White Mountain National Forest

USDA

United States Department of Agriculture

Forest Service

Eastern Region

Radio Improvement Project

Towns of Livermore and Wentworth Grafton County, NH and Beans Purchase, Kilkenny, and Milan Coos County, NH

Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact

May 2015

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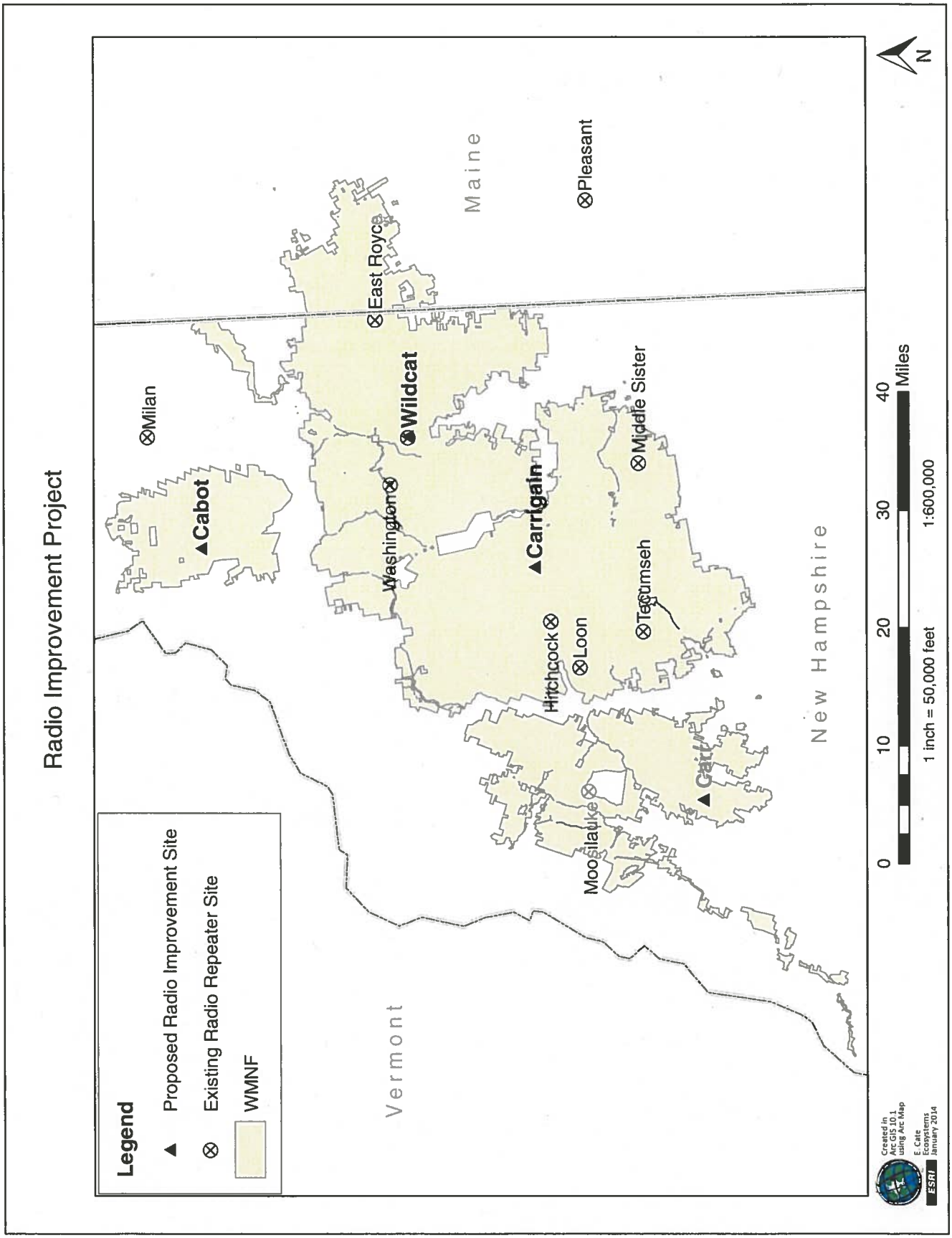
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1. Introduction

This document announces my proposed decision regarding the Radio Improvement Project and my finding that this project will not have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment. This Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact incorporate by reference the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Radio Improvement Project dated March 2015 and its supporting project record.

The Radio Improvement Project is a Forest-wide project with the proposed actions focused on five summits: Carr Mountain, Mount Carrigain, Mount Cabot, Wildcat Mountain, and Milan Hill in the towns of Wentworth, Livermore, Kilkenny, Beans Purchase, and Milan, NH, respectively (see map). The Radio Improvement Project is designed to increase employee and public safety by enhancing on-Forest communications through the expansion of the existing Forest radio system.

2. Purpose and Need

Radios provide a means of communication where landline or cellular phone use is not an option. They also provide the ability to share information with a lot of people simultaneously, which is often a daily necessity. Having reliable communications to send and receive information during normal operations and during emergencies is vital to employee safety and the safety of the visiting public during emergencies. Due to the complex topography of the WMNF and the current radio system design, there are several large areas on the Forest that have little to no radio coverage. Some of these areas are where there are frequent search and rescue (SAR) efforts, high recreation use, timber harvest activity, and Forest responsibility for management of the Appalachian Trail outside the Forest boundary. The lack of reliable communications is a significant safety hazard for people working in and visiting these areas.

