

Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

Management Indicator Species:

A Forest Plan Amendment To the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the Rio Grande National Forest

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Lead Agency: USDA Forest Service
Responsible Official: Peter L. Clark, Forest Supervisor
Rio Grande National Forest
1803 West Highway 160
Monte Vista, CO 81144
For Further Information: Bob Dalrymple, Forest Planner
Rio Grande National Forest
1803 W. Hwy. 160
Monte Vista, CO 81144
(719) 852-6269
email: rdalrymple@fs.fed.us

This document is available on the Internet:
www.fs.fed.us/r2/riogrande/planning/planning.htm

Abstract

I have decided to implement Alternative 2 to amend the 1996 Rio Grande National Forest Plan by identifying nine management indicator species (MIS) and adding or modifying the associated Standards and Guidelines and the Monitoring and Evaluation Strategy. I have determined that this is a nonsignificant amendment. The impacts of the selected action are not significant and preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is not required. The rationale for my decision and findings are described in this document.



Decision Notice

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Introduction

This Decision Notice documents my decision for amending the Forest Plan to include management indicator species (MIS). This Decision Notice contains a brief summary of the environmental analysis completed for this project as well as my decision regarding which alternative to implement and the rationale for my decision. It also contains certain findings required by various laws, and information concerning the rights to administrative review of this decision. The *Environmental Assessment, Management Indicator Species: A Forest Plan Amendment*, completed for this project is incorporated by reference in this decision document and is attached.

Decision

Based on the environmental assessment (EA) completed for this project, as well as comments received from scoping and the 30-day public review of the document, it is my decision to select Alternative 2, the Proposed Action, for implementation.

Alternative 2 amends the Forest Plan by identifying and incorporating nine MIS to be used in analyzing and evaluating species viability. It amends Standards and Guidelines related to MIS and identifies additional monitoring and evaluation requirements to be used to evaluate species viability. The amendments to the Forest Plan are presented in detail in Appendix A of the EA.

In making this decision, I considered applicable laws, regulations, and policy, and the information disclosed in the EA, the Forest Plan, and the planning record. I considered how the alternatives meet the Purpose of and Need for Action and address the issues. I also considered public and agency comment.

Alternative 2 best meets the Purpose of and Need for Action by amending the Forest Plan so that it meets the legal requirements of 36 CFR 219.19 and complies with the Deputy Under Secretary's appeal review direction. It will bring the Forest Plan into compliance with law, regulations, and policy to protect the viability and diversity of species on the Rio Grande National Forest.

Alternative 2 best addresses the relevant issues, concerns, and opportunities.

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Issue 1. The Rio Grande National Forest needs to address the Deputy Under Secretary's direction to include MIS in the Forest Plan.

Alternative 2 will implement the Deputy Under Secretary's instructions to include MIS in the Forest Plan.

Issue 2. MIS selection, monitoring, and assessment need to meet the intent of monitoring and evaluating MIS as described in the 1982 planning regulations (36 CFR 219.19). Included in this issue are the following elements:

- **Select species because their population changes are believed to indicate the effects of management activities.**
- **Select species that represent the ecosystems affected by expected management activities and serve as indicators of change to them.**
- **Select species that can provide indications of effects of management activities on the representative biological communities during monitoring.**

Alternative 2 meets the intent of monitoring and evaluating MIS as described in 36 CFR 219.19. The regulations indicate that MIS are to be selected because of a relationship between population changes and management activities. They do not require that MIS represent all habitat types and management activities, and they do not state that MIS is the only monitoring tool that can be used. The regulations do provide that species will be selected because their population changes are believed to indicate the effects of management activities. Therefore, the availability of data that reveal population responses to management activities, or the ability to collect it, is a fundamental factor in my consideration.

The regulations further list possible categories that shall be represented where appropriate. The regulations do not require a MIS to be included from each of these categories. The regulations and Forest Service Manual direction (FSM 2620.3) give me the discretion to determine what species are appropriate to address issues, concerns, and opportunities relevant to the Rio Grande National Forest.

