on the project website: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=49606>; located in the Decision Folder/Objection Responses.

decisions on the forest or for the implementation of plan components FW-DC-ROS 6, 8, 10, 12, and 14.

Instruction 1: State when the forest will initiate scoping for developing a map for the winter recreation opportunity spectrum settings.

Response 1: The Ashley will initiate scoping for winter recreation opportunity spectrum settings within 3 years of signing this Record of Decision.

Instruction 2: Clarify that the Plan includes desired conditions for winter recreation opportunity spectrum settings, which considered over-snow vehicle use in Appendix H, Response to Comments, Recreation Opportunity Spectrum Issue #1, #3, and #4.

Response 2: Clarifications were made to the responses in appendix H (pp. 102-103).

Instruction 3: Clarify that the recreation opportunity spectrum classifications in the Plan are for summer and winter use in Appendix H, Response to Comments, Recreation Opportunity Spectrum Issue #3 but that only summer recreation opportunity spectrum classifications are mapped. When the Ashley National Forest conducts motorized over-snow vehicle travel management, winter recreation opportunity spectrum classifications will be mapped.

Response 3: These clarifications were made to the response in appendix H (p. 102).

Instruction 4: Clarify in the Plan that FW-DC-ROS 2, 3, and 4, as well as FW-GO-ROS 1, apply to both summer and winter recreation, and “Specific locations and distributions of desired summer recreation opportunity spectrum settings are mapped in Figure 1-3.”

Response 4: These clarifications were made in the Plan. The sentence was added to page 57 of the Plan.

Recreation Recommendations

- Additional clarification was provided regarding the connectivity of trail systems in appendix H on page 102 in response to Recreation— Recreation Opportunity Spectrum Issue #3.
- In the Plan on page 62, guideline (FW-GD-RECTEC-01) was revised to read: “Use of new and emerging recreation technologies and equipment should be managed in order to avoid or minimize adverse effects to existing recreation uses and activities,” where previously it read that “use of new and emerging recreation and technologies and equipment should not create adverse effects”.
- In the Plan, in the Recreation Management Areas section (page 84), language was added to emphasize that other authorized and multiple uses, such as livestock grazing, occurs in these management areas.

Tribal and Traditional Uses

Tribal Water Rights

Issue summary: The objector contends that the Plan does not adequately address the Ute Indian Tribe's water rights and requests the prioritization of the protection of the Tribe's water supply and water storage.

Instruction: Update plan direction to address concern.

Response: In the Plan on page 39 the goal (FW-GO-TRIBE-01) was changed to address this concern, with water resources added as one of the issues important to the Ute Indian Tribe. The goal now reads "Collaborate with the Ute Indian Tribe to facilitate solutions to issues that are important to the Tribe and to the Ashley National Forest, including water resources, tribal identification of and access to culturally important plants on National Forest System lands, and access to or on National Forest System lands."

Recommendation

It was recommended that text in the Plan that references collaboration or coordination where "tribe(s)" is used should be updated to specifically reference the "Ute Indian Tribe" where appropriate. This change was made in the Plan in Appendix 3 on page 3-1, Working and Coordinating with Tribes, Partners, and Cooperators.

Vegetation Management and Timber Harvesting

The reviewing official recommended development of a 10-year integrated vegetation management strategy. The Forest Service will develop a vegetation management strategy through the shared stewardship process.

Wild and Scenic Rivers

Wild and Scenic River Suitability and Eligibility

Issue summary: Objectors contend that the 28 rivers previously found eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System must remain eligible, regardless of a subsequent suitability determination, and thus must continue to be afforded interim protection measures, because "Congress is the ultimate decider on Wild and Scenic River designation."

Conclusion: Although the reviewing official found the Forest Service decisions to conduct a suitability study during the Plan revision process and not re-study 22 streams previously determined not suitable in 2008 to be consistent with applicable law, regulation, and policy, I was instructed to make clarifications and updates to the 2022 suitability report and the record of decision.

Instructions:

- Correct the last sentence in the introduction paragraph of the 2022 suitability report to: "In total, 4 eligible rivers were studied for their suitability as part of this process

and all 4 were determined to be not suitable for inclusion in the NWSRS”; or delete the sentence in its entirety.