In addition to coverage gaps, Forest-wide communication ability is limited. There is another project currently being implemented that will provide the Forest Head Quarters with Forest-wide communication ability for Continuity of Operations. However, no other office is able to monitor Forest-wide communications or send out critical communications Forest-wide, which can include alerts on approaching extreme weather, pertinent and immediate threats that require action,

or other essential announcements (e.g., SAR in progress).

Thus, there is a need to improve the existing radio system to provide more comprehensive and reliable communications and a safer environment for employees and the public, especially in times of emergency.

Management of the White Mountain National Forest is guided by our 2005 Forest Plan, which is based on several years of collaboration with the public and extensive environmental analysis. The Plan documents the agreed-upon balance of uses and activities desired to meet society's needs while protecting, restoring, and enhancing our natural resources. The WMNF Health and Safety Plan serves as the primary guidance for the Forest Safety Program and builds upon our current safety policy, awareness, and culture. To achieve our safety goals, safety is integrated into all programs and be the highest priority in all that we do.

3. Decision and Rationale

Decision

Based on consideration of on-the-ground conditions in and near the project area, input from the interdisciplinary team, public comments, the Environmental Assessment and Project Record, and the overall purpose and need, I have decided to approve implementation of the project as described in Alternative 2, with the exception of the proposed action for Mount Carrigain for which I have decided to approve implementation as described in Alternative 3.

A set of actions will be implemented for each of the following locations: Carr Mountain, Mount Carrigain, Mount Cabot, and Wildcat Mountain. Each set of actions will include four items: type of radio shelter (Standard versus Micro), placement of radio shelter, placement of Helicopter Landing Zone (HLZ) (if applicable), and resulting access. Also being implemented are the activities associated with discontinuing the Milan Hill repeater site. (See the final EA, Chapter 2 for additional details).

The clearing sizes stated here are in feet and indicate the maximum diameter of a circular clearing. Actual clearing size will be dependent on site specific factors and requirements for safe operations, but will not exceed the sizes stated here.

Carr Mountain. A Standard radio shelter will be installed directly on the summit of Carr Mountain. The shelter will be placed in the existing opening between the historic tower footings. No tree clearing and no effect to the tower footings is ex-

pected. An HLZ will be created adjacent to the Carr Mountain Trail approximately 1.0 mile down from the summit. The area is currently forested and will be cleared. The resulting 100′ clearing will be directly adjacent to the trail. The HLZ will be maintained as a 75′ clearing and will incorporate a forested buffer between the trail and the clearing. Access to the shelter from the HLZ will be approximately 1.0 mile with 780′ of elevation gain.

Mount Carrigain. A Micro shelter will be installed on the summit of Mount Carrigain underneath the existing observation tower. The mast and antenna will be mounted to the top of the tower and attached to the shelter by a cable. The solar panels will be mounted on a separate structure and installed in close proximity to the shelter where it will receive adequate sun exposure. The solar panels will be attached to the shelter with a cable that will be buried or pinned down to avoid creating a safety hazard. No tree clearing is expected. An HLZ will not be created. Access to the shelter from the nearest trailhead, the Signal Ridge Trail, will be approximately 5.1 miles (one-way) with 3,280′ of elevation gain.

Mount Cabot. A Standard shelter will be installed approximately 130′ south/south-east of the true summit where it is sparely forested. This location is in close proximity to the Kilkenny Ridge Trail, though the site will incorporate a small forested buffer between the trail and the clearing. To achieve the needed 30′ clearing for safe helicopter delivery of the shelter, minimal tree cutting of mostly dead or dying balsam firs will need to occur. An HLZ will be created on the Kilkenny Ridge Trail approximately 0.3 miles south-east from the summit where a fire tower once stood. This site is now an approximately 25′ diameter clearing of exposed bedrock surrounded by dense fir forest that slopes off steeply to both sides of the trail. A landing pad will be constructed due to the bedrock being insufficiently uniform to land a helicopter. Because this site will require a permanent landing pad, it is most appropriate to design it for its primary use by the smaller, Type 3, maintenance helicopter. The Larger Type 2 Helicopter will be used to deliver the shelter, but would not be able to land nearby, so the crew will be shuttled to the summit in a separate Type 3. The result will be an approximately 15′ square wooden landing platform, centered in the existing clearing, astride the Kilkenny Ridge Trail, and anchored to the bedrock. The landing pad will incorporate design elements to accommodate hikers visiting the area, such as steps onto and off of the pad and a safety railing. Because this HLZ will be designed for a Type 3 Helicopter only, the resulting clearing will not exceed 75′ in diameter. Access to the shelter from the HLZ will be approximately 0.3 miles

with 100' of elevation gain.

Wildcat Mountain. The radio equipment will continue to be housed in the ski patrol building. The equipment will be isolated by constructing a separate room in the existing building; the size of the room will be sufficient to house the equipment necessary to upgrade the site to a remote base station (approximately 6 foot square). The mast and antenna will be mounted to the top of the observation tower which is located at the summit of Wildcat Mountain. The antenna will be attached to the repeater with a cable. The cable will be run aboveground and placed so as to minimize the potential for damage to the cable, to prevent creating a safety hazard, and minimize visibility to visitors, particularly those hiking the Appalachian Trail. No tree clearing is expected. A helicopter will not be needed to accomplish this action. All necessary materials, equipment and crew will be transported to the site via alternative methods of transport commonly used for work done by the Wildcat Ski Area (e.g., chairlift, gondola, Snowcat, Muskeg). The existing Wildcat Mountain repeater will be discontinued and upgraded equipment will be installed to create a remote base station, allowing the Androscoggin Ranger Office to have Forest-wide radio communication ability. Access to the shelter will be proved by chairlift or gondola.

