



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

National Forests in North Carolina
Pisgah National Forest
Appalachian Ranger District
Burnsville Station

PO Box 128
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Burnsville, NC 28714-0128
828-682-6146

File Code: 1950-1

Date: December 15, 2006

Dear Interested Citizen:

The Decision Notice (DN) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) has been signed for the Appalachian Ranger District New Office Construction Environmental Assessment (EA) within Madison County. The decision includes a project-specific, non-significant Forest Plan amendment to designate the acquired lands the new office will be constructed on as Management Area 16. The DN discusses in detail the decision and rationale for reaching it. Copies of the DN and FONSI are enclosed. The November 2006 EA was updated to incorporate a comment received by a member of the public. The December 2006 EA and DN are available on our website: <http://www.cs.unca.edu/nfsnc/nepa/nepa.htm>.

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.11. A written appeal, including attachments, must be postmarked or received within 45 days after the date this notice is published in *The Asheville Citizen-Times*. The Appeal shall be sent to: National Forests in North Carolina, ATTN: Appeals Deciding Officer, 160 Zillicoa Street, Suite A, Asheville, North Carolina, 28801-1082. Hand-delivered appeals must be received within normal business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Appeals may be faxed to (828) 257-4263 or mailed electronically in a common digital format to: appeals-southern-north-carolina@fs.fed.us.

Those who provided comments or otherwise expressed interest in a particular proposed action by the close of the comment period may have eligibility to appeal this decision (as per the recent *The Wilderness Society v. Rey* ruling). Appeals must meet content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14. For further information on this decision, contact Michael Hutchins, Pisgah National Forest NEPA Coordinator at 828-682-6146.

Sincerely,

M. Hutchins (for)

PAUL L. BRADLEY
District Ranger

Enclosure





United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest Service

December 2006



Decision Notice; Finding Of No Significant Impact; and Project- Specific, Non-Significant Forest Plan Amendment #21

Appalachian Ranger District New Office Construction

Appalachian Ranger District, Pisgah National Forest
Madison County, North Carolina

Decision Notice;
Finding of No Significant Impact; &
Project Specific, Non-Significant Forest Plan Amendment #21

Appalachian Ranger District New Office Construction

USDA Forest Service
Appalachian Ranger District, Pisgah National Forest
Madison County, North Carolina

Decision and Rationale for the Decision

Decision

Based upon my review of the alternatives, I have decided to select **Alternative B** (Selected Alternative) of the Appalachian Ranger District New Office Construction Environmental Assessment (EA – Section 1.3, Chapter 1 and Section 2.2.2, Chapter 2) on the Appalachian Ranger District, Pisgah National Forest and the Project Design Feature listed in Section 2.4, Chapter 2. The Selected Alternative will:

- Construct a new office building for the Appalachian Ranger District which will also include: improving the existing access route (that will become an open classified Forest Service road); developing paved parking areas; installing utility lines and wastewater treatment facilities; constructing a work center; placing security fencing around the property; and landscaping around the facilities. The activities will require minor site grading and removal of some side slope soil to accommodate the work center—less than an acre will be newly impacted.
- Amend the Forest Plan (see Forest Plan Consistency below). The Selected Alternative will designate the newly acquired NFS lands as Management Area 16 which: *[p]rovides support facilities for the Forests and the public. It includes District offices and workcenters, Job Corps Centers, the Beech Creek Seed Orchard and other facilities.* (Forest Plan, page III-173).

Rationale

As stated in Section 1.4 of the EA, the purpose and need (objectives) for the proposal is to:

- Provide Appalachian Ranger District employees with a single, more centrally located office in relation to the Appalachian Ranger District and to

continue to provide services to members of the public. The proposed site would roughly split in half the current driving distance and time between the two offices and would also split in half the driving time and distance between the two existing offices and the headquarters for the National Forests in North Carolina in Asheville, North Carolina. Over time, consolidating the current two offices into a single office is expected to increase financial, planning, and logistical efficiency of the Appalachian Ranger District.

I believe the Selected Alternative will achieve the purpose and need for the project while addressing concerns raised by members of the public (see also Appendix C for public comment highlights and the Agency's response).

In reaching my decision, I began by once again reviewing the purpose and need for the project and all of the alternatives presented in the EA. I then carefully weighed the effects analyses of the alternatives analyzed in detail and the public comments received on the EA. The Appalachian Ranger District New Office Construction Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) conducted field surveys, database queries, and other localized research in order to determine the effects each alternative analyzed in detail could have on the area's ecology, including threatened and endangered species. During their analysis, they took a hard look at past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions that could be combined with expected effects from the proposal. I believe they provided me sufficient analyses and conclusions to make a reasoned decision.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the Selected Alternative, I considered one alternative in detail: Alternative A – No Action. A comparison of these alternatives can be found in Section 2.5, Chapter 2 of the EA.

Alternative A – No Action

Under this alternative the actions described in the proposed action (Chapter 1, Section 1.3) would not be accomplished. District employees would continue to provide services out of both office locations. I did not select this alternative because I believe one office capable of providing work-space to all district employees will enhance productivity and efficiency amongst the employees. I believe the Selected Alternative will also maintain the Agency's ability to initially provide many of the current services to the Burnsville and Hot Springs communities.

