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Environmental Assessment

Williamson Rock Critical Habitat Closure

**Santa Clara-Mojave Rivers Ranger District, Angeles National Forest
Los Angeles County, California**

T. 3N, R. 9W, Section 7, & T. 3N, R. 10W, Sections 11, 12, 13, and 14

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SUMMARY

The Angeles National Forest proposes to extend the existing temporary closure in the Williamson Rock vicinity. The proposed action would prolong the closure of the area to dispersed recreation for an additional three years for species monitoring.

The project area is located within the upper reaches of Little Rock Creek of the High Country area of the San Gabriel Mountains and is within the Santa Clara-Mojave Rivers Ranger District, Angeles National Forest, California. This action is needed to provide required protection for a Federally-listed endangered species, while neighboring population segments are given time to rebound from the effects of wildfire and consequent watershed emergency.

The proposed action may affect recreational use in the High Country, by prolonging the existing closure for an additional period. Williamson Rock would remain closed to dispersed recreation while neighboring portions of the Forest recover from the 2009 Station Fire. Monitoring during the closure would guide subsequent decision.

In addition to the proposed action, the Forest Service also evaluated the following alternatives:

- *A No-Action Alternative, under which the existing one year species habitat closure would remain in effect until its expiration in December 2010.*
- *A Recreational Development Alternative, under which facilities would be constructed to route use away from Critical Biological Habitat.*
- *An Environmentally Preferred Alternative, under which permanent closure of the Williamson Rock vicinity to dispersed recreation would be enacted.*

Based upon the effects of the alternatives, the responsible official will decide if the Forest Closure Order addressing the Critical Biological Habitat in the Williamson Rock vicinity should be extended.

INTRODUCTION

Document Structure

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

- *Introduction:* The 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 and how the public responded.
- *Comparison of Alternatives, including the Proposed Action:* This section provides a more detailed description of the agency's proposed action as well as alternative methods for achieving the stated purpose. These alternatives were developed based on significant issues raised by the public and other agencies. This discussion also includes possible mitigation measures. Finally, this section provides a summary table of the environmental consequences associated with each alternative.
- *Environmental Consequences:* This section describes the environmental effects of implementing the proposed action and other alternatives. This analysis is organized by significant issues. Within each section, the affected environment is addressed, followed by the effects of the No Action Alternative that provides a baseline for evaluation and comparison of the other alternatives that follow.
- *Agencies and Persons Consulted:* This section provides a list of preparers and agencies consulted during the development of the environmental assessment.
- *Appendices:* The appendices provide more detailed information to support the analyses presented in the environmental assessment.

Additional documentation, including more detailed analyses of project-area resources, may be found in the project planning record located at the Angeles National Forest Supervisor's Office at 701 N. Santa Anita Avenue, in Arcadia, California 91006.

Background

Williamson Rock is a well-known High Country recreation area within the Angeles National Forest (ANF). It has been utilized by rock climbers since the 1960s and is regarded as one of the unique rock climbing resources in Southern California, due to its mild summer temperatures and close proximity to urban centers. Williamson Rock hosts over 300 mapped climbing routes, spanning all ranges of difficulty, and is relatively easily accessible from public roads. In the absence of any developed access hiking routes to the rock from Angeles Crest Highway (CA-2), the public has historically utilized a series of intertwining user-created trails, which has led to unregulated recreation in the adjacent upper Little Rock Creek.

Williamson Rock is located on National Forest System lands within the Santa Clara-

Mojave Rivers Ranger District, in upper Little Rock Canyon (see attached map). The proposed action involves portions of T. 3N, R. 9W, Section 7, and T. 3N, R. 10W, Sections 11, 12, 13, and 14, SBM, in Los Angeles County, California.

On July 2, 2002, the Southern California distinct vertebrate population segment (DPS) of the mountain yellow-legged frog (*Rana muscosa*) (MYLF) was listed as endangered, by the US Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS), under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (16 USC 1531-1536; 1538-1540). On September 13, 2005, the FWS proposed the designation of approximately 8,283 acres of streams and riparian areas as critical habitat for the Southern California DPS of MYLF. The designation of critical habitat provides protection from destruction or adverse modifications to habitat under the Endangered Species Act. Coinciding with the proposed designation, on December 29, 2005, the ANF Forest Supervisor issued a temporary closure order (ORDER No. 01-07-01: 50 CFR part 17, Federal Register/Vol. 71, No. 178, pp 54244-54385) of approximately 1000 acres within the upper reaches of Little Rock Creek, an area including Williamson Rock. Critical habitat for the species, totaling 8,283 acres (including 615 acres in Little Rock Creek), was officially designated by FWS on September 14, 2006.

The MYLF have historically occurred in drainages throughout the San Gabriel, San Bernardino, and San Jacinto Mountains, but numbers have markedly declined in the modern era. The species has been extirpated from 99% of its historic range in southern California, with five of the seven remaining known MYLF units located on the Angeles National Forest (Bear Canyon, Devil's Canyon, South Fork Big Rock Creek, Upper Little Rock Creek, and Vincent Gulch).

The MYLF is naturally preyed upon by the western terrestrial garter snake (*Thamnophis elegans*), Brewer's blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*), Clark's nutcracker (*Nucifraga columbiana*), coyote (*Canis latrans*), and even their own kind, but there are indications that introduced brook charr (*Salvelinus fontinalis*) trout species (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*, *O. aguabonita*, *Salmo trutta*), and bullfrog (*Rana catesbeiana*) have also been responsible for depressing the species within their natural habitat. During the existing closure interval, the ANF has cooperated with other agencies to construct fish barriers on both Big Rock Creek and Little Rock Creek. The structures are designed to prohibit upstream dispersal of non-native fish species within MYLF habitat, thereby preventing a major source of predation and permitting frog populations in those areas to expand their range.

In addition to predation, the interface between recreational forest users and the MYLF is a subject of particular concern at Williamson Rock. The base of the rock has traditionally drawn recreation activities to the creek habitat, as the start point for many of the popular climbing routes (e.g., the 'London Wall' and 'Stream Wall') actually sits in the streambed. Concentrated human presence in the habitat can lead to physical disturbance of egg masses, trampling of individual frogs, capture and handling of tadpoles and adult frogs, and generalized disruption of mating and migration. Recreation may also render habitat unsuitable by altering streambeds and denuding banks, and lead to the introduction of pollutants and garbage into the creek. Moreover, human waste also has the potential to contaminate critical habitat due to lack of facilities in the area. Human contact with frog populations may also be a factor in the spread of pathogens through inadvertent transmission by human agency (e.g., on boot soles). Infection from chytrid

fungus causes high mortality and has threatened the MYLF with extirpation at numerous sites in California, and has been identified in all of the Southern California DPS (USGS, personal communication). Research in the Sierra Nevada populations have shown extremely high mortality rates in infected tadpoles during and shortly after metamorphosis, when compared to non-infected frogs (Rachowicz, *et al.*: Emerging Infectious Disease as a Proximate Cause of Amphibian Mass Mortality. *Ecology*, 87(7), 2006, pp. 1671–1683).