Milan Hill. The existing Milan Hill radio site will be discontinued. Currently, the repeater is housed in a small shelter inside an existing fire tower (owned by the state) with the antenna attached to the exterior of the fire tower. This activity will simply remove the equipment, leaving the tower in place.

My decision includes the following Mitigation Measures and Design Features from EA, Appendix A. These Mitigation Measures and Design Features were developed by the Interdisciplinary Team to eliminate, reduce or control a potentially adverse effect associated with implementing my decision.

Heritage

- At Carr Mountain, hang hazard flagging and place safety cones on top of the tower footings during implementation to improve the visibility
- At Mount Carrigain, hang hazard flagging on the observation tower during implementation to improve the visibility
- Ballast for shelters must be brought in from offsite; do not use local rock

Aviation

- Follow Interagency Helicopter Operations Guide regulations and implement a project aviation safety plan (including marking the shelter drop location with an "X", identifying any heritage items on maps, and conducting a pre-implementation helicopter operations briefing) (NWCG 2013)
- The landing pads for Carr and Carrigain, a 20′ x 20′ square in the center of the helicopter landing zone, will be cleared to ground level, leaving roots and small brush in place, without soil disturbance

Visuals/Recreation

- All new structures will be looked at independently when choosing materials/paint colors for installation in order to make selections that blend into the existing environment (natural or man-made)
- Where site specific characteristics allow, leave a forested buffer between new clearings and trails
- The landing pad at Mount Cabot could incorporate steps on to and off of the plat-form and a removable safety railing to be installed when not in use as a landing pad
- The cable from the antenna to the repeater on Wildcat Mountain will be placed to minimize the potential for damage to the cable, creating a safety hazard, and being seen from the Appalachian National Scenic Trail

Wildlife

- Do not cut vegetation lower than 2′ in height in the helicopter landing zones (outside of the 20′ x 20′ touch down area in the center)
- Tree cutting will be limited to the period when most bats are hibernating (November 1 to March 31)
- Attempt to avoid helicopter use during Bicknell's thrush breeding season (May 1 through mid-August)

Radio System

- The room constructed to house the repeater equipment at Wildcat Mountain will be no smaller than 6′ square. The room will be locked and una-

vailable for other uses, including storage and housing other equipment (aside from the existing Mount Washington Observatory equipment)

This decision is consistent with all Forest Plan guidelines except one Forest-wide guideline related to scenic integrity objectives (USDA-FS 2005a, p. 2-26):

> **G-1: All management activities should meet or exceed Scenic Integrity Objectives established for the Forest through the Scenery Management System (SMS) outlined in Agricultural Handbook 701, Landscape Aesthetics – A Handbook for Scenery Management**

The Scenic Integrity Objective (SIO) for the area around all new shelter sites and helicopter landing zones is "High". The definition of the High SIO states that things should "appear unaltered… appear intact… [and] deviations may be present but must repeat the form, line, color, texture and pattern common to the landscape character so completely and at such scale that they are not evident (USDA-FS 1995, p. 2-4)." The actions I have decided to approve at Carr Mountain, Mount Carrigain, and Mount Cabot are not consistent with the guideline. The new clearings, shelters, solar arrays, and masts will not fit within the landscape character of the environments where they will be located and consequently will not meet the scenic integrity objective. At Wildcat Mountain, structures already exist. Alternative 2 will result in the radio mast moving from a ski building to a nearby tower, both of which are visible from scenic viewpoints. Therefore consistency with the SIO will not change as a result of this decision.

Therefore the following site-specific rationale for not implementing this guideline will stand as part of this decision:

The IDT explored alternative project designs intended to minimize effects to scenery, such as placing some sites in existing openings so as not to create new openings, installing the smaller Micro-shelter at Mount Carrigain, and requiring mitigation measures such as paint color and mast materials that would best blend in to the existing environment. In recognition of cultural and historic context, the actions will not be creating the first human-made features at these locations: large concrete tower footings and a concrete staircase exist on Carr Mountain, an observation tower exists on Mount Carrigain, and a cabin, outbuilding, and old fire tower clearing (with remnants of footings and rebar) exist on Mount Cabot. While effects were reduced, the team could not find a way to make the project consistent with a High SIO and still install repeaters in locations that

would address identified deficiencies in coverage and the resultant safety issue. Therefore, this guideline could not be met while still achieving the purpose and need of the project.

This decision is consistent with all Forest Plan standards except one Forest-wide standard designed to protect Bicknell's thrush habitat (USDA-FS 2005a, p. 2-16):

> **S-1: Projects must not result in a net decrease of suitable Bicknell's thrush habitat.**

Generally speaking, dense softwood stands above 2800 feet elevation are suitable Bicknell's thrush habitat. Suitable habitat can change based on latitude, elevation, and site conditions, so suitability should be reviewed site-specifically by a wildlife biologist if potentially suitable habitat will be affected by a project. All proposed repeater locations to be implemented are in or adjacent to suitable Bicknell's thrush habitat based on field review.