Public Involvement

The proposal was listed in the July and October 2005, and January, April, July, and October 2006 editions of the Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA)—no comments on the proposal have been received from members of the public through this scoping effort. Beginning in 2002, local governments in each community and county were briefed on the proposal, leading to the project design feature listed in Section 2.4, Chapter 2.

A 30-day Notice and Comment period of the Appalachian Ranger District New Office Construction EA was initiated on November 10, 2006, and was completed on December 11, 2006. Three comments were submitted by members of the public during this period. A summary of the comments is attached to this decision notice in Appendix C.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

1. My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action (Sections 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3, Chapter 3).
2. There will be no significant effects on public health and safety and implementation will be in accordance with project design features (Section 2.4 Chapter 2; Section 3.3.2, Chapter 3; and Appendix F).
3. There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area, because there are no park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and

- scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas in the project area, nor are there local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment (Section 3.3.3, Chapter 3).
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial because there is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the project (Sections 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3, Chapter 3).
5. We have considerable experience with the types of activities to be implemented. The effects analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk (Sections 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3 Chapter 3).
6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because the project is site specific and effects are expected to remain localized and short-term (Sections 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3 Chapter 3).
7. The cumulative impacts are not significant (Sections 3.1.1.2, 3.1.2.2, 3.1.3.2, 3.2.1.2, 3.2.2.2, 3.2.3.2, 3.2.4.2, 3.3.2.2, and 3.3.3.1, Chapter 3).
8. The action will have no effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (Section 3.2.4, Chapter 3). The action will also not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources (Section 3.2.4, Chapter 3). A heritage review was completed for this project on July 26, 2005. The State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) concluded in a letter dated December 1, 2006; *We have conducted a review of the proposed undertaking and are aware of no historic resources that would be affected by the project* (see also Letter 2, Appendix C below).
9. The action [i]s not likely to adversely affect any Federally listed species. *No further consultation with USDI Fish & Wildlife Service is required* (Appendix A, EA). In a letter dated November 30, 2006, the US Fish and Wildlife Service stated: *Based on the information provided in your letter and a review of our records, we concur with your determination that the subject project is not likely to adversely affect federally listed endangered or threatened species or critical habitat* (see also Letter 1, Appendix C below).
10. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA. The action is consistent with the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan Amendment 5 (Section 1.1.1, Chapter 1).

Forest Plan Consistency

Project-Specific Forest Plan Amendment #21

My decision to implement the Selected Alternative includes a Project-Specific Forest Plan amendment. The Forest Plan states: Use plan amendments to designate management areas to new land acquisitions. Assure management area designations are compatible with the purposes of acquisitions. (Forest Plan, page III-45). I am authorizing a project-specific Forest Plan amendment that will: *Designate the new land acquisition for the Appalachian Ranger District's new office as Management Area 16.*

Determination That Project-Specific, Forest Plan Amendment #21 Is Not Significant Under NFMA

I have determined this amendment is not a significant amendment under the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) implementing regulations [36 CFR 219.10(f)]. In reaching this conclusion, I considered the following factors from Forest Service Handbook 1909.12, section 5.32, Process to Amend a Forest Plan.

Timing

A change is less likely to result in a significant plan amendment if the change is likely to take place after the plan period (first decade). This plan amendment is taking place immediately (during the planning period for the current Forest Plan) and will be a permanent change; however, timing in and of itself is not enough to warrant a significant amendment.

Location and Size

The smaller the area affected, the less likely the change is to be a significant change to the Forest Plan. The Selected Alternative will require an amendment for designating approximately nine acres of acquired land as MA 16; less than 0.7% of the total 1,260 acres of MA 16 on the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests (Forest Plan, page III-56).

Goals, Objectives, and Outputs

An action is more likely to be a significant Forest Plan amendment if it alters the long-term relationship between levels of goods and services projected by the Forest Plan and particularly if it will forego the opportunity to achieve an output in later years. The amendment is part of my decision [t]o *provide Appalachian Ranger District employees with a single, more centrally located office in relation to the Appalachian Ranger District and to continue to provide services to members of the*

public. (Section 1.4, Chapter 1). As stated above, my decision will: [i]nitially provide "storefront" access in Burnsville and Hot Springs to issue permits and other services (Section 2.5, Chapter 2). I believe my decision will initially continue to provide many of the services residents of Hot Springs and Burnsville have come to expect.

Management Prescription

A change is more likely to require a significant amendment if it will apply to future decisions throughout the planning area. The amendment is for just this project. The changes should not affect future actions. Thus, the lack of change of prescription beyond this project indicates non-significance for the amendment.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

My decision to implement the Selected Alternative is consistent with the intent of the long-term goals listed on pages III-1 and III-2 of Forest Plan Amendment 5. The project was designed to meet land and resource management plan standards and incorporates appropriate land and resource management plan guidelines (Section 1.2, Chapter 1).

Administrative Review and Contacts

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.11. A written appeal, including attachments, must be postmarked or received within 45 days after the date this notice is published in *The Asheville Citizen-Times*. The Appeal shall be sent to:

National Forests in North Carolina
ATTN: Appeals Deciding Officer
160 Zillicoa Street, Suite A
Asheville, North Carolina 28801-1082

Hand-delivered appeals must be received within normal business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Appeals may be faxed to (828) 257-4263 or mailed electronically in a common digital format to:

appeals-southern-north-carolina@fs.fed.us.