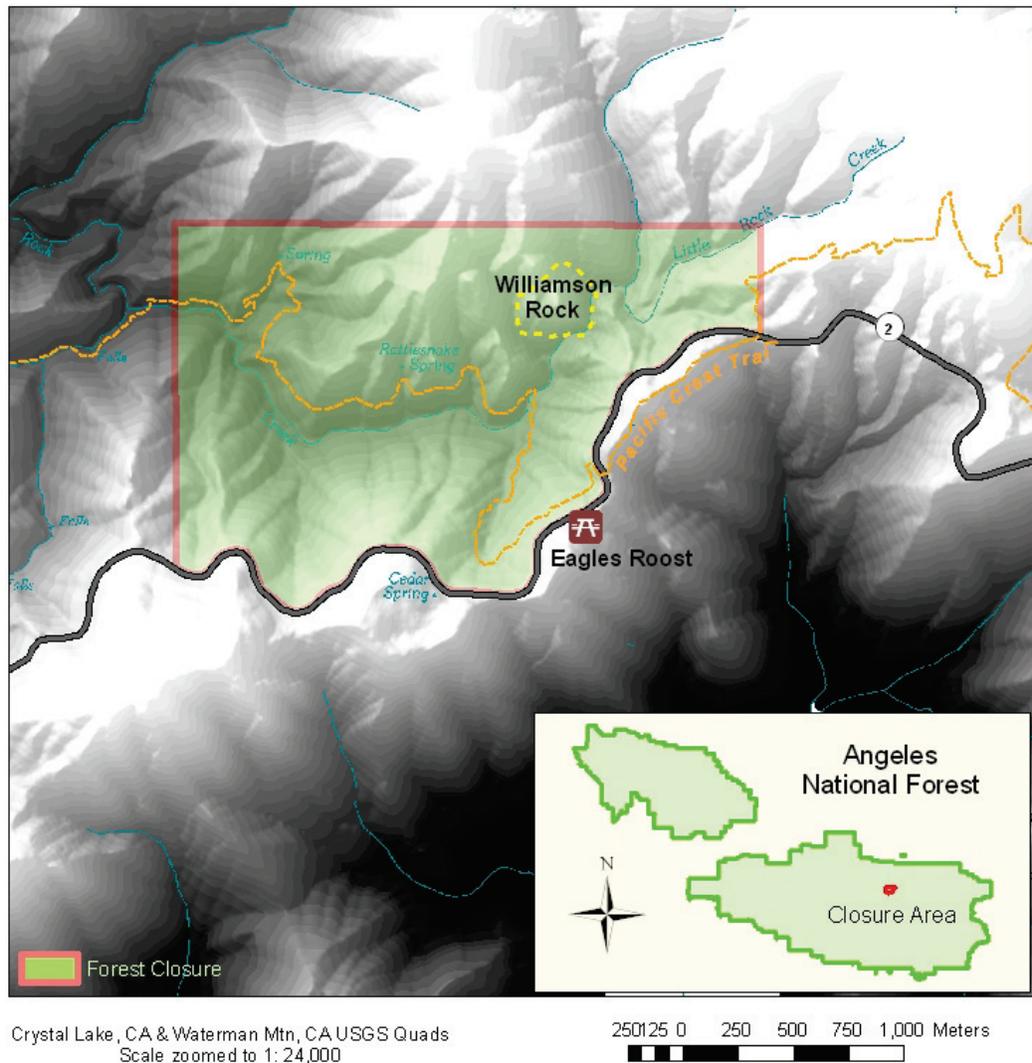


Figure 1. Existing Closure at Williamson Rock

Surveys for the MYLF have been conducted in the San Jacinto, San Bernardino and San Gabriel mountain ranges since 2000. From 2000-2006, monitoring showed a decline in numbers occurring within all populations. There are approximately 150 individuals split among persisting populations, with single-digit estimates identified in Little Rock Creek

in 2005. Subsequent surveys have identified approximately 20 adults at the location in 2008. Although the increase is desirable, the numbers represented are statistically insignificant; small populations of ten pairs or less face a heightened probability of being unable to weather environmental fluctuation and catastrophic events, and risk issues for longterm viability (*cf.*: Pimm, *et al.*: On the Risk of Extinction. *American Naturalist* 132(6), 1988, pp.757-785; Traill, *et al.*: Pragmatic Population Viability Targets in an Rapidly Changing World. *Biological Conservation* 143, 2010, pp.28-34).

The ANF has annually renewed the existing Williamson Rock closure order. The original closure was intended to be temporary, and has been renewed as the ANF had gone through the NEPA process to analyze measures for area management. As the issue was analyzed, it became quite clear that it was much more complicated than originally conceived (the Williamson Rock vicinity was also found to be home to peregrine falcons, as well as Forest Service-listed sensitive plant species). To make matters more challenging, most of the Forest Service project files were burned during the 2007 Buckweed Fire, along with the Santa Clara-Mojave Rivers Ranger District Office. The project files needed to be re-created and reassembled to continue the process.

The Interdisciplinary (ID) team was reorganized in late 2008, and a new analysis for the resolution of the closure was developed. The resulting proposed action (currently the Recreational Development Alternative) included:

- Development of facilities (including parking facilities, toilets, trash bins, and information kiosks) along Angeles Crest Highway to create a focal point for recreation management, and provide basic public needs for parking and sanitation;
- Designation and development of a single access trail, with signage and barriers as appropriate, to Williamson Rock to protect the quality of the visitor experience, promote human safety, and promote the recovery of species;
- Designation and development of a primary staging area in order to manage recreational use at Williamson Rock;
- Closure of areas on permanent and seasonal bases, as necessary, to protect the habitat and reproductive success of species;
- Management of recreational use to protect the primitive solitude of climbing and the quality of the visitor experience, as well as perpetuate resource protection in the Williamson Rock vicinity; and
- Strategic management to restore habitat and implement recovery actions for TES populations.

Concurrent with the development of the proposal, the Pleasant View Wilderness was designated under the 2008 Omnibus Bill. The new congressionally-designated wilderness includes a large expanse of territory north of Angeles Crest Highway in the Williamson Rock vicinity, with the exception of the square mile around Williamson Rock (T. 3N, R. 10W, Sec. 12).

As the process was undergoing analysis in late 2009, the Station Fire, an arson fire of approximately 160,000 acres, burned through the San Gabriel Mountains. The short term and long term effects from the fire represent a change in environmental circumstances for

analysis; hence the ANF has had to re-assess the conditions surrounding the closure at Williamson Rock.

As the existing Southern California MYLF DPS units are small and isolated, naturally-derived stochastic events such as wildfire, drought/flood cycles, sedimentation, etc., may result in local extirpation. Analysis tied to the Station Fire indicates that one or more of the ANF units of the MYLF (outside of Williamson Rock vicinity) have been severely impacted - both from direct burning effects and anticipated post-fire sedimentation effects to the ecosystem. During the wildfire emergency, USGS personnel conducted emergency salvage activities of the Devil's Canyon population of the MYLF, as fire-related impacts to the habitat and neighboring watersheds created conditions that threatened the population with certain impacts - including extirpation. A group of 106 tadpoles were removed by USGS under authorization of FWS (per 50 CFR 17.21(c)(3)(i)) and transported to the Fresno Chaffee Zoo, in order to captive rear them until such time as local conditions improve so that reintroduction can be considered (*cf.*, Backlin, *et al.* 2009: Emergency Salvage of Mountain Yellow-Legged Frog (*Rana muscosa*) Tadpoles from Devils Canyon, Los Angeles County, California. U.S. Geological Survey Western Ecological Research Center: Sacramento, CA).

The population in the Williamson Rock area is currently considered to be the most viable MYLF population on the Forest (*cf.*, Gallegos, *et al.* 2008: Data Summary for the 2008 Mountain Yellow-legged Frog (*Rana muscosa*) Surveys Conducted in the Angeles National Forest. U. S. Geological Survey Western Ecological Research Center: Sacramento, CA). Data suggests that the Vincent Gulch and Bear Canyon units currently contain so few individuals that they represent nonviable populations; Devil's Canyon salvage was undertaken due to fears that the population in that location would be extirpated due to effects from the Station Fire. That all of the remaining units of the Southern California MYLF DPS have been confirmed positive for presence of chytrid fungus elevates the level of concern for the species.

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of this initiative is to protect the habitat of the Federally-listed mountain yellow-legged frog within upper Little Rock Creek while allowing neighboring population units to rebound from the effects of the Station wildfire and consequent watershed emergency.

This action is needed, because populations of MYLF in Southern California are imperiled; conservation and protection of habitat and known populations are essential to the survival of this species. The action is presently needed, because the Upper Little Rock Creek unit is currently considered the most viable on the ANF, and the time afforded by the existing annual closure order is insufficient to address the needs of the Southern California MLYF DPS, which is enduring post-Station Fire recovery. Natural recovery time might take 3-5 years; it may also take longer. To open the area before the neighboring populations have a chance to recover through natural landscape cycle may result in a harmful effect to the species as a whole. This action responds to the goals and

objectives outlined in the Angeles Forest Plan, and helps move the project area towards desired conditions described in that plan.

In meeting the needs for action, the following purposes (objectives) must be achieved:

- Manage use to perpetuate resource protection in the Williamson Rock vicinity.
- Utilize multiple management strategies to restore habitat and expand populations within local TES populations.

The ANF Land Management Plan (LMP) vision is to provide a balanced and sustainable flow of goods and services for a growing diverse population while ensuring long-term ecosystem health, biological diversity, and species recovery (LMP 2005, Part 1, p. 6). Successful management will provide the ecological conditions to sustain viable populations of native species and neutralize or reverse the declining trends in threatened, endangered, proposed, candidate, and sensitive species populations (LMP 2005, Part 2, p. 22). The desired condition for the Williamson Rock area is to retain the natural character and habitat characteristics in the vicinity and limit the level of human development to manage for protection of species-at-risk (LMP 2005, Part 2, p. 10). In order to reduce conflicts with recreation activities, infrastructure is to be designed to direct use away from sensitive areas (LMP 2005, Part 1, pp. 33-35). However, existing use of the Williamson Rock climbing area is to be retained (LMP 2005, Part 2, p. 11).

The project vicinity is classified in the LMP as portions of Backcountry Non-motorized and Developed Area Interface, with Existing Wilderness to the south and Critical Biological Habitat. With the creation of the Pleasant View Wilderness in 2008 (post-dating, and not yet amended into the LMP), most of the lands in the vicinity (outside T. 3N, R. 10W, Sec. 12) are now designated wilderness. Applicable Plan Standards Required by 36 CFR 219 (LMP 2005, Part 3, pp.6-8) include:

S11: When occupied or suitable habitat for a threatened, endangered, proposed, candidate or sensitive (TEPCS) species is present on an ongoing or proposed project site, consider species guidance documents to develop project-specific or activity-specific design criteria. For the MYLF, the document is the *Mountain Yellow-Legged Frog Conservation Assessment and Strategy: Angeles and San Bernardino National Forests* (2002). Management objectives outlined include:

- Maintain viable population within individual hydrologic units;
- Restore habitat and expand populations within individual sub-basins;
- Obtain additional information on MYLF distribution; cause and effect of possible stressors; management remediation techniques; biology of MYLF populations, genetics, and movement ecology;
- Use multiple strategies for protection and expansion of populations (e.g., habitat improvement, translocation, fish, and exotic species control);
- Improve public understanding of conservation and recovery needs;
- Estimate costs and seek funding to implement strategy.

