Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact for the Bean North Vegetation Project

February 14, 2012

Chugach National Forest
Seward Ranger District
P.O. Box 390
Seward, AK 99664

Decision

It is my decision to implement the Proposed Action as described in the Bean North Vegetation Project Environmental Assessment (Bean North EA). The Bean North EA is the supporting environmental analysis for this decision. This decision will allow specific actions to meet the purpose and need including the improvement of fire protection and prevention, reduction of hazardous fuels, and improvement of vegetation and wildlife habitat to occur on approximately 705 acres near the community of Cooper Landing, Alaska; Section 24, T5N, R4W; Seward Meridian.

Treatments include the removal of dead downed, dead standing, dying and unhealthy trees, thinning of trees adjacent to the trail system and potential sources of ignition, and piling and burning of residual slash to reduce existing fuel loads. Other treatments including improvement of existing vegetation and wildlife habitat through patch cuts to create early seral hardwoods, maintenance of aspen stands to remove competing vegetation, and hinge cutting of Scouler's willow.

The project area includes two treatment areas: the West area is 220 acres and the East area is 485 acres. Both units are planned for mechanical treatment which would require removal of vegetation for equipment access, maneuverability, and skid trails. The West unit would be accessed from existing skid trails off the Juneau Creek Road system. The East unit would be accessed from the Slaughter Ridge Road and existing skid trails. Project implementation may occur with the use of stewardship contracts or agreements, service contracts, or Forest Service personnel.

The map (Figure 1, page 4) shows the Bean North Vegetation Project units and the map legend corresponds with the treatment column in the table that follows (only items in bold) to show approximate locations of treatments and design criteria. Table 1 outlines specific actions or treatments prescribed for both units and the design criteria outlines environmental protection and other design developed during project planning and public involvement.

Table 1 Proposed Action Descriptions

Treatment	Description
Fuel Removal + Pile/Burn	Treatment of dead and/or dying standing trees and dead downed trees by cutting trees; and piling and burning or mastication of the slash material and the smaller diameter boles. Treatment would increase success of fire suppression by minimizing accumulation of surface fuels and reducing the probability of rapid fire spread near potential points of ignition.

Treatment	Description
Thin Within 100 Feet of Trails	Remove ladder fuels through thinning live trees within 100 feet of Resurrection Pass and Bean Creek trail while maintaining the natural appearance of vegetation. This would be accomplished through variable density thinning, an overall thinning of an area with small areas of removal, or "gaps," and areas of exclusion where no vegetation is cut, or "skips." The overall thinning would be lower understory, focusing on small diameter trees. Thinning would increase probability of fire suppression along access points (trails) by removal of ladder fuels, reducing risk of torching and crown fire near trails, and by maintaining crown cover in order to minimize the growth of bluejoint reedgrass, a flashy fuel in dry conditions, following treatment. This treatment would also maintain or improve spruce stand vigor by reducing competition, thereby reducing susceptibility to drought or future insect infestation.
Patch Cuts ¼ up to 30 Acres	Regenerate hardwoods through patch cuts on up to 30% of the project acreage to enhance moose browse: West: 60 acres; East 140 acres. • Transition conifer dominated stands to early seral birch and willow in a mosaic of patch sizes across the planning area by removing existing trees. Large patches would be long and narrow in order to provide nearby cover for moose. Some birch and willow would be retained in order to provide limited seed sources for regeneration. • Regenerate all or part of existing small clones of aspen that would otherwise be outcompeted by more shade tolerant species, such as spruce or hemlock, by removing aspen trees and other trees around the clone, allowing it re-sprout and expand. Where possible depending on operational feasibility and timing, treatments will occur during winter dormancy to allow maximum reserves for prolific root and stump sprouting the following growing season. The entire clone should be harvested, including all stems greater than 1 inch diameter and 4.5 feet high, to ensure maximum release of root sprouts. • Enhance Scouler's willow by regenerating 25% of the mature trees throughout the project area through hinge cutting. Select healthy trees without rot to maximize sprouting from the stump and along the bole.
Retain Mature Aspen	Remove competing vegetation (spruce and hemlock) 50 to 100 feet in and around remaining aspen clones in order to allow the clone to expand while leaving it intact for goshawk and migratory bird habitat. This method would allow some mature aspen clones to remain on the landscape.
Minimize bluejoint	Pile and burn trees removed within patch cuts and/or pile trees and