The selected MIS will serve as an additional planning, analysis, and evaluation tool in conjunction with other Forest Plan and program monitoring and analyses to help assess species viability. These species will provide an effective monitoring tool.

They will provide suitable indicators of change in their ecosystems. MIS are not required to represent every management activity on the Rio Grande National Forest. I chose these nine species as MIS because they best respond to and provide indications of effects of the key forest management activities of concern. These key activities include timber harvest, prescribed fire, livestock grazing, and travel and related use disturbance within the Rio Grande National Forest. These MIS represent the ecosystems where most of these activities occur, and they will serve as indicators of change within them.

The selection of MIS followed the *Region 2 Management Indicator Species Selection Process and Criteria* (2001), Forest Service Manual direction, and guidance from the Under Secretary's Discretionary Review decision and the Associate Deputy Chief's June 18, 2001 memo to the Regional Forester. It included a rigorous and thorough evaluation of species considered for MIS, including population and habitat data.

I appreciate the many recommendations we received from the public and other agencies for selecting MIS. While many species could qualify as MIS, I feel these nine species will best meet the needs of the Rio Grande National Forest in evaluating and monitoring for species viability. The process and rationale for selecting these species are displayed in Appendix B, which documents the scientific basis for choosing each species, including its associated habitats and the management activities that are likely to affect it. Appendix B also presents the extensive list of other species that were considered, and the rationale for not including them as MIS. Additional rationale for selecting or not selecting species is addressed in the response to comments in Chapter 5 of the EA.

Issue 3. Monitoring and assessment of the selected MIS need to be implementable and feasible. Included in this issue are the following elements:

- **Species selected should be feasible and cost-effective to monitor.**
- **MIS monitoring should provide information that is useful for the Forest Plan evaluation process.**
- **MIS monitoring and evaluation efforts should be commensurate with the viability risks associated with land management activities.**

Alternative 2 amends the Forest Plan Monitoring and Evaluation Strategy for the selected MIS (see Appendix A). It will improve the Forest's monitoring capability to detect population trends and effects on habitats represented by MIS. The selected MIS are practical and cost-effective to monitor and will provide information that is useful for the Forest Plan evaluation process. I feel the MIS monitoring and evaluation efforts are commensurate with the viability risks associated with land management activities on the Rio Grande National Forest. Increased monitoring costs to include MIS have been minimized by using ongoing monitoring efforts to the extent practicable, by coordinating with the Colorado Division of Wildlife and other federal agencies, and cooperating within other national forest and regional monitoring efforts.

Alternative 2 provides the Forest Service with an evaluation tool to help achieve the Forest Plan goal for a desired condition to maintain habitats to provide viable populations of species. It also helps to achieve the objectives for biologically diverse ecosystems. Habitat objectives and predicted trends in habitat change would remain the same as those levels anticipated in the current Forest Plan.

Species viability and diversity were key considerations during the development of the revised Forest Plan. A fine-and coarse-filter approach for assessing and conserving biological diversity commensurate with the viability risks associated with the land management decisions being made was used to assess species viability and diversity in the Forest Plan. This approach was found to be reasonable by the Deputy Under Secretary and upheld during his appeal review.

The Forest Plan provides the overall direction for management on the Rio Grande National Forest. The Forest Plan was developed to protect biodiversity and ensure a biologically healthy and sustainable Forest in the future within the concepts of multiple-use. This is accomplished by incorporating the protection of biodiversity and maintenance of species viability in all components of the Forest Plan, which include the goals; objectives; Standards and Guidelines; Management-Area designations and prescriptions; and monitoring and evaluation strategy.

The Forest Plan Goals provide for biological diversity by maintaining or improving habitat conditions and managing wildlife habitat at the appropriate scale to maintain the ability of species to disperse over large areas and to mimic disturbance frequencies similar to natural disturbance. The Forest-wide Objectives to accomplish this include

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protecting, conserving, and restoring important terrestrial and aquatic habitats, maintaining or improving the health and vigor of all native plant associations, ensuring the sustainability of viable populations of fish and wildlife by maintaining or improving habitat conditions and forage levels, and maintaining the ability of species to disperse. The management requirements used to achieve these goals and objectives are provided in the comprehensive list of Forest-wide Standards and Guidelines that govern all management activities on the Forest. There are specific Standards and Guidelines governing the management and protection of fish and wildlife habitat for all areas of the Forest. These were developed to reduce the impacts on wildlife and protect the biological diversity of the Forest into the future.

