



File Code: 1920

Date: February 8, 2012

Dear Interested Party:

The Sawtooth National Forest is proposing an amendment to the *Sawtooth National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan* (Forest Plan) to establish a wildlife conservation strategy (WCS) for the Sawtooth National Forest, as required by the Forest Plan. The amendment would modify, delete, and add to current Forest Plan direction in response to new information and/or changed conditions concerning wildlife habitat through the WCS. These changes in direction would be a non-significant amendment to the Forest Plan. The *Wildlife Conservation Strategy Environmental Assessment* (WCS-EA) has been prepared to analyze the proposed amendment and is now available for review at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/land/sawtooth/landmanagement>.

One action alternative, the proposed action, evaluates proposed modifications, additions, or deletions of management direction designed to implement a forested biological community wildlife conservation strategy. More specifically, the proposed changes in management direction would:

- Add to or modify management direction to emphasize the retention of most forest stands that meet the definition of old-forest habitat or large tree size class.
- Add to or modify management direction to focus restoration in forest stands classified as large tree size class and medium tree size class to promote desired old-forest habitat or large tree stand conditions and reduce hazards and risks to these habitats.
- Delete wildlife standard WIST01 and replace it with standards that focus on size class, canopy cover, and composition specific to individual potential vegetation groups (PVGs) identified to be in need of restoration rather than a one-size-fits-all standard.
- Add or modify existing management direction to emphasize the retention of large snags while balancing other objectives associated with a given Management Prescription Category (MPC).
- Prioritize vegetative and associated wildlife habitat restoration treatments to increase the overall probability of restoration success
- Identify where potential conflicts between wolverine and human use may exist, especially during their critical winter denning period, and determine if additional management direction is warranted.
- Balance wildlife habitat restoration needs with multiple use objectives, allowing exceptions that respond to emergencies; provide for public health and safety; and allow for the exercise of existing rights and other statutory requirements.



Background

Separate Record of Decisions for revised Forest Plans were issued in July 2003 for the Boise, Payette, and Sawtooth National Forests (NFs). Assessments supporting the 2003 Forest Plan revision identified more habitat areas in need of restoration for a variety of species within each planning unit than could be moved toward desired conditions by natural processes or management activities within the 10- to 15-year planning period. As a result, the 2003 Forest Plans for the Boise, Payette, and Sawtooth NFs identified that maintaining and restoring habitats for species of concern should be prioritized based upon the greatest risks to the persistence of certain species (Boise and Payette Forest Plans, p. 11–10 and Sawtooth Forest Plan, p. 11–9). To address this need, each Forest Plan included a wildlife objective, WIOB03, to prioritize wildlife habitat to be restored at a mid- or Forest-scale, using information from sources such as species habitat models and fine scale analyses. On September 14, 2007, the Forest Service published a Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to disclose the environmental effects of proposed non-significant amendments to the three Southwest Idaho Ecogroup 2003 Forest Plans (Federal Register, Vol. 72, No. 178, pp. 52540–52542) for development of a Wildlife Conservation Strategy (WCS). The intent of the amendments was to address wildlife objective WIOB03 to prioritize wildlife habitat to be restored at a mid- or Forest-scale. A correction to the September 14, 2007 NOI was published on December 8, 2008 to reflect a delay of more than a year in filing the draft EIS. Given the complexity of species and associated habitats found across the three Forests, the December 2008 correction also provided notice of a change in the approach to the amendment process, dividing the WCS amendments into four phases. The first phase was to address the forested biological community, the second phase was slated to address the rangeland biological community; and the third and fourth phases were to address the unique combinations of rangeland and forest biological communities and riparian/wetland biological communities, respectively. The December 8, 2008 NOI was corrected on April 22, 2009 to reflect that three EISs will be prepared (one for each Forest) instead of one EIS addressing all three Forests.

