# Species of Conservation Concern Identification Process for the Nez Perce - Clearwater National Forests Plan Revision

## INTRODUCTION

This document outlines the Northern Region's approach in identifying species of conservation concern (SCC) for the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests. This process supersedes the process that led to the identification of potential SCC for the 2014 Forest Plan Assessment, which occurred before the Forest Service planning directives were finalized.

The 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219) defines a species of conservation concern (SCC) as "a species, other than a federally recognized threatened, endangered, proposed or candidate species, that is known to occur in the plan area and for which the regional forester has determined that the best available scientific information indicates substantial concern about the species' capability to persist over the long-term in the plan area" (36 CFR 219.9).

Direction for identifying SCC is in the Forest Service handbook (FSH) for land management planning (i.e., the planning directives) at FSH 1909.12, chapter 10, section 12.52 and at chapter 20, section 21.22a. Also central to the SCC identification process is the use of best available scientific information (BASI), which is clarified at FSH 1909.12, Zero Code, section 07. The Northern Region considered a variety of sources in its pursuit of BASI, including but not limited to peer reviewed articles; scientific assessments; observational data; expert opinion; and other scientific information generated or managed by the Forest Service, other government agencies, tribal entities, and the public.

## PROCESS

### Determine the list of species to consider for SCC status

Staff from the NPCNF and Regional Office query spatial observation records of all species with documented occurrences in the plan area to identify the subset that meet at least one category needing consideration. The plan area includes all National Forest System lands addressed in the revised plan; other landownerships are not included.

The spatial observation records for the plan area are obtained from the Idaho Natural Heritage Program's (INHP) Species Diversity Database (SDD). The SDD database was used because it is the most comprehensive, reliable, and up-to-date source of documented species occurrences on NFS lands in Idaho. The INHP, which is part of the international NatureServe network, manages statewide observational data and other information for species of conservation interest. The Forest Service, other agencies, and the public all contribute observation records to the SDD. The SDD includes records from the Forest Service's official terrestrial and aquatic animal observational databases (i.e., the NRM Wildlife and AqS databases) and the threatened endangered and sensitive plant (TESP-IS) application.

The categories of species to consider originate from the final planning directives at FSH 1909.12, chapter 10, section 12.52. A species meeting any one category is further considered for SCC status regardless of whether it meets any another category, provided there is at least one observation record of the species in the plan area. The categories are:

A) NatureServe global (G) or intraspecific taxon (T) ranks of 1 or 2[1].

B) NatureServe G3 ranks (plants and vertebrate animals only)[1]. G3 invertebrate species are not evaluated because they often lack reliable characteristics for field identification, and commonly, there is insufficient scientific information available to indicate substantial concern (e.g., data is very limited on plan area distribution, abundance, habitat use, trends, relevant threats and life history characteristics). Neither vertebrate nor invertebrate species with higher ranks (e.g., G4, G5) are automatically considered because they are reasonably secure at the global level, and if there is concern at the plan level, they will be identified in category H. This approach is consistent with FSH 1909.12 chapter 10, section 12.52d(3)(a).

C) Idaho state (S) ranks of 1 or 2.[1] Higher numerical ranks (e.g., S3, S4, S5) are not included in this category because they are relatively secure at the statewide level; concern at the plan level would be identified in category H.

D) Delisted (removed) from the Endangered Species Act list within the last five years, or delisted and still monitored by the authoritative regulatory agency.[2]

E) Positive "90-day findings" made in response to federal listing petitions.[2]

F) Threatened or endangered designations by the state of Idaho[1] or federally recognized tribes.

G) Regional Forester's sensitive species in the plan area and on adjoining National Forests in other regions (i.e., R1 Bitterroot and Idaho Panhandle, R4 Payette, and R6 Wallowa-Whitman). The planning directives do not require consideration of this category. However, it was adopted to compensate for the absence of SCC on adjoining units, which the directives recommended for consideration, but have not yet been identified.[3]

H) Local conservation concern due to significant threats to populations or habitats, declining trends in populations or habitat, restricted ranges or habitats, or low population numbers. This category of species may be identified through public comments and from conversations with local biologists from the Forest Service, other federal agencies, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, tribal entities, and local groups or individuals with scientific expertise.

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[1]Statuses obtained from INHP. See https://idfg.idaho.gov/species/taxa/ranks and IDFG (2017) for definitions and more information.

[2] Statuses obtained from US Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service.

[3] SCC identified for the Salmon-Challis National Forest will be reviewed when the list becomes available; this forest is not adjacent to the NPCNF plan area but is nearby.

