

## Species Status Designations

Species status designations may differ depending on whether a land management plan was developed under the 1982 or 2012 Planning Rule. These include management indicator species (MIS), regional forester sensitive species (RFSS), focal species, and species of conservation concern (SCC). These are in addition to the endangered, threatened, proposed and candidate designations under the Endangered Species Act.

Forests with plans developed under the 1982 Planning Rule currently manage for MIS and RFSS populations and will continue to do so until the plan is revised. As part of the revision process under the 2012 planning rule, SCC and focal species are identified, and the forest will no longer manage for MIS or RFSS once a new plan is signed.

### What are Management Indicator Species (MIS)?



**Figure 1—Elk are designated as a management indicator species on the Lolo National Forest, and are considered representative of big game species habitat needs**

MIS were required by the 1982 Planning Rule, as an interpretation of National Forest Management Act (NFMA) requirements to “maintain viable populations of existing native and desired non-native vertebrate species in the planning area.” MIS populations were intended to be indicative of broader ecological conditions across a forest and to be representative of other species’ status. Population changes for an MIS are

therefore interpreted as a potential signal of change in ecosystem health. Criticisms of the MIS approach to monitoring ecosystem health include 1) it ignores inherent differences between species, 2) similar species may compete for resources, 3) animal behavior may change seasonally, spatially, or in response to ecosystem change, and 4) populations may be limited by factors other than habitat. In 1999, the Committee of Scientists recommended that the NFMA regulation be rewritten to focus on focal species rather than MIS.

### What are Regional Forester Sensitive Species (RFSS)?

The 1982 Planning Rule also required each region develop a RFSS list. Sensitive species are “Those plant and animal species identified by a regional forester for which population viability is a concern, as evidenced by either: a) significant current or predicted downward trends in population numbers or density, or b) significant current or predicted downward trends in habitat capability that would reduce a species’ existing distribution” (FSM 2670). The goal of identifying sensitive species is to ensure that population abundance and distribution are adequate to prevent extirpation of the species from the forest and federal listing.

### What are Focal Species?

The 2012 Planning Rule replaces MIS with focal species, defined as a “small subset of species whose status permits inference to the integrity of the larger ecological system to which it belongs and provides meaningful information regarding the effectiveness of the plan in maintaining or restoring the ecological conditions to maintain the diversity of plant and animal communities in the plan area.” The responsible official must identify at least one focal species (36 CFR 219.12 (a), FSH 219.20) for each Land Management Plan.

### What are Species of Conservation Concern (SCC)?

The 2012 Planning Rule replaced the RFSS designation with SCC. A SCC is “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(c)).

The Forest Service Handbook (FSH 1909.12.52) describes specific criteria to identify a species of conservation concern. A description of how these criteria are used to identify plant and animal species in the Northern Region can be found at:

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r1/landmanagement/planning/?cid=fseprd500402>. Limitations on the designation of an SCC include:

- The species must be native and known to occur in the plan area.
- The best available scientific information must indicate substantial concern about the species' capability to persist over the long-term in the plan area.
- There must be sufficient scientific information available to conclude that substantial concern exists.
- The species occurrence must not be "accidental," or well outside its current range.



**Figure 2—Westslope cutthroat trout was recently designated as a species of conservation concern on the Custer-Gallatin National Forest**

## What is "substantial concern"?

Substantial concern arises when the best available scientific information indicates that a particular species may not persist within the forest over the long-term. Considerations for determining substantial concern include:

1. Decreasing population (abundance or distribution) or habitat availability.

2. Significant threats, particularly when threats are novel or greater than expected under natural variation.
3. Other changes in demographics or life history characteristics that could influence long-term persistence in the plan area.
4. Rarity, though only in concert with the conditions described above, as many species are naturally rare.

## What is the difference between an SCC and a threatened or endangered species?



**Figure 3—Whitebark pine, found at high elevations throughout the Northern Rockies, was recently proposed for listing under the Federal Endangered Species Act and is therefore ineligible to be designated as an SCC**

An SCC is a Forest Service-specific term that comes from the 2012 Planning Rule and Forest Service Handbook. The regulations help us determine if there is substantial concern about a particular species' ability to persist within a planning area. If there is substantial concern, we ensure that the forest plan will provide the habitat conditions that will enable the species to persist on the forest. An SCC is not a federally threatened, endangered, proposed or candidate species under the Endangered Species Act. We identify SCC using the best available science in a proactive step intended to maintain their persistence in the plan area. The SCC list is therefore independent of ESA listings, and species listed under the ESA are not eligible to be considered as SCC.