

Species of Conservation Concern Identification Process

Blue Mountains National Forests Plan Revision

INTRODUCTION

This document summarizes the approach for identifying species of conservation concern (SCC) for the Malheur, Wallowa-Whitman, and Umatilla National Forests in the Pacific Northwest Region of the Forest Service. The purpose of the SCC list is to meet the National Forest Management Act's (NFMA) requirement of "providing for diversity of plant and animal communities based on the suitability and capability of the specific land area in order to meet overall multiple-use objectives."

[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](#) 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 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 until a final list is determined.

The final list will be reflected in the revised forest plans and Record of Decisions (ROD) signed by each forest supervisor. The Regional Forester may amend these lists over the life of the forest plans to provide for long-term persistence in the case of species additions, and to remove/revise components that are no longer needed in the case of removals. If a new species is added in subsequent years, the Forest supervisor then evaluates whether existing plan components would provide the ecological conditions necessary to maintain the long-term persistence of the species within the planning area or if a plan amendment is warranted. The process for amending an SCC list is outlined in Forest Service Handbook (FSH 1909.12, Chapter 20, Section 21.22b).

PROCESS

Starting List

The intent of the SCC list is to compile all possible species of conservation concern in the plan area. WE began with a comprehensive list for Oregon and Washington derived from existing information such as the current Regional Forester's sensitive species and state status rankings. Other sources are listed below. If a species qualified based on status rank, they were then determined if they are documented to occur in the plan area.

Conservation Status Ranks

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. State (S) ranks of 1 or 2. Higher numerical ranks (e.g., S3, S4, S5) are species relatively secure at the statewide level; concern at the plan level would be identified in category H.
- C. Oregon, Washington and Idaho State listings of threatened and endangered species, sensitive species, species of concern, and conservation strategy species.
- D. Regional Forester's sensitive species in the plan area.
- E. Delisted (removed) from the Endangered Species Act list within the last five years, or delisted and still monitored by the authoritative regulatory agency.
- F. Positive "90-day findings" made in response to federal listing petitions.
- G. Threatened or endangered designations by the states or federally recognized tribes.
- 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 and state agencies, tribal entities, and local groups or individuals with scientific expertise.

Known to Occur Criteria

A species is known to occur in a plan area if, at the time of plan development, the best available scientific information indicates that a species is established or is becoming established in the plan area. Species that are transient or accidental or are well outside the species existing range at the time of plan development, are not considered established or becoming established. 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 (FSH 1909.12, Chapter 10, Section 12.52c).

Forest Service spatial observation records maintained by the Regional Office were queried to determine all species with documented occurrences in the plan area to identify the subset that meet at least one category needing consideration. The SCC plan area includes all National Forest System lands for the Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests. Primary sources of information about presence of a species in the plan area were the Natural Resource Manager (NRM) data that houses Forest Service fish and wildlife observations in GIS, as well as the Threatened, Endangered and Sensitive Plants (TESP) database.

Oregon Biodiversity Information Center (ORBIC) data was also queried. ORBIC is a comprehensive, reliable, and up-to-date source of documented species occurrences on NFS lands in Oregon. ORBIC manages statewide observational data and other information for species of conservation interest.

Additional sources of occurrence information included:

- Regional Forester's Sensitive Species list
- Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife data
- Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife data
- Washington Natural Heritage Program (WNHP)
- ICBEMP² dataset summaries (for insects)
- Xerces Society data and agency Fact Sheets for invertebrates
- Geographic Biotic Observations (GEOBOB), Bureau of Land Management GIS data which has some records on National Forests

