

**ACCESS ACROSS
RUNNING CREEK
PROJECT
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

**Bitterroot National Forest
West Fork Ranger District
Idaho County, Idaho**

March 2013

Lead Agency:

USDA Forest Service

Responsible Official:

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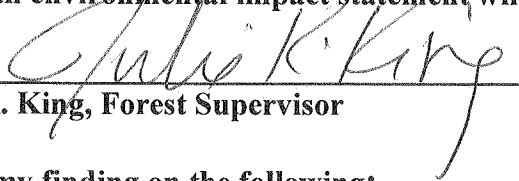
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After considering the environmental effects described in the attached environmental assessment, and the entirety of the project planning record, I have determined that the actions associated with Alternative 3 will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.


Julie K. King, Forest Supervisor
Date

I base my finding on the following:

Context: The project does not have any large or lasting effect on society as a whole, the nation, or the state. The effects are local in nature, mostly short term and ephemeral, and are not likely to significantly affect regional or national resources. The affected area is limited in size and the proposed activities and their adverse effects are limited in duration.

While the proposed action would authorize and specifically regulate activities within a part of the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness, the resulting actions and effects are limited to only a small portion, about 0.5 percent, of this 1.3 million acres wilderness (EA p.41). Some motorized tools will be used during portions of the 5 week construction period. Potential users whose wilderness experience could be affected by this activity will have numerous opportunities to find equivalent experiences nearby or, if they choose, they may find the same opportunities and experiences within the project area both before and after these limited activities are completed.

Additionally, the selected alternative is designed to achieve purposes recognized and validated by Congress when it established the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness, established by Congress under both the Wilderness Act and consistent with the Bitterroot Forest Plan (EA p. 3, 4, 21-42).

Additional context considerations are discussed below relative to individual intensity factors.

Intensity:

1. Significant Impacts That May be Both Beneficial and Adverse

I considered beneficial and adverse impacts associated with the alternatives as presented in p. 21-103, and A-1 to A-39 of the EA and in the project file. The selected alternative would reduce the risk of severe and long lasting adverse effects to wilderness and other aspects of the human environment, including public safety, in the long term without risking significant adverse effects in the short term. The individual and overall impacts of the selected alternative will have no significant adverse impacts.

On this basis, I conclude that the specific and cumulative adverse effects of the selected alternative are not significant.

2. The Degree to Which the Proposed Action Affects Public Health or Safety

It is my determination that the selected alternative will have no significant adverse effects, but will have beneficial long term effects on public health and safety. The action is designed to protect public health and safety by providing access across Running Creek on Trail #4 during periods of high water (EA p. 25,36, Appendix p. A- 21). Mitigation measures and terms and conditions will provide reasonable public safety precautions during the actual removal of the existing damaged Running Creek bridge and construction of a new bridge. (DN-2 p.9-11)

Issues concerning public health and safety raised by members of the public regarding this proposal have been addressed (EA p. 5, 6). Activities will result in long term beneficial effects to public safety and temporary effects will be mitigated (EA p. 17-20, 24-42).

3. Unique Characteristics of the Geographic Area, Such as Proximity to Historic or Cultural Resources, Park Lands, Prime Farms, Wetlands, Wild and Scenic Rivers, or Ecologically Critical Area

The project area does not contain any park land, prime farmlands, or ecologically critical areas. The project area is in the Selway River designated wild river reach (EA p. 42-44). Alternative 4 would protect and enhance the Outstandingly Remarkable Values of the Selway River in the short and long-term by continuing to provide recreation opportunities.

Effects on cultural resources have been analyzed. The analysis found that the proposed access and project work would not adversely affect any known cultural sites, provided the mitigation measure to halt project activity if cultural materials are discovered during project implementation is followed. (EA p. 18).

The selected alternative action does occur within the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness. The selected alternative provides access on the Selway River trail #4. The Running Creek bridge was a pre-existing structure (as shown on a 1950 map)-within the wilderness when the Wilderness Act was enacted. The effects of the proposal on this wilderness are limited geographically and are predominately ephemeral (EA p.41, EA-Appendix C and Appendix DN -A, Comments and Response to Comments).

The selected alternative would produce minimal disturbance and is highly unlikely to affect any sensitive or unique water resources in the vicinity or downstream. The selected alternative would not significantly modify, encroach upon or threaten floodplains downstream along Running Creek or on the larger Selway River. The selected alternative would have an extremely low potential to produce substantial sediment in Running Creek. With very little existing human impact in the upper watershed, and little possibility of substantial effects from this project, loss of beneficial uses, water quality, or channel damage in Running Creek are unlikely to occur. (EA P.71, 74-75).

Based on these findings, I have concluded that my decision will have no significant effects on unique resource characteristics of the geographic area.