The Forest Plan also provides more specific management direction for each area of the Forest by identifying Management-Areas with specific Prescriptions and Standards and Guidelines that guide management activities within each area. These provide a strategy where biological diversity is protected across the Forest as a whole with about half of the forest in Wilderness or remaining primarily undeveloped. Biological diversity is provided through protected areas, connective habitats, and resource protection measures. The only Management-Area Prescription which does not have specific provisions for biodiversity and viability is the ski area, which encompasses less than 0.1% of the Forest.

- Approximately 51% of the Forest is in Wilderness, Eligible Wild or Scenic River, Research Natural, Special Interest, or Backcountry Management-Area Prescriptions which provide areas of little to no disturbance where ecological processes are essentially allowed to operate relatively free from human influence.
- Another approximately 6% of the Forest is in Scenic Byways, Dispersed and Developed Recreation, and Eligible Recreation Rivers Management-Area Prescriptions where recreation use is managed to be compatible with the ecological values.
- About 39% of the Forest is in General Forest and Intermingled Rangelands, Forest Products, Deer and Elk Winter Range and Special Wildlife Management-Area Prescriptions managed for wildlife habitat and a mix of other resources. In these areas, other uses must ensure that sufficient wildlife habitat is maintained in key locations. The Deer and Elk Winter Range and Special Bighorn Sheep Management-Area Prescriptions are identified specifically for wildlife.
- General Rangelands Management-Area Prescription (approximately 4% of the Forest) is managed to produce forage and provide habitat for wildlife. The forage requirements for wildlife are to be met before allocating forage to livestock grazing.

Overall, the Forest Plan proposes minimal habitat alteration over the planning period. The majority of the RGNF landscapes proceed to change primarily under the influence of natural processes. Therefore, special status animals, plants, and communities are expected to perpetuate themselves over time. The risk to species viability is considered very small. The Forest Plan Monitoring and Evaluation Strategy is designed to assess whether the Forest Goals and Objectives are being achieved and whether the Standards and Guidelines are effective in achieving the wildlife objectives, especially in regard to the limited risk involved to species viability.

The Alternative 2 MIS amendment will add a useful monitoring and evaluation tool to the Forest Plan to assist in evaluating and monitoring species viability.

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I also reviewed and considered the *Species Assessments*, *MIS Analysis and Monitoring*, and *Evaluation of the Effects of the Forest Plan Alternatives on Proposed MIS* documents and the biological assessments and biological evaluations in making my decision. These reports support my decision to select these MIS species and my findings of no significant change and no significant impact.

The *Species Assessments* provide comprehensive species assessments conducted as part of the selection of MIS. These assessments involved extensive reviews of the current scientific literature and provided a foundation for the MIS selection process through the identification of important life history attributes and habitat needs, monitoring methods, species distributions, and population trends at several different spatial scales. Information compiled through the species assessments also helped to compare the MIS with the *Region 2 Management Indicator Species Selection Process and Criteria* to determine whether they would function appropriately and feasibly on the Rio Grande National Forest in relation to several local factors including local occurrence data, habitat distribution, monitoring difficulties, proposed management activities and affected habitats.

The *MIS Analysis and Monitoring* document synthesizes pertinent information from the species assessments in relation to management activities and Landtype Associations (LTAs) identified in the Forest Plan. It includes information regarding how the proposed species function as MIS on the national forest and how they represent other local species within the biological community. The document also displays the management context for each MIS, such as the associated major management activities and affected LTAs. Key attributes regarding viability, risk factors, and the management context were used to develop monitoring questions and the monitoring and evaluation strategy. *MIS Analysis and Monitoring* provides the rationale for maintaining or strengthening the current protection measures described in the Forest Plan and displays the environmental effects of the Forest Plan on each MIS.