**Determine BASI for each species**

Regional office staff research and compile BASI for all species meeting one or more of the categories for consideration described above. This includes reviewing the scientific information provided by any source, including other agencies, tribal entities and the public. The information is documented in a concise, transparent format that is publicly available upon completion. Information sought relates to the habitat, distribution, abundance, population and habitat trends, threats, life history, and other information relevant to the population of the species using the plan area.

**Evaluate BASI to Identify SCC**

Regional Office staff, in coordination with the NPCNF planning team and other experts as needed, evaluate the BASI to determine which species they recommend be identified as SCC, and which species should not be identified as SCC. The recommendations are based on criteria contained in the planning directives at FSH 1909.2, chapter 10, section 12.52c. Summary rationale are provided for all recommendations, including those species found not to meet the criteria. The recommendations are then provided to the Regional Forester for ultimate identification as SCC.

The criteria for identifying SCC are:

A) The species must be native to and known to occur in the plan area.

   i. A species is "known to occur" if, at the time of plan development, the best available scientific information indicates that it is established or becoming established on NFS lands in the plan area. We applied NatureServe timelines[4] to species observation records in the plan area to differentiate which species have sufficient information to determine they are *currently* known to occur in the plan area from those only known to *historically* occur in the plan area. NatureServe's timelines were used as best available scientific information to establish when past observations are not enough evidence to conclude that the species is known to occur in the plan area at this time.

   ii. A species with individual occurrences in a plan area that are merely "accidental" or "transient," or are well outside the species' existing range at the time of plan development, is not established or becoming established in the plan area. If the range of a species is changing so that what is becoming its "normal" range includes the plan area, an individual occurrence should not be considered transient or accidental.

   iii. Species are removed from further consideration if they were designated by the state NHP as extirpated (SX) or historic (SH).[1]

   iv. Observation records are reviewed and excluded from further review if the point

[4] NatureServe describes their guidelines for ranking species as historical occurrences at http://explorer.natureserve.org/eorankguide.htm

location or description was too imprecise or vague to determine whether the observation actually occurred in the plan area. These types of records most commonly originate from historical documentation that provided only broad reference to locations. However, it is important to note that exclusion of these records would only result in dropping a species from further consideration if more precise records for the species were not available within the planning area.

B) The best available scientific information must indicate substantial concern about the species' capability to persist over the long term in the plan area.

   i. In general, substantial concern is best demonstrated by some combination of a decreasing population (abundance or distribution), decreasing habitat, or significant threats, particularly when greater than expected under natural variation and the population in the plan area is very small. Other factors considered during this evaluation included abundance, geographic distribution, reproductive potential, dispersal capabilities, and other demographic and life history characteristics of the species that could influence long-term persistence in the plan area. This approach is based on best available scientific information in conjunction with professional expertise of Regional Office biologists.

   ii. Rarity alone typically is not considered a substantial concern unless accompanied by one or more of the three general conditions listed in (B)(i) immediately above, or there are other prominent circumstances leading to concern for long-term persistence in the plan area. Most species in any given community are naturally rare (McGill et al. 2007, Magurran and Henderson 2003), so low abundance is not necessarily cause for concern.

C) Rationale for not identifying species as SCC include:

   i. If the species is secure and its continued long-term persistence in the plan area is not at risk based on knowledge of its abundance, distribution, lack of threats to persistence, trends in habitat, or responses to management.

   ii. Insufficient scientific information is available to conclude that there is a substantial concern about the species' capability to persist in the plan area over the long term. Lack of sufficient scientific information includes having limited inventory data resulting from low survey effort, lack of effective detection methods, or, in the case of purported population declines, lack of reasonably consistent monitoring methods among trend monitoring periods that would preclude meaningful comparison. The availability of information about other factors noted in the rationale spreadsheet was also considered.

**The Regional Forester identifies SCC**

The Regional Forester reviews the recommendations provided by Regional Office specialists to verify that BASI has been used in the species evaluations. The Regional Forester then identifies SCC for the plan area, through a letter to the Forest Supervisor. The letter and the evaluation

documents are made publicly available on the Regional SCC webpage at https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r1/landmanagement/planning/?cid=fseprd500402

**Review the documentation and the list of SCC as warranted by BASI**

The SCC identification process is iterative, and any or all portions of it may be repeated in response to public comments or the availability of new scientific information. The list of species identified as SCC may change over time in response to new BASI.

**References**

Magurran, A.E. and P.A. Henderson (2003). Explaining the excess of rare species in natural species abundance distributions. Nature, vol. 422: 714-716.

McGill, B.J. et al. (2007). Species abundance distributions: moving beyond single prediction theories to integration within an ecological framework. Ecology Letters, vol. 10: 995-1015.