New repeater shelters must be placed in a clearing 30 feet in diameter to allow for safe placement by a helicopter. The repeater shelter location at the Mount Cabot site will be cleared; all other shelters would be placed in existing openings. The entire summit of Mount Cabot is suitable Bicknell's thrush habitat so about 0.02 acres of suitable habitat will be lost when this clearing is created. In the long term, the clearing would be allowed to revegetate though any vegetation that blocks the antenna or solar panels, brushes against the equipment, or blocks access to the shelter would be cut back.

The creation of an HLZ near the Mount Cabot site will clear approximately 0.1 acres of suitable Bicknell's thrush habitat and maintain most of it in an open, unsuitable condition for the foreseeable future. A suitable site for the helicopter landing zone near Carr Mountain was identified that is outside of suitable Bicknell's thrush habitat. No HLZ will be created for the Mount Carrigain site.

An interdisciplinary team made up of specialists representing resources that may be affected by the project helped to develop the proposed action. The IDT explored alternative project designs that would minimize effects to Bicknell's thrush habitat, such as placing some sites in existing openings and the Carr Mountain landing zone outside suitable habitat. While effects were reduced, the team could not find a way to avoid effects to habitat entirely and still install repeaters in locations that would address identified deficiencies in coverage, so implementation of the final actions will require a Forest Plan amendment.

Therefore the following site-specific Forest Plan amendment is part of the decision (italics indicate proposed amendment text):

> **S-1: Projects must not result in a net decrease of suitable Bicknell's thrush habitat.** ***The radio shelter site and associated helicopter landing site at Mount Cabot are the only allowed exceptions to this standard.***

Based on the Biological Evaluation (available in the Project Record), it was determined that the decided upon set of actions may effect individual Bicknell's thrush but will not likely cause a trend toward federal listing or loss of viability. Suitable habitat is present at all four sites and Bicknell's thrush individuals have been documented at three of the four sites. Habitat losses will be minor, making up only a fraction of one percent of the total habitat around each site. Effects from helicopter operations and installation will be short-term, but could displace a Bicknell's thrush if it occurred during the breeding season (May 15-August 1).

Reasons for the Decision

In making this decision I considered the project's purpose and need, the interdisciplinary team's analyses outlined in the Environmental Assessment (EA), all the information contained in the project record, and input received from the public. As stated in the Purpose and Need for the Project, the project is designed to provide radio coverage to areas on the Forest currently without that coverage. I've carefully considered each comment received on this project. Based on those comments I understand there are some who don't agree with the need for this project or who don't want to see the effects outlined in the EA. However, I must also consider the risks to employees when they work in areas without adequate radio coverage as well as others visiting these areas. The decision I've reached represents a balance between the projects purpose and need, public comments, and resource considerations.

The 2012 review of the WMNF radio system conducted by the Chief Information Office (CIO) shows the extent and locations of areas on the Forest that do not currently have radio coverage. The increase in public and employee safety is the driver in my decision. Enhancing the existing radio system by implementing the actions described above will decrease the Forest area without radio coverage from 12% to 4% (as described in Chapter 3 of the EA in the Radio Systems Effects Analysis). Some felt this was not enough of an improvement to warrant the effects outlined in the EA. It is an improvement and in all likelihood as close to

full coverage as is practical given the topography of the White Mountains. Therefore, given the level of effect described in the EA I've decided to implement the decision as described above. Again, I find this to be a good compromise with balance.

I'm also very aware of the effect to Bicknell's thrush habitat and the need for an amendment to the Forest Plan. Although I've included an amendment to the Forest Plan in this decision, every effort has been made to minimize the actual effect to Bicknell's habitat. There will be no effect from my decision to habitat on Carr Mountain, Wildcat Mountain, or Mount Carrigain. Based on field reviews by the interdisciplinary team, the project was designed to avoid Bicknell thrush habitat where possible. At Mount Cabot, both the repeater site location and the helicopter landing zone were placed specifically to minimize effect to Bicknell's habitat. So although unavoidable effects with this decision does require a Forest Plan amendment, the actual loss is only a fraction of one percent (EA, p. 49). I find this to be acceptable given the gains in safety.

The interdisciplinary team working on this project has made every effort to locate the repeaters and HLZs, where applicable, in a manner to reduce effects to resources. The differences between Alternatives 2 and 3, discussed in the EA, are based on access to the radio repeater sites. This access is needed for both installation and yearly maintenance, and the possibility of emergency repairs. The fastest way to reach a repeater for yearly maintenance or to make the needed repairs in an emergency situation is by helicopter. When a repeater goes down unexpectedly, anyone working in or visiting the area is subject to increased risk to their personal safety. The longer the repeater is down the longer the risk persists. I considered this in making my decision to provide helicopter access for the Carr Mountain and Mount Cabot repeaters. These repeaters in particular offer the most in expanded radio coverage (EA, p. 19 Map – Proposed Action Radio Coverage) and so the greatest area with risk if a repeater fails.

Once the decision is implemented, all new and existing repeaters on the Forest, except that on Mount Carrigain, will have reasonable access (defined as being no more than a hiking distance of approximately one mile). If temporary coverage gaps occur due a repeater going down, the vast majority of the Forest could have coverage quickly restored due to this high level of accessibility. This fact, in addition to the unique recreation and scenic qualities of the area described below, and effects to Bicknell's Thrush habitat, have led me to conclude that the effects

to Mount Carrigain from creating an HLZ outweigh the need for reasonable access to this one repeater and therefore an HLZ will not be created. Due to the coverage provided by Carr and Cabot repeaters, I am not willing to leave them with hike only access.