Those who provided comments or otherwise expressed interest in a particular proposed action by the close of the comment period may have eligibility to appeal this decision (as per the recent *The Wilderness Society v. Rey* ruling). Appeals must meet content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14. For further information on this decision, contact Michael

Hutchins, Pisgah National Forest NEPA Coordinator
at 828-682-6146.

appeal-filing period (215.15). If an appeal is filed,
implementation may occur on, but not before the 15th
business day following the date of appeal disposition.

Implementation Date

As per 36 CFR 215.9, if no appeal is received,
implementation of this decision may occur on, but not
before, the 5th business day following the close of the

Marisue Hilliard

12/15/06

MARISUE HILLIARD

Forest Supervisor
National Forests in North Carolina

Date

**APPENDIX C – RESPONSE TO COMMENTS
FOR THE
APPALACHIAN RANGER DISTRICT NEW OFFICE CONSTRUCTION
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT**

General Discussion

A 30-day Notice and Comment period of the Appalachian Ranger District New Office Construction EA was initiated on November 10, 2006, and was completed on December 11, 2006. Three comments were submitted by members of the public during this period. The following individuals provided comments on the proposal:

- Commenter 1:** Brian Cole, USDI Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Commenter 2: Peter Sandbeck, North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO)
Commenter 3: Kenneth V. Harvey

Commenter 1 – Brian Cole, USFWS

Comment 1-1

Based on the information provided in your letter and a review of our records, we concur with your determination that the subject project is not likely to adversely affect federally listed endangered or threatened species or critical habitat. Thus, the requirements of section 7(c) of the Act are fulfilled. However, obligations under section 7 of the Act must be reconsidered if: (1) new information reveals impacts of this identified action that may affect endangered or threatened species or critical habitat in a manner not previously considered, (2) this action is subsequently modified in a manner not considered in this review, or (3) a new species is listed or critical habitat is determined that may be affected by the action.

Agency Response

Comment is noted

Commenter 2 – Peter Sandbeck, SHPO

Comment 2-1

We have conducted a review of the proposed undertaking and are aware of no historic resources that would be affected by the project. Therefore, we have no comment on the undertaking as proposed. The above comments are made pursuant to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation's Regulations for Compliance with Section 106 codified at 36 CFR Part 800.

Agency Response

Comment is noted

Commenter 3 – Kenneth V. Harvey

Comment 3-1

This letter is in regard to your proposal to build a new District office near Mars Hill, NC. You already have two offices located in Hot Springs and Burnsville which are the original and fine working locations established for your management of the public's local National Forest areas. Do not get rid of these. Rather return to the original Districts: Tocane and French Broad. Hire another District Ranger to adequately serve the public's need to consult with a nearby Ranger from such two disparate forest areas. Saving money on one District Ranger's salary was the original intent of the new ADMINISTRATION in the early ninetys; spending millions more to continue such small savings is misguided. Sure it will be easier to have your commuting distance back and forth (1-1/2 hrs minimum) eliminated but your proposal also eliminates nearby access for those of us who have a concern to discuss Forest Service

matters with someone LOCALLY. The only advantage of the Mars Hill, I-26 US 19 location is it makes your drive to the Supervisor's Headquarters closer and WAY convenient. Why not move all the way to Asheville and teleconference with the tourists, galax pickers, bikers and fishermen, loggers, naturalists, local officials concerned about riparian effects, landowners adjacent to National Forest lands, lease holders, county development planners, just about everyone in the four North Carolina counties of our high Eastern mountains which are in a very large part untaxed Forest Service lands. Talk about spending money!

Agency Response

The Agency merged the administrative functions of the French Broad and Toecane Ranger Districts in the mid 1990s due in large part to reduced budgets and for the past 10 years the Appalachian Ranger District's employees have operated out of both offices. As correctly stated, the new office location would reduce driving time for district employees but it would also meet the purpose and need for the proposal which is to: [p]rovide Appalachian Ranger District employees with a single, more centrally located office in relation to the Appalachian Ranger District and to continue to provide services to members of the public. (Section 1.4, Chapter 1). The proposal also includes a specific project design feature that was developed following discussions with local governments affected by the action: *The Forest Service would initially provide "storefront" access in Burnsville and Hot Springs to issue permits and other services as requested by elected officials in the area.* (Section 2.4, Chapter 2).

An alternative was considered that proposed to return to the two ranger districts with two district rangers (Section 2.3.1, Chapter 2). It was eliminated from detailed study because it did not meet the purpose and need for the proposal: [t]o provide Appalachian Ranger District employees with a single, more centrally located office in relation to the Appalachian Ranger District and to continue to provide services to members of the public. (Section 1.4, Chapter 1). A No Action alternative was analyzed in detail and would maintain both offices under one District Ranger (Section 2.2.1, Chapter 2).

Due to previous and expected budgets, the National Forests in North Carolina analyzed the current Forest-wide work force and made a recommendation for a target organization to the Regional Forester. The recommendation maintained the existing three District Rangers on the Pisgah National Forest – one each on the Appalachian, Grandfather, and Pisgah Ranger Districts.

Comment 3-2

I strongly oppose the new District office ideas! Instead return to the practice of your forebearers about 75 years ago: two Districts, two Rangers located close-by within a few hours or buggy ride away, all at a low cost and low CO₂ emissions, and I might add Paul, your neighbors' stream.

Agency Response

Comment is noted. See Comment 3-1 above and Agency Response.