¹ See Appendix A. Glossary

² Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project

- Published Distribution maps (e.g. ICBEMP, Atlas of Oregon Wildlife, Birds of Oregon, Birds of Washington, Field Guide to the Rare Plants of Washington and similar books) often gave specific occurrence information on each forest.
- Birds of the World website
- GBIF Global Biodiversity Information Facility, for eBird data <https://www.gbif.org/what-is-gbif>
- Breeding Bird Survey observation points on the Avian Knowledge Network website (<https://avianknowledge.net/index.php/observations-map/>) and count data on the USGS Eastern Ecological Science Center website (<https://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/BBS/PublicDataInterface/index.cfm>)
- North American Bat Monitoring Program in the Pacific Northwest (OR, WA, ID) via Oregon State University Cascades Northwestern Bat Hub (<https://osucascades.edu/HERS/northwest-bat-hub/nabat>)

Additional sources for plant species included:

- Oregon Department of Agriculture (interactive web map of listed vascular plants)
- Oregon Flora Project, especially the Atlas (www.oregonflora.org/atlas.php)
- Consortium of Pacific Northwest Herbaria
- Burke Washington Atlas herbarium website
- Consortium of Lichen Herbaria
- Hornworts and liverworts of Washington State: a summary of herbarium records listed by county (Heinlen 2021)
- Northwest Lichenologists working list of Rare Washington Lichens

Reviews

Forest specialists are invited to review the initial potential SCC list and concur with documented presence and add species we may have missed. Forest review at this stage of planning is only intended to inform the potential SCC list and development of species accounts, and not intended to inform the determination of substantial concern for the species to persist on the forests. Forest review of comments and information will be added to the SCC master worksheet that informs the SCC lists for each forest.

Recommendation to Regional Forester

Forest Supervisors will recommend the potential SCC lists to the Regional Forester. The Regional Forester will be briefed on the process of list development, the forest review process, and next steps. There is no Regional Forester decision at this stage.

Public, Tribal, and Other Government Engagement

The potential SCC lists will be shared with tribes, other government agencies, and the public. At this stage, no determination has been made regarding whether the species on the potential SCC list will be carried forward. That determination will be made during the assessment phase, and supporting documentation will be provided.

The primary input that will be requested at this stage is for the public to inform us of any species they believe are missing from the potential SCC lists, and scientific information that supports considering them (date of last observation, threats observed, condition and size of the occurrence, habitat parameters associated with the species).

Species would be added to the potential SCC list if warranted, for example if the species is native, and established on the forest in question, and there is some evidence that they may be at-risk. A species account would then be developed for consideration.

ASSESSMENT PHASE

The assessment phase has three primary SCC tasks that collectively inform the development of the Regional Forester's SCC lists:

1. Prepare or gather Species Accounts that have the best available scientific information.
2. Determine which species on the list have substantial concern for long-term persistence on each planning unit and record that determination in a substantial concern rationale document, and
3. Develop species groups based on ecological conditions the species have in common, including habitat and stressors.

Species Accounts

Species accounts are intended to be focused on information that is directly related to the determination of substantial concern. Species accounts document information about population and habitat trends, distribution, life history, limiting factors, stressors, and threats (including the degree and extent), that inform determining substantial concern for long-term persistence of the species on the planning units. This information comes from the best available scientific information for each of the species. An existing partnership agreement with Oregon Biodiversity Information Center (ORBIC) was utilized to produce most of the species accounts.

Species Accounts reflect the Best Available Science Information (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. Species accounts cover habitat, distribution, abundance, population and habitat trends, threats, life history, and other information relevant to the population of the species using the plan area.

Evaluation of BASI and Rationale Determinations

The species accounts provide the basis for the rationale statement and the rationale statements provide the determination of substantial concern. Upon completion of rationale statements for each species, the Regional Foresters' SCC lists for each forest will be developed to include those species with a rationale supporting the substantial concern finding, and excluding those species that do not.