In addition, I considered that Carr Mountain and Mount Cabot have vegetation directly on or surrounding the summit that blocks the view of the greater landscape and thus the view of the HLZs that will be created. The effects analyses point out that on Carr Mountain, due to the size and location of the HLZ, it more than likely will only be noticed by hikers as they pass it by on the Carr Mountain Trail. People observing Carr Mountain from a distance, from popular viewpoints such as Stinson Mountain, will not likely be able to see such a small opening (as stated in Chapter 3 of the EA in the Visuals Effects Analysis). On Cabot, the HLZ will be more apparent to hikers, as they will be hiking directly onto the landing pad on their way to the summit. Although located on the ridgeline, it is still unlikely that the HLZ will be visible from distant viewpoints due to its small size. Although obvious to hikers visiting the area, the HLZ may actually be considered a welcome addition to the area, improving views and providing a platform for tenting. A cabin and outbuilding are located only 100′ or so down the trail from the HLZ location (itself being where a fire tower once stood), so the addition of another small simple structure would not completely change the character of the summit.

In the case of Mount Carrigain, I've made a decision for no helicopter access decided based on public comment and the specialist's effects analyses, particularly those for the recreation and visuals resources. Public concerns with the effects of the proposed actions to recreation experience and scenic value were concentrated on Mount Carrigain to a much greater extent than either Carr Mountain or Mount Cabot. Commenters focused on the uniquely exceptional view from the observation tower on the summit, which includes a view down Signal Ridge where the HLZ was proposed to be created. The effects analyses also highlighted other unique characteristics of Carrigain as compared to Carr and Cabot.

Mount Carrigain similarly has vegetation surrounding the summit that blocks the view of the greater landscape, but also supports a lookout tower that provides hikers a 360 degree superior view of a mostly contiguous forest canopy, long ridgeline, and down into the Pemigewasset Wilderness. The Appalachian Mountain Club's White Mountain Guide states, "Carrigain has one of the finest

viewpoints in the White Mountains (AMC 1992, p. 218)...." Carrigain is also colloquially known as the peak hikers save for last when hiking all WMNF peaks over 4,000 feet (known as the "4,000 footers club"), which adds a special quality to the recreational experience of the area that cannot be quantified. The recreational and scenic qualities of Mount Carrigain, as well as the fact that Carrigain is considered to have Very High recreational use, as opposed to Carr and Cabot which are considered Low and Moderate use, respectively (as stated in Chapter 3 of the EA in the Recreation Effects Analysis), led me to choose Alternative 3 for Mount Carrigain which minimizes the effects to this peak while still achieving the purpose and need for the project.

Access to the Carrigain repeater will be limited to a long strenuous hike that is approximately 5.1 miles (one-way) with 3,280' of elevation gain. Additional process, time and money will be needed to bring in a qualified technician that has both the technical and physical ability to repair the repeater when needed. By choosing Alternative 3 for this peak, I am accepting the increased risk that if the repeater goes down it is unlikely to be immediately repaired. To minimize risk to staff working in these areas when communications go down, extra care will be taken to mitigate the situation (e.g., detailed itineraries, checking in and out throughout the day where possible, rescheduling work in those areas, etc.).

This decision is based on my review of the Radio Improvement Project EA and the extensive supporting documentation in the project record, including input from the public and appropriate resource specialists. I am satisfied that the interdisciplinary team conducted a thorough analysis of the proposed action and alternatives and that we effectively involved the public and carefully considered and responded to their comments. In addition to applying standards and guidelines from the Forest Plan, the interdisciplinary team developed project design and mitigation measures required for implementation. The record shows a thorough review of relevant scientific information, a consideration of responsible opposing views, and the acknowledgement of incomplete or unavailable information, scientific uncertainty, and risk. The analysis is based on best available science.

Alternatives Considered but not Selected

The interdisciplinary team evaluated three alternatives in detail in the Environmental Assessment. These alternatives are described fully in Chapter 2 of the EA; the potential effects of each alternative are analyzed in Chapter 3 of the EA. Here

I summarize the alternatives I did not select and give my reasons for not choosing them.

Alternative 1

Analysis of this alternative provides a baseline for evaluating the effects of action alternatives. Under this alternative, current activities would continue but none of the activities proposed in the Radio Improvement Project would occur at this time. Trail and facility maintenance and monitoring activities would be the only management occurring in the project area.

I did not select Alternative 1 because it would not have addressed the purpose and need of the project.

Alternative 2 for Mount Carrigain and Alternative 3 for Carr Mountain and Mount Cabot

The reasons for why I did not select Alternative 2 for Mount Carrigain and Alternative 3 for Carr Mountain and Mount Cabot are described above in the Reasons for Decision section. As stated there, I am not willing to have hike only access for those two repeaters due to the extensive area where they provide radio coverage. In addition, the effects to the scenic and recreational resource for these peaks does not warrant the risk of a longer term loss in coverage if they fail.

Alternatives Considered but Not Fully Evaluated

Public and internal comments identified two other possible alternatives. The interdisciplinary team and I considered these possible alternatives, but did not evaluate them fully in the Environmental Assessment because they were infeasible or would not meet the purpose and need identified in Chapter 1 of the EA. A more detailed rationale for not analyzing each of these possible alternatives is at the end of Chapter 2 of the EA.