S13: Manage Critical Biological land use zones so that activities and discretionary uses are either neutral or beneficial for the species and habitats for which the area was

established. Accept short term adverse impacts if such impacts will be compensated by the accrual of long-term benefits to habitat for the species.

S34: Where a TEPCS species occurs in a recreation site or area, take steps to avoid or minimize negative impacts to the species and its habitat. Use the least restrictive action that will effectively mitigate adverse impacts to the species and habitat.

Proposed Action

The action proposed by the Forest Service to meet the purpose and need is to institute a closure to dispersed recreation of the Williamson Rock vicinity for three years in order to monitor MYLF response to conditions associated with the 2009 Station Fire.

In meeting the needs for action, the following measures are being proposed:

Temporary closure of the Williamson Rock area to protect the habitat and reproductive success of species during natural burn area recovery.

- A three-year closure would be implemented for the Williamson Rock area in order to monitor the critical habitat of the Upper Little Rock Creek MYLF population while the nearby 2009 Station Fire burn area naturally recovers. The area would be closed in order to preserve the viability of MYLF populations in the San Gabriels by reducing the potential for human/frog interaction while the neighboring population segments are allowed to respond to the effects of the fire. A renewed assessment of the species, based upon interim survey data, should determine whether there has been sufficient progress at the end of three years to consider reopening the area.
- All pullouts and potential access points from along CA-2, between Eagles Roost Picnic Area (T 3N, R10W, SE ¼ SE ¼ Section 12) and the Kratka Ridge turnout (T 3N, R10W, SW ¼ NW ¼ Section 11), would be posted with closure signage, and (where warranted) physically modified to prevent unrestricted access to the upper Little Rock Creek vicinity.
- All Williamson Rock ‘user-created’ braided trails and paths along scree slopes, which have historically provided direct access into MYLF habitat, would be subject to continued closure and (where warranted) limited rehabilitation at their outlets. The routes’ closure, combined with implementation of visible signage and physical obstructions, would reduce direct public access to the creek at the base of Williamson Rock.
- In order to ensure the effectiveness of management, measures would be subject to compliance monitoring, including on-site checks of the area. As management feedback dictates, additional measures may be determined necessary. If response has been insufficient at the end of three years, future decisions may include renewal of the closure, or assessment of a more permanent solution in order to protect the critical biological habitat.

Strategic management to restore habitat and implement recovery actions for TES populations.

- Management of the human factors within the Williamson Rock vicinity would be coupled with the ongoing regime of biological enhancement activities by the agency to provide for species recovery. In 2002, the ANF participated in the development of the Conservation Assessment and Strategy for management and recovery of the MYLF. Key components of the document include habitat protection and enhancement, inventory, monitoring, database development and data storage, research, information and education, coordination, cooperation and collaboration among management agencies, funding to accomplish goals and objectives, and reporting. The Forest is committed to utilizing that document in management of the Williamson Rock area.
- As funding permits, ongoing tri-annual surveys by the USGS of the MYLF populations in the ANF and annual supplemental condition surveys would be conducted for all sensitive botanical and biological species within the area by Forest personnel.
- The Forest would also continue planned projects for fish barriers and removal in MYLF habitat within the ANF in order to aid in species recovery.

Decision Framework

Given the purpose and need, the deciding official reviews the proposed action and the other alternatives in order to determine whether the decision to be made is consistent with legal requirements and Forest Plan consistency:

- Endangered Species Act of 1973
<http://endangered.fws.gov/esa.html>; <http://laws.fws.gov/lawsdigest/esact.html>
Authorizes the determination and listing of species as endangered and threatened; prohibits unauthorized taking, possession, sale, and transport of endangered species; provides authority to acquire land for the conservation of listed species, using Land and Water Conservation Funds; authorizes establishment of cooperative agreements and grants-in-aid to states that establish and maintain programs for endangered and threatened wildlife and plants; authorizes the assessment of civil and criminal penalties for violating the Act or regulations; and authorizes the payment of rewards to anyone furnishing information leading to arrest and conviction for any violation of the Act or any regulation issued there under. Section 7 of the Act requires federal agencies to insure that any action authorized, funded or carried out by them is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of listed species or modify their critical habitat. Section 7(a)(1) of the Act identifies the affirmative conservation duties of agencies and requires all federal agencies to carry out programs aimed at recovery of listed species.
- Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act of 1960
Requires the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture, in cooperation with state agencies, to plan, develop, maintain, and coordinate programs for the conservation and

rehabilitation of wildlife, fish, and game on public lands under their jurisdiction.

- Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918

The statute makes it unlawful to pursue, hunt, take, capture, kill or sell birds listed therein ("migratory birds"). The statute does not discriminate between live or dead birds and also grants full protection to any bird parts including feathers, eggs and nests.

- Wild & Scenic Rivers Act of 1968

Directs United States policy to protect the character of selected wild rivers and scenic rivers, which possess remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, or other similar values. Sections of designated rivers are preserved in their free-flowing condition and not dammed or otherwise impeded by development that would substantially change their wild or scenic nature.

- National Environmental Policy Act of 1970

<http://ceq.eh.doe.gov/nepa/regs/nepa/nepaeqia.htm>

Directs all federal agencies to consider and report the potential environmental impacts of proposed federal actions, and establishes the Council on Environmental Quality. Also states that it is the continuing responsibility of the federal government to use all practicable means to assure for all Americans, aesthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings.

- Code of Federal Regulations - Title 36: Parks, Forests, and Public Property
Area closure responsibility is defined in 36 CFR 261.50(a), with specialized biological area closures provided in 36 CFR 261.53(a) at the Forest Supervisor level, and specialized closure at the Regional Forester level in 36 CFR 261.71(a)(4).

- Forest Service Directives (Manual and Handbook)

The Directives System is the primary basis for the management and control of all internal programs and serves as the primary source of administrative direction for Forest Service employees. The system sets forth legal authorities, management objectives, policies, responsibilities, delegations, standards, procedures, and other instructions.

Forest Service Manuals and Supplements

1010 - Laws, Regulations, and Orders

1020 - Forest Service Mission

1900 - Planning

2300 - Recreation, Wilderness, and Related Resource Management

2320 - Wilderness

2350 - Trail, River, and Similar Recreation Opportunities

2354 - Wild and Scenic Rivers

2370 - Special Recreation Designations

2600 - Wildlife, Fish, and Sensitive Plant Habitat Management

2670 - Threatened, Endangered and Sensitive Plants and Animals

Includes the direction: The Regional Forester identifies sensitive species, requires that management decisions do not result in a trend towards federal listing and loss of viability, and requires that a biological evaluation be prepared for all Forest Service activities to address potential impacts to sensitive species. FSM 2670.44 (15) provides for special biological closures.

Region 5 Supplement 2600-97-1 discusses the consultation process. Region 5 Supplement 2600-92-3 to FSM 2672 lists the sensitive species protected by the Regional Forester.

Public Involvement

The project was first listed on the Schedule of Proposed Actions on June 18, 2006. A series of scoping meetings with non-Government organizations and other agency personnel were held in order to provide information on project planning activities and solicit input regarding issues and potential impacts associated with the closure. Six stakeholder meetings and three internal scoping meetings have been held to-date since the December 2008 re-initiation of the NEPA process for Williamson Rock:

- December 18, 2008: ANF Supervisor's Office, Arcadia. Meeting was attended by members of Friends of Williamson Rock, Allied Climbers of San Diego, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and Forest Service. Topics included a discussion of the circumstances to-date, transition to new Interdisciplinary Team, and major issues involved in a proposed action to re-open Williamson Rock to recreation.
- February 3, 2009: ANF Supervisor's Office, Arcadia, and on-site at Williamson Rock (Internal meeting of the Williamson Rock Interdisciplinary (ID) Team). Topics included Recreation analysis for use at the Rock and proposed actions involving the Pacific Crest Trail (historic numbers, activities, access, needs, parking, etc., and how these might be affected under certain limitations governed by other issues), Biological Analysis and issues (MYLF, falcon, botany, and opportunities), climbing culture (activities, wants, needs, etc.), Public Affairs issues, Heritage analysis, strategy development, and public notifications.
- March 3, 2009: ANF Supervisor's Office, Arcadia (Internal meeting of the Williamson Rock ID Team). Follow up discussions and progress updates from the February meeting.
- March 3, 2009: Meeting at Congressman Buck McKeon's Office, Santa Clarita. Forest Service personnel met with the Congressman's representatives, as well as concerned members of the climbing community, including members of Friends of Williamson Rock and the Access Fund. Discussions focused upon progress to-date, prevailing issues involved in proposal to reopen recreational access to Williamson Rock, and served as a forum for the climbing community to provide further input.
- March 24, 2009: ANF Supervisor's Office, Arcadia. Meeting between Forest Service Personnel and members of Friends of Williamson Rock to informally

- discuss the Forest's draft proposed action. Issues discussed included proposal for closing of the stream-based climbing trails, and focused access by a single trail.
- April 10, 2009: ANF ID Team Field Meeting at Williamson Rock. The team physically examined access routes to the rock and stream crossings. Botanical species were identified.
 - April 27, 2009: Field meeting at Williamson Rock involving biological specialists from United States Geological Survey, Forest Service, and academia. Discussions focused on reaching consensus between Forest Service proposed actions, climbing community input, and biologist input. Issues identified involved the stream along Williamson Rock, methods for compliance monitoring, and discussion of stream crossings.
 - May 20, 2009: Field meeting at Williamson Rock between Forest Service personnel and members of the Friends of Williamson Rock. The purpose was to discuss the Forest-proposed measures "on the ground", including the approach, the critical habitat boundary, and an orientation tour of the crag from a climber perspective.
 - June 18, 2009: Field meeting at Williamson Rock between Forest Service personnel and members of the Friends of Williamson Rock. Forest Landscape Architects and Biologists examined the efficacy of the possible solutions that were discussed during the prior trip. Discussion focused particularly on staging at the rock and the associated options down at the creek level.