- Update the final Wild and Scenic River Eligibility Study and Report, 4.2 Suitability Study, pp. 4-5 by changing text “the Ashley National Forest intends to conduct a suitability evaluation as part of a plan amendment, subsequent to the Record of Decision for its land use plan revision” to clarify that a suitability study was conducted during the Forest Plan revision process as documented in appendix F of the final EIS.
- Update the record of decision descriptions of the alternatives for Alternative B modified (p. 30) and Alternative C (p. 31) to clarify that all alternatives include two rivers recommended as suitable (the Green River below the Flaming Gorge Dam (13 miles, scenic classification) and the Upper Uinta River including Gilbert Creek, Center Fork, and Painter Draw (40 miles, wild classification) (Forest Service 2008), and Alternative C includes four additional river segments as suitable.

Response: Clarifications were made to Appendix F. Wild and Scenic Rivers Eligibility and Suitability Reports. On pages 31 and 32 in this document the clarifications to suitable river segments by alternative were made.

Consideration of Streams for Eligibility

Issue Summary: The objector contends that the forest failed to consider and evaluate 11 additional streams as eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. They believe the forest dismissed their comments and failed to adequately consider additional information regarding at-risk species provided in their comments on the draft 2022 Eligibility Report.

Conclusion: The reviewing officer found the 2022 eligibility report is consistent with law, regulation, and policy. However, the forest should more specifically respond to the objector’s information regarding habitat for dusky grouse, ruffed grouse, greater sage grouse, and snowshoe hare.

Instructions 1: Add the 2022 eligibility report as an appendix in the final EIS, per FSH 1909.12, Chapter 80, section 82.93.

Response 1: The 2022 eligibility report is now included in Appendix F. Wild and Scenic Rivers Eligibility and Suitability Reports of the final EIS.

Instruction 2: Document the consideration of habitat for the following species: dusky grouse, ruffed grouse, greater sage grouse, and snowshoe hare in a manner similar to how you considered other species in your analysis.

Response 2: The response to question #7 in Appendix H. Response to Comments on page 160 was updated to be more responsive as to why these 11 river segments were not found to have outstandingly remarkable values. The consideration of habitat for the species listed in the instruction is as follows: The dusky grouse, ruffed grouse, and snowshoe hare are not species at risk nor species of interest and are widespread

throughout their habitat on the Ashley plan area. These species' habitat associated with these stream segments are not unique and are not any different than their habitat elsewhere in the plan area. The greater sage-grouse is a Species of Conservation Concern, but habitat for this species does not occur in the area of any of these stream segments except for Mosby creek. Priority greater sage-grouse habitat does occur in the area of Mosby Creek, however this priority habitat is not unique and is not any different than sage-grouse priority habitat elsewhere in the plan area.

Recommendation

Add a summary of how the river-related cultural resources identified in the suitability study for the four rivers would be protected by the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) regardless of Wild and Scenic River Designations to Appendix F, Wild and Scenic River Eligibility and Suitability Reports, p. 95, and in abbreviated form in Ch. 3. This summary is now incorporated as recommended in Appendix F:

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act primarily emphasizes that wild and scenic rivers are free of impoundments and have natural and undeveloped shorelines [Public Law 90-542, Sec. 3(b)]. The law does not specifically provide protection to cultural resources, except as part of a broad policy that certain rivers which “possess outstandingly remarkable scenic recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, or other similar values, shall be preserved in free-flowing condition, and that they and their immediate environments shall be protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations” [[Public Law 90-542, Sec. 1(b)]. Whereas multiple other federal regulations provide specific protections for cultural, historic, and archaeological resources. The NHPA specifically directed federal agencies to take into account how federal undertakings may effect National Register eligible cultural

resources. The implementing regulations for NHPA (found at 36 CFR 800) provide a very specific process to identify, document, evaluate, and assess cultural, historic, and archaeological resources prior to the authorization of federal actions. The regulations also require agencies to avoid, minimize, or mitigate any proposed actions that could adversely affect the cultural resources. The Archaeological Resources Protection Act (ARPA) and its implementing regulations (43 CFR 7) prohibit unauthorized damage to cultural, historic, or archaeological resources on federal lands. The proposed Ashley National Forest Land Management Plan also includes a Standard (FS-ST-HIST-01) to “Avoid, minimize, or mitigate adverse effects on cultural resources eligible to the National Register of Historic Places for all projects, activities, permits, or actions on National Forest System lands in accordance with section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, as specified in 36 CFR 800, and in consultation with the appropriate State Historic Preservation Officers, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, tribes, local governments, and other consulting parties.” These federal statutes, regulations, and directives provide substantially greater protection for cultural, historic, or archaeological resources than would be available through the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Wilderness

