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Department of
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Forest Service

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Route To:

Subject: Significance Evaluation - Forest Plan Amendment - Twister Salvage

To: Regional Forester:

Attached is the Significance Evaluation for the Forest Plan Amendment required for the salvage of the 3.3 Backcountry Area defined in the Twister Salvage EA. The evaluation has been completed as per your instructions in your letter of June 8, 1998. The significance evaluation concludes that this amendment would be non-significant so there would be no change in my decision to conduct salvage operations on the 62 acres of Backcountry. We intend to proceed with the salvage and anticipate the sale to be offered for bid near the middle of July.

Sincerely,


JAMES B. WEBB
Forest Supervisor



Appendix 14 - Significance Analysis - Twister 3.3 Backcountry

14.1 Forest Plan Amendment Requirements

Forest Service requirements for amending forest plans are included in agency regulations and policies. These require that land uses be consistent with forest plans and that proposed activities which would be in conflict with the plan be denied, modified (so as to be consistent), or that the forest plan be amended. Regulations at 36 CFR 219.10(f) direct the Forest Service to consider whether a proposed amendment to a forest plan would be considered a significant change.

The Forest Service is authorized to implement amendments to forest plans in response to changing needs and opportunities, information identified during project analysis, or the results of monitoring and evaluation. The process to consider forest plan amendments, review them for significance, document the results, and reach a decision is contained in the Forest Service Manual (FSM) 1922.5 and the Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.12, Chapter 5.32. An assessment of a proposed amendment's significance in the context of the larger forest plan is a crucial part of this process. It is important to note that the definition of significance for amending a forest plan (36 CFR 219.10(f) and FSH 1922.5) is not the same as the definition of significance defined by NEPA. Under NEPA, significance is generally determined by whether a proposal is considered to be a "major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment" (40 CFR 1512).

The criteria to be examined in an analysis of the significance of a forest plan amendment are detailed in FSH 1909.12, Chapter 5.32, and summarized below. The discussion which follows uses these parameters to evaluate the significance of adopting the proposed forest plan amendment.

1. **Timing:** When the change in the Forest Plan would take place relative to the planning period and scheduled revisions of the plan.
2. **Location and size:** Location and size of the area affected compared to the size of the overall planning area.
3. **Goals, Objectives, and Outputs:** How, or to what degree, the amendment would affect the long-term relationship between levels of goods and services projected by the Forest Plan.
4. **Management Prescription:** Whether the change would apply only to a specific situation, or to future situations across the planning area.

14.2 Post Decision Review of the Forest Plan

In the recently revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the Rio Grande National Forest, the Snowshoe Mountain unroaded area was assigned to Management-Area prescription 3.3 Backcountry. The Snowshoe Mountain Backcountry area consists of approximately 31,766 acres. Management emphasis is on the maintenance of plant and animal habitats that are shaped primarily through natural processes, and to provide backcountry experiences in areas where there is little evidence of human activity. Management-Area Standard 1, stipulates that timber harvest (for any reason) is prohibited. The tornado created blown-down stands of trees on approximately 62 acres of MA 3.3. The area is located directly adjacent to MA 5.13 where the majority of the blow-down occurred. The blown down material presents a threat of insect infestation on a large scale if left untreated. The infestation would likely spread into healthy tree stands in both MA 3.3 and 5.13, as well as other MA's if left untreated. Since the area is directly adjacent the 5.13 MA where the majority of the blowdown occurred, the blown down material does offer an opportunity for salvage. Since this is prohibited by the Forest Plan (Management-Area Prescription 3.3, Standard #1), a decision was made to review the MA prescription to determine whether the no harvest stipulation is appropriate in this situation.

