

Environmental Assessment

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CHAPTER I

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

INTRODUCTION

The Wallowa-Whitman National Forest proposes to set outfitter use allocations and operational limitations in the Wild and Scenic Snake River corridor within the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area (HCNRA). New management direction resulting from the decision on this environmental assessment (EA) will amend the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). Implementation is scheduled for September 1996.

Preparation of this EA is in accordance with the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 (RPA), as amended by the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA), and the associated National Forest System Land and Resource Planning Regulations (36 CFR 219).

Preparation of this EA is required by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), the Council of Environmental Quality NEPA Regulations (40 CFR 1500), and the implementing regulations of NFMA (36 CFR 219).

This EA is tiered to Alternative G as modified by the Record of Decision (ROD) for the Wild and Scenic Snake River Recreation Management Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS). The FEIS and accompanying ROD allocated general recreation use for the Wild and Scenic Snake River corridor. The Forest Service, through this EA, proposes implementation of river use decisions made in the ROD. There are no physical or environmental effects different from those described in the FEIS except as discussed herein. All mitigation measures provided for in the ROD remain in effect for all alternatives in the EA.

PROPOSED ACTION/ PURPOSE AND NEED

The proposed action responds to the Regional Forester's July 1995 decision on the appeal of the ROD for the Wild and Scenic Snake River Recreation Management Plan (Snake River Plan) and its accompanying FEIS. The Regional Forester directed the Forest Supervisor to further analyze the specific economic effects of allocation and operational limitations on individual commercial river permits. The proposed actions and the need for each action are described below.

The need for the proposed action originates from Forest Service visitor use reports showing a 147% increase in visitor use during the primary season from 1979 to 1991 (see FEIS). The visitor use study completed in 1989 highlighted a concern that an increase in recreation use in the river corridor was negatively impacting visitors' recreational experiences. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, HCNRA Act and visitor preferences became the underlying reason for initiating actions to achieve the desired recreation opportunity spectrum (ROS) settings within the Snake Wild and Scenic River (W&SR) corridor.

The purpose of the proposed action is to adjust the current commercial recreational uses of the Snake W&SR in order to meet the desired recreational experiences as described in the FEIS. In addition, the proposed action seeks to allow business flexibility for commercial permittees to ensure the public need for these services will be met.

1. **Launch locations for commercial floatcraft and powerboats.** There is a need to provide public service through offering a level of outfitted services at each river portal. Forest Service policy (36 CFR 251.56(f)) requires that the permittee charge reasonable rates and furnish such services as may be necessary in the public interest. Through specifying the launch locations, the availability of a desired mix of visitor services can be better assured. These services are needed by members of

the public that are unable to enjoy the unique recreational experience of the Snake W&SR because of a lack of skills or specialized equipment.