Treatment	Description
reedgrass (for tree establishment and to prevent the creation of flashy fuels)	use mechanical site preparation, to expose mineral soil to create a seedbed for tree establishment and to limit competition of young trees with bluejoint reedgrass. Seed or plant with native birch and willow one year after harvest, following exposure of mineral soil, in order to take advantage of stored seed and reduce the lag time in which competing grass cover has time to monopolize sites. This treatment would reduce flashy fuels and competition for hardwood regeneration. For mechanical site preparation, 50-60% of the area will be scarified, removing the overlying duff from patches or strips without excessive displacement of the underlying mineral soils. Scarification should occur when soils are dry or frozen enough to support equipment without becoming compacted and when snow would not hamper success. Areas of aspen would regenerate naturally by root and stump sprouting without scarification.
Habitat Linkage – Limited Patch Cuts	Vegetation treatments that occur in the habitat linkage zone within 750' of Juneau Creek, including thinning, hazardous fuel treatments, and limited patch cuts, will maintain habitat connectivity. Limited patch cuts will not exceed five acres for each patch and 50 acres total within the 750' corridor, and will be irregularly shaped and well dispersed.
Provide Free Use Firewood	Utilize mechanized equipment to bring material to a point where it can be accessed at the end of the Slaughter Ridge Road. The quantity of material made available will be dependent on operational feasibility dependent on reasonable skidding distances. Some improvements of Slaughter Ridge road and existing skid trails may be necessary, including clearing of a landing, brushing and resurfacing. No temporary or permanent roads will be constructed for the purposes of public motorized access to fuel wood.