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

December 2006



Environmental Assessment

Appalachian Ranger District New Office Construction

Appalachian Ranger District, Pisgah National Forest
Madison County, North Carolina

Appalachian Ranger District New Office Construction

Environmental Assessment

Location of Action: Appalachian Ranger District
Pisgah National Forest
Madison County, North Carolina

Lead Agency: USDA Forest Service

Responsible Official: Marisue Hilliard
NFs NC Forest Supervisor
160 Zillicoa Street, Suite A
PO Box 2750
Asheville, NC 28802

For More Information: Michael Hutchins
ID Team Leader
(828) 682-6146
(828) 682-9179 (fax)

Send Electronic Comments to: comments-southern-north-carolina-pisgah-appalachian@fs.fed.us

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CHAPTER 1 – PURPOSE AND NEED

The Forest Service has prepared this Environmental Assessment (EA) in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations. This EA discloses direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental effects that would result from the proposed action and alternatives. The document is organized into five parts:

- *Chapter 1 – Purpose and Need:* This section includes information on the history of the project proposal, the purpose of and need for the project, and the agency’s proposal for achieving that purpose and need. This section also details how the Forest Service informed the public of the proposal.
- *Chapter 2 – Alternatives:* This section provides a detailed description of alternative methods for achieving the stated purpose as well as the No-action Alternative. These alternatives were developed based on significant issues raised by the public and other agencies. This discussion also includes project design features. This section also provides a summary of the environmental consequences associated with each alternative.
- *Chapter 3 – Environmental Consequences:* This section describes the environmental effects of implementing the proposed action and other alternatives. This analysis is organized biologic resources, physical resources, and other resource and human concerns.
- *Chapter 4 – Preparers and Public Involvement:* This section provides a list of preparers and members of the public consulted during the development of the environmental assessment.
- *Appendices:* The appendices provide more detailed information to support the analyses presented in the EA.

1.1.1 Project Record

This EA incorporates by reference (40 CFR 1502.21) the project record. The project record contains specialist reports and other technical documentation used to support the analysis and conclusions in this EA. The specialist reports provide additional detailed analysis. This EA incorporates by reference the Nantahala and Pisgah Management Indicator Species (MIS) Report. This report along with Monitoring and Evaluation Reports for the National Forests in North Carolina contains the most current information about forest population trends for MIS species.

1.2 Background

In 1995 administrative oversight for the French Broad Ranger District headquartered in Hot Springs, North Carolina was transferred to the then Toecane Ranger District office headquartered in Burnsville, North Carolina to become the current Appalachian Ranger District. Both offices are currently staffed by employees and both currently provide services to members of the public. The two offices are separated by over 50 miles; requiring about 1½ hours to drive between them. In February 2005 the USDA Forest Service purchased about nine leveled and compacted acres and a 50 foot wide right-of-way access near Mars Hill, North Carolina in Madison County to construct the new office, parking area, and work center on. The location of the office was established based on a Forest Service management efficiency analysis and input from elected officials. The acquired land has not been assigned management area (MA) designation, but would best meet MA 16 which provides [s]upport facilities for the Forests and the public. It

includes District offices and workcenters, Job Corps Centers, the Beech Creek Seed Orchard and other facilities (Forest Plan, page III-173). Appendix B provides digitals of the activity area and a location map. This EA tiers to the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the Forest Plan and is designed to adhere to Forest Plan standards and guidelines.

1.3 Proposed Action _____

The Appalachian Ranger District, Pisgah National Forest proposes to construct a new District office building, work center, and associated improvements near the junction of US Highway 19E and US Interstate 26, about two air miles northeast of Mars Hill, North Carolina in Madison County (immediately NW of Exit 9 on Interstate 26). Activities that would be part of the new Appalachian Ranger District Office construction are:

- Construction of a new office building for the Appalachian Ranger District which would also include: improving the existing access route which would become an open classified Forest Service road; developing paved parking areas; installing utility lines and wastewater treatment facilities; constructing a work center; placing security fencing around the property; and landscaping around the facilities. The activities would require minor site grading and removal of some side slope soil to accommodate the work center—less than an acre would be newly impacted. The proposal would designate the newly acquired NFS lands as MA 16.

1.4 Purpose and Need for Action _____

The purpose of the proposal is to provide Appalachian Ranger District employees with a single, more centrally located office in relation to the Appalachian Ranger District and to continue to provide services to members of the public. The proposed site would roughly split in half the current driving distance and time between the two offices and would also split in half the driving time and distance between the two existing offices and the headquarters for the National Forests in North Carolina in Asheville, North Carolina. Over time, consolidating the current two offices into a single office is expected to increase financial, planning, and logistical efficiency of the Appalachian Ranger District.

1.5 Decision Framework _____

Based on the analysis disclosed in this EA, the Responsible Official will make a decision and document it in a Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact. The Responsible Official can:

- Select the Proposed Action along with designating the NFS lands as MA 16, or
- Select the No-action Alternative.

1.6 Public Involvement _____

The proposal was listed in the July and October 2005, and January, April, July, and October 2006 editions of the Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA)—no comments on the proposal have been received from members of the public through this scoping effort. Beginning in 2002, local governments in each community and county were briefed on the proposal, leading to the project design feature listed in Section 2.3, Chapter 2.