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4. The Degree to Which the Effects on the Quality of the Human Environment are Likely to be Highly Controversial

The effects of this action on the quality of the human environment are not highly controversial. Scoping, comments on the EA, and subsequent analysis did not indicate any highly controversial issues. We received five scoping public comments and one comment on the EA. Four respondents supported helicopter access and one respondent had concerns about helicopter access, effects to wilderness, and the analysis process.

Only one of the comments raised questions of scientific controversy surrounding potential effects of this activity (EA p 5, 6 and Appendix DN-A). The question was regarding environmental impacts from wood treated with Pentachlorophenol or Copper Naphthenate. Although elevated preservative levels have been detected in sediments adjacent to treated wood in aquatic environments, Brooks (Brooks 2000, USDA Forest Products Laboratory 2000) did not find any measurable impact on the abundance or diversity of aquatic invertebrates associated with those sediments. See response to comments (DN p.A-16).

5. The Degree to Which the Possible Effects on the Human Environment are Highly Uncertain or Involve Unique or Unknown Risk

The EA discloses potential effects, none of which are significantly unique or involve potentially significant unknown risks (EA p. 21-103, A-1 to A-42). The potential effects are well understood. It is my conclusion that there are no unique or unusual characteristics in the area or project which have not been previously encountered or that would constitute an unknown risk to the human environment.

6. The Degree To Which the Action May Establish a Precedent for Future Actions With Significant Effects or Presents a Decision in Principle About a Future Consideration

The proposed activities are consistent with the Bitterroot National Forest Plan (EA p.3,4, 21-103, A-1-A-42) The selected alternative is not setting a precedent for future actions with potentially significant effects. This action does not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration.

7. Whether the Action is Related to Other Actions With Individually Insignificant but Cumulatively Significant Impacts

The effects of the bridge removal and construction work in the vicinity of Running Creek and the use of some motorized tools, combined with the effects of past and other present and reasonably foreseeable activities, are discussed and disclosed throughout the EA. The action's effects are not cumulative to other actions with individually or cumulatively significant impacts.

I looked particularly at the cumulative effects to wilderness and public safety because they were identified as important issues from scoping. The cumulative effects to Wilderness resources are minor and typically short-term and ephemeral. The Selway Bitterroot Wilderness includes approximately 1,340,360 acres. The analysis area (the Selway Wild and Scenic River Corridor -

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from the wilderness boundary at Paradise to the bridge across Moose Creek) is approximately 7040 acres. Thus, the analysis area for this project is 0.5% of the entire Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. Motorized tools may be used throughout the project. Estimated length of project is 7 weeks. While the project is ongoing, users will have safe access across Running Creek to the rest of the wilderness. Users will experience less wilderness character (less undeveloped quality, less solitude) from Paradise to Running Creek should they happen to be there during the project which is scheduled between July 1 and August 15, 2013 or when funding and timing allow.

The cumulative effects to public safety are beneficial. There is no indication of any significant adverse cumulative effects to the environment. (EA p. 21-103)

8. The Degree to Which the Action may Adversely Affect Districts, Sites, Highway Structures, or Objects Listed in or Eligible for Listing in the National Register Of Historic Places, or May Cause Loss or Destruction of Significant Scientific, Cultural, or Historic Resources

Effects on cultural resources have been analyzed. The Running Creek trail bridge has been determined to be not eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. The analysis found that the return of the short Trail #4 segment at Running creek to its original alignment will constitute no adverse affect on Trail # 4. Bridge replacement, relocation and access activities will have no adverse effect on cultural resources, provided any cultural sites that may be identified are avoided. (EA p. 18, 101-102).

9. The Degree to Which the Action may Adversely Affect an Endangered or Threatened Species or Its Habitat That Has Been Determined to be Critical Under The Endangered Species Act Of 1973

The Forest Service completed Biological Assessments and Biological Evaluations for federal threatened endangered, candidate, and sensitive wildlife, fish, and plant species, which could be affected by the proposed project.

The Westslope Cutthroat Trout and Spring Chinook Salmon are sensitive fish species that occur in the project area. The finding is that this project "may impact individual Westslope Cutthroat Trout and Spring Chinook Salmon or their habitat, but is unlikely to contribute to federal listing or result in losses of viability". EA p. 62-63. The Western Pearlshell Mussel is a sensitive mollusk species that may occur in the project area. The environmental assessment concludes that this project "may impact individual mussels and their habitat, but is unlikely to contribute to federal listing or losses in viability". EA p. 63. The Pacific Lamprey is a sensitive fish species that is thought to be absent from the project area. The environmental assessment concludes that this project would have "No Impact" on Pacific Lamprey. EA p.63.