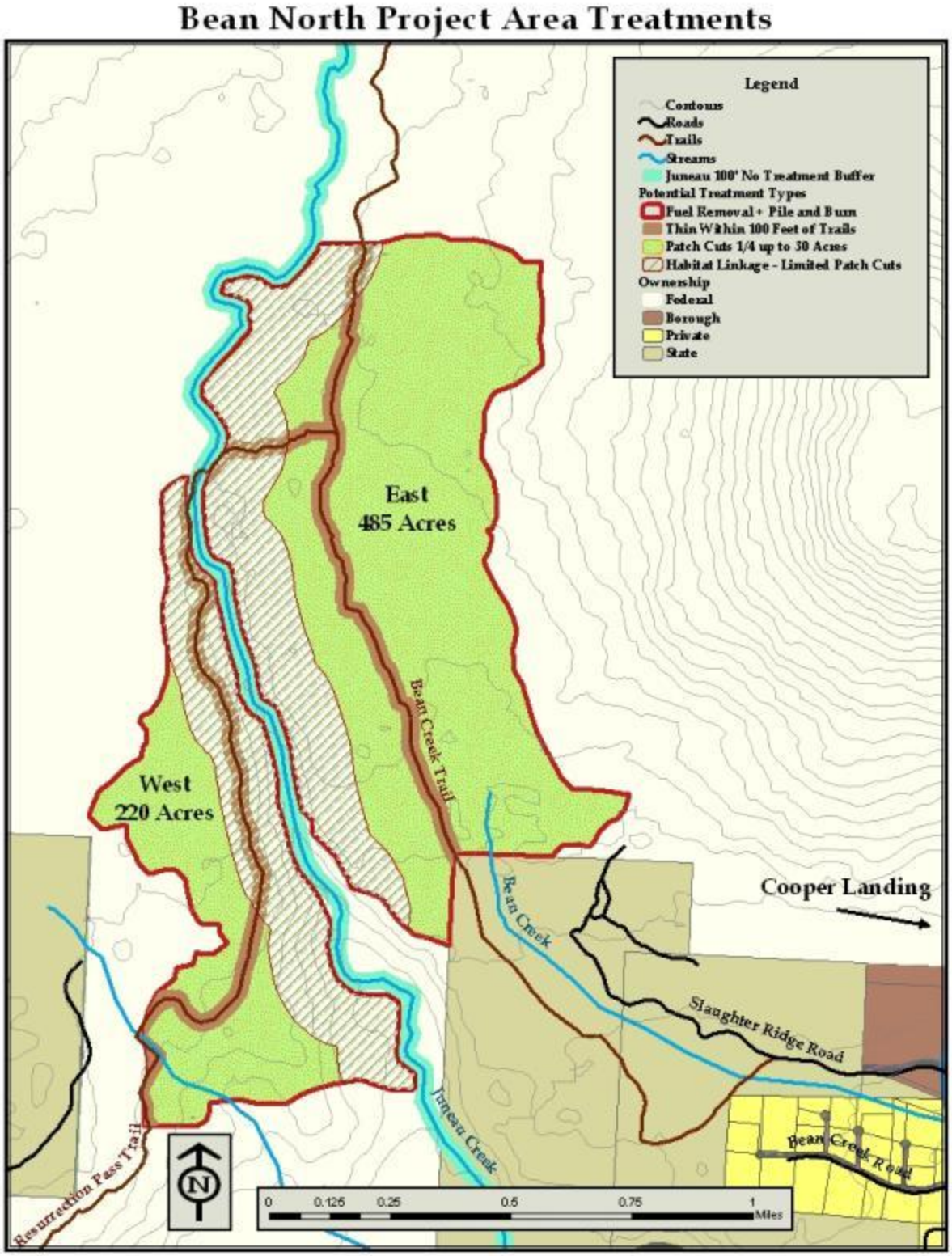

Figure 1 Bean North Vegetation Project Treatment Areas

Project Design Criteria

The following criteria are required under this decision:

Wildlife

- Follow Forest Plan guidelines for buffer zones around any new goshawk or bald eagle nests.
- Exclude treatment of large diameter (36”+ DBH) hemlock in order to retain some old growth characteristics.

Fisheries

- Maintain 100-ft no-disturbance buffer along the project streams.
- Follow the Forest Service fishery standards and guidelines and all other applicable fishery protection guidelines (see fishery report)

Silviculture

- Avoid wet areas when selecting locations for patch cuts in order to limit favorable sites for bluejoint reedgrass.
- Burn piles resulting from hazardous fuels treatments will be located in openings to protect residual trees from damage when the piles are burned.
- Maintain four snags per acre and at least 50 linear feet of larger (15-20 inch diameter) downed logs/surface material (Forest Plan 3-25).

Soil Resources

- Avoid wetlands where possible and only operate mechanized equipment in wetland areas under frozen conditions.
- Only slopes up to 35% are considered suitable for mechanical operation. Streams will be identified during layout and avoided during operations.
- Do not place burn piles in streams or any other water body.
- The mechanized equipment work will be done when soils are well drained (summer) or frozen (winter) to minimize rutting.
- Operate mechanized equipment on a slash mattress to avoid displacing or compacting soil. Slash can be tops, limbs, and sections of non-merchantable logs. In patch cuts where it is desirable to disturb some soil to achieve conditions favorable for tree establishment, this practice is only necessary if excessive displacement or compaction is occurring.
- Operate mechanized equipment on the contour of the slope and avoid traveling perpendicular to the contour. This prevents ruts that concentrate and move water and soil.
- Rehabilitate all mechanized equipment trails by:
    - Pulling berms back into the trail
    - “Fluffing” any slash pressed into the soil
    - Placing slash over exposed soil in the skid trail to prevent erosion

- If work is completed in summer, there may not be a need to scarify a site for birch regeneration.

Recreation Resources

- Increase monitoring and enforcement during the first years after project implementation to help reduce illegal OHV access.
- Access for cutting firewood in the winter will be allowed consistent with motorized use restrictions in the Resurrection Pass area, or every other year.

Visual Resources

- Establish a 50-foot buffer around Resurrection Pass and Bean Creek Trail to retain visual integrity: no limbing of trees, no slash piles, hand treatment only, and stumps should be 6" or less within the buffer. Mechanized equipment would be allowed to cross the trails only in designated areas. At these crossings, vary the width and edge shape to avoid a road look. Restore crossings to a natural appearance as soon as they are no longer needed for implementation in order to lessen the visual impact.
- Slash piles will be created to allow maximum consumption and generally be burned within one year following implementation in areas visible from the trails. In addition, during pile burning residual trees will be protected and excessive creeping of fire from piles will be prevented in those areas visible from trails.
- Shape, blend and orient treatment units in a manner that is natural appearing and will not draw attention of an average forest visitor when the project is completed.

Hydrology

- Applicable Best Management Practices should be followed during the proposed activities, as stated in the Region 10 Soil and Water Conservation Handbook (USDA Forest Service, Alaska Region, 2006).
- No treatments, burn piles, access roads, or skid trails should occur within 100 feet of Juneau Creek, Bean Creek, or the small Kenai River tributary in order to preserve the functional riparian zones around these streams and minimize erosion potential.
- Unmapped streams within the treatment area will be identified in the field during the summer months prior to any treatment, particularly prior to treatments that would occur in the winter when streams may not be visible. Access roads and skid trails should cross perpendicular to these streams in locations that would minimize stream bank impacts. Burn piles should be located at least 100 feet from any stream.
- To minimize potential impacts to wetlands, areas of mapped wetlands should be avoided during the proposed activities (see Best Management Practice 12.5). For mechanical treatments, if access roads, or skid trails are necessary in wetlands, then these activities should only occur during the winter with adequate snowpack and freezing temperatures. Hand treatments may occur in wetlands during the summer months.