Substantial concern about the species capability to persist over the long term in the plan area for each species on the potential SCC list will be determined by evaluating the best available science documented in the species accounts and considering the following five factors³:

1. Significant threats, caused by stressors on and off the plan area, to populations or the ecological conditions they depend upon (including habitat). These threats include climate change.⁴
2. Declining trends in populations or habitat in the plan area.⁵
3. Restricted ranges (with corresponding narrow endemics, disjunct populations, or species at the edge of their range).⁶

³ The first 4 of these factors come from FSH 1909.12, Section 12.52d. The last one is included to capture other information that should be considered, listed at FSH 1909.12, Section 12.53. The other factors in that list are summarized in the first 4 factors here and explained in the footnotes below.

⁴ Corresponds to numbers 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, and 12 in the list of information that should be considered related to at-risk species at FSH 1909.12, Section 12.53.

⁵ Corresponds to numbers 3, 4, and 7 in the list of information that should be considered related to at-risk species at FSH 1909.12, Section 12.53.

⁶ Corresponds to numbers 2 and 7 in the list of information that should be considered related to at-risk species at FSH 1909.12, Section 12.53.

4. Low population numbers or restricted ecological conditions (habitat) within the plan area.⁷
5. Other factors: taxonomy, diversity, and important ecological function of the species, where any of these factors are of importance in determining the likelihood of long-term persistence of the species in the plan area.⁸

The species status related to these factors is documented in the substantial concern rationale document described below. All factors do not have to apply for a species to qualify as a SCC. Rather, it's possible for only one factor to apply, if the science indicates the conditions related to that factor pose a condition that could lead to the species not persisting in the long term in the planning area; therefore, the conclusion of whether a species qualifies as an SCC is based on professional judgement concerning the weight of evidence in the best available science.

Substantial concern rationale documents summarize the most relevant information that supports, or does not support, the determination for a substantial concern for the species capability to persist over the long term in the plan area. Facts regarding threats, stressors, and limiting factors (e.g., life history requirements) are summarized to explain how and why they led to the determination. The basis for substantial concern rationale statements is the best available science documented in species accounts.

Substantial concern rationale statements follow the 'Issue, Rule, Analysis, Conclusion' (IRAC) framework. The issue at hand for the rationale documents is determining whether the species qualifies as a SCC. The rule for the rationale documents is the four factors of substantial concern described above. The analysis section points to the parts of the species accounts that inform the four factors of substantial concern. If any of the four factors of substantial concern do not apply, then that is stated in the analysis section. The conclusion is a statement that makes the connection between the rule (i.e. the four factors of substantial concern) and the information in the analysis section, with a conclusion about whether there is substantial concern for the species to persist within the planning area in the long-term.

Substantial concern rationale statements have three possible outcomes:

- The science indicates substantial concern for the long-term persistence of the species within the plan area.
- The science indicates that 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.
- There is insufficient information to determination substantial concern for long-term persistence of the species in the plan area.

Forest Review

Rationale statements are drafted and provided to the forests specialists to review and give feedback regarding substantial concern determinations. Forest input will be considered by the core SCC planning team for incorporation into the species rationale documents and the Regional Forester's SCC lists.

Leadership Briefing

When the Regional Foresters' SCC lists are completed with accompanying rationale statements, the Regional Foresters and Responsible Officials will be briefed on the SCC lists, supporting documentation, and next steps.

Public, Tribal, and Other Government Engagement

⁷ Corresponds to numbers 2 and 3 in the list of information that should be considered related to at-risk species at FSH 1909.12, Section 12.53.

⁸ Corresponds to numbers 1, 5, and 8 in the list of information that should be considered related to at-risk species at FSH 1909.12, Section 12.53.

The Regional Forester's SCC lists, species accounts, species rationales will be released for review. Reviewers are invited to propose additional best available scientific information to incorporate into species accounts. The public will also be offered an opportunity to provide feedback on the existing plan component crosswalk.

The core SCC planning team will review feedback regarding best available scientific information. The documentation of why an article is or is not determined to be best available scientific information will be documented in an excel spreadsheet. Those articles that are determined to be best available scientific information will be incorporated into the species accounts, and then the team will consider whether the new science warrants a change in the determination in the species rationale document, and an associated change in the Regional Foresters' SCC lists.

