



**DECISION MEMO
ALASKA REGION
CHUGACH NATIONAL FOREST**

2002 Revised Land Management and Resource Plan MIS Amendment

Decision to be Implemented

It is my decision to amend the 2002 Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (RLRMP) by removing three Management Indicator Species (MIS) – coho salmon, pink salmon and Dolly Varden char – and replacing the related MIS monitoring questions with an aquatic habitat monitoring question as follows:

Are riparian and aquatic habitat protection measures included in project planning and are RLRMP standards and guidelines being met during project implementation?

In addition, it is my decision to remove the Management of Fish and Wildlife Habitat objective: Complete habitat capability models for cutthroat and coho salmon (RLMRP page 3.5).

The current MIS list was established during the development of the RLRMP under the 1982 planning regulations (36 CFR 219.19). These regulations require that certain species be selected because their population changes are believed to indicate the effects of management activities. The purpose of this non-significant RLRMP amendment is to remove three MIS whose population trends cannot be tied to forest management activities.

Rationale

The 2002 Chugach NF RLRMP includes three fish MIS, coho salmon, pink salmon and Dolly Varden char. Pink salmon were selected to represent anadromous fish limited in their freshwater life-period by spawning gravel quality and quantity. Coho salmon were chosen to represent anadromous fish that are generally limited in their freshwater life-period by stream and lake rearing habitat. Dolly Varden char were selected because of their widespread distribution in freshwater habitat.

A Monitoring and Evaluation Interdisciplinary Team (MEIT) was established to develop monitoring protocols for the three fish MIS. The MEIT found that population fluctuations for coho and pink salmon are primarily unrelated to the activities associated with RLRMP implementation. As anadromous species, coho and pink salmon spend over half their life in the ocean where they are subject to conditions and predation pressures outside Chugach National Forest management parameters. Population trend monitoring of these species would not provide meaningful information regarding the effects of forest management activities.

In addition, the MEIT found resident Dolly Varden char unsuitable as a MIS due to the limited exposure of these populations to management activities. The forest has few stream reaches with robust fish populations above barriers where aquatic habitat conditions are subject to change due to active forest management. This limited sample size creates difficulty in statistical analysis and erodes confidence in conclusions related to forestwide population trends.

My decision to remove these aquatic species as MIS does not reduce their importance as natural and socioeconomic resources for the Chugach National Forest or change habitat objectives for maintaining viable populations. Rather the change is a reflection of the inability to monitor population trends in a reliable and meaningful way and relate those trends to the effects of forest management.

The RLRMP provides riparian and aquatic habitat protection through Regional and Forest aquatic ecosystem protection standards and Best Management Practices. Replacing the fish population trend monitoring questions with aquatic habitat monitoring will allow the forest to monitor the efficacy of these standards and practices.

My decision to remove the three fish MIS, remove the requirement to develop a habitat capability model and replace the fish MIS population trend monitoring with aquatic habitat monitoring does not have any direct, indirect or cumulative effect on population trends, their associated habitat or other biological resources since changing monitoring requirements does not affect Forest conditions (no ground disturbance). Standards and guidelines for protection of aquatic habitat remain unchanged. The change will be in the data collection and analyses, shifting emphasis from monitoring population trends to monitoring whether aquatic habitat protections (standards) are being met.

Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Decision

A proposed action may be categorically excluded from analysis and documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or environmental assessment (EA) only if: (1) the proposed action is within a category listed in 36 CFR §220.6(d) or (e) and (2) there are no extraordinary circumstances.¹

This decision is within the scope of 36 CFR §220.6(e)(16): “Land management plans, plan amendments and plan revisions developed in accordance with 36 CFR part 219 *et seq.* that provide broad guidance and information for project and activity decisionmaking in a NFS unit.”

36 CFR § 220.6(b) identifies resource conditions that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances related to a proposed action warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or an EIS. Below is a list of the resource conditions listed in 36 CFR §220.6(b) that was considered:

Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species.

This programmatic forest plan amendment involves three management indicator species, none of which are federally listed threatened or endangered species, species proposed for federal listing or Forest Service sensitive species. This decision does not authorize any site-specific activities on the Forest including any activities within designated critical habitat. Therefore there are no extraordinary circumstances related to this condition.

