INTERIOR COLUMBIA BASIN ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT PROJECT

THE LEADING EDGE

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Newsletter of the Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project—Evaluating and implementing ecosystem management within the Interior Columbia River Basin.

Preferred Alternative Announced for Draft Environmental Impact Statements

On April 23 regional executives who oversee the Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project announced the preferred alternative for the management of more than 72 million acres of Forest Service- and Bureau of Land Management (BLM)-administered land in the Interior Columbia River Basin and portions of the Klamath and Great Basins covered by the Eastside and the Upper Columbia River Basin Draft Environmental Impact Statements (EISs). One EIS covers eastern Oregon and Washington, and the other covers much of Idaho, western Montana, northern Nevada, and parts of Utah and Wyoming. A strong call for public review of the Draft EISs, which will be available in late May, was also issued.

"We have identified Alternative Four as the 'preferred alternative' in the Draft Environmental Impact Statements," stated Idaho State BLM Director and the Project's Executive Steering Committee chair Martha Hahn. "The preferred alternative allows citizens to share the many values and uses of the Federal public lands. Among the seven alternatives, it strikes the best balance of actively restoring forest, rangeland and watershed resources, while providing resource goods and services to people. It also seeks to involve the public, other levels of government, and tribes in the decision making that affects public lands."

The Project was launched in 1993 by the Forest Service and BLM to address environmental and economic issues that affect larger areas than traditional administrative boundaries, such as recovery of Snake River salmon, declining forest and rangeland health, and changing economies and social conditions of local communities. Comprehensive science reports were issued in December 1996. The Draft EISs respond to the scientific information as well as over 10,000 public comments.

"We have reached a substantial milestone in this Project. We look forward to a vigorous public discussion of the role of these Federal Lands in the Basin ."

JIM MAY
Acting Project Manager,
Interior Columbia Basin
Ecosystem Management Project

"We are confident the proposed management strategy is firmly based on science and meets the requirements and spirit of the nation's environmental laws," said Intermountain Regional Forester Dale Bosworth. "A big picture strategy for Federal lands is necessary to prevent further declines of fish and wildlife, address the threat of catastrophic wildfires, and support people and communities. Without it we face continued litigation and gridlock."

Release of the Draft Environmental Impact Statements in late May will be followed by a 120-day public comment period. Public debate is essential to mold the final strategy, due to be completed by the summer of 1998. "These are draft documents," said Forest Service Northern Regional Forester Hal Salwasser. "The final direction will reflect your comments. There will be many opportunities to ask questions about the documents and give comments over the next few months."

The preferred alternative was selected after months of listening to governments and advisory committees, and sets the stage for continued dialogue. "The proposed management strategy will ensure that affected people have a say in what happens in the landscapes they live in," said BLM Oregon-Washington State Director Elaine Zielinski. "The preferred alternative features strong interagency collaboration with states and counties, and better consultation to see that tribal treaty and government trust responsibilities are fulfilled. We also want public participation at the watershed and local level."

A Summary of the Preferred Alternative- Alternative 4

Alternative 4 is designed to aggressively restore ecosystem health through active management, the results of which resemble endemic disturbance processes including insects, disease, and fire. The alternative focuses on overall watershed restoration including short term vegetation management; for example - prescribed burning and thinning to improve ecosystem health. Watershed restoration 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. Direct involvement with other Federal agencies, and Tribal, state, and county governments will be used in planning, identifying, and implementing programs and projects.

The priority in this alternative is placed on forestland, rangeland, and watershed health, including riparian and aquatic health. Vegetation management is designed to mimic natural disturbances resulting in patterns and structures that are more resilient and sustainable over time. Actions taken to achieve desired conditions are designed to produce economic benefits whenever practical. A wide variety of management tools are available under this alternative. It is highly consistent with, and responds to key science findings.

This alternative provides conservative approaches for riparian management through an extensive system of riparian conservation areas where the main objectives are restoration and maintenance of riparian function. In addition, it retains existing specially designated areas, such as wilderness, Wild and Scenic River corridors, Research Natural Areas, and Areas of Critical Environmental Concern. Natural processes can function in these areas, providing refuge for species needing minimal human contact. It also provides for more cautious management approaches in areas of higher risks.

Alternative 4 allows actions to proceed based on existing knowledge, while providing a process for other actions where more information or analysis is needed over time. It is an approach that examines overall landscape conditions before individual actions are initiated.

