



File Code: 2670/2330

Date: November 9, 2012

Dear Interested Party,

The US Forest Service is preparing an Environmental Assessment for cave and abandoned mine management options for the bat disease commonly known as white-nose syndrome (WNS). National Forests and Grasslands in Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, and most of South Dakota and Wyoming are currently under an emergency closure order, prohibiting access for caves and abandoned mines as a proactive measure to minimize human spread of this lethal bat disease. WNS has not yet been reported in these states, but the fungus that causes the disease has been confirmed as close as Oklahoma.

This emergency closure order, set to expire at the beginning of August 2013, has some limited exceptions that allow entry under certain conditions. We are starting an Environmental Assessment to gather public comment and evaluate management options regarding WNS and access for caves and abandoned mines.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) asks Federal agencies to articulate a *purpose and need* for a *proposed action*. The purpose of and need for this proposed action is to reduce the potential for human introduction, spread, and impacts of the fungus *Geomyces destructans* and the bat disease commonly known as white-nose syndrome (WNS) by providing management options for caves and abandoned mines on National Forests and Grasslands within the Rocky Mountain Region.

NEPA also asks Federal agencies to develop a proposed action designed to address the purpose and need statement. We are proposing an adaptive management strategy for caves and abandoned mines to limit potential human introduction, spread, and impacts of the fungus and WNS. This strategy should be adaptable to changing situations and identify conditions where access to caves for recreational users and scientific communities may be permitted. The proposed strategy would include a range of management activities based on the goals of minimizing the chances of human-facilitated transmission of the disease, and potential impacts of the disease, while permitting access consistent with WNS management. The following management activities may be considered in an adaptive context:

- Access restrictions
- Seasonal restrictions
- Fungicidal application
- Decontamination requirements for entry
- Application and permit requirements for entry
- Inventory and monitoring



These management tools may be implemented in whole, or in part, in specific management areas, or throughout multiple National Forests and Grasslands in the Rocky Mountain Region. There may be separate analysis and considerations for caves and abandoned mines.

A central theme to adaptive management is the identification of trigger points, or thresholds, which may invoke a particular management response. In the case of WNS, thresholds might be defined in terms of distance of WNS to the Region, or other measures. For example, the presence of WNS within a 200-mile radius of a cave, or abandoned mine, could be considered a threshold for closure. Some management activities might be implemented proactively, before the presence of WNS. Other management activities might be implemented reactively, after the disease arrives within the Region.

I ask for your ideas and concerns to help define appropriate management options and thresholds, or triggers, during the public scoping and comment process. A 30-day comment period will provide an opportunity for you to provide meaningful participation in this process. More information regarding background on WNS, the emergency closure order, and public comment period, please visit <http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/r2/wns>

Written comments must be submitted to Trey Schillie, USDA Forest Service, 740 Simms Street, Golden, CO 80401. For facsimile, use (303) 275-5134. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 9:00 am to 4:00 pm, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted via email at wns@fs.fed.us

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Stephen Lenzo". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

STEPHEN LENZO
Line Officer Representative for Forest Supervisors
in Colorado, South Dakota, and Wyoming