The *Evaluation of the Effects of the Forest Plan Alternatives on Proposed MIS* was prepared in compliance with 36 CFR 219.19 and the Deputy Under Secretary's instructions. This report documents the anticipated effects of the Forest Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) alternatives on the proposed MIS.

An update to the Forest Plan biological assessment, including consultation with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and a biological evaluation were completed to evaluate species with viability concerns. I reviewed the biological evaluation and the updated 2003 Forest Plan biological assessment and have determined that this proposed action to amend the Forest Plan by incorporating MIS, by itself, will have no adverse effect on any federally listed threatened, endangered or proposed species and no impact on any Forest Service Region 2 sensitive species since it is an administrative and programmatic action that will cause no ground or resource disturbance. The MIS amendment will provide incidental beneficial effects to Threatened, Endangered, Proposed, and Sensitive (TEPS) species by providing additional habitat protection for both MIS and TEPS species.

Species listed as threatened, endangered, or proposed under the Endangered Species Act were considered as potential MIS but were not selected because these species have limited, if any, breeding populations occurring on the Rio Grande National Forest. These species would be of limited value as MIS. Sensitive species were also considered, and two are proposed as MIS. See Appendix B, Management Indicators Evaluation and Selection Process, for more detailed information.

Threatened, endangered, proposed, and sensitive species will continue to be monitored and evaluated according to the amended Forest Plan Monitoring and Evaluation Strategy. Consultations with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service on TEP species will

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continue, as needed, at the project level to meet the requirements of Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act. Biological evaluations of all Forest Service sensitive species will also continue during individual project analysis, as prescribed by law, regulation, and agency policy. Population monitoring for important game species will continue through the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW). The Forest Service will continue to collaborate with the state regarding habitat management for these species.

The aspects of the Forest Plan that address biological diversity will be strengthened by the amendment because it provides an additional tool for monitoring and assessment for species viability in the Monitoring and Evaluation Strategy. It also provides some increased protection measures beyond those already in the Forest Plan for riparian and other habitats related to MIS, TEPS, and other species from the amended Standards and Guidelines. Snag retention requirements are increased and maximum size openings are clarified. The riparian measures previously discussed will also benefit fish and wildlife species using riparian habitats. MIS will also serve as representatives for other species associated with similar ecological communities during project-level effects analysis. There will be no expected changes to any habitat trends disclosed in the Forest Plan FEIS.

Both MIS and those species not selected as MIS will continue to be protected through the general viability requirements of National Forest Management Act (NFMA), Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines, the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA). Species of concern (threatened, endangered, proposed or sensitive species) will continue to be analyzed during project analysis through the preparation of biological evaluations and assessments. Potential impacts on these species will not increase under this decision.

Public Involvement

The Rio Grande National Forest invited public, tribal government, and other agency comment and participation throughout this planning process with the Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA), public notices in the newspaper of record, a public meeting, a radio interview, a scoping letter, and posting on the Rio Grande National Forest website.

The Rio Grande National Forest website displays the Deputy Under Secretary's decision, copies of the Forest Plan and FEIS, the EA For Comment and other supporting information (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/riogrande/planning/planning.htm>).

A letter inviting review and comment on the EA was sent out to approximately 486 people and organizations and posted on the Forest's website. The EA For Comment was also made available by public notice in the *Valley Courier* on March 18, 2003. Eight letters were received during the 30-day public comment period. These are addressed in Chapter Five in the attached EA.

Alternatives Considered

Two alternatives were considered in detail. Alternative 1, the no-action alternative, represents the existing Forest Plan management situation for the Rio Grande National Forest. This alternative would not amend the Forest Plan. It would not add an MIS list or update the Monitoring and Evaluation Strategy in the Forest Plan.