There are many risks that resource managers must consider, including those risks that the environment poses to people and things people value, as well as risks to the environment from human activities. Alternative 4 provides an effective balance in managing multiple risks from natural events and human activities. Through the restoration emphasis and adaptive management approach, a modest increase in risk in the first several years is balanced with achieving significant risk reduction in subsequent years.

Time to Tell us What You Think

When will the Draft Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) be available to the public? How will the public be able to comment on the Draft EISs?

Mailing of the Draft EISs will begin in late May. For those who have not requested Draft EISs, copies will be available at both Project offices and at the BLM and Forest Service administrative units throughout the Basin. The Draft EISs will be available on the Internet through the Project homepage (http\\www.icbemp.gov) in mid-May. We are also exploring the possibility of accepting comments on the Draft EISs electronically.

How long is the comment period for the Draft EISs?

The comment period will be 120-days beginning after the Draft EISs are available to the public. The comment period would end in September.

Will briefings be scheduled to explain the Draft EISs?

There will be many opportunities to learn about the Draft EISs. A Basin-wide teleconference is planned in mid-June to present the Draft EISs and answer questions. This summer, there will be a series of public meetings/open houses throughout the Basin, tailored to meet local community needs. Additional presentations will be made, by request, during the comment period.

How will states, counties, Resource Advisory Councils, tribes and other partners be involved during the comment period?

We will continue our intergovernmental coordination work with state, tribal and county governments, and Resource Advisory Committees. Some of these entities are planning opportunities for public interaction and comment that the Project will help support.

Questions and Answers about the Preferred Alternative

Do you expect the preferred alternative will change?

Yes. We will be responsive to public comment and are willing to make necessary changes to the preferred alternative, including selection on an entirely different alternative.

How does the preferred alternative address forest health and the threat of catastrophic fire?

The preferred alternative proposes the use of prescribed fire and thinning to promote species and age diversity of the forests to reduce the risk of insect and disease infestation and catastrophic fire.

How does Alternative 4 differ from PACFISH/INFISH? Does Alternative 4 providelong-term protection?

PACFISH and INFISH are interim measures intended to halt the decline of aquatic habitat and begin the process of recovery. PACFISH and INFISH riparian buffers have fixed widths by stream type.

Alternative 4 places more emphasis on an ecosystem management approach that moves the decision process from the broad-scale sub-basin view through ecosystem analysis at the watershed scale through to local conditions and local projects. A zonal strategy is applied to riparian buffers. Buffer widths will vary by forest and range type, stream type and the steepness of upland slopes.

Will Alternative 4 preclude listing and provide for recovery of species on Federal lands?

Pursuant to the Endangered Species Act, as amended, listing determinations for species must consider all relevant information about the status of the species' populations, habitats and overall geographic distribution, and must take into account existing management measures designed to protect the species. For those species which exist primarily on federal lands, Alternative 4 provides the framework necessary to conserve species and their habitats, which will support species recovery on federal lands, and may avoid the need for listing. The EISs do not attempt to restrict activities affecting habitat on non-federal lands.

Does the preferred alternative allow for salvage logging?

Salvage logging is one of many tools available to land managers to address forest health issues in the Basin. Other tools available include forest thinning, prescribed burning and watershed restoration. The preferred alternative does not prescribe where salvage logging or other management activities will take place. Rather, priority areas are identified and a variety of management tools are available to local managers.

How does the preferred alternative deal with noxious and exotic weeds?

The draft EIS identifies areas where problems exist and the priorities for controlling future spread of noxious weeds.

How does Alternative 4 address restoration and/or protection of resources, particularly salmon, important to tribes?

Alternative 4 takes aggressive actions to protect and restore watersheds with a focus on riparian and aquatic conditions. This will conserve populations of native fish (salmon, steelhead, and bull trout) and provide for tribal use. Also, the use of prescribed fire and thinning and the control of noxious weeds will restore native ecosystems and provide resources of importance to tribes.

Does the preferred alternative deal with the issue of old growth?

Yes. We are changing our management to focus on future forest conditions that are more resilient to large natural disturbances such as catastrophic fire and insect infestation. This means managing to achieve a range of forest types, including mature forests. This preferred alternative sets a desired condition for old forests that is equal to or greater than all the other alternatives

Will decisions from the EISs change existing livestock grazing permits?

No, existing permits will not be changed with the Records of Decisions. However, over time, permits will be adjusted if they are not consistent with the direction in the Records of Decisions.

What is the impact on traditional commodity outputs (timber, livestock production) from BLM and Forest Service administered lands?