1.7 Issues

Issues are defined as a point of discussion, debate, or dispute about environmental effects. Issues are used to develop alternatives, mitigation measures, or analyze environmental effects. The Forest Service separates issues into two groups: significant and other—no significant issues were identified that required development of an alternative to the Proposed Action.

1.7.1 Non-significant Issues

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1.7.1.1 Water Quality and Aquatic Resources – | <i>Constructing the new office may adversely affect water quality and threatened, endangered, sensitive (TES), Forest Concern (FC), and Management Indicator aquatic species (MIS)</i> |
| 1.7.1.2 Wildlife Resource – | <i>Constructing the new office may adversely affect TES, FC, and MIS wildlife species</i> |
| 1.7.1.3 Botanical Resource – | <i>Constructing the new office may adversely affect TES, FC, and MIS botanical species</i> |
| 1.7.1.4 Soil Resource – | <i>Constructing the new office may adversely affect soils</i> |
| 1.7.1.5 Scenic Resources – | <i>Constructing the new office may adversely affect scenic resources</i> |
| 1.7.1.6 Cultural Resources – | <i>Constructing the new office may adversely affect cultural sites</i> |
| 1.7.1.7 Invasive Exotics – | <i>Constructing the new office may increase infestation of invasive exotic plants</i> |
| 1.7.1.8 Civil Rights – | <i>Constructing the new office may adversely affect civil rights of employees and members of the public</i> |
| 1.7.1.9 Other Areas of Concern – | <i>Constructing the new office may adversely affect park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, ecologically critical areas, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.</i> |

CHAPTER 2 – ALTERNATIVES

Chapter 2 is the “heart” of an EA (40 CFR 1502.14) and describes alternatives the agency considered in addition to the proposed action. This chapter compares each alternative considered in detail and lists project design features.

2.1 Range of Alternatives

The range of alternatives developed and analyzed by the interdisciplinary team (IDT) was driven by the purpose and need underlying the proposal (Chapter 1, Section 1.4), and by the significant issues responding to the proposal. An alternative should (1) reasonably respond to the purpose and need, and (2) address one or more significant issue. The only exception is the No Action Alternative, which is required by regulation [40 CFR 1502.14(d)]. For this proposal, two alternatives were considered in detail. Based on the issues identified no other alternatives were considered.

2.2 Alternatives Considered in Detail

Three alternatives were developed by the IDT in response to the issues and concerns regarding the proposal; Alternative A – No Action, Alternative B – Proposed Action, and Alternative C. The action alternatives fulfill the specific purpose and need for these actions. Project design features for activities in each action alternative are also described in this chapter.

2.2.1 Alternative A – No Action

Under this alternative the actions described in the proposed action (Chapter 1, Section 1.3) would not be accomplished. District employees would continue to provide services out of both office locations. This alternative serves as the environmental baseline for analysis of effects.

2.2.2 Alternative B – Proposed Action

A complete description of the Proposed Action can be found in Section 1.3, Chapter 1 above.

2.3 Alternative Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study

As per 40 CFR 1502.14(a), the following alternative was considered but eliminated from detailed study:

2.3.1 Alternative 1 – Return to Two District Offices with Two District Rangers

This alternative considered returning to the two previous Districts; the Toecane and the French Broad. It was eliminated from detailed study because it did not meet the purpose and need for the proposal: *[t]o provide Appalachian Ranger District employees with a single, more centrally located office in relation to the Appalachian Ranger District and to continue to provide services to members of the public.* (Section 1.4, Chapter 1).

In the mid 1990s the Toecane and French Broad Ranger Districts were combined into the Appalachian Ranger District due to declining budgets and workforce. This trend of declining

budgets and workforce has continued; leading the National Forests in North Carolina to complete a reorganization analysis in 2006 that determined the current situation of one District Ranger on the Appalachian Ranger District was the best option for managing the land and providing services given anticipated budgets and workforce.

2.4 Project Design Feature _____

Alternative B includes design features that would become mandatory if the responsible official selects it for implementation.

- The Forest Service would initially provide “storefront” access in Burnsville and Hot Springs to issue permits and other services as requested by elected officials in the area.

2.5 Summary Comparison of Actions by Alternative _____

The following table summarizes management activities within each of the alternatives:

Table 2-1: Summary Comparison of Proposal by Alternative

Activity	Alternative	
	A	B
Construct new District office, associated utilities and access, parking area, work center and security fence, and landscaping near US Highway 19E and US Interstate 26?	No	Yes

CHAPTER 3 – ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Included in this chapter are disclosures of effects of the alternatives on the different factors. Reports from different resource specialists supplied information for portions of the analysis in this chapter.

3.1 Biologic Factors

3.1.1 Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive (TES) Aquatic, Botanical, and Wildlife Species

3.1.1.1 Alternative A – No Action

Under this alternative the new office would not be constructed. There would be no adverse effects to T&E aquatic, botanical, or wildlife species or impacts to S aquatic, botanical, or wildlife species as the approximately nine acre site is currently leveled, compacted and field surveys have not identified TES species or their habitat on the site.

3.1.1.2 Alternative B – Proposed Action

A biological evaluation (BE, Appendix A) was completed for the proposed action that concluded: *An informal consultation with the USDI Fish & Wildlife Service determined that this project is not likely to adversely affect any Federally listed species. No further consultation with USDI Fish & Wildlife Service is required.*

The natural community type that exist within the activity area is very altered and considered anthropogenic (man made) and consists of a powerline corridor, a leveled and grassy area about nine acres in size, cut banks, an interstate highway on ramp, and a graveled access route (see also digital in Appendix B). Originally, judging by surrounding vegetation, the area was acidic cove forest—a common community type within the region.