Potential Future Wilderness Designations

Issue summary: Objectors contend that the wilderness recommendation process violates the Utah Wilderness Act of 1984.

Instruction: Clarify the language in Appendix H, Response to Comments, Wilderness – Recommended Wilderness, Issue #8, Page 157 regarding the Utah Wilderness Act to read as follows: The release language of the Utah Wilderness Act is similar to other wilderness acts of its time. The language in Title II, Sec 201(b)(2), makes it clear that while the RARE II review was sufficient for “for the initial land management plans”, the Forest Service “shall review the wilderness option when the plans are revised.” Sections 201(b)(3) and 201(b)(4) also make it clear that lands in the inventory shall be managed for “multiple use” except that those lands identified as recommended for wilderness designation through the Forest planning process may be managed to protect their wilderness suitability. Only the performance of a statewide wilderness assessment was prohibited by the Utah Wilderness Act of 1984. Section 201(b)(5) specifically prohibits the Department of Agriculture from conducting “any further statewide roadless area review and evaluation” unless expressly authorized by Congress. Individual reviews by each Forest do not violate this prohibition. The prohibition of a statewide review was intended to prevent a “further” RARE I or RARE II-type exercise.

Response: The forest updated appendix H as instructed (see pp. 157).

Wildlife

Plan Direction for Reducing the Risk of Contact

Issue Summary: Objections were on perceived lack of clarity and specificity of plan components directed at preventing pathogen transfer and commingling of domestic sheep and goats with bighorn sheep (Wildlife Guidelines 09 and 10, and Wildlife Goal 03). Objectors believe the Forest Plan is inconsistent with bighorn sheep statewide management plans and they object to management practices that would result in expansion of bighorn sheep populations beyond their current range. Objectors believe the Forest Plan fails to recognize the potential for pathogen transmission between mountain goats and bighorn sheep.

Instructions:

- The forest must include additional documentation in the planning record regarding the bighorn sheep working group’s refinement of FW-GD-WILDL-09, FW-GD-WILDL 10, and FW-GO-WILDL 03, between draft and final EIS.
- If, based on the updated persistence analysis, the responsible official decides to keep FW-GD-WILDL 10, they must revise that guideline to clarify the intent to provide guidance for the issuance of new term grazing permits.

- Consider if additional monitoring elements are necessary to prompt future review of the persistence analysis and species of conservation concern listing.

Response: The guidelines and goal for bighorn sheep (pp. 36 and 37 of the Plan) have been retained in the Plan but modified based on recommendations. Guideline 09 and Goal 03 were revised to clarify that the goal is to minimize the risk of contact between the species, not maintain separation. Guideline 10 clarifies that it applies to newly established allotments, also the phrase “separation of the allotment from bighorn sheep will be obtained” was replaced by risk to bighorn sheep will be minimized. Goal 03 was edited to delete “strategies described in domestic sheep permit annual operating instructions.”

Bighorn sheep have been identified as a species of interest on the Ashley and as such will be monitored (see MON-WILDL-01 on page 95 of the Plan). Species of interest are those commonly enjoyed and used by the public for hunting, trapping, observing, or sustenance, including cultural or tribal uses. State fish and wildlife agencies manage many of these species through hunting regulation.

Species of Conservation Concern

Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep

Issue summary: Objectors requested removal of the Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep from the Regional Forester’s list of species of conservation concern (SCC). Objectors contend that bighorn sheep are not at risk in the planning area, therefore, the rationale for inclusion of bighorn sheep is inconsistent with regulations and policies. They are concerned that listing bighorn sheep as a SCC will result in unnecessary impacts to current and future domestic sheep grazing.

