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ior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project

Upper Columbia River Basin Draft Environmental Impact Statement

Preferred Alternative

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Dear Reader,

We ask for your participation in the review of this Upper Columbia River Basin Draft Environmental Impact Statement (Draft EIS). It was prepared jointly with the Eastside Draft Environmental Impact Statement, as part of the Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project (ICBEMP).

The Preferred Alternative for the Draft EIS is Alternative 4; the reasons it was chosen are enclosed. Keep in mind that we are at the **draft** stage. A final decision will be recorded in a Record of Decision after full consideration of the comments received on the Draft EIS and the preparation of the Final EIS.

Public comments played an important role in shaping the issues and the alternatives. Numerous public meetings have been held throughout the planning process, which began in September 1994. Input has been received from individuals; interest groups; federal, state, and local agencies; and American Indian Tribes. This input, combined with science and management information, was used to construct the seven alternatives in this Draft EIS. Within these alternatives we have attempted to reflect the diverse and often conflicting desires of the public regarding how the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service implement their legal mandates on public land. We believe that with these alternatives, the stage is set for a full public discussion of future public land management within the project area.

Because of the complexity of this document and the large geographic scope covered by the Preferred Alternative, we have extended the comment period from the required 90 days to 120 days.

Your written comments will be most helpful if they are specific, mention particular pages or chapters where appropriate, and address one or more of the following:

- How well the Preferred Alternative meets the purpose and need statements,
- Which other alternative or parts of alternatives you would support or prefer and why,
- Items that need clarification, and
- New information that would have a bearing on the analysis.

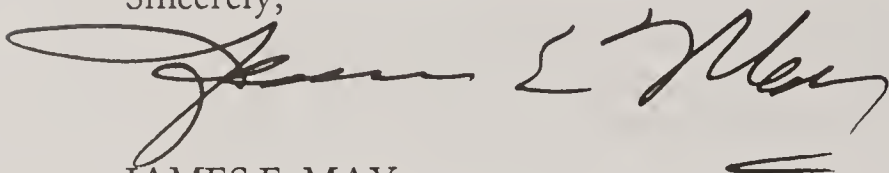
We are particularly interested in receiving your comments on the following topics, with emphasis on how well the Preferred Alternative addresses them:

- How well do the anticipated levels of goods and services provide predictability and sustainability for area economies and communities?
- How well do the alternatives in the Draft EIS meet the reader's expectations for inclusion of a system of reserves or protected areas, and what are the scientific, social, and economic rationale for a different proposal?

- Do the alternatives provide an appropriate balance between the certainty provided by Draft EIS objectives and standards, and on-the-ground adaptive management accomplished through processes, such as site-specific project evaluations, Ecosystem Analysis at the Watershed Scale, and subbasin review?
- Do the alternatives appropriately balance ecological and social and economic needs?
- Do the alternatives establish an adequate framework for monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive management?

Please send your comment letters to the ICBEMP EIS Team, 304 N. 8th Street, Room 250, Boise, ID 83702. Comments received on the Draft EIS will become part of the administrative record, which is available for public review. We look forward to your comments on the Draft EIS. Thank you for your interest.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James E. May". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

JAMES E. MAY
Acting Project Manager
Boise, Idaho

The Preferred Alternative

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Introduction

In July of 1993, President Clinton directed the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service to develop a scientifically sound, ecosystem-based management strategy for lands they administer in the Columbia River Basin. As a result, the two land management agencies joined in a new collaborative effort to form the Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project. The project area for the project includes those portions of the Columbia River Basin, upper Klamath Basin, and northern Great Basin that lie east of the crest of the Cascade range, totaling approximately 144 million acres in portions of seven states. The BLM and Forest Service administer over half (72 million acres) of the lands in this area. The Eastside planning area encompasses approximately 30 million acres of land administered by either the Forest Service or the BLM in eastern Oregon and eastern Washington. The Upper Columbia River Basin planning area encompasses approximately 42 million acres of land administered by either the Forest Service or the BLM in Idaho, western Montana and Wyoming, and northern Nevada and Utah. Separate Draft Environmental Impact Statements (DEISs) have been prepared for the Eastside and Upper Columbia River Basin planning areas.