Plans for further meetings were shelved by the 2009 Station Wildfire Event and subsequent Burned Area Emergency Response. It was felt that after consolidating the input taken from the meetings to-date, the proposals were at a sufficient level to send out for general scoping.

A Scoping Notice was published in the *Los Angeles Times* on September 12, 2009. The Scoping Notice coincided with a September 10, 2009 scoping correspondence letter sent to a list of interested parties identified from the ANF's normal business operations, as well as groups identified as having specific interest in the outcome of the Williamson Rock decision. The scoping included a draft Proposed Action and Purpose And Need that were consistent with the pre-Station Fire analysis of development of recreational facilities for Williamson Rock (per the description in the Introduction section, above).

Responses were accepted through the first week of November, 2009. A total of 426 respondent comment letters and emails were received in response to the Scoping Letter and Scoping Notice. Using the comments from the public, and other agencies, (see *Issues* section), the interdisciplinary team developed a list of issues to address. All comments are given equal consideration, regardless of their proportion of the total received; no special weight was given to volume of responses containing a particular comment.

Issues

The Forest Service separated the issues into two groups: significant and non-significant issues. Significant issues were defined as those directly or indirectly caused by implementing the proposed action. Non-significant issues were identified as those: 1)

outside the scope of the proposed action; 2) already decided by law, regulation, Forest Plan, or other higher level decision; 3) irrelevant to the decision to be made; or 4) conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence. The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) NEPA regulations require this delineation in Sec. 1501.7, "...identify and eliminate from detailed study the issues which are not significant or which have been covered by prior environmental review (Sec. 1506.3)..." A list of non-significant issues and reasons regarding their categorization as non-significant may be found in the project record.

As for significant issues, the Forest Service identified four topics raised during scoping. These issues include:

Impacts to the Mountain Yellow-Legged Frog. The indicators used to measure whether this issue can be remedied by implementing different alternatives or mitigation measures are: 1) impacts to MYLF are avoided; and 2) alternatives would not lead to a trend towards loss of viability.

Impacts to Peregrine Falcon. The indicators used to measure whether this issue can be remedied by implementing different alternatives or mitigation measures are: 1) impacts to falcons are avoided; and 2) alternatives would not lead to a trend towards loss of viability.

Impacts to the landscape. The indicators used to measure whether this issue can be remedied by implementing different alternatives or mitigation measures are: 1) impacts to the natural character and visual quality of the area are minimized; and 2) enduring impacts to surrounding vegetation or watershed function are avoided.

Impacts to recreation opportunities. The indicators used to measure whether this issue can be remedied by implementing different alternatives or mitigation measures are: 1) permanent net loss of recreational opportunities are avoided.

One notable issue that is considered significant, but is not discussed herein, is impact to the Pacific Crest Trail. A portion of the Pacific Crest Trail lies within the MYLF critical habitat, but is considered to retain independent utility from the current decision; the ANF is concurrently working with cooperators to analyze this issue separately.

ALTERNATIVES, INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

This chapter describes and compares the alternatives considered for the Williamson Rock project. It includes a description and map of each alternative considered. This section also presents the alternatives in comparative form, sharply defining the differences between each alternative and providing a clear basis for choice among options by the decision maker and the public. Some of the information used to compare the alternatives is based upon the design of the alternative and some of the information is based upon the environmental, social and economic effects of implementing each alternative.

Alternatives

Alternative 1

No Action

Under the No Action alternative, the LMP would continue to guide management of the project area. The existing one year species habitat closure would remain in effect until its expiration in December 2010. The Williamson Rock vicinity would subsequently revert to dispersed recreation with existing management measures in place; no new facility development or closures would be implemented to accomplish project goals.

Alternative 2

The Proposed Action

The proposed action would prolong the closure of the area to dispersed recreation in order to provide required protection for Federally-listed biological species, while neighboring distinct population segments of the MYLF are given time to rebound from the effects of wildfire and consequent watershed emergency. In meeting the Purpose and Need, the following measures are being proposed:

Temporary closure of the Williamson Rock area to protect the habitat and reproductive success of species during natural burn area rehabilitation.

- A three-year closure would be implemented for the Williamson Rock area in order to monitor the critical habitat of the Upper Little Rock Creek MYLF population unit while the nearby 2009 Station Fire burn area naturally recovers. The area would be closed in order to reduce the potential for human/frog interaction while the neighboring population segments are allowed to respond to the effects of the fire. A renewed assessment of the species, based upon interim survey data, should determine whether there has been sufficient progress at the end of three years to consider reopening the area.
- All pullouts and potential access points from along CA-2, between Eagles Roost Picnic Area (T 3N, R10W, SE ¼ SE ¼ Section 12) and the Kratka Ridge turnout (T 3N, R10W, SW ¼ NW ¼ Section 11), would be posted with closure signage, and (where warranted) physically modified to prevent unrestricted access to the upper Little Rock Creek vicinity.
- All Williamson Rock ‘user-created’ braided trails and paths along scree slopes, which have historically provided direct access into MYLF habitat, would be subject to continued closure and (where warranted) limited rehabilitation at their outlets. The routes’ closure, combined with implementation of visible signage and physical obstructions, would reduce direct public access to the creek at the base of Williamson Rock.
- In order to ensure the effectiveness of management, measures would be subject to compliance monitoring, including on-site checks of the area. As management feedback dictates, additional management measures may be determined necessary.

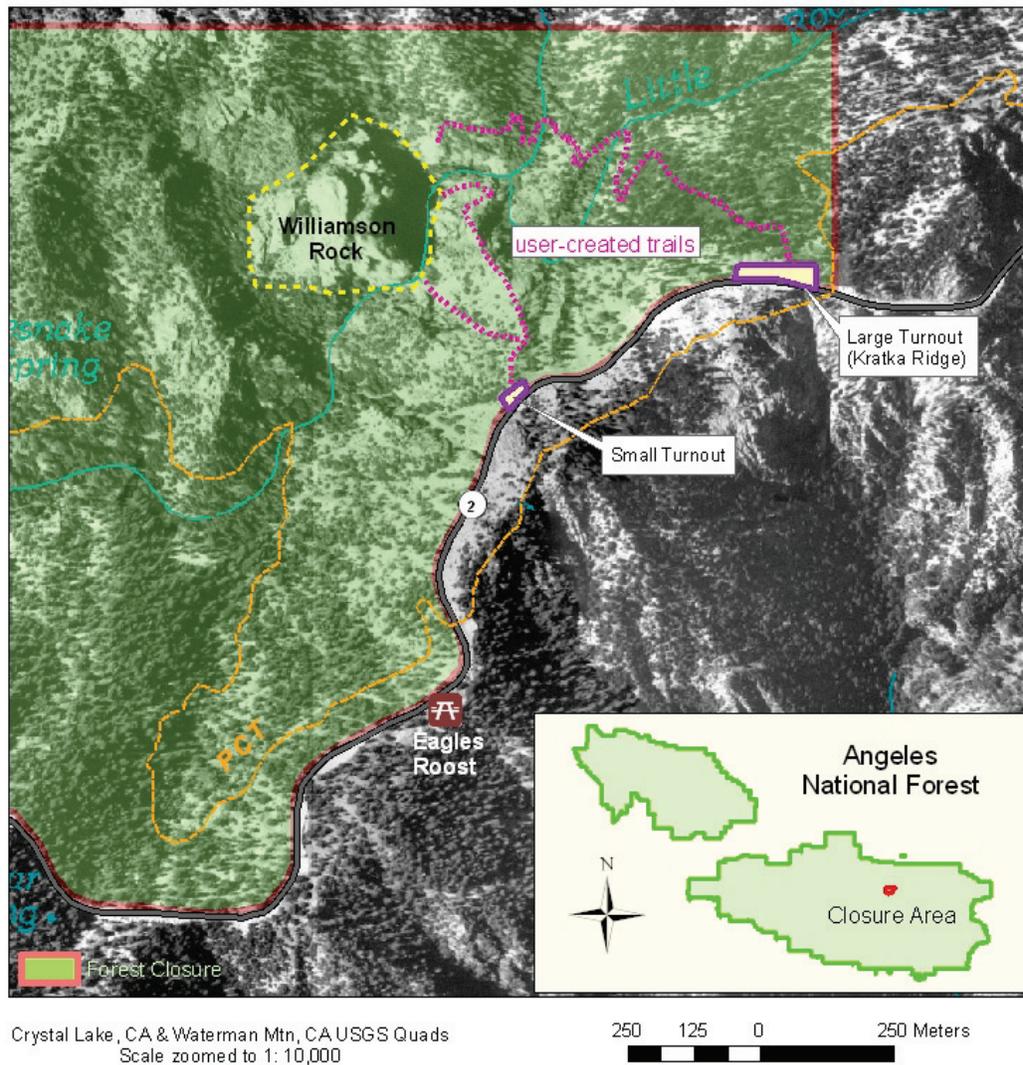


Figure 2. Areas Proposed for Limited Rehabilitation.