Species groups

Grouping species facilitates efficient evaluation of the existing plans in terms of adequacy of plan content (see 'need to change' section below for more information). Species may be grouped in a variety of ways that logically provide for plan components that address individual species needs. For example, groups may be based on ecological conditions the species have in common, and/or stressors. Species that do not fit within a group or that have special management considerations will be treated separately. One species may be included in multiple groupings.

The SCC team will work closely with staff that develop the framework for describing the terrestrial ecosystems and the aquatic ecosystems to ensure that there is an easy crosswalk between the two, and to ensure that the terminology used are consistent. The SCC planning team will also consider incorporating additional grouping recommended by the public. Follow-up conversations could occur to facilitate this process.

NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (NEPA) ANALYSIS

NEPA compliance starts with a Federal Register notice of intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for plan revision. NEPA analysis is initiated by release of the proposed action for public scoping. The proposed action will take the form of a draft revised forest plan. This initiates the NEPA scoping period on the proposed action which will be followed by development of a draft EIS, final EIS, and record of decision. It ends with the Federal Register notice to start an objection period.

Three elements of the SCC process are completed during NEPA analysis:

1. Tribal, other government agency and public scoping.
2. EIS analysis of the outcomes of plan revision on SCC.
3. Persistence assessment demonstrating how plan components maintain a viable population of each SCC within the plan areas.

Plan Content Development

Development of plan content for the revised plans has two parts. First, existing plan content that is key to providing for ecological conditions for SCC will be translated to be consistent with the 2012 planning rule requirements. Second, the need to change informs the development of additional plan components.

The fundamental premise of the 2012 Planning Rule for meeting the NFMA diversity requirement is that plan components for ecosystem integrity and diversity will provide the ecological conditions to both maintain plant and animal community diversity and support the persistence of most native species in a plan area. However, in some cases, the ecological condition plan components may not be sufficient to provide long-term persistence of SCC guilds and individual species.

Ecological condition plan components will be evaluated for sufficiency in a crosswalk like that described

for evaluation of the existing plans above. When crosswalk analysis indicates that the new plan content is not sufficient for long-term persistence of species guilds or individual species, additional ecological condition plan components are developed if possible, and if the plan content is still not sufficient, then species-specific plan components are developed to supplement the ecological condition plan components.

Persistence Assessment

Under 36 CFR 219.9(b)(1), the responsible official must determine whether the plan components provide the ecological conditions necessary to “maintain a viable population of each species of conservation concern within the plan area.” The SCC persistence assessment contains a species-specific analysis of the sufficiency of the plan components to meet this requirement. The Planning Rule set three possible outcomes of the responsible official’s analysis of plan components with respect to SCC. Additionally, a fourth outcome (#2 below) may arise when the planning unit has developed a set of ecological condition plan components it thinks will provide for species persistence, but also provides supplementary species-specific plan components for greater emphasis and clarity.

Four Determination Outcomes:

1. The responsible official may find that the plan components required by 36 CFR 219.9(a) are sufficient to provide the ecological conditions necessary to maintain a viable population of each species of conservation concern within the planning area.
2. The ecosystem plan components should provide the ecological conditions necessary to maintain a viable population of the [SPECIES NAME] in the plan area. Nonetheless, additional species-specific plan components have been provided for added clarity and/or measures of protection.
3. The responsible official may determine that the plan components required by 36 CFR 219.9(a) are insufficient to provide the ecological conditions necessary to maintain a viable population of each species of conservation concern within the planning area, and that “additional, species-specific plan components, including standards or guidelines, must be included in the plan to provide such ecological conditions in the plan area”; or
4. The responsible official may determine “that it is beyond the authority of the Forest Service or not within the inherent capability of the plan area to maintain or restore the ecological conditions to maintain a viable population of a species of conservation concern in the plan area.” If the responsible official makes this determination, it shall: (1) document the basis for the determination; and (2) include plan components, including standards and guidelines, to maintain or restore ecological conditions within the plan area to contribute to maintaining a viable population of the species within its range, in coordination with other Federal, State, Tribal, and private land managers.⁹

This persistence assessment will be informed by a plan component crosswalk developed during the plan content development phase; the proposed revised plans; public scoping input; and the draft EIS effects analysis.

