

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Forest Service
Pacific-Southwest Region

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT, DECISION NOTICE
and
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

FOREST PLAN AMENDMENT #1 - SOUTH SIERRA WILDERNESS DIRECTION

Inyo National Forest
Inyo and Tulare Counties, California

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

Proposed Action

The Inyo National Forest is proposing to amend its Land and Resource Management Plan (i.e. Forest Plan) by adopting additional management direction for the South Sierra Wilderness. Said direction would be added to that for Management Area #20, South Sierra.

Background

An Environmental Assessment for the South Sierra Wilderness Implementation Plan was approved by the Forest Supervisors of the Inyo and Sequoia National Forests on March 9, 1991. This decision was subsequently appealed by the California Wilderness Coalition pursuant to regulations at 36 CFR 217. On April 28, 1992, Reviewing Officer Joyce T. Muroaka issued a decision for this appeal in which she directed the preparation of amendments to the Inyo and Sequoia Land and Resource Management Plans (Forest Plans) that provide refined programmatic direction for this wilderness.

The Inyo Forest Plan was approved by Regional Forester Paul Barker on August 12, 1988. It contains overall wilderness management direction in the form of Forestwide Standards and Guidelines and Management Prescription #1 (Designated Wilderness). The Forest Plan additionally contains direction specific to the South Sierra Wilderness in the form of Management Area Direction for MA #20 (South Sierra).

The need for a Forest Plan amendment is due to the fact that not all the programmatic direction referenced in the South Sierra Wilderness Implementation Plan (SSWIP) was contained in the Forest Plan. The two-staged decisionmaking process used by the Forest Service requires that programmatic direction be located at the Forest Plan level. Therefore, the purpose of this proposed amendment is to incorporate into the Inyo Forest Plan the specific programmatic direction that is presently unique to the SSWIP.

In addition, during the appeals process the Backcountry Horsemen of California pointed out an inconsistency between the management direction as provided in

the Sequoia National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan and the environmental assessment (EA) which accompanied the South Sierra Wilderness Implementation Plan. Standards and Guidelines for the Sequoia plan state "Establish and maintain public pastures to enhance overnight camping opportunities" (pg 4-25). The selected alternative in the EA states "Facilities for recreation stock will not be provided". To resolve this inconsistency, this amendment proposes to add management direction to the Inyo Forest Plan as shown below. Consideration of public pastures in the future will be accompanied by the appropriate level of environmental analysis.

Scoping and Public Involvement

Public involvement focused on contacting all of the parties to the appeal, in addition to other persons and organizations known to have interest in management of the South Sierra Wilderness. A scoping letter was mailed to approximately 235 parties on November 14, 1992. Four letters of comment were received in response to the scoping letter, plus one organization put an announcement of the proposed amendment in their newsletter. In addition, this amendment was listed in the November 1992 "Schedule of Proposed Environmental Actions" for the Inyo National Forest.

Scoping by the Forest Service interdisciplinary team did not identify any new issues. However, the following wilderness issue listed in the Forest Plan (page 19) was reconsidered for the analysis of this proposed amendment: "Is there any need for change in the management of designated wilderness on the Forest?"

ALTERNATIVES INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

Action Alternative

Management Area Direction for MA #20 South Sierra--the area that includes the portion of the South Sierra Wilderness administered by the Inyo National Forest--is located on pages 238 to 241 of the Forest Plan. This amendment proposes to add the following direction to this section of the Forest Plan:

Cultural Resources

- Enforce laws and regulations to minimize vandalism and theft of cultural resources (SSWIP, p. 8).
- Use interpretation and education outside the wilderness to enhance public appreciation and protection of the cultural values (SSWIP, p. 8).

Fire Management

- Use planned or unplanned prescribed fire to maintain wilderness values (SSWIP, p. 9).
- Limit and tightly control the use of mechanized equipment (SSWIP, p. 9).

- Whenever feasible, avoid placing fire camps, staging areas and other concentrations of equipment/personnel within the wilderness. When it is necessary, mitigate temporary fire camps, helispots, evidence of vehicles and other disturbances created by emergency fire suppression activities (SSWIP, p. 9).

Lands and Access

- Pursue methods of reducing vehicular intrusions into the wilderness (SSWIP, p. 11).
- Locate motorized routes outside the wilderness boundary to discourage vehicular intrusions (SSWIP, p. 11).

Livestock Grazing

- Allow livestock grazing to continue initially at its current permitted level (SSWIP, p. 12).
- Utilize range analysis data, including monitoring and the allotment planning process, to determine carrying capacity and livestock management practices (SSWIP, p. 12).