Strategic management to restore habitat and implement recovery actions for TES populations.

- Management of the human factors within the Williamson Rock vicinity would be coupled with the ongoing regime of biological enhancement activities by the agency to provide for species recovery. In 2002, the ANF participated in the development of the Conservation Assessment and Strategy for management and recovery of the MYLF. Key components of the document include habitat protection and enhancement, inventory, monitoring, database development and data storage, research, information and education, coordination, cooperation and collaboration among management agencies, funding to accomplish goals and

objectives, and reporting. The Forest is committed to utilizing that document in management of the Williamson Rock area.

- As funding permits, ongoing tri-annual surveys by the USGS of the MYLF populations in the ANF and annual supplemental condition surveys would be conducted for all sensitive botanical and biological species within the area by Forest personnel.
- The Forest would also continue planned projects for fish barriers and removal in the discrete MYLF habitats within the ANF in order to aid in species recovery.

Alternative 3

The Recreational Development Alternative

Under the Recreational Development Alternative, facilities would be constructed to route use away from Critical Biological Habitat. The existing one year species habitat closure would remain in effect until its expiration in December 2010, during which interval the ANF would develop appropriate facilities for visitor use. In meeting the Purpose and Need, the following measures would be proposed:

Development of facilities along Angeles Crest Highway to create a focal point for recreation management, and provide basic public needs for parking and sanitation.

- A trailhead and parking area would be developed at the existing large turnout in the saddle on Kratka Ridge, on the north side of CA-2 (T. 3N, R.10W, SW ¼ NW ¼ Section 11). The designated parking area would be striped to facilitate management.
- As part of the trailhead, a ‘sweet smelling’ toilet (SST) shall be installed at the parking area to limit human waste contamination of Little Rock Creek. In addition, bear-proof trash bins would be installed at the trailhead to reduce the potential for garbage and litter in the area.
- An information kiosk shall be provided to explain the sensitivities of the Williamson Rock vicinity and promote eco-friendly activities and ‘Leave No Trace’ principles. A map board would also show the areas that are off-limits to recreational use.
- All other pullouts and potential access points from along CA-2, between Eagles Roost Picnic Area and the proposed Kratka Ridge trailhead, would be physically closed and (where warranted) rehabilitated to prevent unrestricted access to the upper Little Rock Creek vicinity.

Designation and development of a single access trail to Williamson Rock to protect the quality of the visitor experience, promote human safety, and promote the recovery of species.

- The ‘Long Trail’, which runs approximately 0.9 miles from the Kratka Ridge saddle to Williamson Rock (T. 3N, R. 10W, SW ¼ NW ¼ Section 11, & N ½ NE

¼ Section 12), would be constructed. This trail, which provides both scenic and safe access to Williamson Rock from CA-2, shall be designated ‘Hiker only’ to enhance the primitive setting of the area. This is consistent with considerations of use in Critical Biological areas within the Forest Plan (LMP 2005, Part 2, pp. 9-10), which permits low impact recreational activities in Critical Biological Areas, provided that activities are beneficial or neutral. Trail alignment and design would be consistent with Forest Service Manual and Handbook direction. No dispersed camping would be allowed within the Williamson Rock vicinity.

- Signage and barriers would be strategically placed to encourage use of the trail. An area closure would be enacted to limit the trail to the Williamson Rock vicinity only. Two drainage crossings exist on the designated route through areas that do not carry appreciable water during the climbing season and are not within MYLF-occupied habitat. These would be direct, perpendicular crossings with identified (and signed) closures outside the designated crossing areas.
- All other Williamson Rock ‘user-created’ braided trails and paths along scree slopes, which have historically provided direct access into MYLF habitat, would be subject to closure and (where warranted) limited rehabilitation at their outlets. The routes’ closure, combined with implementation of visible signage and physical obstructions, would reduce direct public access to the creek at the base of Williamson Rock.

Designation and development of a primary staging area in order to manage recreational use at Williamson Rock.

- The Long Trail terminus at the east side of Williamson Rock would receive limited improvement as a staging area for climbing activities: an information kiosk that would display a map of the existing climbing routes available for use and clearly-identified closed areas. Eco-friendly climbing principles (plant and animal avoidance, packing out all garbage, etc.) would also be stressed to aid in public understanding of conservation and recovery needs for the area.
- An area-appropriate physical barrier would be constructed along the interface of the Williamson Rock staging area and the creek. Appropriate signage would be placed at primary access points.

Closure of areas on permanent and seasonal bases, as necessary, to protect the habitat and reproductive success of species.

- A permanent closure would be implemented for a distance of 50 feet from centerline of Little Rock Creek. In order to preserve the species and its critical habitat, all stream-based rock climbing routes (e.g. the “Stream Wall” and “London Wall”) would be permanently closed to reduce the potential for human/frog interaction.
- To minimize impact to raptors that nest within a portion of the climbing area, portions of the rock may be subject to seasonal closure. Subject closure would consist of a biologist-determined buffer zone for the nesting site, applying to all climbing routes that intersect this zone. Closure shall be carried out in an effort to

avoid impacting the birds during nesting season, and implemented in accordance with Forest Service monitoring data.

Management of recreational use to protect the primitive solitude of climbing and the quality of the visitor experience, as well as perpetuate resource protection in the Williamson Rock vicinity.

- A Williamson Rock Area Recreation Management Plan would be developed, with specific procedures for management activities, and enforcement. Climbing-specific measures would include a map of all existing mapped climbing routes, restricted and permitted activities at Williamson Rock, etc.
- In order to ensure the effectiveness of management, controls would be subject to compliance monitoring. As management feedback dictates, use may be subject to limitation, both in time, season and numbers. Specific use period monitoring would include on-site checks of the trailhead area, stream crossings, and staging area for compliance.

Strategic management to restore habitat and implement recovery actions for TES populations.

- Management of the use of the Williamson Rock vicinity would be coupled with the ongoing regime of biological enhancement activities by the agency to provide species recovery. In 2002, the ANF participated in the development of the Conservation Assessment and Strategy for management and recovery of the MYLF. Key components of the document include habitat protection and enhancement, inventory, monitoring, database development and data storage, research, information and education, coordination, cooperation and collaboration among management agencies, funding to accomplish goals and objectives, and reporting. The Forest is committed to utilizing that document in management of the Williamson Rock area.
- As funding permits, ongoing tri-annual surveys by the USGS of the MYLF populations in the Angeles National Forest and annual supplemental condition surveys would be conducted for all sensitive botanical and biological species within the area by Forest personnel.
- The Forest would also continue planned projects for fish barriers and removal in the discrete MYLF habitats within the ANF in order to aid in species recovery.