Alternative 2 would amend the 1996 Revised Rio Grande Land and Resource Management Plan by incorporating management indicator species to be used as a planning tool for monitoring and evaluation and project analysis to assure that viable populations of existing native and desired non-native vertebrate species are maintained on the national forest. It proposes nine management indicator species (MIS) whose population changes are believed to indicate the effects of key management activities. The alternative would also amend MIS-related Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines and the Monitoring and Evaluation Strategy.

An additional alternative to include other species as MIS was considered but eliminated from further detailed analysis. Considering other species in separate alternatives could have potentially resulted in a separate alternative for each species considered. Instead, more than 50 other species or groups of species were considered during the process of developing the MIS list (Appendix B) in the analysis rather than developing them as separate alternatives.

Findings

An assessment of the significance of a proposed amendment in the context of the larger Forest Plan is an important part of my decision. In this case, significance is defined by the National Forest Management Act (NFMA). The implementing regulation indicates the determination of significance is to be “based on an analysis of the objectives, guidelines, and other contents of the forest plan” (36 CFR 219.10(f)). The Forest Service Handbook FSH 1909.12, Chapter 5.32 provides guidance for what constitutes a significant amendment. It identifies four factors to be used in determining whether a proposed change to a forest plan is significant or not significant. These four factors are: timing; location and size (scope); goals, objectives and outputs; and management prescriptions. I have evaluated the selected Alternative 2 amendment to determine whether it constitutes a significant change regarding these factors.

- Timing - I find that the timing of this MIS amendment is appropriate. It is necessary to meet the Deputy Under Secretary of Agriculture’s requirements and bring closure to the appeal process for the Forest Plan. The amendment needs to be addressed now rather than waiting for the next plan revision. It will become effective following seven days from notice of the decision notice and will apply until changed by subsequent amendment or revision. I have determined that the amendment is not considered significant relative to timing.
- Location and Size - The MIS amendment, while applying to the entire Rio Grande National Forest, is administrative and programmatic in nature and provides an analytical method to help evaluate species viability. It has no effect on the long-term relationships among goals and objectives or the

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levels of goods and services projected by the Forest Plan. There are no changes in the anticipated goods and services resulting from implementation of the Forest Plan with this amendment. None of the alternatives change management-area prescriptions or alter management-area boundaries. There are no changes to timber suitability or other land classifications. It has no regional or national significance. Therefore, I have determined that the amendment is not considered significant relative to the scope, location, or size.

- Goals, Objectives, and Outputs - Chapter 3 of the Forest Plan FEIS provides the outputs and services that were projected during the planning horizon for the Forest Plan. No changes will occur to these projected outputs as a result of implementation of the proposed amendment. There are no changes to the Forest-wide Desired Conditions, Forest-wide Objectives, Management-Area direction, or resulting changes to the multiple-use goals and objectives for long-term land and resource management. The MIS-related changes to the Forest-wide Standards and Guidelines will not change the goals, objectives, or outputs of the Forest Plan. This amendment will not forego the opportunity to achieve outputs in later years.

However, this amendment will provide a useful evaluation tool that will contribute to the achievement of the Forest-wide Desired Condition for biological diversity to maintain habitats that provide viable populations of native and desired non-native plant and animal species. It will also contribute to the Forest-wide Objective to ensure the sustainability of viable populations of all native fish, wildlife and plant species through the maintenance or improvement of habitat conditions. I have determined that the amendment, while beneficial, is not considered significant relative to the goals, objectives, outputs and services of the Forest Plan.

- Management Prescriptions - This amendment will not make changes to nor have an effect on Management-Area Prescriptions and will not alter the desired future condition or alter the anticipated goods and services to be produced; therefore I have determined that the amendment is not considered significant relative to the Management-Area Prescriptions of the Forest Plan.

Finding and Conclusion

I have considered the significance of the selected Alternative 2 amendment, based on considerations of timing; scope; goals, objectives, and outputs; management prescriptions; and other provisions of the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (36 CFR 219.10(e) and (f)). The amendment will not change desired conditions and long-term levels of goods and services projected in the Forest Plan. The amendment will not alter current planning direction on why management is needed (e.g., to provide habitat to support viable populations) or what management actions can be taken (e.g., vegetative treatments to manage habitat). Rather, the amendment provides an evaluation tool (MIS) to monitor the effectiveness of planning direction in moving toward desired conditions and in managing fish and wildlife habitat to maintain viable populations of existing native and desired non-native vertebrate species in the planning area (36 CFR 219.19). Therefore, my finding is that the selected Alternative 2 will not constitute a significant amendment to the Revised Rio Grande Land and Resource Management Plan under the NFMA regulations.