Recreation

- Maintain and/or rehabilitate existing trailheads needed to distribute use. Consider construction of new trailheads only when needed to distribute use (SSWIP, p. 15).
- Allow historic patterns of primitive recreation to continue in their current manner unless they degrade wilderness values (SSWIP, p. 15).
- Manage the SSW for Opportunity Classes as shown in Appendix G (Alternative 2) of the SSWIP, which is hereby incorporated into the Forest Plan. Manage with the Limits of Acceptable Change (SSWIP, p. 15).
- Monitor visitor use, visitor impacts and implementation of the SSWIP. Design the monitoring program (see Management Action in SSWIP) to determine correlation between registration and actual use, to determine user attitudes and management effectiveness (SSWIP, p. 16).
- Prohibit motorized equipment or access except as provided for in FSM 2326.02. (SSWIP, p. 16)
- Favor the use of recreational stock over commercial stock if in the future, limits on total stock use are determined to be necessary (SSWIP, p. 17).
- Allow for the establishment and maintenance of public pastures if environmental analysis supports this use. (Resolves inconsistency with the Sequoia National Forest Land and Resource Plan)

Watershed

- Obtain approval of the Chief of the Forest Service prior to conducting restoration activities (SSWIP, p. 22).

No Action Alternative

The No Action Alternative proposes to not add any new direction to the Inyo Forest Plan, pertaining to the management of the South Sierra Wilderness. On-the-ground management of this wilderness would continue to be provided by an unmodified Forest Plan.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Action Alternative

The Action Alternative is designed to improve management direction for the on-the-ground administration of the South Sierra Wilderness. Specifically, additional direction is provided for cultural resources, fire management, lands and access, livestock grazing, recreation and watershed. Environmental impacts would mostly be indirect, and in general should be beneficial. Administratively, the Action Alternative provides refined programmatic direction and thus has a beneficial impact. The proposed amendment improves the consistency of administration provided by the Inyo and Sequoia National Forests by formalizing management direction at the Forest Plan level.

The Action Alternative amends the programmatic Inyo Forest Plan and therefore by itself does not mandate or make any site-specific project decisions. Rather, it provides more clear and consistent direction that will guide subsequent implementation actions taken within the South Sierra Wilderness. These subsequent projects will require further environmental analysis and may result in additional documentation.

No Action Alternative

The No Action Alternative does not allow for the continued improvement and clarification of Forest Plan management direction for the South Sierra Wilderness. While this would have little environmental impact over the short-term, impacts may be evident over the long-term due to a lack of clear direction. The status of the SSWIP would be uncertain, as it would contain programmatic direction not contained in the Inyo Forest Plan--an inconsistency with the two-staged decisionmaking process used by the Forest Service. Furthermore, specific actions directed by Deputy Regional Forester Muroaka in her appeal decision letter of April 28, 1992 would not be achieved.

LIST OF AGENCIES AND PERSONS CONSULTED

A full listing of those persons contacted during scoping is available in the project file, Inyo National Forest headquarters, Bishop, CA. The following

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persons or organizations provided input specific to the proposed South Sierra amendment:

Anne Lange	Backcountry Horsemen of California, Kern Sierra Unit
Jim Eaton	California Wilderness Coalition
Daniel Christenson	Calif. Dept. of Fish and Game, Region 4
Peter Browning	High Sierra Hikers Association
Phyllis Mottola	

The following Forest Service personnel were consulted regarding the proposed amendment:

John Schuyler	Forest Planner
Richard Warren	Recreation Planner
Sara Chubb	Fish/Wildlife Biologist
Priscila Franco	Recreation Officer, Mt. Whitney RD
Marilee Reese	Sequoia National Forest
Gene Blankenbaker	Sequoia National Forest

DECISION NOTICE AND FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

It is my decision to adopt the Action Alternative as the selected plan for management of resources on the National Forest System lands described in this assessment. This alternative provides the best combination of physical, biological, social, and economic benefits. All practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm have been adopted.

The Action Alternative is adopted for the following reasons:

1. Refined programmatic direction for the South Sierra Wilderness needs to be formalized at the Forest Plan level;
2. The proposed amendment is limited in scope and only provides management direction specific to MA #20;
3. The proposed amendment does not establish a precedent for future Forest Plan amendments--future amendments will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis; and
4. The proposed amendment itself has minimal to no environmental effects.

In assessing the impacts, I have determined that this is not a major federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment; therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. This determination was made considering the following factors:

1. I have considered beneficial as well as adverse effects.
2. Public health and safety are minimally affected by the proposed actions.
3. The proposed actions are not proximal to critical areas, such as wetlands and floodplains.