The acidic cove forest within the activity area is a very common community type with a relatively low probability of occurrences for TES species—making a generally low potential for TES species to occur in the potential activity area. This community type is briefly described in *The Natural Vegetation of North Carolina* by M. Schafle and A. Weekley.

No population of any TES species are known to be directly or indirectly affected by this proposal. The risk of directly or indirectly affecting a TES species is very low—no known TES species would be affected by this proposal. This conclusion was reached based on:

- No known element occurrences (EO) of TES species are known;
- Site visits reveal that habitat of any TES species does not exist; and
- The amount and area of disturbance is minimal (less than nine acres).

3.1.2 Management Indicator Species (MIS) and Forest Concern (FC) Aquatic, Botanical, and Wildlife Species

3.1.2.1 Alternative A – No Action

Under this alternative the new office would not be constructed. There would be no adverse effects to MIS or FC aquatic, botanical, or wildlife species as the site is currently leveled, compacted and field surveys have not identified MIS or FC on the site.

3.1.2.2 Alternative B – Proposed Action

Surveys of the area have taken place and no MIS or FC species was identified. As stated above, the project area is very altered—consisting of a large cut and fill with a major interstate highway less than ¼ mile away. No population of any MIS or FC species are known to be directly or indirectly affected by this proposal. The risk of directly or indirectly affecting either an MIS or FC species is very low. No known MIS or FC species would be affected by this proposal, including MIS biological communities or habitat components.

3.1.3 Exotic Invasive Plants

3.1.3.1 Alternative A – No Action

Under this alternative the new office would not be constructed—the site would remain heavily altered. There would be potential for exotic invasive plants to become established as some species prefer disturbed sites. Field surveys have not identified exotic invasives plants; however, should future monitoring identify presence of exotic invasives, treatments conducted pursuant to Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15, Chapter 31.12, Category 3 could take place: *Repair and maintenance of administrative sites. Examples include but are not limited to: a.) Mowing lawns at a District office; b) Replacing a roof or storage shed; c) Painting a building; or d) Applying registered pesticides for rodent or vegetation control.*

3.1.3.2 Alternative B – Proposed Action

The proposed construction site had been previously cleared of forest vegetation, graded, and an access route established prior to Forest Service acquisition. Grasses and shrubs have re-established since the site was developed and the activity area is considered highly altered and suburban. Surveys did not identify exotic invasives in the activity area, but they are likely in the surrounding area. The activity area has a lack of suitable habitat and establishment of exotic invasives should be a minimal risk. Should observations identify their establishment, future control could occur pursuant to FSH 1909.15, Chapter 31.12, Category 3: *Repair and maintenance of administrative sites.*

3.2 Physical Factors

3.2.1 Hydrologic Resources

3.2.1.1 Alternative A – No Action

The proposed construction site is not located within areas identified as wetlands or floodplains based on a review of the USDI Fish and Wildlife Service *Wetlands Online Mapper* and the North Carolina *Flood Mapping Program*. If Alternative A were implemented, the new office would not be constructed; however, the site would still remain heavily altered. There is no evidence remaining of previous streams (perennial, intermittent, or ephemeral) on the nine acre site; however, a drain was developed along the southern side of the leveled site to facilitate future

runoff for the proposed construction. No adverse effects would be expected on hydrologic resources as a result of implementing this alternative.

3.2.1.2 Alternative B – Proposed Action

The proposed construction site is currently leveled and compacted and was developed by previous property owners through cutting and filling techniques midslope on a hill with 30%-50% slopes. Construction would be accomplished with erosion control measures and best management practices (BMPs) in place to reduce potential for erosion and sedimentation to impact hydrologic resources. There are no expected adverse effects to hydrologic resources as a result of the proposed action because the site is already heavily altered and there are no streams (perennial, intermittent, or ephemeral) on-site.

3.2.2 Soil Resources

3.2.2.1 Alternative A – No Action

Under this alternative, there would be no expected adverse effects to soil resources because the area has been leveled, compacted and is considered an urban development or Ud – Udorthents (nearly level and gently sloping areas where the original soils have been cut away) by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Due to the leveling and compaction, this classification negates previous classifications; however, prior to this classification, the site was classified as soil mapping unit 630 – Walnut series. The Walnut series is considered acceptable for the type of construction proposed (NRCS, pers. comm.).

3.2.2.2 Alternative B – Proposed Action

Under this alternative, construction would be accomplished with erosion control measures and BMPs in place to reduce potential for erosion and sedimentation. There are no expected adverse effects to soils anticipated as a result of the proposed action because the site is already heavily altered and as a result, the site is classified as urban.

3.2.3 Scenic Resources

3.2.3.1 Alternative A – No Action

Under this alternative, there would be no adverse impacts to scenic resources because the site is heavily altered, is adjacent to an interstate freeway, and existing residences and businesses.

3.2.3.2 Alternative B – Proposed Action

The Forest Plan established general direction for administrative sites. They are to provide an inviting public perception (Forest Plan, page IV-174). Under this alternative the new office and surrounding facilities would be designed to meet visual quality objectives (VQOs) consistent with the setting where the facility would be located.