On July 6, 2010, the Forest Service published a correction to the April 22, 2009 NOI to reflect a change in the level of documentation from an EIS to an environmental assessment (EA) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the analysis of the proposed amendment for the Sawtooth Forest Plan. As described in the corrected NOI, preliminary assessments for the forested biological community WCS indicated that fewer changes to the Sawtooth Forest Plan direction would be needed to implement a prioritized WCS than the Boise and Payette forest plans would require. This is in part due to that fact that the Sawtooth does not have the low elevation pine forests found on the Boise and Payette. Across southwest Idaho, it is the low elevation pine forests that are the most highly departed from historic conditions; pose the highest need for restoration; and affect the greatest need for change in management direction to be addressed in the forested biological community WCS plan amendments. The mid- to high elevation forests more typical of the Sawtooth National Forest are less departed. The Sawtooth Forest Plan did not include the MPC 5.2 allocation unit that emphasized commodity production that resulted in forest conditions substantially outside their historic range of variation. And finally, management direction in the 2003 Sawtooth Forest Plan already provides most of the specific restoration objectives for many of the Forest's species of greatest conservation concern associated with the forested biological communities. Because of this, the Sawtooth Forest Plan will require only the identification of priority watersheds for restoration and minor amendments

to management direction. Preliminary assessment results show that the effects of implementing the proposed plan amendment will have only minor environmental effects to the forested biological community on the Sawtooth NF, as well as outputs and services envisioned under the 2003 Forest Plan.

The Purpose of a Forest Plan

Under the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), each planning unit of the National Forest System (NFS) is managed under a forest plan. Forest plans are strategic documents describing the overall management direction for a National Forest. A forest plan is similar to a county master plan and associated zoning ordinances. A forest plan describes the desired resource conditions across the planning unit and provides allocations, goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines for resource management to maintain or restore these desired resource conditions in a way that contributes to the social and economic interests of the public. Forest plans do not grant, withhold, or modify any contract, permit, or other legal instrument; subject anyone to civil or criminal liability; or create any legal rights. While forest plans guide site-specific project activities, they do not approve or execute these projects or activities. Decisions to implement site-specific projects are made after completing a separate environmental analysis and public involvement under NEPA.

Public Involvement

In addition to the NOI's described above, public involvement on the WCS and associated plan amendment was sought at various points and multiple venues including:

- Over 700 scoping packages outlining the WCS and comment process were mailed out in September 2007.
- A WCS newsletter was distributed to over 1,000 potential commenters in December 2008.
- Articles have been published in local newspapers.
- Congressional offices and State and other federal agencies have been contacted on an ongoing basis.
- Consultation with tribal governments has been ongoing, and the tribes have regularly participated in discussions with technical working groups.
- Briefings with county commissioners have occurred at key points in the process.

Over 50 comments were received on the WCS during the scoping process from organizations, tribes, other government agencies, and individuals.

Comment Period

The public is hereby invited to submit comments stating their concerns and issues that are relevant to the proposed action. The purpose of this comment period is to provide an opportunity for the public to provide early and meaningful participation on the proposed amendment prior to a decision being made by the Responsible Official. To be most helpful, written comments should be as specific as possible.

Written, facsimile (Fax), hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments concerning this action will be accepted for 30 days following the publication of the legal notice in the *Times News*

newspaper. The publication date of the legal notice in the *Times News* newspaper is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period. Those wishing to comment should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Written comments should be sent to: Sawtooth National Forest, Attn: WCS, 2647 Kimberly Road East, Twin Falls, Idaho 83301 or via Fax to (208) 737-3236.

Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), and Word (.doc) to: comments-intermtn-sawtooth@fs.fed.us. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00 – 4:30, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Hand-delivered comments may be submitted to the Sawtooth National Forest office at 2647 Kimberly Road East, Twin Falls, Idaho. Oral comments must be provided during these business hours via telephone (208) 737-3200 or in person.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this proposed amendment and will be available for public inspection.

Hard copies of the WCS-EA are available for review at the Sawtooth National Forest Supervisor's Office, 2647 Kimberly Road East, Twin Falls, Idaho 83301. Additional information regarding this proposed amendment can be obtained from Bobbi Filbert at the Sawtooth National Recreation Area Headquarters Office (208) 727-5003 or Sharon LaBrecque at the Sawtooth National Forest Supervisor's Office (208) 737-3200.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Rebecca S. Nourse". The signature is written in a cursive style.

REBECCA S. NOURSE
Forest Supervisor