4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial.
5. The effects on the human environment are not uncertain and do not involve unique or unknown risks.
6. The proposed action does not set a precedent significantly affecting future actions.
7. There are no apparent adverse cumulative or secondary effects.
8. There will be no significant adverse impacts on any known or identified cultural resources.
9. There will be no adverse impact to any sensitive, threatened, or endangered plant or animal species.
10. There will be no significant adverse effects or violation of federal, state, or local laws or requirements.
11. There will be no significant affects caused by the context of the proposed action, since they are of local short-term use and do not preclude maintenance and enhancement of long-term productivity. There are are no known significant irreversible resource commitments or irretrievable loss of resource productivity.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

I have determined that this action is also consistent with the Inyo National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan approved in August, 1988, and with the vegetative management requirements of the National Forest Management Act of 1976. All vegetative manipulation complies with the seven requirements of 36 CFR 219.27(b).

Furthermore, I have determined that this amendment does not result in a significant change in the Forest Plan, in accordance with regulations at 36 CFR 219.10(f). This finding is based on the fact that the proposed amendment does not alter Forest Plan goals, objectives or outputs.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

Implementation of this proposal may not take place until seven days after the publication of the legal notice in the Inyo Register.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

My decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 217. Appeals must be filed within 45 days from the publication of a legal notice in the Inyo Register, a newspaper of general circulation. Notices of appeal must meet the specific content requirements of 36 CFR 217.9.

It is essential that two copies of the notice of appeal be filed with the Reviewing Officer. File notices of appeal with: "Regional Forester, Attn: Appeals, 630 Sansome Street, San Francisco, CA 94111."

CONTACT PERSON

For further information contact: John C. Schuyler, Forest Planner, 873 North Main Street, Bishop, CA 93514; phone (619) 873-2400.



DENNIS W. MARTIN
Forest Supervisor

1/26/93

Date

APPENDIX I - COMMENTS AND RESPONSES

Several comments were received during public scoping for the proposed amendment to the Forest Plan. These comments are summarized below, followed by a Forest Service response:

Comment #1: An element should be added to the Forest Plan, that livestock grazing should be managed to minimize conflicts with other resources and to maintain resources at established standards.

Response: While this comment is not specific to what resources are being mentioned, the Inyo Forest Plan contains direction for the management and protection of other resources, besides that which is specific to the South* Sierra Wilderness. Forestwide standards and guidelines address the management and protection of other resources such as riparian areas, soil and water resources and diversity (Forest Plan, pages 74-105); in addition, Management Prescription #1, Wilderness, also provides direction for the protection of other resources within designated wilderness (Forest Plan, pages 107-112). All of this direction applies to the South Sierra Wilderness. With the current direction as stated in the Forest Plan, it does not seem necessary to add additional elements at this time.

Comment #2: An element should be added to the Forest Plan, that when conflicts arise between recreation and livestock grazing along trails or popular destinations, resolve the conflict to minimize the impact on recreation.

Response: A stated goal of livestock grazing (SSWIP, page 12) is to minimize conflicts with recreational use. This will be achieved through the updating of allotment management plans. We don't feel the addition of the suggested element is appropriate at this time

Comment #3: Provisions should be made for permanent barriers and the use of rotenone to protect the upstream golden trout fishery.

Response: Current management direction for the South Sierra Wilderness does not preclude actions that would promote protection of golden trout. However, such proposals would need to be site specific in order that they may be fully analyzed on a case-by-case basis.

Comment #4: Erosion control, meadow restoration and other habitat protection/improvement measures are necessary to achieve a near-natural ecosystem for the native fisheries.

Response: The overall goal of wilderness management is to allow natural processes to operate freely, to the extent possible. Where discretionary

management actions (or inactions), have lead to less than desirable conditions, restoration actions may be allowed under current management direction for the South Sierra Wilderness. Some restoration actions require approval by either the Regional Forester or the Chief of the Forest Service (see SSWIP, page 22 and FSM 2323.35).

Comment #5: The use of management ignited fires is questioned, since they may not replicate the beneficial effects achieved by natural, lightning-caused fires.

Response: A stated goal of the SSWIP (page 8) is to "allow fire to resume its natural role in the wilderness ecosystem..." One reason the Inyo Forest Plan is being amended is that, as currently written, only management ignited fire may be used. This amendment gives wilderness managers the needed option of considering the use of prescribed natural fire. While planned ignitions may be necessary in the short term to reduce unnatural high forest fuels, the long term goal is to rely primarily on natural ignitions.

Comment #6: The livestock grazing data is too vague, general and out-of-date.

Response: Page 12 of the SSWIP contains a listing of management actions that direct the collection of new range data, in support of the allotment management planning process.