14.3 Proposed Amendment to the Forest Plan

The alternatives considered in the project include an alternative to do salvage operations in the 3.3 Backcountry Management-Area which is inconsistent with the direction in the Forest Plan. The proposed amendment would temporarily suspend Management-Area Standard #1 which prohibits timber harvest. The amendment would apply only to the 62 acres

affected by the tornado. The Standard would still apply to the remainder of the Backcountry areas on the Forest. The proposed amendment would allow the salvage to occur on a one time basis. After salvage is completed and mitigation requirements met, the no-harvest standard would be reinstated and *the area would continue to be managed under the Backcountry Management-Area Prescription*. There will be no adjustments to the Allowable Sale Quantity as a result of this amendment. The discussion which follows is framed around the four significance criteria described above.

Timing

This change in the Forest Plan would become effective when the decision notice for the project is issued and will stay in effect until salvage operations and appropriate mitigation has been completed. The salvage operations may begin in 1998 but the majority of the work is anticipated in 1999. The Forest Plan Revision was completed in 1996, and the Plan has been in implementation since January 1997. The Revised Plan will be in effect for 10-15 years and this amendment will only be in effect until the salvage operation is completed (one to three years). Since the material will be removed via a designated skid trail and trail will be ripped and revegetated, the area is expected to exhibit backcountry characteristics within the life of the plan.

Location and Size

The area affected through adoption of this amendment comprise a generally small site located in the same general area. The total area within the MA is approximately 31,766 acres. The total area affected by the amendment is approximately 62 acres. The 62 acre area is located on the periphery of the 3.3 area directly adjacent to the 5.13 Management-Area where the majority of the blowdown occurred (rather than in the middle of the area). This is roughly .002 percent of the Management-Area. There are approximately 463,470 acres of Backcountry included in the Revised Forest Plan. The area affected by the proposed amendment is roughly .0001 percent of all of the Backcountry on the Forest. There would be no change in Management-Area prescriptions as a result of this amendment. The small size of the area relative to the Snowshoe Mountain Backcountry Area and the total amount of Backcountry in the Revised Plan is not considered significant.

Goals, Objectives, and Outputs

Table S-1 of the 1996 Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the Rio Grande National Forest summarizes key land allocations included in the Plan. There are a total of 463,470 acres of Backcountry identified. There are no projected outcomes or effects identified for Backcountry areas in Table S-2. The proposed amendment corresponds most closely with Forestwide Objective 2.2 which states that the Forest should be managed to "maintain or improve the health and vigor of all native plant associations." The purpose of the salvage operation is to offset the potential for insect infestation of healthy stands of trees in areas adjacent to the blowdown. Forestwide Objective 2.1 states that managers should "allow natural processes to function with little or no human influence in designated Wildernesses and in areas categorized as Backcountry, Wild Rivers, and RNA's. That is the intent of the Forest Plan and the way the majority of the Backcountry will be managed. In this case, however, this portion of the Backcountry Area is immediately adjacent to MA 5.13 where the majority of the blowdown occurred. Road systems are in place (outside of Backcountry) that allow access so that salvage can occur with minimum disturbance to the Backcountry. The risk of insect infestation, which is likely if the blowdown material is not removed, is too great to ignore. The potential risk can effect healthy tree stands on thousands of acres of Forest land in numerous Management-Area prescriptions. The disturbance to the Backcountry setting will be short (10-15 years) compared to the long-term effects of insects over a much larger area. The area will continue to be managed as Backcountry when the salvage is completed which is consistent with the Goals and Objectives identified in the Forest Plan.

Management Prescriptions

The 62 acres affected by the proposed amendment is all in Management-Area 3.3 Backcountry. There will be no change in Management prescription as a result of the proposed amendment.

Findings and Considerations

The analysis above documents the significance of the proposed Forest Plan Amendment described in section 14.3 above. Based on considerations for timing, location and size, goals, objectives, and outputs, and management prescriptions; and other provisions of the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (36 CFR 219.10(e) and (f), if adopted, these changes would not constitute a significant amendment to the Rio Grande National Forest Revised Land and Resource Management Plan.