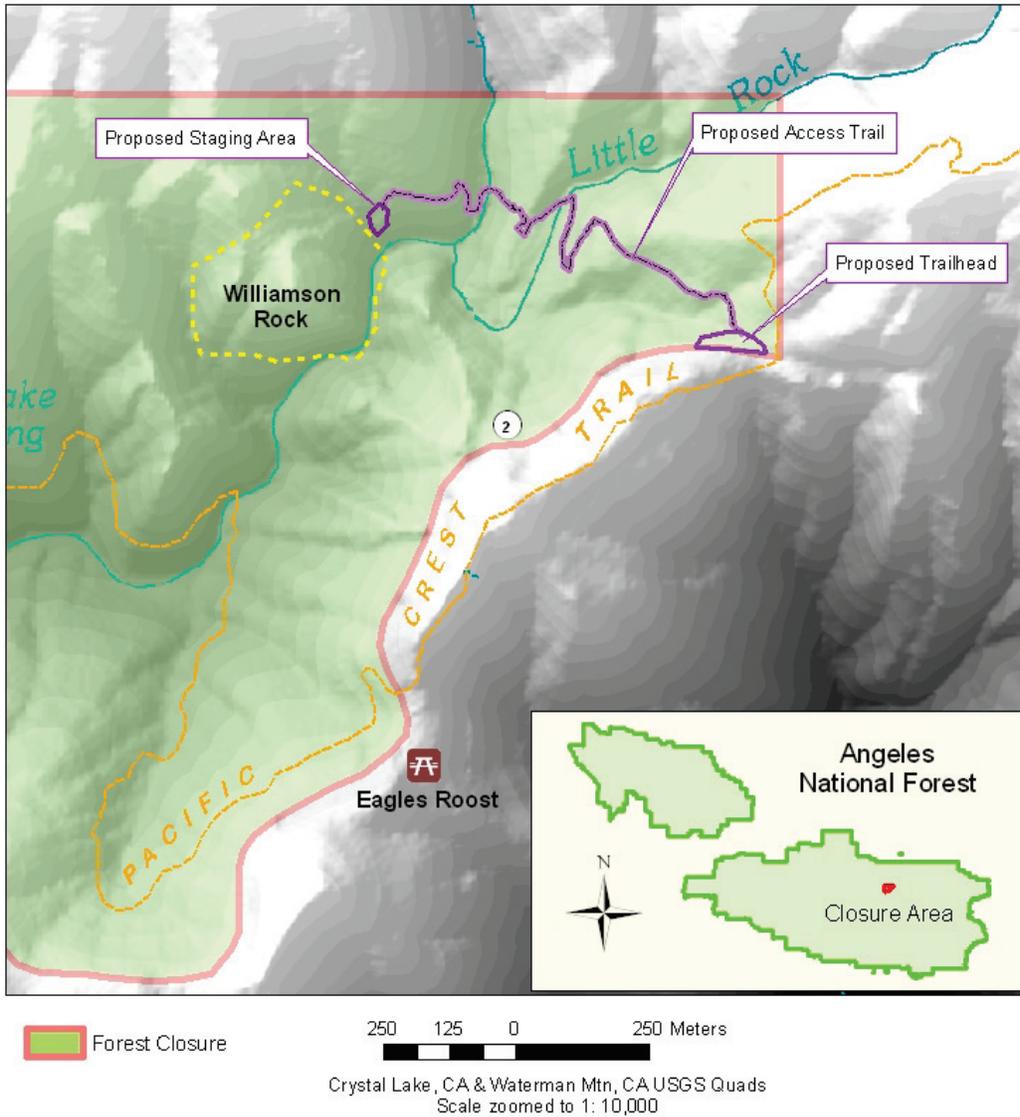


Figure 3. The Recreational Development Alternative.

Alternative 4

The Environmentally Preferred Alternative

- The Environmentally Preferred Alternative would permanently close the Critical Habitat in the Williamson Rock vicinity to dispersed recreation in order to provide the maximum protection for Federally-listed biological species. In meeting the Purpose and Need, the following measures are proposed under this alternative:

Permanent closure of the Williamson Rock area to protect the critical biological habitat.

- The Upper Little Rock Creek area would be permanently closed to dispersed recreation in order to preserve the viability of MYLF DPS in the San Gabriels by minimizing the potential for human/frog interaction with this portion of Critical Biological Habitat. The ANF LMP would be amended to remove consideration of recreation in the Williamson Rock vicinity.
- All pullouts and potential access points from along CA-2, between Eagles Roost Picnic Area (T 3N, R10W, SE ¼ SE ¼ Section 12) and the Kratka Ridge turnout (T 3N, R10W, SW ¼ NW ¼ Section 11), would be posted with closure signage, and physically rehabilitated to prevent access to the upper Little Rock Creek vicinity. Creek-level signage along nearby trail systems may also be appropriate.
- In order to ensure the effectiveness of management, measures would be subject to compliance monitoring, including on-site checks of the area. As management feedback dictates, additional management measures may be determined necessary.

Strategic management to restore habitat and implement recovery actions for TES populations.

- The 2002 Conservation Assessment and Strategy for management and recovery of the MYLF would be updated to reflect the permanent closure.
- As funding permits, ongoing tri-annual surveys by the USGS of the MYLF populations in the ANF and annual supplemental condition surveys would be conducted for all sensitive botanical and biological species within the area by Forest personnel.
- The Forest would also continue planned projects for fish barriers and removal in the discrete MYLF habitats within the ANF in order to aid in species recovery.

Comparison of Alternatives

This section provides a summary of the effects of implementing each alternative. Information in the table is focused on activities and effects where different levels of effects or outputs can be distinguished quantitatively or qualitatively among alternatives.

Table 1. Estimate of Impact by Alternative.

	Alternative 1 No Action Alternative	Alternative 2 Proposed Action	Alternative 3 Recreation Development	Alternative 4 Environmentally Preferred
Impacts to Mountain Yellow- Legged Frog	High	Low	Moderate	Low
Impacts to Peregrine Falcon	High	Low	Low	Low
Impacts to the Landscape	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Low
Impacts to Recreation Opportunities	Low	Moderate ¹	Low	High

¹: This is considered Moderate, due to its temporary nature; otherwise it is High.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

This section summarizes the physical, biological, social and economic environments of the affected project area and the potential changes to those environments due to implementation of the alternatives. It also presents the scientific and analytical basis for comparison of alternatives presented in the chart above.

Impacts to Mountain Yellow-Legged Frog

Mountain Yellow-legged Frog ecology and specific management guidelines are followed in accordance with the species 2002 Conservation and Assessment Strategy, per the ANF 2005 LMP, as well as regulations included within the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Section 7 of ESA requires federal agencies to insure that any action authorized, funded or carried out by them is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of listed species or modify their critical habitat. Section 7(a)(1) of the Act identifies the affirmative conservation duties of agencies and requires all federal agencies to carry out programs aimed at recovery of listed species.

The indicators used to measure the impacts of implementing different alternatives or mitigation measures are: 1) impacts to MYLF are avoided; and 2) alternatives would not lead to a trend towards loss of viability.

Alternative 1 (No Action): The existing species habitat closure would expire in December 2010. The Williamson Rock vicinity would subsequently resume accessibility to dispersed recreation with few existing management measures in place, and providing no specific protection from human use in the Critical Habitat. As the start point of

several of the most popular climbing routes on Williamson Rock lie within the stream habitat, and foot travel to the area from Highway 2 has traditionally led to multiple user-created erosive routes to the base of the rock, direct impacts to the MYLF are anticipated. These impacts derive from renewed recreational presence in the streambed, and include physical disturbance of egg masses, trampling of individual frogs, capture and handling of tadpoles and adult frogs, and generalized disruption of mating and migration. Concentrated recreation also alters streambeds and denudes banks, causing sedimentation into the creek, as well as provides a route for the introduction of pollutants, such as human waste and garbage, into the creek. Indirect impacts to the frogs include the spread of pathogens, such as chytrid fungus, inadvertently carried into the habitat by visitors. Long term impacts from unregulated recreational use in the Critical Habitat may include further depression or complete extirpation of the population subunit, and an overall loss of viability of the Southern California MYLF DPS.

Alternative 2 (Proposed Action): The MYLF Critical Habitat in Upper Little Rock Creek would remain closed for an additional three years while neighboring population subunits are afforded time to recover from the effects of the 2009 Station Fire. Access points to the Williamson Rock area would be closed and rehabilitated to prevent trespass. Administrative presence for species monitoring would remain the only sanctioned human interface with the habitat. As the area would be closed to dispersed recreation – particularly use directly in the creek – no new impacts to the MYLF are anticipated in the short term (three years). Long term impacts are dependent upon the results of monitoring and future management decisions. This alternative is expected to promote short term trends towards species viability.

Alternative 3 (Recreational Development): Facilities would be constructed to route recreational use away from Critical Biological Habitat. A trailhead area would be constructed to create a focal point for management, aiding in lessening trash and human waste contamination of the creek, as well as establishing education at the point of visitor arrival at the highway. A single access trail to Williamson Rock would be developed to prevent the erosion of the user-created braided trails. The trail would route around the designated Critical Habitat, and utilize signage, barriers, and area closures to keep traffic focused on the approach, and minimize dispersion into the area. A primary staging area would be developed at the point of arrival at Williamson Rock in order to manage recreational use. Associated information kiosks, signage, and physical barriers would serve to educate and contain recreational use in the vicinity of Williamson Rock. Specific closures of the stream-based climbing routes would minimize disturbance within the critical habitat. Additional on-site management would serve for quality assurance to maintain use within the restrictions. The anticipated direct and indirect impacts to the MYLF associated with this alternative would be mitigated to a moderate level; although the management measures are in place to minimize disturbance, the facilities channel use into the Critical Habitat and heighten the probability of willful disobedience by promoting that proximity. The trend towards species viability is generally neutral in this alternative, and largely depends on public behavior as to whether it shifts to positive or negative.

Alternative 4 (Environmentally Preferred): The MYLF Critical Habitat in Upper Little Rock Creek would be formally closed to recreational use. Access points to the

Williamson Rock area would be physically closed and rehabilitated to prevent trespass. Administrative presence for initial rehabilitation and species monitoring would remain the only sanctioned human interface with the critical habitat. No direct or indirect impacts to the MYLF are anticipated, as the area – particularly use directly in the creek – would be closed to recreational traffic. This alternative is expected to promote the most positive trend towards species viability.

Impacts to Peregrine Falcon

Williamson Rock is home to at least one breeding pair of Peregrine falcons (*Falco peregrinus*). The Peregrine falcon was removed from the Endangered Species list in 1999, but still retains protection under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA), and is considered a Bird of Management Concern (BMC) by USFWS under the provisions of that Act. Under the January 2001 Executive Order – “Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds”, are the following provisions:

- Integrate bird conservation principles, measures, and practices into agency activities
- Restore and enhance the habitat of migratory birds
- Prevent or abate the pollution or detrimental alteration of the environment for the benefit of migratory birds
- Design migratory bird habitat and population conservation principles, measures, and practices into agency plans and planning processes
- In conjunction with the adoption, amendment, or revision of agency management plans and guidance, ensure that agency plans and actions promote programs and recommendations of comprehensive migratory bird planning efforts
- Ensure that environmental analyses of Federal actions required by the NEPA or other established environmental review processes evaluate the effects of actions and agency plans on migratory birds.