- Do not continue to enhance the existing radio system; instead use satellite phones for communication where radios do not currently work.
- Consider other peaks as locations for the new repeater sites.

4. Public Involvement

This project was listed on the quarterly White Mountain National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) beginning in January 2014. The scoping period began on February 3, 2014. The 30-day comment period started on August 6, 2014 with a legal notice published in the New Hampshire Union Leader.

Those contacted for public comment included local hiking and Search and Rescue groups, state and federal agencies, wildlife groups, the town of Milan, Wildcat Ski Area managers, an adjacent property owner, and interested members of the public.

Ten individuals submitted comments, most of which focused on effects to recreation and visuals. Each comment was discussed by the interdisciplinary team and used to help focus the effects analyses and develop an alternative to the Proposed Action. Refer to Appendix D of the EA for the complete Response to Comments.

On March 6, 2015, the Draft Decision Notice - Finding of No Significant Impact and Final Environmental Assessment were released which initiated the 45-day time period to file any objections. No objections were received during this 45 day objection period. (See Section 7 for more information.)

Issues

Early public involvement and interdisciplinary team discussions were used to determine the significant issues that would be analyzed in depth and to identify the issues that are not significant or have been covered elsewhere (40 CFR 1501.7(a)). The following significant issues, which are described in more detail in Chapter 2 of the EA, were used to develop alternatives:

- The proposed activities would detract from the scenic integrity and recreation experience in these areas.
- Creating a new clearing to allow a helicopter to land is not a necessity.

All other issues were addressed through the project design features and mitigation measures (Appendix A of the EA), or are addressed by the Forest Plan and its Final Environmental Impact Statement.

5. Findings Required By Other Laws and Regulations

My decision will comply with all current, applicable laws and regulations. I have summarized some pertinent ones below.

National Environmental Policy Act

This Act requires public involvement, and consideration and disclosure of potential environmental effects. For this project, a strong effort was made to reach out to the public, identify interested parties, consult with them regarding the proposed action, identify public issues and concerns, and use that information to develop proposed alternatives, improve the effects analysis, and make a well-reasoned decision.

The Radio Improvement Project environmental analysis was conducted following the procedures and requirements contained in this Act. An interdisciplinary team fully evaluated and disclosed the environmental effects of the proposed project based upon field study, resource inventory and survey, the best available science, and their professional expertise. The entirety of documentation for this decision demonstrates compliance with this Act.

Forest Plan Consistency (National Forest Management Act)

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) requires that all site-specific project activities be consistent with direction in the applicable Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). This project implements the WMNF Forest Plan. As required by NFMA Section 1604(i), I find this project to be consistent with the WMNF Forest Plan including goals, objectives, desired future conditions, and Forest-wide and Management Area standards and guidelines with the two exceptions, a Forest-wide standard designed to protect Bicknell's thrush habitat and a Forest-wide guideline related to scenic integrity objectives. Refer to the Decision and Rationale section of this document to review additional information on the required Forest Plan Amendment and the rationale for not meeting the SIO guideline.

Endangered Species Act

The Endangered Species Act requires that federal activities not jeopardize the continued existence of any species federally listed or proposed as threatened or endangered, or result in adverse modification to such species' designated critical

habitat. All species listed or proposed under the federal Endangered Species Act were considered for evaluation of effects in this project (BE, see project record). Note that no federally listed or proposed species are known to occur within the Project Area.

Based on a review of all available information, it was the Forest Service Biologist's and Botanist's determination to complete a more detailed analysis on the following species:

- Canada Lynx (*Lynx canadensis*)- Federally Threatened
- Northern long-eared bat (*Myotis septentrionalis*)- Federally Threatened

For the reasons indicated in the Biological Evaluation, the project will have "no effect" on the Canada Lynx. The listing status of the northern long-eared bat recently changed from Proposed to Threatened. Implementation of the project May Affect, but is Not Likely to Adversely Affect northern long-eared bats. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concurred with this determination on May 12, 2015 (see project record). This project will have "no effect" on any other listed or proposed species, or designated critical habitat, because they do not occur in the project area.

National Historic Preservation Act and Archaeological Resources Protection Act

Surveys were conducted for archaeological sites and historic properties or areas that might be affected by this decision (project record). Three historic and no prehistoric sites are in the project area. The three historic sites are all former fire lookout tower stations: FS Site No. 4-177 (state No. 27-GR-2254) at Carr Mountain, FS Site No. 5-075 (state No.27-GR-2142) at Mount Carrigain, and FS Site No. 2-047 (state No. 27-CO-2047) at Mount Cabot. As discussed in the Heritage Effects Analysis section of Chapter 3 of the EA, project design and mitigation measures (Appendix A of the EA) will ensure that all known existing features at these sites will be avoided by project activities. The findings and recommendations from the inventory and report were submitted to the New Hampshire State Historic Preservation Office, and they concurred with our finding that there would be no adverse effects to any cultural resources (project record). Therefore I find that this decision complies with the National Historic Preservation Act and the Archaeological Resources Protection Act.

Migratory Bird Treaty Act

This decision is consistent with this Act and Executive Order 13186 regarding the responsibilities of Federal agencies to protect migratory birds. As required by the Memorandum of Understanding between the Forest Service and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to promote the conservation of migratory birds, the Forest Biologist evaluated the likely effects to migratory birds known to nest and breed on the White Mountain National Forest. The key migratory bird species for this project is Bicknell's thrush, which was analyzed in detail in the Biological Evaluation. Minor effects to Bicknell's thrush habitat will occur, resulting in a site-specific Forest Plan amendment, but are not expected to cause measurable population effects.