Plants/Non-Native Invasive Plants

- Avoid travel through patches of common dandelion (*Taraxacum* officinale) and/or invasive plants identified in the booklet "Selected Invasive Plants of Alaska," particularly

when they have gone to seed to prevent their spread into new areas. Prior to entry onto National Forest, ensure all equipment engaged in vegetation clearing or ground disturbing activities have been cleaned/washed so they are free of visible dirt, plants, and plant parts. Take particular care to ensure undercarriages of vehicles are clean. In the event equipment is taken off site and then brought back, re-cleaning is only necessary if the equipment was used in another area with infestations of invasive plants.

- Some non-native species already occur on the Bean Creek Trail and Resurrection Pass South Trail. Stretches along those trails which are free of non-native species should be used as potential machine crossing locations to minimize the potential spread of these species.
- Use natural revegetation where seed source and site conditions are favorable towards achieving revegetation objectives. Use native plant species when natural revegetation conditions are not favorable (Forest Plan 3-25).
- If any previously undiscovered sensitive plants are encountered at any time prior to or during implementation of this project, protect the population and avoid any disturbance in the area containing the population (and similar habitats in that vicinity). The district or forest botanist/ecologist should be notified immediately to evaluate the population and recommend avoidance or mitigation measures. The following sensitive species have the potential to occur in the project area:
    - *Cypripedium guttatum*
    - *Ligusticum caldera*
    - *Papaver alboroseum*
    - *Romanzoffia unalaschcensis*

Fuels and Fire Behavior

- A prescribed burn plan will be developed and approved prior to initiating any burning operation.
- Hand piled material will consist fuels less than or equal to 7” in diameter.
- Piles will be burned after October 1st and during a time with southerly or easterly winds to mitigate smoke concerns in Cooper Landing and along the Sterling Highway.

Heritage Resources

- The areas where mechanized equipment cross the Bean Creek Trail should be reviewed before implementation or monitored during implementation by the district archaeologist because it is eligible for the Register of Historic Places. No other cultural resources were identified within the project area.
- Post-project cultural resource survey will take place in any units with mechanical treatment and where the ground has been significantly disturbed or exposed. Disturbance can expose cultural resources that were not identifiable during initial surveys.

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of this project is fire prevention and protection, hazardous fuels reduction, and wildlife habitat and vegetation enhancement, while protecting recreational values.

The Chugach National Forest and the State of Alaska have been working in the Juneau Creek and Cooper Landing area to reduce fuels related to the spruce bark beetle and improve wildlife

habitat since the early 1970s, often achieving both objectives with one entry. The Bean North project will continue the treatment of hazardous fuels in the area, creating a fairly continuous treated area northwest of Cooper Landing and north of the Sterling Highway. The project area is within the Cooper Landing Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) of the Kenai Peninsula Borough. A Community Wildfire Protection Plan has been developed to address the hazardous fuels in the Cooper Landing WUI. A need exists to create defensible space for more effective fire suppression and to reduce the probability of rapid fire spread by minimizing surface and ladder fuels, removing dead and dying trees, and thinning stands of trees. These treatments are important to protect the community and its infrastructure from wildfire.

A need also exists to enhance wildlife habitat to create browse for moose in their winter range. The Bean North project aims to promote young birch, willow, and aspen within moose winter range. Browse availability in moose winter range is very important to winter survival and maintaining healthy populations. Treatments promote browse for a limited time, often 20-30 years once hardwoods are established, before the trees and new shoots grow out of reach. The time period browse is available after treatment is variable and dependant on site conditions and the type of treatment. Implementing treatments over space and time help to provide a continuous supply of food in addition to what becomes available naturally after avalanches, flooding, and fire. This project works in concert with recent habitat improvement projects to maintain habitat into the future, while some of the older projects are providing browse today.

Aspen is relatively rare on the landscape and a need exists to maintain or enhance the forest type. Some existing mature clones can be maintained over the short term by removing competing coniferous vegetation that will eventually over top and outcompete aspen. Other aspen clones can also be maintained and expanded for a longer time period by regenerating the stand by stimulating new sprouting, which is also beneficial for moose browse.