The Forest Service and USFWS entered into the “2008 Memorandum of Understanding to Promote the Conservation of Migratory Birds,” which strengthens migratory bird conservation through enhanced collaboration and cooperation between the Forest Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service as well as other federal, state, tribal and local governments. Therein lies the commitment to the conservation of migratory birds, with a focus on providing a diversity of habitat conditions at multiple spatial scales and ensuring that bird conservation is addressed in land management activities.

Primary concerns in the vicinity are the interface with humans (*cf.*, Pagel, J. n.d.: *Project Design Criteria: Protection Measures for Peregrine Falcons*. Biological Assessment Supplement). Disturbance by human activity during the nesting season can cause nest sites and new territories to be abandoned, active nesting attempts to fail due to egg breakage, or divert adult attention from opportunities to forage and feed nestlings. In order to reduce probability for disturbance, it is common to institute seasonal closures around nesting sites, with restrictions to human activity, including foot, vehicle, or aerial activity.

The indicators used to measure whether this issue can be remedied by implementing different alternatives or mitigation measures are: 1) impacts to falcons are avoided; and 2) alternatives would not lead to a trend towards loss of viability.

Alternative 1 (No Action): The existing species habitat closure would expire in December 2010. The Williamson Rock vicinity would subsequently resume accessibility to dispersed recreation with few existing management measures in place, and providing no specific protection from human use of falcon habitat areas during nesting season. As climbing routes on Williamson Rock run in close proximity to observed nesting sites, direct impacts to the falcon are anticipated. These impacts derive from renewed recreational presence in close proximity to the nesting area, and include physical disturbance of nest sites, causing nest and new territories to be abandoned, active nesting attempts to fail due to egg breakage, and the diversion of adult attention from opportunities to forage and feed nestlings, as well as removal of eggs for sale on the black market for purposes of falconry. Long term impacts from unregulated recreational use in the nest vicinity may include reduced use or complete abandonment of the site by the Peregrine falcon. This alternative is expected contribute to a negative trend for the falcons at Williamson Rock.

Alternative 2 (Proposed Action): The Upper Little Rock Creek vicinity would remained closed for an additional three years while areas of the Forest are afforded time to recover from the effects of the 2009 Station Fire. Access points to the Williamson Rock area would be closed and rehabilitated to prevent trespass. Administrative presence for species monitoring would remain the only sanctioned human interface with the habitat. As the area would be closed to dispersed recreation, no new impacts to the falcon are anticipated in the short term (three years). Long term impacts are dependent upon the results of monitoring and future management decisions. This alternative is expected to promote short term trends towards species reproductive success.

Alternative 3 (Recreational Development): Facilities would be constructed to route recreational use away from falcon nesting areas. As part of the facility development, information kiosks, signage, and physical barriers would serve to educate and contain recreational use in the vicinity of Williamson Rock. Specific permanent and seasonal closures of climbing routes would minimize interaction between humans and falcons. Additional on-site management would serve for quality assurance to maintain use within the restrictions. The anticipated direct and indirect impacts to the falcon associated with this alternative would be mitigated to a fairly low level by removing proximity; although even with management measures in place to minimize the interface of humans and falcons, the possibility of willful disobedience by cannot be discounted. Moreover, disclosure of specific falcon nesting sites for purposes of avoidance could increase the danger of nest destruction or removal of eggs for sale on the black market for use in falconry. The trend towards reproductive success is generally neutral in this alternative, and largely depends on public behavior as to whether it shifts to positive or negative.

Alternative 4 (Environmentally Preferred): The Upper Little Rock Creek vicinity would be formally closed to recreational use. Access points to the Williamson Rock area would be physically closed and rehabilitated to prevent trespass. Administrative presence for initial rehabilitation and species monitoring would remain the only sanctioned human interface with the critical habitat. No direct or indirect impacts to the falcon are anticipated, as the area would be closed to recreational climbing. This alternative is expected to promote the most positive trend towards species reproductive success.

Impacts to the Landscape

The Williamson Rock vicinity is classified in the ANF LMP as Backcountry Non-motorized and Developed Area Interface, with portions of Existing Wilderness and Critical Biological Habitat. In 2009, the Pleasant View Wilderness designation modified the LMP land use zones indicated above, though land use zones within the immediate vicinity of Williamson Rock (Section 12) remain the same. The area lies within the Angeles High Country Place, a key place valued for its scenic quality and maintained as a naturally evolving and natural appearing landscape that functions as a year-round forested mountain recreation area. The desired condition is to retain the natural character and habitat characteristics in the vicinity and limit the level of human development to manage for protection of species-at-risk (LMP 2005, Part 2, p. 10). The valued landscape attributes to be preserved over time are large conifer trees in groups and as scattered individual specimens, views of distant landscapes, and oak woodlands along the shaded slopes of the canyons. The built environment must portray a rustic, historic image. Management emphasis is focused on forest health, while maintaining vistas and natural appearing landscapes. Additional emphasis will be placed on the use by recreationists and urban and national forest infrastructure that is sustainable such that it has minimal effects to species and their habitat. Protection and enhancement of TEPCS species, and a wide array of rare and sensitive plants will be emphasized in all activities. The focus is toward finding a balance that will result in a sustainable level of human use and the sustainability of forest health. Special emphasis on managing the Pacific Crest Scenic Trail and other National Recreation Trails that occur here will also be given (LMP 2005, Part 2, pp. 41-2).

Approximately 7.5 miles of Little Rock Creek is Eligible Wild and Scenic River. The study for the river emphasizes that its undisturbed and primitive condition gives it local *scenic* significance (LMP 2005, Part 2, p. 81). Under the LMP, all existing facilities, management actions, and approved uses will be allowed to continue on eligible river corridors, provided these facilities, actions, and uses do not interfere with the protection and enhancement of the outstandingly remarkable values. New proposals of facilities, management actions, or uses on National Forest System land are not allowed if they have the potential to affect the eligibility or potential classification of the river segment (LMP 2005, Part 2, p. 13). Per the LMP (2005, Part 2, p. 106), protection measures apply to the bed, bank, and one-quarter mile on either side of the ordinary high-watermark. For scenic-eligible rivers, recreational development must be consistent with FSH 1909.12, chapter 82.51: public-use facilities such as moderate-size campgrounds, simple sanitation and convenience facilities, public information centers, administrative sites, or river access developments are allowed within the river corridor. All facilities shall be located and designed to harmonize with their natural and cultural settings, protect identified river values including water quality, and be screened from the river to the extent possible.

Program Strategies and Tactics under the LMP (LMP 2005, Part 2, p. 113) include managing landscapes and built elements to achieve scenic integrity objectives (Landscape Aesthetics: LM1):

- Use best environmental design practices (BEIG) to harmonize changes in the landscape and advance environmentally sustainable design solutions.

- Mitigate ground disturbance to maintain scenic integrity objectives.

Maintain the character of key places to preserve their intact nature and valued attributes (Landscape Character: LM3):

- Maintain the integrity of the expansive, unencumbered landscapes and traditional cultural features that provide the distinctive character of the place.
- Promote the planning and improvement of infrastructure along federal and state scenic travel routes.

The indicators used to measure whether this issue can be remedied by implementing different alternatives or mitigation measures are: 1) impacts to the natural character and visual quality of the area are minimized; and 2) enduring impacts to surrounding vegetation or watershed function are avoided.

Alternative 1 (No Action): The existing species habitat closure would expire in December 2010. The Williamson Rock vicinity would subsequently resume accessibility to dispersed recreation with few existing management measures in place. As access to Williamson is not currently managed, direct impacts to the landscape are anticipated. These impacts are considered to be generally moderate in magnitude, and derive largely from the multiple braided user-created trails between Highway 2 and the Rock. The use of the most direct routes and the scree slopes above the drainage can lead to slope destabilization, vegetation trampling, siltation/loss of water quality, and erosion. Long term impacts from unregulated access trail use may include rilling and exposure of bedrock, slope failure, as well as vegetative die-off and type-conversion along user trails. This alternative is expected contribute to a negative trend for the landscape at Williamson Rock.

Alternative 2 (Proposed Action): The existing species closure would remain in place for an additional three years. Existing access points to the Williamson Rock area would be closed and rehabilitated to prevent trespass. Administrative presence for species monitoring would remain the only sanctioned human interface. As the area would be closed to dispersed recreation – particularly involving access along the user-created trails – no new impacts to the landscape are anticipated in the short term (three years); existing vegetation along user trails would continue to rehabilitate. Long term impacts are dependent upon the results of monitoring and future management decisions. This alternative is expected to promote short term trends towards enhancing the natural character of the watershed.

Alternative 3 (Recreational Development): Facilities would be constructed to route recreational use away from Critical Biological Habitat. A trailhead area would be constructed to create a focal point for management, aiding in lessening trash and human waste contamination of the creek, as well as establishing education at the point of visitor arrival at the highway. A single access trail to Williamson Rock would be developed to prevent the erosion of the user-created braided trails. The trail would route around the designated Critical Habitat, and utilize signage, barriers, and area closures to keep traffic focused on the approach, and minimize dispersion into the area. A primary staging area would be developed at the point of arrival at Williamson Rock in order to manage recreational use. Associated information kiosks, signage, and physical barriers would

serve to educate and contain recreational use in the vicinity of Williamson Rock. Although the visual impacts of the user-created trails would be reduced, the new facilities would be introduced into the landscape. Impacts related to this alternative are at a moderate level, and are dependent upon the location and management of improvements. Available landforms and screening vegetation may not exist or be appropriate to reduce impacts, which may affect the feasibility of the alternative in regards to the Wild and Scenic River eligibility. Long term impacts of the alternative depend upon effective management of use patterns. The trend towards enduring impacts to the landscape is negative in this alternative, as improvements require a long-term commitment to operations and maintenance, increasing the likelihood of impacts over time.