Instruction 1: Address the following in the Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep persistence analysis:

- Update the bighorn sheep persistence analysis with the latest data on population numbers and trends, consistent with state reports on these herds, and make the reports and data available to the public.
- Clarify how state management actions, including augmentation, were considered in determining the species’ capability to persist in the plan area over the long-term.
- Clarify the relationship between the factors noted in the threat analyses and state management actions.

Instruct the Responsible Official to determine whether to recommend that the Regional Forester change the species of conservation concern list based on this information in accordance with FSH 1909.12, Ch. 20, Section 21.22.

Instruct the Regional Forester to determine whether to change the species of conservation concern list based on this recommendation and to notify the public and Responsible Official of this determination. The rationale for the Responsible Official's recommendation and the Regional Forester's determination should be based on the best

available scientific information and the criteria in FSH 1909.12, Chapter 10, Section 12, and documented.

Response 1: The updated persistence analysis for bighorn sheep, reflected in the Intermountain Region Species of Conservation Concern Review for Bighorn Sheep (USDA 2023c), concluded that species persistence in the plan area is not of substantial concern. I recommended to the responsible official that this species no longer be included as a SCC. The responsible official for SCC in the Intermountain Region, Regional Forester Mary Farnsworth, reviewed both the data and updated rationale for not including bighorn sheep as a species of conservation concern. She determined that concern for the species persistence in the plan area is not substantial, therefore the bighorn sheep should not be identified as species of conservation concern (Forest Service Handbook [FSH] 1909.12, chapter 10, section 12.52c).

The updated list of SCC on the Ashley NF is posted on the regional At-Risk Species website (USDA 2024)⁴. The final EIS Chapter 2 and 3 discussion was edited to reflect the change in SCC status for the bighorn sheep. This species is now classified as a species of interest. Due to the level of public interest and comment on bighorn sheep, detailed analysis has been retained.

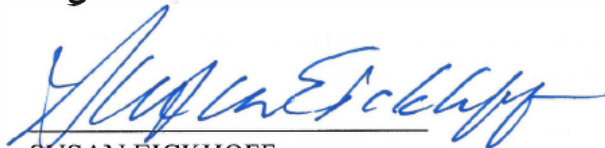
Instruction 2: Determine whether the plan components for bighorn sheep should be kept as is, modified or removed.

Response 2: Refer to Wildlife section above.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this decision, please contact Anastasia Allen, Forest Planner (anastasia.allen@usda.gov), or Lars Christensen, Collaboration Specialist, Ashley National Forest, Forest Supervisor's Office, 355 North Vernal Avenue, Vernal, UT 84078, by email to lars.christensen@usda.gov or by phone at 435-781-5126.

Signature and Date



SUSAN EICKHOFF

Forest Supervisor
Ashley National Forest



DATE

⁴ Access at

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r4/landmanagement/planning/?cid=fseprd944994>

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- _____ 2022b. Wild and scenic rivers eligibility study and report: Summary responses to scoping comments and errata to draft eligibility report. Prepared by Environmental Management and Planning Solutions, Inc. Vernal, UT: USDA Forest Service, Ashley National Forest.
- _____ 2022c. Wildfire crisis strategy: A strategy for protecting communities and improving resilience in America’s forests. FS-1187a. Washington, DC: USDA Forest Service.
- _____ 2023a. Biological Assessment for the Ashley National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. Prepared January 2023 by Dan Abeyta, Biological Scientist, Robert Christensen, Wildlife Biologist, and Allen Huber, Ecologist, Ashley National Forest, Vernal, UT.
- _____ 2023b. Letter requesting concurrence for the North American Wolverine for the Ashley National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. Prepared December 2023 by Susan Eickhoff, Forest Supervisor, Ashley National Forest, Vernal, UT.
- _____ 2023c. Intermountain Region Species of Conservation Concern Review for Bighorn Sheep. Prepared December 2023 by Robert Christensen, Wildlife Biologist, Ashley National Forest, Vernal, UT.
- _____ 2024. Letter from Regional Forester to the Ashley National Forest Supervisor regarding removal of Bighorn Sheep as a Species of Conservation Concern. Prepared January 2024 by Mary Farnsworth, Regional Forester, Intermountain Region, Ogden, UT.
- Forest Service GIS. 2020. Geographic information system (GIS) data from Forest Service Region 4 geospatial data website and internal forest data. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detailfull/r4/landmanagement/gis/?cid>
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Appendix A. Maps