Other Alternatives Considered

Ski Trails

The concept of developing a system of formal or informal cross country ski trails in the vicinity of the Bean North project was recognized during the scoping process. However, the design and analysis of such a system has not been included in the Bean North Vegetation Project Proposed Action. For this project, the full development of a ski trail system is beyond the scope of this analysis. There are a number of considerations which would need to be assessed in the development of a comprehensive ski trail system including the connections to Borough and State lands, appropriate geographic location of a ski trail system on the landscape, how motorized travel would be managed on the trails, and how the trails would be constructed and maintained. The Bean North project area can be considered in selection of an appropriate location for trail systems on the landscape in the future. These considerations and decisions would be made following an analysis specific to a ski trail system proposal.

Free-use Firewood Access

Several comments received during scoping requested access to firewood in winter via snow machine, snow cat or pickup trucks. In addition, access was requested allowing the use of vegetation openings for mechanized equipment access after the snow has been packed down, and that these openings be planned strategically in consideration of use for ski trails. The Proposed Action provides opportunities for accessing firewood. In the winter, access would be allowed

consistent with motorized use restrictions in the Resurrection Pass area, or every other year. Firewood would be expected to be made available utilizing mechanized equipment to bring a portion of the trees to a point where it can be accessed by the public by an existing established road. However, the quantity of material made available will be dependent on economic feasibility. The contract for this project would determine the quantity of material that can be accessed and removed, allowing the creativity of contractors bidding on the project.

Temporary Road

A temporary road was considered during project development to allow greater access for both free-use firewood and commercial removal of firewood. However, the concept was not fully developed because the purpose and need of the project does not focus on wood product removal. If firewood or other wood products are produced during implementation, these are a by-product of other project objectives, such as reduction of hazardous fuels and enhancement of wildlife habitat and vegetation. In addition, the cost of construction of a temporary road would likely outweigh the value of the product. Finally, the area is managed for motorized uses over snow on alternating years. A temporary road would create additional enforcement issues with motorized uses outside of that allowed such as Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) use.

Rationale for the Decision

I have reviewed the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations for "significance" (40 CFR §1508.27) and I have determined that this decision is not an action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment either individually or cumulatively; nor would this decision affect the quality of the human environment in either context or intensity. Therefore, an environmental impact statement (EIS) will not be prepared. This conclusion is based upon the following factors:

Context	Intensity	Reason not Significant
Effects to soil and water resources	Temporary	Project buffers along mapped streams and avoidance of wetlands will ensure protection of riparian zones, stream banks, and prevention of unnatural erosion. Soil design criteria will ensure that impacts to soils are minimized.
Disturbance to wildlife habitat	Temporary	The project area is not considered critical habitat for any wildlife species. The project is not expected to cause any meaningful effect on any species population viability either generally or locally because of the small size of the project area relative to the size of the existing intact habitat for these species.
Disturbance to migratory bird species, especially during nesting (May 1-	Temporary, local	The project may cause short term direct and indirect impacts to migratory birds and their habitats due to vegetation

Context	Intensity	Reason not Significant
July 15)		removal and disturbance. Also much of the work is likely to occur outside of the nesting season as a normal orderly progression of work will not impact all of the area at once. Although this would affect individuals during nesting season, effects would be limited in space and time. It is unlikely that the small scale of the operation would impact populations of any migratory bird species.
Disturbance to fisheries resources	Temporary	Project buffers along anadromous streams will ensure that shading is maintained and unnatural erosion does not occur. Impacts restricted to stream crossings
Introduction or spread of non-native plant species	Minimal potential for spread or establishment of non-native plan species	Equipment will be cleaned/washed before entry into the project area and populations of non-native plants will be avoided during implementation to reduce the potential for the spread of non-native plant species.
Disturbance to sensitive species	None	No sensitive species were found within the project area. Project design criteria would protect sensitive plants if they were discovered.
Effects on air quality	Minimal; Levels within State of Alaska standards for particulate matter and air quality.	A burn plan will be developed for pile burning to ensure that any pile burning is in accordance with State of Alaska standards for particulate matter, air quality standards, and public notification requirements.
Effects to scenery resources	Temporary	Overall impacts to the Resurrection and Bean Creek trail corridors will be minimal. Project design includes treatments that are natural in appearance (variable density thinning), a fifty foot buffer along trails with hand treatment only, and minimal trails crossings for equipment.
Effects to recreation resources	Temporary	Overall impacts to recreation will be minimal. Equipment paths may allow for illegal OHV use but monitoring and law enforcement should mitigate effects.
Disturbance to heritage resources	None	A cultural resources survey was completed, finding that no historic properties will be affected.