Alternative 4 (Environmentally Preferred): The Upper Little Rock Creek vicinity would be formally closed to recreational use. Access points to the Williamson Rock area would be physically closed and rehabilitated to prevent trespass. Administrative presence for initial rehabilitation and species monitoring would remain the only sanctioned human interface with the critical habitat. As the area would be closed to dispersed recreation – particularly involving access along the user-created trails – no new impacts to the landscape are anticipated; existing vegetation along user trails would continue to rehabilitate. This alternative is expected to promote the most positive trend towards enhancing the natural character of the watershed.

Impacts to Recreation Opportunities

Rock climbing at Williamson Rock dates back to at least the late 1960s. Beginning in 1987, with the establishment of modern technical routes, the area developed into one of the most popular climbing areas of its type in Southern California. The Williamson Rock vicinity experiences mild summer temperatures and close proximity to urban centers, and visitor use may reach 100 climbers a day on the weekend during the peak season. The rock is fractured granite, and features over 300 climbing routes of all grades suitable for beginner to expert level climbers, clustered into a single large crag. Per the climbing community, no other crags in southern California contain an equivalent combination of proximity, climate, geology, and variability. The rock face has been developed by the climbing community over a number of years: all existing climbing routes have been mapped across the rock, and graded on a difficulty scale in climbing guidebooks (*cf.*, Mayr, Troy. 2005. *The Guide: Southern California Sport Climbing*, 3rd Edition. Huntington Beach: K. Daniels and Associates).

Under a 2009 Service-Wide Memorandum of Understanding (No. 09-SU-11130124-172) between the United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service and the Access Fund (MOU), the Forest Service works with Access Fund staff and members to develop mutually beneficial projects and educational activities, encourage recreational use, and incorporate the goals and concerns of the Access Fund as they relate to climbing and resource protection on National Forest System (NFS) lands. This commitment is subject to availability of funds and personnel, applicable federal law, applicable land management plans, and other FS management direction.

Basic objectives for recreation management are contained within FSM 2300 (Recreation, Wilderness, and Related Resource Management), Chapter 2350.2: Objectives

1. Provide recreation-related opportunities for responsible use of national forests and national grasslands

2. Provide opportunities for a variety of recreational pursuits, with emphasis on activities that harmonize with the natural environment and are consistent with the applicable land management plan.
3. Mitigate adverse impacts of recreational uses on natural, cultural, and historical resources and on other uses through education, outdoor ethics programs, and on-the-ground management, including law enforcement and restoration.

Under the LMP (2005, Part 2, pp. 9-10), the management intent is to retain natural character and habitat characteristics in Critical Biological Land Use Zones (CBLUZ), and limit the level of human development to manage for the species-at-risk. Activities and modification to existing infrastructure are allowed if they are beneficial or neutral to species for which the zone was primarily designated. Within the South Fork Little Rock Creek CBLUZ, climbing at Williamson Rock is considered a Primary Use, and that existing use of the climbing area is to be retained. Per the LMP (2005, Part 2, p. 42), management emphasis will be placed on the use by recreationists and urban and national forest infrastructure that is sustainable such that it has minimal effects to species (MYLF) and their habitat.

To provide outdoor recreation opportunities is a stated objective under the National Strategic Plan. Under the LMP, Program Strategies and Tactics, recreation experiences must be geared toward sustainable use and environmental design (REC2). Forests must analyze stabilize, and restore areas where visitor use is negatively affecting recreation experiences, public safety, and environmental resources. Visitor use must be managed within the limits of identified capacities, and forests must implement Adaptive Mitigation for Recreational Uses (see below) whenever a conflict between uses and sensitive resources is detected (LMP 2005, Part 2, p. 110). Recreation Participation (REC3) is also included within the strategies. Forests should offer a wide range of high quality, environmentally sustainable developed and dispersed recreational opportunities within minimal visitor conflicts and effects to other resources (LMP 2005, Part 2, p. 111):

- Develop new, environmentally sustainable recreation opportunities, areas, and infrastructure to relieve concentrated demand within existing high-use areas and to accommodate future growth and new uses elsewhere.
- Improve, remove or replace gaining developed recreation infrastructure to better meet current needs and future demand. Replacing opportunities lost to closures will be a high priority.
- Inventory and analyze existing and potential dispersed use. Identify areas where that use is consistent with resource protection and public safety, and mitigate or eliminate problems over time.

Recreation Implementation Guidelines for Adaptive Mitigation for Recreation Uses apply to all existing and new recreation sites and uses whenever a conflict between uses or sensitive resources, including TEPCS species, is detected. Management actions are to be implemented in the order of: 1) Conservation Education; 2) Perimeter Control; 3) Management Presence; and 4) Direct Action/Redirection of Use. The order of management actions is appropriate unless analysis of the conflict clearly indicates that a stronger measure is immediately necessary (LMP 2005, Appendix D, pp. 63-4).

The indicators used to measure whether this issue can be remedied by implementing different alternatives or mitigation measures are: 1) permanent net loss of recreational opportunities are avoided.

Alternative 1 (No Action): The existing species habitat closure would expire in December 2010. The Williamson Rock vicinity would subsequently resume accessibility to dispersed recreation with few existing management measures in place. This alternative is expected to have a positive direct impact to recreational opportunities at Williamson Rock, and within the region, based upon the particular qualities of the crag. Long term impacts are dependent upon the results of future management decisions, as the existing resource conflicts are not resolved. Removal of the closure would contribute towards a positive trend for recreational opportunities in the Angeles National Forest and across the southern California region.

Alternative 2 (Proposed Action): The existing species closure would remain in place for an additional three years. Existing access points to the Williamson Rock area would be closed and rehabilitated to prevent trespass. Administrative presence for species monitoring would remain the only sanctioned human interface. The area would be closed to dispersed recreation, and no comparable alternatives of a similar type are planned to be offered during that interval. Therefore, direct impacts to recreational opportunities at Williamson Rock are anticipated in the short term (three years), and are considered moderate due to their temporary nature. As the crag is considered unique, based upon location, climate, geology, and concentrated climbing route variability, it would also cause a net loss of recreational opportunities of this particular type across the southern California region. Long term impacts are dependent upon the results of monitoring and future management decisions – which could include a more permanent solution in order to protect the critical biological habitat. This alternative would have a temporary negative trend towards net recreational opportunities locally and regionally.

Alternative 3 (Recreational Development): Facilities would be constructed to route recreational use away from Critical Biological Habitat. A trailhead area would be constructed to create a focal point for management, aiding in lessening trash and human waste contamination of the creek, as well as establishing education at the point of visitor arrival at the highway. A single access trail to Williamson Rock would be developed to prevent the erosion of the user-created braided trails. The trail would route around the designated Critical Habitat, and utilize signage, barriers, and area closures to keep traffic focused on the approach, and minimize dispersion into the area. A primary staging area would be developed at the point of arrival at Williamson Rock in order to manage recreational use. Associated information kiosks, signage, and physical barriers would serve to educate and contain recreational use in the vicinity of Williamson Rock. Specific closures of the stream-based climbing routes would minimize disturbance within the critical habitat. Additional on-site management would serve for quality assurance to maintain use within the restrictions. The facility development and cooperation of climbing groups is anticipated to provide a high level of user satisfaction and an enhancement of the visitor experience, despite closure of several climbing routes. This alternative is expected to have the most positive direct impact to recreational opportunities at Williamson Rock, and within the region, based upon the particular qualities of the crag and the improvements. Long term impacts are dependent upon the

results of future monitoring and management decisions, largely to be determined by visitor behavior. Removal of the closure and enhancement of the recreational opportunities at Williamson Rock would contribute towards a positive trend for recreational opportunities in the Angeles National Forest and across the southern California region.

Alternative 4 (Environmentally Preferred): The MYLF Critical Habitat in Upper Little Rock Creek would be formally closed to recreational use. Access points to the Williamson Rock area would be physically closed and rehabilitated to prevent trespass. Administrative presence for initial rehabilitation and species monitoring would remain the only sanctioned human interface with the critical habitat. The area would be closed to dispersed recreation, and no comparable alternatives of a similar type are currently planned. Direct impacts to recreational opportunities at Williamson Rock are anticipated, as the crag is considered unique, based upon location, climate, geology, and concentrated climbing route variability. The closure would also cause a net loss of recreational opportunities of this particular type across the southern California region, as no equivalent set of circumstances occur in a single location, locally. Long term impacts are dependent upon future management decisions, but are expected to be negative until another comparable crag could be developed by the climbing community elsewhere. This alternative would have a negative trend towards net recreational opportunities locally and regionally.

CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

The Forest Service consulted the following individuals, Federal, State, and local agencies, tribes and non-Forest Service persons during the development of this environmental assessment:

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