2. **Areas of operation.** Permittees currently have the flexibility to operate anywhere in the river corridor. This has resulted in an undesirable concentration of use and associated levels of encounters with other users in some river segments, and has created keen competition for campsites in the wild corridor. Institutionalizing historic area of operation patterns achieves the desired recreation experience and precludes undesirable changes resulting from future growth and uses. Managing these areas requires that use and encounters be addressed, especially in the wild corridor.
3. **Maximum and minimum numbers of commercial outfitters at specific portals.** The establishment of maximum and minimum numbers of commercial outfitters at specific portals is needed to provide a diversity of commercial outfitted services for the public to choose from. It also provides commercial competition which helps to ensure quality services.
4. **Allocation of use.** An examination of the factors affecting the allocation of use for commercial powerboat and floatcraft use is important to assess whether the desired recreational experience can be achieved. Part of the allocation process was designed to reduce campsite competition. The factors affecting the allocation of use are commercial powerboat and floatcraft allocation levels in the wild and scenic sections, temporary special use permits for commercial use, supply trips, access to Sheep Creek Cabin, and reducing the number of commercial float pool dates. The commercial float pool dates are a group of launches made available to float outfitters in aggregate. Drawing from the pool allows an outfitter additional use that is not counted against the outfitter's allocated use.
5. **Timing and duration of a non-motorized period relative to commercial use.** The wild corridor of the Snake W&SR allows motorized use (reference the HCNRA Act). In meeting the desired recreational experience for the wild corridor, there is a need for a non-motorized period relative to commercial use. This need results from a desire from a segment of the public to have a period free of motorized activity within the wild corridor, thus allowing an enhanced perception of solitude and remoteness. While the decision was made in the ROD to have a non-motorized period, the analysis in this EA will determine when that period should be in effect.
6. **Launch schedule.** The majority of commercial powerboat trips are one-day versus multi-day for commercial floatcraft use. Many powerboat customers tend to "walk-in" and make spontaneous trip plans as compared to making long range trip plans. Developing a launch schedule allows outfitters to be responsive to customer needs while managing total use to meet recreation objectives.
7. **Party sizes for commercial users.** Party size is a factor in how visitors relate their experience to the desired type of recreational settings and opportunities. In general, larger party sizes have a greater effect on visitor experiences, particularly in primitive recreation settings. Larger parties also tend to increase the amount of environmental impact, particularly from overnight use. Limiting party size is needed to minimize onshore impacts on ORV's from excessive party sizes. Party size limitations were recommended based on the visitor use study in which nearly all surveyed visitors supported management policies that would protect the natural qualities of the river canyon.
8. **Trip duration for commercial powerboats.** Trip duration for commercial powerboats includes both overnight and day use. Limiting trip duration is needed to reduce campsite competition and the number of parties encountered along the river. In order to reduce impacts at and competition for campsites, trip duration decisions considered historic camping patterns and the availability of overnight facilities.
9. **Maximum size (length) of commercial powerboats.** The need for length restrictions on commercial power boats is based on concerns about the potential negative appearance of large double decked boats conflicting with the desired recreational setting. There is also a concern about the potential boat wake effect from large craft on other recreationists. Currently, size

restrictions are non-existent. Placing limits on size will ensure the desired recreational opportunity experience and settings (established in the FEIS) are met.

10. **Launching of inflatable watercraft from commercial powerboats.** There is currently no limit on launching inflatable watercraft from commercial powerboats. Regardless of where the watercraft launches, it is use on the river, and thus may conflict with the achievement of the desired recreation experience. Because the existing system does not account for inflatable watercraft launches from powerboats, there is a need to address this specific use.
11. **Maximum number of commercial floatcraft per party.** There is a need for establishing a limit on the number of floatcraft per party to protect the desired river recreation experience.
12. **Use of kickers (outboard motors) on commercial floatcraft in the wild river.** Campsite competition is high in the wild corridor, and allowing kickers for commercial floatcraft allows an advantage in selecting campsites. There is a need to preclude the use of kickers in the wild section to provide greater equity in campsite selection. Eliminating or restricting the use of kickers will also reduce the amount of noise during the non-motorized period and increase the opportunity for solitude on motorized days.
13. **Limiting commercial float use in the scenic river, including a strategy for managing the commercial Salmon River float traffic.** There is a need to limit the amount and type of commercial float use in the scenic river in order to protect the desired recreational experience and to prevent traffic congestion on the river. Managing the float traffic entering the Snake W&SR from the Salmon River, including providing a management strategy, is necessary if the recreational settings prescribed in the FEIS are to be achieved.

DECISIONS TO BE MADE

The Forest Supervisor will make the following decisions based on the interdisciplinary analysis contained in this EA:

1. **Launch locations for commercial floatcraft and powerboats**
2. **Areas of operation**
3. **Maximum and minimum numbers of commercial outfitters at specific portals**
4. **Allocation of use, including the following facets:**
 - Commercial powerboat and floatcraft allocation levels in the wild and scenic sections
 - Temporary special use permits for commercial use
 - Supply trips to Sheep Creek Cabin and Copper Creek Resort
 - Access to Sheep Creek Cabin
 - Modifying the number of commercial float pool dates
5. **Timing and duration of a non-motorized period relative to commercial use**
6. **Launch schedule**
7. **Party sizes for commercial users**
8. **Trip duration for commercial powerboats**
9. **Maximum size (length) of commercial powerboats**

10. Launching of inflatable watercraft from commercial powerboats
11. Maximum number of commercial floatcraft per party
12. Use of kickers on commercial floatcraft in the wild river
13. Limiting commercial float use in the scenic river, including a strategy for managing the commercial Salmon River float traffic

The Decision Notice for this EA will amend the Forest Plan. Implementation of the decision is scheduled for September 11, 1996.