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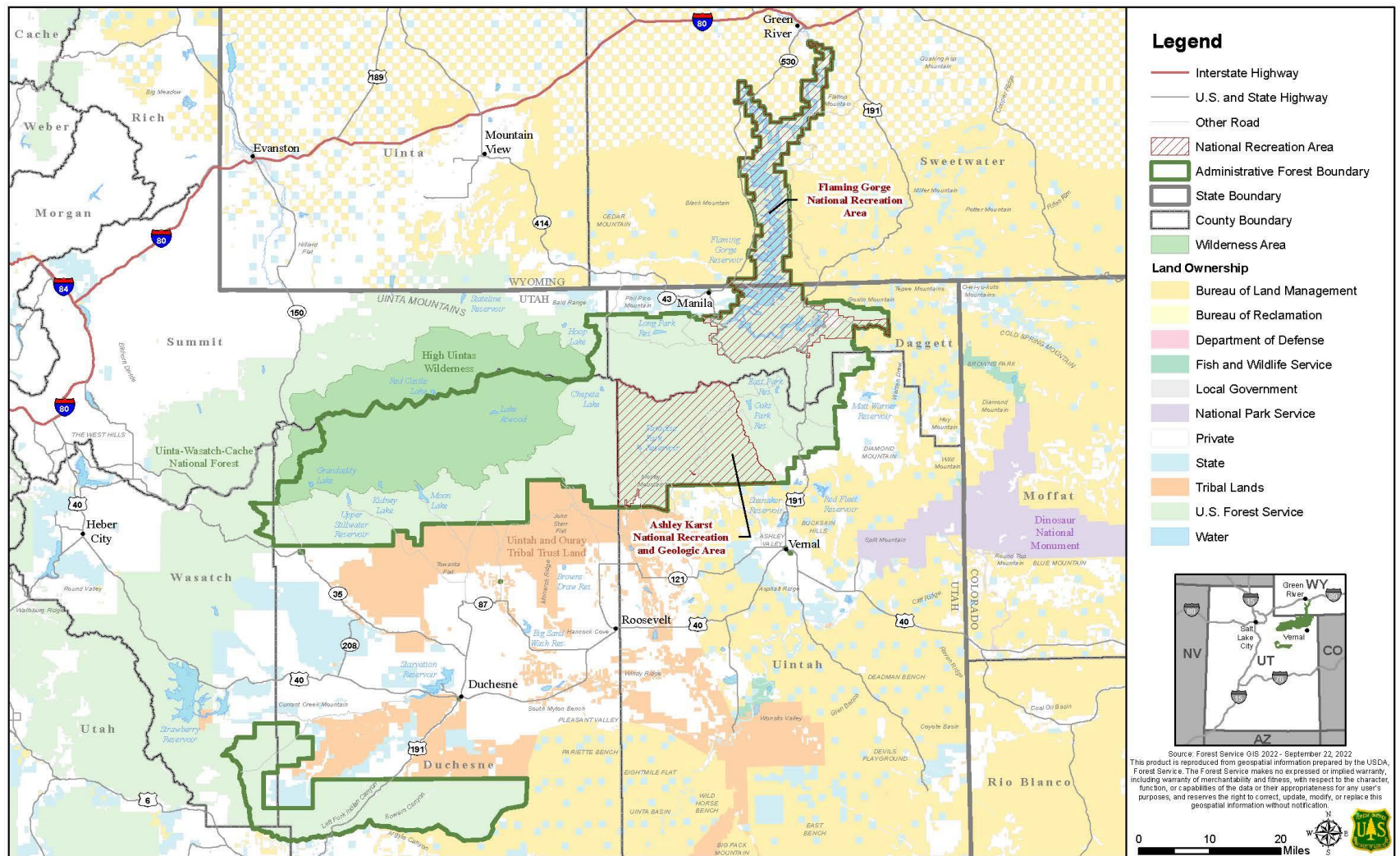