6. Finding of No Significant Impact

Findings

Based on my review of the Radio Improvement Project EA and documentation, I have determined that the activities included in Alternative 2 for Carr Mountain, Mount Cabot, Wildcat Mountain and Milan Hill and Alternative 3 for Mount Carrigain will not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment. Therefore, preparation of an environmental impact statement is not required. This finding is based on the context and intensity of the actions (40 C.F.R. § 1508.27) as explained below.

Context

The significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts and varies with the setting. In the case of a site-specific action, significance usually depends on the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Both short- and long-term effects are relevant (40 CFR 1508.27).

This decision and the project EA are tiered to the Forest Plan Record of Decision and incorporate by reference the Forest Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), which analyzed and disclosed effects of potential Forest management at a larger scale. The activities planned in the Radio Improvement Project are similar to others completed on the White Mountain National Forest and are within the range of effects anticipated in the Forest Plan FEIS.

The environmental effects of this project are analyzed at varying scales (e.g. the

project area, viewshed, or Forest), as described for each resource in Chapter 3 of the EA. I have reviewed the cumulative effects of past management, combined with this project and reasonably foreseeable future actions as they are analyzed in Chapter 3 of the EA, and feel that the context of this decision is limited to the land in and adjacent to the project area. The project's relatively small scale limits its effects. The analysis in Chapter 3 indicates that project design and application of Forest Plan standards and guidelines and best management practices will minimize negative effects to all resources. Given the short-term and localized nature of effects described in the EA, the Radio Improvement Project will have no measurable effects at the regional or national levels and consideration of significance will focus on the local setting.

This decision, and the environmental assessment and effects analysis on which it is based, applies only to this local area. After a thorough review of the effects analysis contained in the EA, I find that this project does not establish a local, regional, or national precedent, nor does it have any substantial applicability beyond the bounds of the White Mountain National Forest.

Intensity

Intensity is a measure of the severity, extent, or quantity of effects, and is based on information from Chapter 3 of the EA and the project record. I have determined that the interdisciplinary team considered the effects of this project appropriately and thoroughly with an analysis that is responsive to concerns and issues raised by the public. They took a hard look at the environmental effects using relevant scientific information and their knowledge of site-specific conditions gained from numerous field visits. My finding of no significant impact is based on the intensity of effects using the ten factors identified in 40 CFR 1508.27b.

1. ***Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.***

   As described in the EA (Chapter 3), there are likely to be both beneficial and adverse effects to certain resources from taking the actions proposed in Alternative 2 for Carr Mountain, Mount Cabot, Wildcat Mountain and Milan Hill and Alternative 3 for Mount Carrigain. In reaching my finding of no significant impact, I did not ignore or trivialize negative effects by "offsetting" them with beneficial effects. The EA demonstrates that, due to careful project design that incorporates

protective measures (Forest Plan standards and guidelines, best management practices, and site-specific design features), the possible negative effects are relatively minor and of short duration, and disclosed for direct, indirect, and cumulative effects.

2. ***The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.***

   As discussed in the EA, there will be a benefit to public health and safety from taking the actions proposed in Alternative 2 for Carr Mountain, Mount Cabot, Wildcat Mountain and Milan Hill and Alternative 3 for Mount Carrigain. The project was proposed to address an existing safety concern on the Forest, gaps in radio coverage which limit communications to and from the field. Implementing this set of actions will decrease the total Forest area without radio coverage from 12 to 4 percent, providing a means of communication where none currently exists. This increase in coverage will allow Forest staff to both send and receive important messages that may be vital to their, or a member of the public's, personal health and safety (e.g., Alert of an incoming storm or Search and Rescue coordination).

3. ***Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.***

   There are no park lands, prime farmlands, perennial or ephemeral waterbodies, research natural areas, outstanding natural communities, or ecologically critical areas in the project area, and therefore none would be adversely affected by this project. The interdisciplinary team conducted field visits to the project areas and identified specific locations for the proposed actions, along with design features and mitigation measures, to avoid effects to any special features. Cultural resources will be protected by the application of Forest Plan standards and guidelines and project design features and mitigation measures (EA, Chapter 3, Heritage Effects Analysis). Project activities will occur in the Kilkenny, Pemigewasset, and South Carr inventoried roadless areas and adjacent to the Wild River inventory area. Activities will occur in areas included in the Roadless Area Conservation Rule (RACR) inventory and areas in the inventory that was completed during the most recent Forest Plan revision. In line with agency policy, the Regional Forester for the Eastern Region was briefed on the potential cutting of trees in RACR inventoried roadless areas as part of this project. No concerns were identi-

fied as part of that review (see project record). All activities to be implemented are consistent with the RACR and will not affect any area's potential to be included in future inventories or its future eligibility as potential Wilderness (EA, Chapter 3, Roadless/Wilderness Character Effects Analysis).

4. ***The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.***

   In the context of the National Environmental Policy Act, controversy refers to a substantial dispute in the scientific community regarding the effects of an action, not social opposition. The interdisciplinary team for this project considered extensive scientific research (see project record), including any submitted by the public, to determine its applicability to the project and found no controversy related to the predicted effects. Our contact with the State Historic Preservation Office did not identify any scientific controversy regarding the direct, indirect, or cumulative effects of this project on Heritage Resources (the SHPO concurrence [signed 6/20/2014] document is available in the project record). Based on these factors, and the analysis provided in the EA and project record, I have concluded that the effects of Alternative 2 for Carr Mountain, Mount Cabot, Wildcat Mountain and Milan Hill and Alternative 3 for Mount Carrigain on the quality of the human environment are not controversial.