PROJECT AREA DESCRIPTION

The Wild and Scenic Snake River runs north from Hells Canyon Creek to the Oregon-Washington border and forms the northern portion of the boundary between Oregon and Idaho. The Act establishing the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area (HCNRA) designated 67.5 miles of the Snake River as wild and scenic, classified into the following segments:

WILD RIVER: The 31.5 miles from Hells Canyon Creek to Pittsburg Landing.

SCENIC RIVER: The 36 miles from Pittsburg Landing to the northern boundary of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

STUDY RIVER: Approximately four (4) miles of river directly upstream from the Oregon-Washington border to the boundary of the scenic river.

The river corridor is approximately a quarter mile of each side of the high water mark. Hells Canyon Wilderness is adjacent to the corridor along southern portions of the river in both Oregon and Idaho but does not include the wild and scenic corridor.

See Figure I-1 for a vicinity map.

MANAGEMENT DIRECTION

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act [Sec. 3 (A)(d)(1)] requires that the river management plan shall address user capacities. Section 10 (d) of the HCNRA Act specifies that such rules and regulations shall include provision for the control and the use and number of motorized and non-motorized river craft.

The Forest Plan, as amended, provides guidance through its established goals, objectives, desired future condition, Forest-wide standards and guidelines, and specific management direction. The Snake River Plan is Forest Plan Amendment 12.

The primary management emphasis for Forest Plan Management Area 8, Hells Canyon National Recreation Area Snake River Corridor (14,355 acres), is to ensure the protection and enhancement of the river's outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs) pursuant to the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, and assure that use levels are compatible with the objectives of Sections 7 and 10 of the HCNRA Act. Administrative sites within the corridor are to be managed in accordance with Forest Plan Management Area 16, Administrative and Recreation Sites.

The study river portion is managed according to the guidance provided by Management Area 7, Wild and Scenic Rivers, until determined unsuitable as a wild and scenic river or acted upon by Congress.

For additional discussion on management direction and legislative requirements, refer to pages I-9 through I-12 in the FEIS for the Snake River Plan.

KEY ISSUES

Based on concerns and comments received during the scoping process and the scope of the proposed action, the following issues were identified as key in relation to the proposed action. Each issue is accompanied by key indicators to provide a basis for comparison among the alternatives analyzed in this EA.

1. **ISSUE: Commercial boating use levels and operational limitations within the established allocation should meet the primitive or semi-primitive recreational settings with attributes that accommodate motorized and non-motorized use and provide a suitable mixture of outfitter provided services to the public.**

Scoping comments and responses to the Snake River EIS displayed a wide array of opinions about the appropriate type and level of river access. While most agreed that both powerboating and floating were valid uses of the river, there was little agreement on the mix of use levels. There was not complete consensus regarding allocation of use, however, most people recognized a need to limit use in order to preserve the special recreation settings that draw people to the canyon.

Commercial outfitters and guides provide access to the river for people who prefer not to pilot their own water craft. The Forest Service has concluded (ROD) that there is a demonstrated need for commercial public services to access the Snake River.

Key Indicators:

- *Capability of visitors to achieve the desired recreational experience: sense of remoteness, level of social encounters*
- *Capability to provide an appropriate level of visitor management*
- *Campsite competition*
- *Capability to provide a diversity of necessary outfitter services to the public*

2. **ISSUE: Regulation of commercial boating use could affect the economic condition of current river-based special use permittees.**

During scoping and the review of the DEIS and FEIS, and through use of the appeal process, many of the river outfitter/guide services expressed concern about their ability to maintain businesses if their access to the river was restricted by use allocations and/or other operational limitations. This EA provides further analysis of the effects of the use allocations and operational limitations to individual permits. Economic effects are disclosed.

