

Colville National Forest
Plan Revision Update to Air Force
March 29, 2016

Attending

Todd Foster, USAF

Forest Service:

Amy Dillon, Forest Plan Revision Team Lead, Rick Hall, Air Force Liaison, and Marcy Rumelhart (notes).

A meeting with Air Force survival school personnel was held on March 15 at the Newport Ranger Station. This was a follow-up meeting with Todd to provide clarification on proposed management areas in the draft plan and potential impacts to the survival school permit.

Focused and General Restoration Areas

Amy explained the differences between focused and general restoration areas and the intent to do more broad treatments across the forest, more landscape level work. The focused restoration areas are based on subwatershed boundaries and have wildlife, water or other issues that need to be considered prior to treatment.

Alternative P opens up more of the forest for treatment and management than under the current plan. Both focused and general restoration areas are open for management. Another difference between the two is road management. Under focused restoration there is the possibility of moving some roads if they are adjacent to creeks. Main differences between focused and general restoration areas are roads, wildlife, and fish concerns.

Recommended Wilderness

The amount of recommended wilderness varies between alternatives. The areas recommended under Alternative P should not impact use by the Air Force survival school. Majority of the recommended wilderness acres are outside the permit boundary. The south piece of Abercrombie Hooknose that is inside the permit area would only be used for cross-country foot travel, so designation as backcountry non-motorized or recommended wilderness would not change current use. Some of the areas proposed as recommended wilderness under alternatives could potentially affect types of use and ability to use parts of the permit area.

Alternative P is the alternative preferred by the Forest Service. There is a good chance that the alternative will change after the comment period.

Todd – don't see any issues with the northern boundary of their permit (just north of lone).

Amy – the only potential change in the northern portion of the permit area would be the addition of recommended wilderness. However, there is more potential for change in the Kettle Crest area.

Todd – two areas of concern would be Betty Creek area and South Sherman area. If those areas become recommended wilderness there could be an impact to helicopter routes.

Amy – have received comments from WA Dept of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). They want to be able to use helicopters to track wolf packs and wouldn't be able to do that if areas become recommended wilderness. Would need special authority to use helicopters over wilderness.

Rick will look into what the ceiling restriction is for flying over wilderness.

Todd – the areas on the Kettle Crest they use (that might become recommended wilderness) are fairly steep anyway so probably would not be an impact. The Air Force uses those areas about 20 days each year. There are no fueling options on that side of forest, but they should be able to live with that.

Amy – under Alternative P there is a special interest area overlaying the Kettle Crest. In that scenario there would be no flight ceiling restrictions for helicopters.

Winter range

Amy – WDFW is surveying where deer and elk use winter areas. Their scientists are delineating areas that are about 10 acres. We are working with them on where we should manage for winter range, at a larger scale. There could be fewer areas and in slightly different locations than what is in the current plan.

Todd – the Ruby/Cusick/Tacoma corridor would be a concern if there are big changes to that area. Would how the winter range is used be negotiable? Similar to how staggering use between winter range areas occurs now.

Amy – it should be. It would also affect timber sales in that area. So far the only area WDFW has mentioned is the Tiger Highway deer corridor.

Other topics covered

Todd – would like to know what the ceiling is for flying helicopters over recommended wilderness. Also, have been working with Mike (Borysewicz) regarding location of helicopter landing zones. There are approximately 50 areas across the forest, and have been keeping them open by reducing meadow encroachment. They are developing some landing zone locations in the Kettle Crest area, but the majority are in the Pend Oreille valley.

For road maintenance they would continue to use Forest Service standards, working with Eric Decker. Should not be an issue, and would deal with at project level.

Todd – don't see anything insurmountable for the survival school permit other than designated wilderness.

Rick – the current permit is good until 2030. Does there need to be some specific language about it in the new plan?

Amy recommended updating the background information in the Lands and Special Uses section of the new plan to include something about existing permits, and managing them toward consistency with the new plan. The Forest Service is required to coordinate with other federal agencies, including the Air Force, and that is covered in the new plan.

Amy – the primary dispersed recreation sites don't change, and heritage issues also do not change.

Amy mentioned there is a change to riparian buffers in the focused restoration areas.

Todd stated they are already following those guidelines so would not be a change for them.

Amy briefly discussed comments and feedback received to date from other federal agencies and meetings that have been held with other interest groups.

Rick asked if the Air Force should submit formal comments, or review the meeting notes as confirmation of their preferences.

Todd felt review and concurrence of the meeting notes would be more beneficial. He stated there is a strong preference for Alternative P at this time. He felt the larger management areas being proposed would be beneficial to the survival school.

Discussion of air space and ground space

Todd asked for clarification on the difference between air space and ground space. His understanding is that everything locally is Class G, uncontrolled, airspace. There was a situation where a survival school helicopter landed on the Sullivan Lake airstrip in the middle of the night and they received complaints. Would like to have an answer to that. Is it addressed anywhere in the new plan?

Rick stated the Federal Aviation Administration website lists Sullivan Lake airstrip as being open 24/7, all year. If the Forest Service doesn't want helicopters landing at Sullivan lake in the middle of the night that may need to be addressed. Are there guidelines for what is considered air space and what is not? In regard to grizzly bear habitat? In regard to campgrounds at Sullivan Lake?

Amy – that would be considered a noise disturbance factor and she would need to look into that. In the new plan there are spring habitat restrictions for grizzly bear and road density restrictions, but that is ground space, for noise.

Rick – the only time Class G air space changes would be for a wildfire or special situation.

Todd – if there is some management objective for flight ceiling? Recommend a ceiling cap in new plan, for clearer direction.

Amy – if an area becomes recommended wilderness it could be treated like designated wilderness (no fly zone) so would need clear direction for that as well. Will need to look into a guideline. With guidelines there are options for site-specific exceptions.

Amy asked about snowmobile use. There were no issues regarding that.

Rick and Todd – if recommended wilderness is adopted as proposed in Alternative P, even on Kettle Crest, it would not be an issue for the survival school permit.

Todd – within historical core areas where training occurs, the desire is for roads, creeks, and flat ground. The Blue Ruby timber sale reduced the available winter training area for 20 years. We would like to be involved at the project level to ensure we are part of the discussion of what is being proposed in core areas.

Amy stated the comment period ends July 5th for plan revision and would be good to have comments by then, but since the Air Force is a federal agency they are not necessarily bound to that.

Meeting ended at about 10:00.

Follow-up needed

- Update the background information in the Lands and Special Uses section of the new plan to include verbiage about existing permits.
- Determine if there is, or needs to be, a ceiling for flying helicopters over recommended wilderness. Does that need to be added to the new plan?
- Look into difference between air space and ground space. Look at whether there is a need to add verbiage regarding noise disturbance.