3.2.4 Cultural Resources

3.2.4.1 Alternative A – No Action

There would be no adverse effect to cultural resources under this alternative because the site is a cut-and-fill area and a cultural review in the field did not identify any significant archaeological sites.

3.2.4.2 Alternative B – Proposed Action

A cultural review was completed for the proposed action that concluded: *Recommend archeological clearance because activity will be within previously disturbed area with little or no potential for containing significant archeological sites. The proposed project has no potential for effect, adverse or beneficial, to a significant heritage resource, and therefore is an Exempt Undertaking, no further Section 106 compliance documentation is required, other than recommended mitigation or protection measures.*

The area is highly disturbed and consists of cut-and-fill material created during US I-26 construction and was previously surveyed by a North Carolina Department of Transportation archaeologist in 1990, with no significant sites recorded in the proposed area.

3.3 Other Factors

3.3.2 Civil Rights

A Civil Rights Impact Analysis (CRIA) was completed and approved in March 2006. The CRIA analyzed impacts on employees, leadership, and delivery of services.

3.3.2.1 Alternative A – No Action

Impacts on Employees

Currently employees are stationed in four separate offices in three communities. Opportunities to work directly with all district employees, staff, and the District Ranger is limited; requiring separate meetings in a few locations throughout the year to interact all together. Lack of day-to-day interaction amongst all employees has potential to decrease “team” opportunities and the benefits highly productive teams produce. Twelve times a year employees meet at AB Technical College in Marshall, North Carolina to hold monthly safety/employee meetings. Meetings at this location require employees to drive up to 30 miles and 45 minutes each way.

The Hot Springs office is not large enough to accommodate the employees headquartered there, requiring some employees to work out of the work center. The Forest Service rents the Hot Springs office and it is not designed for efficient use—both electronically and work-space.

Impacts on Leadership

Currently the District Ranger and Assistant District Rangers are in two separate offices. This reduces potential for face-to-face interactions between the District leaders and employees and members of the public. The District Ranger is stationed at the Burnsville office and spends three to six hours a week driving between the two offices to provide leadership at the Hot Springs office. This reduces the District Ranger’s efficiency due to “lost” driving hours as well as reducing leadership opportunities at Hot Springs to specific days a week. As a result, opportunities for day-to-day interaction with all employees are reduced.

Impacts on Delivery of Services

Under this alternative the current delivery of services to members of the public would continue. Both offices provide full services to members of the public which include issuing permits and providing information to tourists. The Hot Springs office is located on Bridge Street (US 25/70)

and the Appalachian Trail (AT) and is the first full service community on the AT from hikers heading north. As a result, many of the “walk-ins” at the Hot Springs office are hikers.

3.3.2.2 Alternative B – Proposed Action

Impacts on Employees

There would be some impacts to current employees; however, they would be non-discriminatory as they would affect employees equally. Commute time to the office location from Burnsville is approximately twenty minutes and commute time from Hot Springs is approximately 40 minutes. Commute time from the SO is approximately 20 minutes. Driving time for employees would vary (more or less) depending on which side of Hot Springs, Burnsville, and Asheville they live. Office space conditions would improve for Hot Springs employees due to the unacceptable conditions at the currently leased office. Conditions would be essentially the same for employees in Burnsville and Asheville.

Impacts on Leadership

There would be no adverse impacts on leadership. Positive impacts would be improved communication and efficiency by being in one location.

Impacts on Delivery of Services

The new office is needed to provide forest visitors and the Appalachian District employees with a safe and healthy facility that meets American’s with Disability Act (ADA) requirements. The existing Appalachian District Office in Hot Springs is too small to accommodate the existing organization and visiting public and does not fully meet ADA requirements. The general public would have greater access to resources in the reception area and lobby with the increase in size of the new building. The current offices total approximately 6,000 square feet, including reception areas. Some employees are currently located at the Hot Springs Work Center and the Supervisors office. The proposed facility is expected to be approximately 7,600 square feet. Working efficiency of the office in general would increase as well as employee productivity based on the increased space and unified location. A more efficient, more productive work space leads directly to an increase in services and product to the public. As disclosed in Section 2.3, Chapter 2 above, the Forest Service would initially provide “storefront” access in Burnsville and Hot Springs to issue permits and other services as requested by elected officials in the area.

3.3.3 Other Areas of Concern

3.3.3.1 Alternatives A & B

Under these alternatives park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, ecologically critical areas, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment would not be adversely affected because none of these areas of concerns occur on the nine acre site or are imposed to the property.