Flood plains, wetlands or municipal watersheds.

This is a programmatic action related to monitoring aquatic habitat and does not authorize site-specific activities. Therefore there are no extraordinary circumstances related to flood plains, wetlands or municipal watersheds.

¹ 36 CFR §220.6(a).

Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas or national recreation areas.

This is a programmatic action related to monitoring aquatic habitat and does not authorize site-specific activities. Therefore there are no effects to wilderness, wilderness study areas or national recreation areas.

Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas

This is a programmatic action related to monitoring aquatic habitat and does not authorize site-specific activities. Therefore there are no effects to inventoried roadless areas.

Research Natural Areas

This is a programmatic action related to monitoring aquatic habitat and does not authorize site-specific activities. Therefore there are no effects to research natural areas.

American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites

This is a programmatic action related to monitoring aquatic habitat and does not authorize site-specific activities. Therefore there are no effects to any cultural sites.

Archeological sites, or historic properties or areas

This is a programmatic action related to monitoring aquatic habitat and does not authorize site-specific activities. Therefore there are no effects to archeological sites, or historic properties or areas.

Scoping to determine the presence or absence of potential effects of extraordinary circumstances occurred December 2011 through January 2012. One letter was received. This letter was supportive of the proposal. No extraordinary circumstances were identified. Based on my review of the interdisciplinary team analysis and public input, I determine there are no extraordinary circumstances related to this amendment.

Interested and Affected Agencies, Organizations and Persons Contacted

Scoping letters requesting comment were sent on December 9, 2011 to 45 organizations and agencies including local fish sporting groups, Alaska Fish and Game Department and the Tribes and Native corporations. The project was listed on the Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) in January 2012. The SOPA is available on the Chugach National Forest website and is hardcopy mailed to 22 individuals. One letter of support was received from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and no issues were identified. Scoping also consisted of a review by forest staff and fish resource specialists. No significant issues or extraordinary circumstances were identified.

Findings required by other laws

Chugach Revised Land and Resource Management Plan

This decision is consistent with the Chugach RLRMP. It will not change the purpose and need of the RLRMP, nor will it change the goals related to management of fish and wildlife habitat to “maintain habitat to produce viable and sustainable wildlife populations that support the use of fish and wildlife resources for subsistence and sport hunting and fishing, watching wildlife, conservation and other values”

(RLRMP, page 3-4) and “emphasize maintenance of fish and wildlife habitat in the 501(b) area of the Chugach National Forest” (RLRMP, page 3-5).

Replacing population trend monitoring questions with an aquatic habitat monitoring question will allow the forest to monitor the efficacy of the riparian and aquatic habitat protection standards and guidelines established to meet these goals.

ANILCA Section 810, Subsistence Evaluation and Finding

As a programmatic forest plan amendment related to monitoring aquatic habitat, there would be no effects to subsistence use. Therefore, this amendment would not result in significant restriction of subsistence use of wildlife, fish or other foods.

ANILCA Section 811, Subsistence Evaluation and Finding

As a programmatic forest plan amendment related to monitoring aquatic habitat, no access would be restricted as a result of this decision. Therefore, this action would not result in a significant restriction of subsistence users having reasonable access to subsistence resources on National Forest System Lands.

Endangered Species Act of 1973

This programmatic forest plan amendment involves three management indicator species, none of which are federally listed as threatened or endangered species, species proposed for federal listing or Forest Service sensitive species. This decision does not authorize any site-specific activities on the Forest including any activities within designated critical habitat. Therefore, there are no effects to any species listed as endangered or threatened, or proposed for listing under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

National Historic Preservation Act of 1966

The Forest Service program for compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) includes locating, inventorying and evaluating the National Register of Historic Places eligibility of historic and archeological sites that may be directly or indirectly affected by scheduled activities. Regulations (36 CFR 800) implementing Section 106 of the NHPA require Federal agencies to consider the effects of their actions on sites that are determined eligible for inclusion in or are listed in the National Register of Historic Places (termed "historic properties"). As a programmatic amendment to the forest plan, this decision does not authorize site-specific activities that may directly or indirectly affect historic properties.