In addition, I also considered the extent to which treatment will reduce the risk of wildfire to the community in Cooper Landing. After treatment, it is expected that if a wildfire occurs, that flame lengths have a higher probability of being less than four feet, which will allow firefighters a better chance of controlling the surface wildfire before it can potentially spread into tree crowns and ultimately to the private structures in the town of Cooper Landing.

Public Involvement

Public involvement for the Bean North Vegetation Project has been conducted in accordance with the requirements set forth in the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) at 36 CFR 104(e). The Forest listed the proposed action in the Schedule of Proposed Actions on July 1, 2009. The Forest conducted two public meetings in Cooper Landing on January 25, 2011 and April 26, 2011 to help craft the proposed action. Participants of the public meetings, as well as other parties showing interest through mailed comments, were given another opportunity to comment on the Proposed Action between June 15 and June 30, 2011.

Consistency with Forest Plan and Other Relevant Laws

Endangered Species Act -Biological evaluations were completed for threatened, endangered, proposed, and sensitive plant and animal species. No threatened and endangered plant or animal species would be affected by any of the action alternatives.

Bald Eagle Protection Act -Management activities within bald eagle habitat would be in accordance to a Memorandum of Understanding between the Forest Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. No bald eagle nests are known in the project area.

ANILCA Section 810, Subsistence Evaluation and Finding -There is no documented or reported subsistence use that would be restricted by any of the action alternatives. For this reason, none of the alternatives would result in a significant possibility of a significant restriction of subsistence use of wildlife, fish, or other foods.

National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 -Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires that all federal undertakings follow the regulations found at 36 CFR §800 to identify and protect cultural resources that are within the project areas and which may be effected by projects. The Chugach National Forest has followed the procedures in the Second Amended Programmatic Agreement among the USDA Forest Service, Alaska Region, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the Alaska State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) regarding management of the project area. A finding of "no historic properties affected" has been reached by the Forest Service and this report is included in the 2010 Programmatic Agreement Annual Report to the SHPO.

Executive Order 12898 -Environmental Justice -Implementation of this project is not anticipated to cause disproportionate adverse human health or environmental effect to minority or low-income populations because the proposed activities are not expected to cause any affects to human health or result in meaningful adverse environmental consequences.

Clean Air Act -Any pile burning anticipated from the implementation of the Proposed Action would be of short duration and would not be expected to exceed State of Alaska ambient air quality standards (18 AAC 50).

Executive Order 13112 -Invasive Species -Invasive species populations would have little

potential to spread in the project area.

Executive Order 11988 and 11990 - The Proposed Action meets the intent of Executive Order 11988 for floodplain management and Executive Order 11990 for protection of wetlands.

Recreational Fisheries (E.O. 12962) - Federal agencies are required, to the extent permitted by law and where practicable, and in cooperation with States and Tribes, to improve the quantity, function, sustainable productivity, and distribution of United States aquatic resources for increased recreational fishing opportunities (U.S., 1995). As required by this Order, I have evaluated the effects of this action on aquatic systems and recreational fisheries and documented those effects relative to the purpose of this order. This action is consistent with this order because it would not impact the public's ability to recreationally fish in this area.

Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act - This project is not expected to result in any adverse effects to fisheries habitat because it is a low intensity action and proper application of applicable Forestwide standards and guidelines and Best Management Practices (U.S., 1996). Following these protocols and practices would also ensure that there are no additional impacts to fish populations and habitat over time and therefore no negative cumulative effects.

Implementation Date

The Bean North Project was analyzed under HFRA authority and thus is not subject to appeal (36 CFR 215.12 and 218.3). Implementation may occur immediately following publication of a legal notice in the Anchorage Daily News announcing the decision.

HFRA Section 105(a) of the HFRA replaces the USDA Forest Service's administrative appeals process with an objection process. A 30-day objection process for the Bean North Vegetation Project was initiated with the publication of the EA and with the issuance of a legal notice of the availability of the EA in the Anchorage Daily News on October 22, 2011. No objections were received.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service objection process, contact Joe Ford, Vegetation Manager, at the above address, or by email at jpford@fs.fed.us, or by calling (907) 288-7744.

/s/Travis Moseley 2/14/12

Travis Moseley Date
District Ranger
Seward Ranger District

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