Bull Trout, Steelhead and Fall Chinook Salmon are listed as Threatened Species within the Columbia River Basin by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service. The environmental assessment concludes that this project "may affect, but would not likely adversely affect" Bull Trout, Steelhead or their designated critical habitat. EA p. 63-65. A project-specific Biological Assessment was not prepared for this project because

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Section 7 consultation is already covered by two Biological Opinions - the Biological Opinion for the Restoration Activities at Stream Crossings (Stream Crossing Programmatic, 01EIFW00-2012-F-0015) – Idaho and Nevada (signed by the USDI Fish and Wildlife Service, on June 15, 2012), and the Endangered Species Act Section 7 Formal Consultation Biological and Conference Opinion & Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act Essential Fish Habitat Consultation for the Restoration Activities at Stream Crossings on National Forests and Bureau of Land Management Public Lands in Idaho (signed by the National Marine Fisheries Service on June 4, 2012). Those two Biological Opinions allow projects such as the Running Creek Bridge to proceed without individual consultations as long as certain mitigations and timing windows are incorporated into the project design. Those mitigations and timing windows have been incorporated into the Running Creek Bridge project. Copies of the Biological Opinions are available in the project file. The Forest reviewed the Running Creek Bridge project with United States Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service biologists in January 2012 at a Central Idaho Level 1 Team meeting. The Level 1 Team concurred with the “may affect, not likely to adversely affect” determinations for bull trout and steelhead, and agreed that Section 7 consultation would be addressed by the programmatic stream crossing Biological Opinions listed above. The determination of effect for Fall Chinook Salmon is “No Effect”, as Fall Chinook Salmon are not present in the Selway River Basin. EA p.654.

The United States Fish and Wildlife Service lists Canada lynx (Threatened), yellow-billed cuckoo (Candidate) and wolverine (Candidate) as Threatened, Endangered or Candidate wildlife species that could occur on the Bitterroot National Forest. Canada lynx do not occur in the analysis area and the effects call for this species would be No Effect. Yellow-billed cuckoos do not occur in the analysis area and this alternative would not affect cuckoo habitat or populations. The effects call for this species would be No Impact. Wolverine may be a transient species in the analysis area, and the effects call for this species would be May Impact Individuals or Habitat, but Will Not Likely Result in a Trend Toward Federal Listing or Reduced Viability to the Population or Species (EA p. 86).

For this selected alternative the effects call for the following sensitive species is May Impact Individuals or Habitat, but Will Not Likely Result in a Trend Toward Federal Listing or Reduced Viability to the Population or Species for the peregrine falcon, bald eagle, bighorn sheep, fisher, gray wolf, long-eared myotis, long-legged myotis, townsend's big-eared bat, western toads and wolverine. The effects call for all other sensitive species is No Impact (EA p. 81-86).

The project meets Forest Plan standards (EA p. 77-85) for Management Indicator Species (MIS) wildlife species (American marten, elk, and pileated woodpecker). These MIS wildlife species occur in the analysis area and may be impacted.

Extra traffic by crews and pack trains has the potential to cause avoidance behaviors that are greater than seen currently. The additional traffic on the trail is also expected to necessitate trail repair sooner than is typical for that trail, which could lead to supplementary disturbances and interactions between wildlife using the area and humans repairing the trail.

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The project effects from the selected alternative would not adversely impact any rare plant species (Threatened, Endangered or Bitterroot Forest Sensitive Plant species) since none are known to occur in the vicinity of the bridge or along the trail accessing the bridge, although habitat for these and other species was found. For the following sensitive plants, Pointed Broom Sedge, Chaffweed, and Shining Flat Sedge, there may be an impact to individuals or habitat, however these impacts will not likely result in a trend toward federal listing or reduced viability for the population or species. There may be some adverse impacts on potentially suitable sensitive plant habitat due to the spread or introduction of noxious weeds. However, these impacts will not likely result in a trend toward federal listing or reduced viability for any sensitive plant species. (EA p. 88-100)

Based on this analysis I find that this project will not significantly adversely affect any threatened or endangered species.

10. Whether the Proposed Action Threatens a Violation of Federal, State, or Local Law or Requirements Imposed for the Protection of the Environment

This project decision meets Federal, State, and local laws for water quality, air quality, cultural resources, and threatened and endangered species, and meets National Environmental Policy Act disclosure requirements (EA, p. 1-103, EA Appendix p. A-1 to A-42). This project decision meets the Wilderness Act Section 4 (a)3(b) which states: Except as otherwise provided in this Act, each agency administering any area designated as wilderness shall be responsible for preserving the wilderness character of the area and shall so administer such area for such other purposes for which it may have been established as also to preserve its wilderness character. Except as otherwise provided in this Act, wilderness areas shall be devoted to the public purposes of recreational, scenic, scientific, educational, conservation, and historical use. Thus the Wilderness Act devotes wilderness areas to the public purpose of recreation.

Based on the context and intensity of the project as discussed in the items above, I conclude there will be no significant direct, indirect or cumulative impacts from implementing the Access Across Running Creek project as described in Alternative 3.

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