

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 8/17/2023 4:00:00 AM

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Organization:

Title:

Comments: Thank you for considering comments on the draft Environmental Assessment (EA) and Preliminary Finding of No Significant Impact for the Sandwich Vegetation Management Project.

I frequently visit the WMNF to hike, hunt, fish, and bike. As an avid outdoorsman, I am pleased to see that the Sandwich Vegetation Management Project includes a wildlife habitat management objective. I have witnessed over the years the decline of my favorite gamebird species the ruffed grouse on the forest along with the habitat suitable for it. Of all my forest related recreational pursuits, bird hunting is one of the few that I need to look to places other than the WMNF. The WMNF is in critical need of regeneration age class and young forest age class wildlife habitat. Research validates what I have witnessed:

* The New Hampshire Fish and Game Department performs an annual survey of grouse observations by hunters (Grouse Observation Rates by Region). Reports for the White Mountain Region determined that between 2002 and 2022, hunter observation rates for Ruffed Grouse have fallen from over 1.6 sightings per hour hunted in 2002, to less than 0.6 sightings per hour hunted in 2022. This 60% decline specific to the White Mountains region is near linear over the time period pointing to habitat loss, not annual population variation typical of this species, as a factor.

* The December 2020 report by the Eastern Working Group titled Ruffed Grouse Population Declines in the Eastern United States reports a 69% decline in ruffed grouse populations in New England, and the loss of young forests as the primary driver of the decline.

On the Sandwich HMU mature forest is dominant and regenerating forest is reported at 0%. Young Forest Species have declined in recent years and continue to decline as the Forest Plan targets for regeneration have been missed. Habitat needs for ruffed grouse and the suite of species that require young forest is at a critical stage.

I support the Sandwich Vegetation Management Project's goals of improving wildlife habitat by creating regeneration growth, young aspen/birch forest, and wildlife openings. I hope that well timed re-entry will solidify this move in the right direction for the critical need of this type of wildlife habitat.