Floodplain Management (E.O. 11988), Protection of Wetlands (E.O. 11990)

This is a programmatic action and does not authorize site-specific activities. I have determined it will not have any impacts on wetlands and floodplains and will comply with Executive Orders 11988 and 11990.

Recreational Fisheries (E.O. 12962)

This forest plan amendment is a programmatic action and does not authorize site-specific activities that would affect recreational fisheries. It does provide for aquatic habitat monitoring to evaluate implementation of the Chugach NF RLRMP to ensure the plan is meeting the goal to “maintain habitat to produce viable and sustainable wildlife populations that support the use of fish and wildlife resources for subsistence and sport hunting and fishing, watching wildlife, conservation and other values.” This is consistent with Executive Order 12962.

Environmental Justice (E.O. 12898)

As a programmatic decision related to forest plan monitoring, I have determined that, in accordance with Executive Order 12898, this project does not have disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects on minority populations and low-income populations.

Invasive Species (E.O. 13112)

Executive Order 13112 directs Federal agencies not to authorize any activities that would increase the spread of invasive species. This programmatic forest plan amendment does not authorize any site-specific activities that would have the potential to spread invasive species. I have determined this amendment complies with Executive Order 13112.

Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act

This forest plan amendment is a programmatic action and does not authorize site-specific activities that would affect anadromous species and continental shelf fisheries. The act does require use of the best science to support the national fishery conservation and management program. The interdisciplinary team has determined that population trend monitoring of coho salmon, pink salmon and Dolly Varden char would not provide meaningful information on the effects of forest management activities. This amendment drops the requirement for population trend monitoring and replaces it with an aquatic habitat monitoring question to better meet the goals of the Chugach NF RLRMP to maintain habitat to produce viable and sustainable fish populations. This is consistent with the requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

Finding of Consistency with All Applicable Federal Laws and Regulations

Based on my review of the actions associated with this amendment and all applicable specialists' input, I find that the forest plan amendment to remove three fish species, add an aquatic monitoring question and remove the objective to complete a habitat capability model is consistent with applicable Federal laws and regulations.

Public Review Period and Objection Process

Amendments to Forest Plans that are categorically excluded from analysis in an EIS and that are documented in a decision memo are subject to a 30-day objection process. A legal notice will be published in the Anchorage Daily News. This will mark the beginning of the 30-day objection period. The regulations at 36 CFR 219.32² describe the objection process that governs amendments to forest plans.

Any person may object to a proposed amendment or revision prepared under 36 CFR 219. An objection must be filed with the reviewing officer identified in the notice and contain:

- 1) The name, mailing address, and telephone number of the person filing the objection;
- 2) A specific statement of the basis for each objection; and
- 3) A description of the objector's participation in the planning process for the proposed amendment, including a copy of any relevant documents submitted during the planning process.

Within 10 days after the close of the objection period, I will publish notice of all objections in the Anchorage Daily News. Objectors may request meetings with the reviewing officer and the responsible official to discuss the objection, to narrow the issues, agree on facts, and explore opportunities for

² Federal Register Volume 74, No. 242, December 18, 2009, 67059-67075.

resolution. The reviewing officer must allow other interested persons to participate in such meetings. An interested person must file a request to participate in an objection within 10 days after publication of the notice of objection as described above.

The reviewing officer must respond, in writing, to an objection within a reasonable period of time and may respond to all objections in one response. The reviewing officer's response regarding an objection is the final decision of the Department of Agriculture.

AMENDMENT IMPLEMENTATION

This decision shall be implemented in accordance with Forest Service regulations contained in 36 CFR, Part 219.32(d). I, the Forest Supervisor, may not approve this proposed amendment until the reviewing officer has responded to all objections. A decision by the responsible official approving an amendment or revision must be consistent with the reviewing officer's response to objections to the proposed amendment or revision.

FOREST CONTACT

For additional information concerning this proposed amendment or for information on the objection process, contact Sharon Randall by phone: (907) 743-9497 or email: FS-comments-alaska-chugach@fs.fed.us.

Terri Marceron
Forest Supervisor

Date

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