CHAPTER 4 – PREPARERS AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The following individuals helped develop this environmental assessment:

4.1 ID Team Members

4.1.1 Core IDT

Sandy Burnet – Pisgah NF Zone Wildlife Biologist

David Danley – Pisgah NF Botanist

Michael Hutchins – Pisgah NF Planner

Bob Noel – Pisgah NF Archaeologist

Lorie Stroup – Pisgah NF Fisheries Biologist

4.1.2 Other Forest Service Personnel Providing Input

Dan Belanger – NFs in NC Land Acquisition Negotiator

Paul Bradley –Appalachian District Ranger

Erik Crews – NFs in NC Landscape Architect

Alice Goldstein – Forest Civil Rights Coordinator

Marisue Hilliard – NFs in NC Forest Supervisor

Dan Manning – NFs in NC Soil Scientist

APPENDIX A – BIOLOGICAL EVALUATION

BIOLOGICAL EVALUATION
FOR THE
HOT SPRINGS, BURNSVILLE RANGER RESIDENCES, BUSICK WORK CENTER, ALLEN GAP
RESIDENCE AND **MARS HILL ADMINISTRATIVE SITE**
PISGAH NATIONAL FOREST
APPALACHIAN RANGER DISTRICT

I. INTRODUCTION.

A. Purpose of the Biological Evaluation

The purpose of this Biological Evaluation is to make sure that the United State Forest Service is in compliance with various federal environmental laws (ESA, NFMA, NEPA) regarding Federally Endangered or Threatened, Regional Sensitive or Forest Concern species. It is also to provide biological information to the Forest Service decision maker so that he may make an knowledgeable decision.

B. Proposed Action

The Appalachian Ranger District proposed exchanging or selling three administrative sites and developing a new site. The sites are listed below. The proposed sites total less than two acres in Yancey and Madison Counties, North Carolina. The areas that potentially may be exchanged, sold, or developed are referred to as the activity areas. See the individual project proposal for detailed description of proposals.

Sites:

- 1) Ranger's Residence, Serpentine St., Hot Springs, Madison County
- 2) **Construction of Administrative site Mars Hill, Madison County** [emphasis added]
- 3) Ranger's Residence, Burnsville, Yancey County
- 4) Busick Work Center and residence, Yancey County
- 5) Allen Gap Residence, Allen Gap, Madison County

II. SPECIES CONSIDERED AND SPECIES EVALUATED

A. Federally Threatened and Endangered or Proposed Species (T&E)

Any species that has been formally listed or is proposed for listing by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service is considered within this evaluation.

B. Regionally Sensitive Species (S)

Any species appearing on the current (2002) Regional Foresters Sensitive Species List for the Southern Region is considered within this evaluation.

III. METHODS

Potentially affected T&E or S species were identified after:

- (1) Reviewing the list of T&E or S species of the Pisgah and Nantahala National Forest and their habitat preferences.
- (2) Consulting element occurrence records of T&E or S species as maintained by the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program.
- (3) Consulting with individuals both in the public and private sector who are knowledgeable of the area and its biology.
- (4) Because all of the areas were visited in the recent past by all resource biologists, existing information and field surveys in areas designated for activities were considered adequate.

Table A-1: Potential & Known T&E or S Species in the Activity Areas

Species	Type	Natural Community or Habitat	Occurrence
Federally Threatened or Endangered Species (T&E)			
N/A	N/A	N/A	None known to occur
2005 Region 8 Regional Forester's Sensitive Species (S)			
N/A	N/A	N/A	None known to occur

III. ENVIRONMENTAL BASELINE FOR SPECIES EVALUATED:

A. Existing Biological Condition

The natural communities type that exist within the proposed are all very altered and may be considered anthropogenic (man made) such as lawn habitat. Originally, judging by surrounding vegetation, the ranger's residence in Hot Springs was probably Chestnut Oak Forest community, the Mars Hill site, the Burnsville, Allen Gap residences and Busick were Acidic Cove Forest. These are all common community types within the region.

The Acidic Cove Forest and Chestnut Oak Forest communities within the activity area are very common community types and have a relatively low probability of occurrences for T&E or S plant species. This makes a general low potential for T&E or S species to occur in the potential activity areas. These community types are briefly described in The Natural Vegetation of North Carolina by M. Schafle and A. Weekley.

B. Biological Surveys

Lorie Stroup, fisheries biologists, Pisgah National Forest evaluated potentially affected aquatic resources. David Danley, botanist, Pisgah National Forest evaluated potentially affected

botanical resources in the activity areas and Sandy Burnet Pisgah National Forest evaluated potentially affected wildlife resources. All evaluations and surveys were conducted June 2005.

IV. BIOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF PROPOSED MANAGEMENT ACTION

Botanical, Aquatic Resources and Wildlife resources

No population of any T&E or S species are known to be directly or indirectly affected by this proposal. The risk of directly or indirectly affecting a T&E or S species is very low. This conclusion was reached based on:

- 1) No known element occurrences of T&E or S species are known.
- 2) Site visits reveal that habitat of any T&E or S species does not exist.
- 3) The amount and area of disturbance is minimal. Therefore, it is concluded that no known plant or aquatic T&E or S species will be affected by this proposal.
- 4) The use in the residence sites is likely to remain similar to the present use.

V. DETERMINATION OF EFFECT

An informal consultation with the USDI Fish & Wildlife Service, determined that this project is not likely to adversely affect any Federally listed species. No further consultation with USDI Fish & Wildlife Service is required.

VI. MITIGATION MEASURES

None

VII. LIST OF PREPARERS

David M. Danley, Botanist, Appalachian Ranger District (BE and Botanical analysis, June, 2005)

Lorie Stroup, Fisheries Biologist, Appalachian Ranger District (Aquatic Resources Analysis, June, 2005).

Sandy Burnet, Wildlife Biologist, Grandfather Ranger District (Wildlife Resources analysis, June, 2005)

/s/Dave Danley

David M. Danley June 30, 2005
Botanist

APPENDIX B – DIGITALS OF CONSTRUCTION SITE AND PROJECT LOCATION MAP



Appalachian Ranger District New Office Construction