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I have reviewed the environmental effects of the proposed amendment disclosed in the EA. I have also evaluated whether the proposed amendment constitutes a significant impact on the quality of the human environment or whether the environmental impacts would be significant based on their context and intensity as defined by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) using the criteria in the implementing regulations (40 CFR 1508.27).

I have determined that the administrative nature of the amendment to add MIS to the Forest Plan will not result in any anticipated effects that exceed the level at which a significant effect on the human, biological, or physical environment in terms of context or intensity would occur. There are no proposed activities that would result in any ground or resource disturbances. Both beneficial and adverse effects have been considered. The effects from the proposed amendment are expected to be minor and beneficial. The effects are not highly uncertain and do not involve unique and unknown risks. The action will not, in relation with other actions, cause cumulatively significant impacts. There are no effects on public health and safety. Activities associated with the amendment will not cause any ground disturbance or vegetative manipulation; therefore, there are no effects on any unique characteristics of the Rio Grande National Forest such as historic or cultural resources, parklands, prime farmland, wetlands, floodplains, wild and scenic rivers, Wilderness areas, inventoried roadless areas, or ecologically critical areas. There are no effects on listings or listing eligibility in the National Register of Historic places, and there is no loss of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. The amendment will not affect either the short-term or long-term productivity of the Rio Grande National Forest, in terms of sustainability of the resources or outputs associated with them, from the current management direction. There are no adverse effects on TEPS species or critical habitats from this amendment. The action is in compliance with all federal, state, and local environmental protection laws. While many aspects of forest management tend to be somewhat controversial, the effects of the Alternative 2 amendment on the human environment are unlikely to be highly controversial. No new or unusual methods or activities are proposed. The action does not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represent a decision in principle about future considerations. This decision causes no irreversible or irretrievable commitment of resources. There are no civil rights issues, and none of the alternatives have any civil-rights-related effects because consideration of management indicator species has no effect on rights protected under civil rights law.

Finding and Conclusion

Based on the environmental assessment and the above considerations, I find that the amendment to the Forest Plan provided in the selected Alternative 2 is not a major action that will constitute a significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, it does not require the preparation of an environmental impact statement.

Implementation

Implementation of this Decision may occur after seven days following the date of publication of legal notice of this Decision in the Valley Courier, published in Alamosa, Colorado.

Right to Appeal or Administrative Review

This Decision is subject to administrative review (appeal) pursuant to 36 CFR 217. Any appeal of my Decision must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 217. The written notice of appeal must contain, as a minimum, the following information: a statement that indicates the document is a Notice of Appeal filed pursuant to 36 CFR 217; the name, address, and telephone number of the appellant; the title and subject of the decision document and the date of the decision; the name and the title of the deciding officer; the portions of the decision or decision document to which the appellant objects; the specific reasons for objecting, including issues of fact, law, regulation, or policy, and if applicable, specifically how the decision violates law, regulation, or policy; and the specific change(s) in the decision that the appellant seeks.

A written notice of appeal must be filed, in duplicate, within 45 days following the date of publication of legal notice of this Decision in the *Valley Courier*, published in Alamosa, Colorado. Notices of appeal must be filed with the Appeal Deciding Officer:

Rick Cables, Regional Forester
Rocky Mountain Region
P.O. Box 25127
Lakewood, CO 80225-0127

Questions regarding this decision should be directed to: Bob Dalrymple, Forest Planner, Rio Grande National Forest, 1803 West Highway 160, Monte Vista, CO 81144, telephone (719) 852-5941.

Peter L. Clark

October 24, 2003

Peter L. Clark
Forest Supervisor

Date

Go to Environmental Assessment