The project is designed to respond to several critical broad scale issues including, but not limited to, forest and rangeland health, listing of Snake River salmon and other plant and animal species pursuant to the Endangered Species Act, potential listing of steelhead trout and bull trout as threatened or endangered, species associated with old forest structure, economies of rural communities, and treaty and trust responsibilities to American Indian Tribes.

What is the Preferred Alternative?

Of the seven alternatives, Alternative 4 has been identified as the Preferred Alternative in both DEISs. This alternative is designed to aggressively restore ecosystem health through

active management using an integrated ecosystem management approach. The alternative focuses on overall watershed restoration including short-term (within the next ten years) vegetation management; for example, prescribed burning, commercial thinning, and noxious weed controls to improve ecosystem health. Watershed restoration management is designed to reduce risks to property, products, and economic and social opportunities that can result from large disturbance events such as wildfire, insects and disease. Continued involvement with other federal agencies, and state, county, and tribal governments will be important in planning, identifying and implementing programs and projects.

Why was Alternative 4 Identified as the Preferred Alternative?

From public scoping, seven issues were identified and used as the foundation for development of the purpose and need statements and alternatives. These seven issues are described in Chapter 1. Alternative 4 was identified as the Preferred Alternative because it achieves, at a more accelerated rate than other alternatives, fulfillment of the purpose and need statements. It does so by:

- ◆ Setting a course to restore and maintain long-term ecosystem health and ecological integrity,
- ◆ Supporting economic and/or social needs of people, cultures, and communities, by providing sustainable and predictable levels of products and services from lands administered by the BLM or Forest Service,
- ◆ Providing guidance to update or amend BLM and Forest Service land use plans to provide consistent long-term direction at regional and subregional levels,
- ◆ Providing consistent direction to assist federal managers in making decisions at a landscape level within the context of broader ecological, social and economic considerations,

- ◆ Emphasizing adaptive management over the long term,
- ◆ Helping to restore and maintain habitats of plant and animal species, especially those of threatened, endangered, proposed, candidate, and sensitive species,
- ◆ Providing opportunities for cultural, recreational, and aesthetic experiences,
- ◆ Identifying how federal trust responsibilities to American Indian Tribes will be met,
- ◆ Providing long-term management direction to replace interim strategies (PACFISH, INFISH, and Eastside Screens), and,
- ◆ Identifying where changes to current policy, process, or organization structure can improve the ability to implement the strategy and achieve the desired future conditions.

Key Factors That Led to the Identification of Alternative 4

Several overarching factors were considered in the identification of the Preferred Alternative. Alternative 4 aggressively reduces the risks of wildfires to life, property, and resource values. In addition, it actively addresses other issues, such as deteriorating fish and aquatic habitat, road related sedimentation problems, and the spread of noxious weeds. By actively restoring and maintaining ecosystems, this alternative contributes to the social and economic well being of communities throughout the project area. Sustainable ecosystems result in sustainable communities.

The Preferred Alternative provides a conservative approach to riparian management. It does so through an extensive system of riparian conservation areas where the main objectives are restoration and maintenance of riparian function. In addition, it incorporates existing specially designated areas, such as wilderness, research natural areas, wild and scenic river corridors, and areas of critical environmental concern into the overall management strategy. Natural processes can

function in these areas, providing refuge for species needing minimal human contact. The Preferred Alternative, therefore, provides a balance between passive and active management. It generally recognizes that in areas of higher risk a more cautious approach to management is needed.

The Preferred Alternative is highly consistent with, and addresses the key science findings resulting from, the *Integrated Scientific Assessment for Ecosystem Management in the Interior Columbia Basin including Portions of the Klamath and Great Basins* and the *Assessment of Ecosystem Components in the Interior Columbia Basin and Portions of the Klamath and Great Basins* (both are collectively referred to as the *Scientific Assessment*). The Preferred Alternative provides a strategy that integrates actions over the next ten years with long-term goals as described in Chapter 1. The Preferred Alternative best allows actions to proceed based on existing knowledge, while providing a process for other actions where more information or analysis is needed over time. The Preferred Alternative provides a scientifically sound, ecosystem-based strategy that moves away from emphasis on individual components of ecosystems (for example, timber and fish) to a landscape scale approach. In other words, the strategy provides for managing the whole and not just fixing the parts.