Figure 2. Vicinity map of the Ashley National Forest

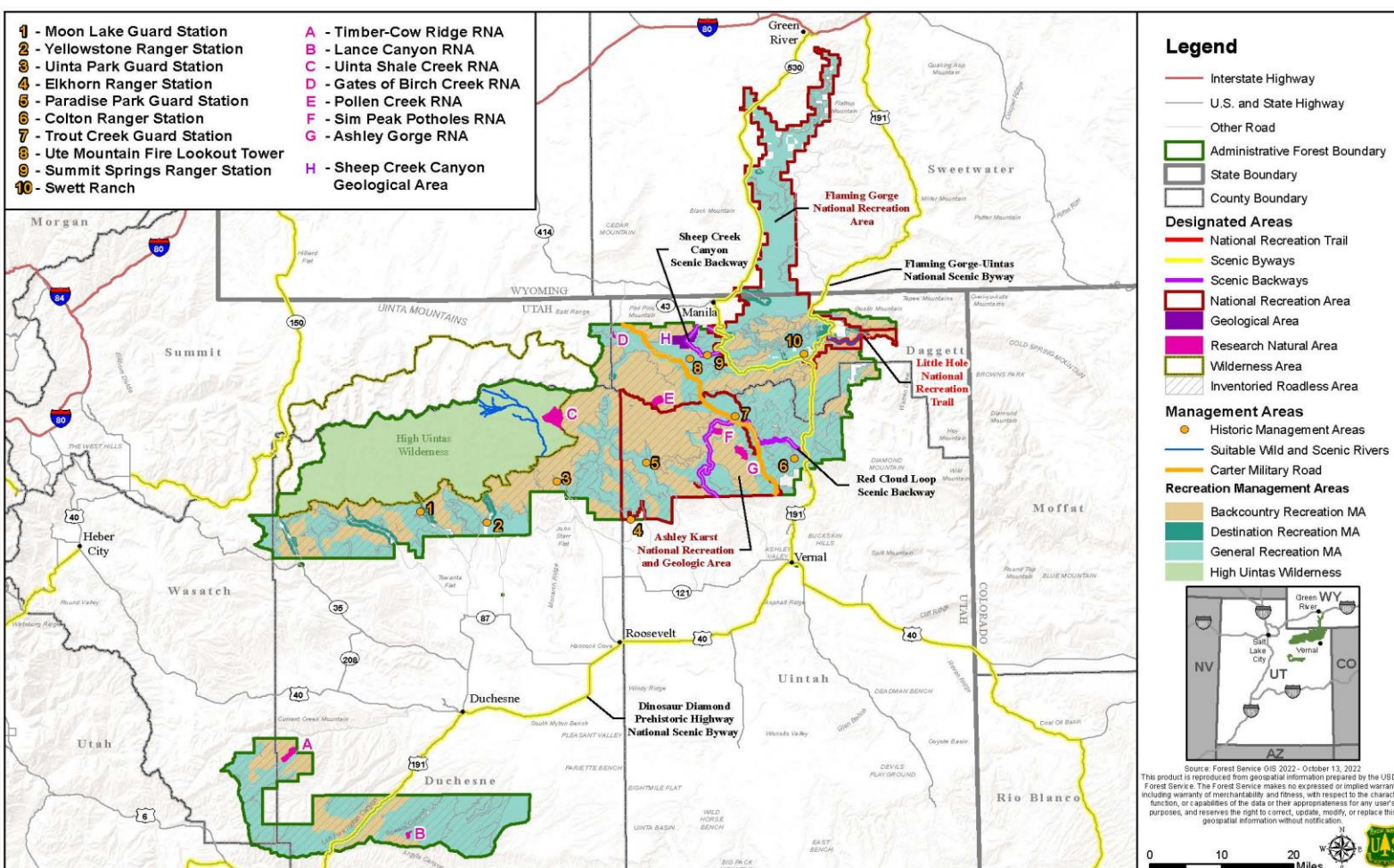


Figure 3. Designated Areas and Management Areas on the Ashley National Forest