Key Indicators:

- *Change in boat days/float launches by outfitter*
- *Change in total gross revenue by outfitter*
- *Scheduling flexibility*

OTHER ISSUES

The following issues, concerns, and opportunities were identified during scoping and were addressed in the associated FEIS, by establishing management elements, or through monitoring.

Issues Outside the Scope of this Document

People raised concerns about whether the Forest Service used correct planning protocol in developing NEPA documents, interpreting the HCNRA Act, and applying the proper connection to other planning processes and decisions (including the Limits of Acceptable Change process). These issues have already been addressed in the FEIS. See Appendix K of the FEIS, pages K-4 through K-45.

Comments regarding noise levels and increasing rules and regulations received during scoping for this EA were considered in the FEIS. See Appendix K of the FEIS, pages K-190 through K-195 and FEIS pages IV-35 through IV-41.

Safety concerns about navigation markers, hazards created by presence or absence of powerboats, campsites, and fuel transportation continue to be of concern to many respondents. These issues were responded to in the FEIS. See Appendix K of the FEIS, pages K-260 through K-269.

Some respondents raised appropriate uses of wilderness as an issue. This issue was responded to in the FEIS. See Appendix K of the FEIS, pages K-274 To K-277.

Aircraft use and cultural and historical resource issues raised by comments are outside the scope of this document.

Other Issues

Adequacy of the data

Several comments on the proposed action responded that if visitor surveys were conducted today, they would reveal continued visitor satisfaction with their Hells Canyon experience and, therefore, no limitations on commercial use levels should be instituted.

The 1989 Visitor Use Study is not the only factor that led to identification of a need to manage visitor use. Other factors that led to the decision to investigate methods of managing visitor use included a 147% increase in visitor use during the primary season from 1979 to 1991 and the results of the "Recommended Limits of Acceptable Change Recreation Management Plan for the Snake River." Use has continued to increase. There is no indication that the original factors which showed a negative impact on some visitors recreation experience have improved.

In fact, a 1994 public opinion poll of HCNRA users confirmed that some visitor recreation experiences continue to be negatively impacted (see analysis file).

Although visitor use surveys were used to identify perceived satisfaction levels, there is also a need to meet standards for ROS settings and to provide for appropriate recreation opportunity experiences.

SCOPING PROCESS

The original EIS involved an intense public scoping and notification process including public meetings and mailings to over 1,700 individuals and organizations. For details, see FEIS at I-17 and Appendix K.

For this EA, the following scoping actions were taken:

<u>Date</u>	<u>Action</u>	<u>Number of People Contacted</u>
11/22/95	Fall newsletter mailed to original FEIS mailing list. Contained information about status of FEIS and plans for completing NEPA process. Required completion of an interest card for continued participation in process.	1,766
12/19/95	Scoping notice and proposed action mailed to mailing list generated by fall newsletter.	585
1/24/96	Meeting held with Snake River outfitters and other interested publics held at Clarkston, Washington.	35
1/24/96	Meetings between individual outfitters and Interdisciplinary Team.	20
2/21/96	Meeting with individual Riggins-based outfitters.	6
3/96	Telephone contact follow-up with all outfitters that did not attend 1/24 or 2/21 meetings. Exceptions: No contact could be made with Anderson River Adventures, S&S Outfitters, Peers Snake River Rafting, Oregon Trail Adventure, Inc., and Freewater.	30
3/96	Narratives describing each outfitter business mailed with cover letter requesting feedback.	30
6/5/96	Letters mailed to Snake River outfitters notifying them of imminent release of the Environmental Assessment and 30-day review and comment period	30

A total of 43 letters were received as a direct result of scoping. Eighteen of the letters were from Snake River outfitters.