Implementation of the Preferred Alternative would improve the BLM and Forest Service's institutional capacity for collaborative management, so that opportunities for intergovernmental coordination and public involvement are provided early and often. Although the Preferred Alternative requires additional expenditures, it is one of the most cost effective in restoration of landscape health. For example, over time, implementation of the Preferred Alternative should result in the highest reduction in wildfire suppression costs.

The Preferred Alternative provides an effective balance in managing multiple risks from natural events and human activities. Through the restoration emphasis of the alternative, a modest increase in risk in the first few years is offset by the achievement of significant risk reduction in subsequent years. For example, the potential erosion associated with thinning an over-dense timber stand must be balanced with the potential loss of an important salmon-bearing watershed from catastrophic wildfire.

Comparison of the Preferred Alternative to Other Alternatives

In addition to these general findings, the alternatives were compared with each other in Chapter 3, using ten evaluation criteria that reflect the purpose and need statements. Based on this comparison and use of the evaluation of effects of alternatives in Chapter 4, a more specific discussion of factors leading to the identification of the Preferred Alternative follows.

Of the seven alternatives, the Preferred Alternative would be one of the most effective in moving forest conditions to a more desirable pattern of forest structural stages and composition over the next several decades. This alternative would also provide greater long-term resilience to stresses such as wildfire, insects and disease, and noxious weeds.

Overall, the Preferred Alternative is most responsive to rangeland health issues and needs. It is predicted to be among the most effective of the alternatives in reducing the spread of noxious weeds and cheatgrass, and reducing the encroachment or density of woody species on rangelands. It is also among the most effective in restoring rangeland vegetation and achieving/maintaining healthy rangelands because of its emphasis on aggressive implementation of management actions, such as adjusting seasons of use for livestock and controlling noxious weeds.

Based on the effects information provided in Chapter 4, the Preferred Alternative is one of the highest ranked in improving aquatic and riparian health. A high degree of watershed restoration is predicted in the long-term for this alternative. It facilitates achievement of multiple ecological goals and provides the framework and flexibility to address Clean Water Act issues, such as 303(d) listed water bodies.

Landscape health reflects the interaction of a variety of ecosystem functions on a broad scale. Because the Preferred Alternative takes aggressive action to address a variety of issues and problems identified in the *Scientific*

Assessment, it ranks very high, overall, in providing for both short- and long-term landscape health.

The Preferred Alternative is among those alternatives providing the highest likelihood of species persistence and viability in the long term. It is also among those alternatives with the fewest unfavorable habitat outcomes for species at risk. This alternative emphasizes the restoration of habitats to reverse negative trends for most species.

For most threatened or endangered fish species, the Preferred Alternative is ranked among the highest for long-term recovery and delisting. No threatened or endangered terrestrial species exhibited a substantial difference among alternatives at this scale of analysis.

Overall, the Preferred Alternative is expected to be among the most responsive to federal trust responsibilities and tribal rights and interests. It enhances consultation processes with tribes in federal decision making, and access to areas of importance to the tribes is maintained. While none of the alternatives fully satisfies all the interests of all the tribes in the project area, the Preferred Alternative is expected to be among the most responsive because it results in healthy ecosystem functions and processes.

The Preferred Alternative presents a workable balance between ecological restoration and the provision of goods and services. It is expected to provide for recreation activity and livestock production at high levels, and timber volume at a moderately high level compared with other alternatives. The emphasis of the Preferred Alternative on active restoration to attain a healthy ecosystem should improve opportunities for delivery of goods and services in the long term.

As a contributor to community vitality and resiliency across the project area, the Preferred Alternative provides one of the highest levels of jobs of all the alternatives, including timber, restoration, ranching, and recreation jobs.

While it is difficult to assess the potential impact of any alternative on quality of life in communities throughout the project area, the Preferred Alternative achieves a desirable balance between providing goods and services, and improving ecological conditions. Both are important to quality of life.

Conclusion

Of the seven alternatives, Alternative 4 provides the best strategy to respond to the purpose and need statements; issues raised by the public, other agencies and governments; and findings from the *Scientific Assessment*. The Preferred Alternative provides a framework to comply with federal environmental laws. It also establishes an adaptive management approach to incorporate new information and respond to changing conditions. Finally, the Preferred Alternative maintains a desirable balance among the various and sometimes competing purposes and needs.

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