The draft persistence assessment will be released during the public comment period on the draft EIS. This will provide the public with an opportunity to comment on the sufficiency of the content of the draft EIS analysis and the persistence assessment. That public input will be incorporated into the final EIS and the final persistence assessment. An additional public input opportunity is provided by the administrative review process, which occurs after release of the final EIS and prior to the publication of the Record of Decision.

⁹ 36 CFR 219.9(b)

Appendix A. Glossary

At-risk species: federal Endangered Species Act endangered, threatened, proposed, and candidate species, and species of conservation concern (see below). FSH 1909.12, Chapter 10, Section 12.5

Best available scientific information: the most accurate, reliable, and relevant scientific information to the issues being considered. FSH 1909.12 zero code, section 07

Species groups: this term is meant to indicate a group of species that have common ecological conditions or habitat requirements, and/or have common threats.

Known to occur in the plan area: A species is known to occur in a plan area if, at the time of plan development, the best available scientific information indicates that a species is established or is becoming established in the plan area. 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. FSH 1909.12, Chapter 10, Section 12.52c

Native species: An organism that was historically or is present in a particular ecosystem as a result of natural migratory or evolutionary processes; and not as a result of an accidental or deliberate introduction into that ecosystem. An organism's presence and evolution (adaptation) in an area are determined by climate, soil, and other biotic and abiotic factors. 36 CFR 219.19

NatureServe Global (G) and State (S) ranks: These ranks apply at the global or state rank. Sometimes the state rank and the global rank are different from one another depending on more local factors.

G1 or S1	Critically imperiled – at very high risk of extinction or elimination due to very restricted range, very few populations or occurrences, very steep declines, very severe threats, or other factors.
G2 or S2	Imperiled – At high risk of extinction or elimination due to restricted range, few populations or occurrences, steep declines, severe threats, or other factors.
G3 or S3	Vulnerable — At moderate risk of extinction or elimination due to a fairly restricted range, relatively few populations or occurrences, recent and widespread declines, threats, or other factors.
G4 or S4	Apparently Secure — At fairly low risk of extinction or elimination due to an extensive range and/or many populations or occurrences, but with possible cause for some concern as a result of local recent declines, threats, or other factors.
G5 or S5	Secure — At very low risk of extinction or elimination due to a very extensive range, abundant populations or occurrences, and little to no concern from declines or threats.

Need to change: In the context of at-risk species, the need to change the plan is identified where current plan content is found to be insufficient to maintain a viable population of each species of conservation concern within the plan area, except where the responsible official determines that it is beyond the authority of the Forest Service or not within the inherent capability of the plan area to maintain or restore the ecological conditions to maintain a viable population. 36 CFR 219.9(b)

Persistence: Continued existence. 36 CFR 219.19

Potential SCC list: a list of all species that meet the “must” and “should” consider categories in FSH 1909.12, 12.52d. Note: the potential SCC list is a list of species that will be considered for inclusion on the SCC list. It is not the regional forester’s SCC list.

Regional Forester’s SCC list: The list of species that are found to have concern for long-term persistence in the plan area (see definition of SCC below). This list is released for public input concurrent with the assessment.

SCC planning team: members are a combination of staff from Forest Service Region 6 office, local revision team members based on Blue Mountains forests, and Pacific Planning Service Group (PPSG) who specialize in plan revisions.

Species of Conservation Concern (SCC): Species, other than 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(c).

Viable population: A population of a species that continues to persist over the long term with sufficient distribution to be resilient and adaptable to stressors and likely future environments. 36 CFR 219.19