5. ***The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.***

   The White Mountain National Forest has considerable on-the-ground experience with the types of activities to be implemented in this project, under similar conditions. The range of site characteristics are similar to those taken into consideration and disclosed in the Forest Plan FEIS, Chapter 3, and the effects of this project are within the range anticipated in that FEIS and the Forest Plan Record of Decision. The effects analysis (EA Chapter 3) is based on the best available science and demonstrates that the effects of these activities are not uncertain and do not involve unique or unknown risks. The body of knowledge gained through years of project-level and programmatic monitoring, timber sale inspections, stand examinations, wildlife surveys, and applied research (see project record) provides a basis for the effects analysis in the EA and supports my determination that there will be no highly uncertain effects or unique or unknown risks associated with this project.

6. ***The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.***

   This is not a precedent-setting decision. The effects of implementing Alternative 2 for Carr Mountain, Mount Cabot, Wildcat Mountain and Milan Hill and Alternative 3 for Mount Carrigain are within the range of effects disclosed in the Forest Plan FEIS, which analyzed the effects of the types of activities that will be implemented under this set of actions at a larger scale. The implementation of this set of actions does not make a commitment to do anything in other areas on the White Mountain National Forest or any other national forest. This action and its effects are fully disclosed in the EA and limited to the geographical areas analyzed in the individual resource effects sections. It will not set a regional or national precedent. For these reasons, I have determined this action does not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects.

7. ***Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.***

   Chapter 3 of the EA discloses the combined effects of this project with other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions. None of the actions included in Alternative 2 for Carr Mountain, Mount Cabot, Wildcat Mountain and Milan Hill and Alternative 3 for Mount Carrigain would create significant impact alone or when considered with other actions. The interdisciplinary team carefully chose cumulative effects analysis areas and timeframes, including private lands where it made sense for the resource, that would most thoroughly examine and predict effects (see Chapter 3 of the EA). Based on the analysis in the EA and incorporating by reference the range of effects predicted in the Forest Plan FEIS, I have determined that implementing this set of actions will not result in significant cumulative effects.

8. ***The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.***

   For the reasons explained in Chapter 3 of the EA and Section 5 of the Decision Notice, above, I find that this decision will not adversely affect any cultural or

historical resources. Our contact with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) did not identify any scientific controversy regarding the direct, indirect, or cumulative effects of this project on Heritage Resources (the SHPO concurrence document [signed 6/20/2014] is available in the project record). No significant scientific resources have been identified in the project area (see project record).

9. ***The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.***

   Compliance with the Endangered Species Act and protection of species and their habitat are described in the Biological Evaluation (in the project file) and in the EA (Chapter 3), and summarized in Section 5 of the Decision Notice, Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations. Each of these references explains the determination that Alternative 2 for Carr Mountain, Mount Cabot, Wildcat Mountain and Milan Hill and Alternative 3 for Mount Carrigain will not have a significant adverse effect on any listed species.

10. ***Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.***

    All applicable laws for the protection of the environment are incorporated into the standards and guidelines in the White Mountain National Forest Plan. Alternative 2 for Carr Mountain, Mount Cabot, Wildcat Mountain and Milan Hill and Alternative 3 for Mount Carrigain comply with the Forest Plan, with two exceptions, a Forest-wide standard designed to protect Bicknell's thrush habitat and a Forest-wide guideline related to scenic integrity objectives. A Forest Plan Amendment to address the Bicknell's thrush habitat standard and rationale to address the scenic integrity objective guideline is included as part of this decision (See Section 3, Decision). A further description of the project's compliance with applicable laws occurs in Section 5 of the Decision Notice. I find that none of the actions in this decision threatens to violate applicable Federal, State, or local laws or other requirements to protect the environment.

    None of the ten factors considered here for intensity of effects reaches a threshold of significance. As described above, the context of effects for this project are local. Therefore I have determined that the activities included in this decision will not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the quality of the

human environment. Therefore, preparation of an environmental impact statement is not required.

7. Pre-Decisional Objection Opportunities

This decision is subject to the objection process pursuant to 36 CFR Part 218, Subparts A and B. A legal notice announcing the availability of the Draft Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for this project was published on March 9, 2015 in the *New Hampshire Union Leader*. The Draft Decision Notice and FONSI were posted on the Forest's website and provided to all interested parties, including everyone who commented on the project during a designated comment period.

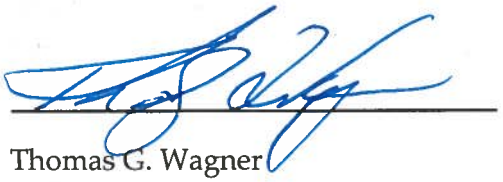
8. Implementation Date and Contact

Implementation may begin immediately.

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Erica Roberts at email: ericajroberts@fs.fed.us, or by phone at 603-536-6230, or by FAX at 603-536-3685.

Additional information about this decision also can be found on the White Mountain National Forest web page at:

http://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/whitemountain/landmanagement/projects.



Thomas G. Wagner

Forest Supervisor

Responsible Official

Date

References

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