Long-term commodity outputs vary by Draft EIS alternative and will depend on which alternative is finally selected. In general, most of the seven alternatives show a slight to moderate increase in timber harvest volume over the current situation (the last three years) but lower than the 10 year average. However, tree species and size may differ. The one noted exception is Alternative 7, which shows lower timber levels than current. Livestock production does not vary significantly from alternative to alternative, with again Alternative 7 being the one exception. Alternative 7 does not allow timber harvesting or grazing within reserves.

Have rural communities been considered in developing your strategy?

Yes, rural communities have been considered. The Scientific Assessment and the Draft EISs focused on broadscale social and economic conditions and trends in the Basin but also examined the characteristics and conditions of the 387 small rural communities in the study area. This was done in part with 1990 US Census data on all communities and, in part, with in-depth, detailed data from a survey of 198 communities conducted in the spring of 1995. In addition, economic profiles were prepared for many of communities, both large and small, within the Basin.

When do you expect to release the Final Environmental Impact Statements and Records of Decisions?

We expect the Final EISs to be released during the summer of 1998. The Records of Decisions will follow within two to three months following the release of the Final DEISs.

The Alternative Themes

Alternative 1: No Action

Continues management specified under 74 existing Forest Service and BLM land-use plans (including recent direction from the Northwest Forest Plan with certain National Forests and one BLM Resource Area).

Alternative 2:

Applies recent interim direction (PACFISH, INFISH, and Eastside screens) as the long-term strategy for lands administered by the Forest Service or BLM. All other direction from existing plans would continue. Direction in Alternative 1 would apply to areas not covered by interim direction.

Alternative 3:

Updates existing Forest Service or BLM plans in response to changing conditions. Minimizes changes to local plans, addressing only priority conditions that most hinder effectiveness or legal conditions. Provides a broader dimension and more integrated management regarding priority large-scale issues than Alternative 1 or 2.

Alternative 4:

Aggressively restores ecosystem health through active management using an integrated ecosystem management approach. Priority is placed on forest, rangeland, and watershed health. Actions are designed to produce economic benefits whenever practical.

Alternative 5:

Emphasizes production of goods and services consistent with ecosystem management principles. Areas are targeted for specific uses based on biological capability and economic efficiency; other uses may occur but conflicts would be resolved in favor of the priority use of the emphasis area.

Alternative 6:

Emphasizes an adaptive management approach to restore and maintain ecosystems while providing for social and economic needs. Takes a slower, more cautious approach than other alternatives and implies the use of experimental processes, local research, and extensive monitoring.

Alternative 7:

Emphasizes reducing risks to ecological integrity and species viability by establishing a system of reserves on Federal lands. Reserves are selected for representation of vegetation and rare animal species. Management activities are limited within reserves and are similar to Alternative 3 outside of the reserves.

Comparing Alternatives with Existing Plans

Alternatives 1 and 2 ("No Action"Alternatives) Existing Management Plans	Alternatives 3–7 ("Action" Alternatives)
Written with the assumption that ecosystems were healthy.	Written knowing that some ecosystems are unhealthy and altered by years of human use. Some of these changes were desired by society, but have nonetheless created long-term challenges. Other events, such as climate cycles, exotic weed expansion, and management of non-Federal lands, influence how these Federal lands are managed. Their cumulative effects are more fully considered.
Emphasis is on commodity production with mitigation for other resource values. Activities are planned without much consideration of historic ranges of variability or disturbance regimes.	Managers consider what vegetative patterns, structure, and composition are desirable to carry into the future. Natural resources in excess of these needs are available for commodity production.
Traditional approaches, such as clearcutting, are used to optimize timber yield on lands available for timber production.	Focus is on developing a range of vegetation structures, including mature growth stages, that reflect conditions expected under more natural disturbance regimes.
Timber harvest volumes come from all size classes.	Most timber harvest volume comes from smaller trees and younger age classes. Tree thinning is used to sustain residual overstory trees.
Prescribed fire is used less frequently.	Prescribed fire is used in a way that mimics natural disturbance processes, in order to restore naturally occurring patterns and structures.
Less emphasis on restoration.	More emphasis on restoring forest and rangeland health, so ecosystems can be self-sustaining and productive.
No overall fish and riparian management strategy. Interim plans address only parts of the Project Area.	Provides a more consistent, landscape-level approach for managing aquatic and riparian resources. Focuses on maintaining or improving aquatic/riparian functions and processes rather than mitigating commodity production.
No overall weed management strategy that guides control of exotic weeds in the Project Area.	Emphasizes an overall Integrated Weed Management strategy that incorporates education of the land user, techniques for prevention of weed spread, and use of a combination of weed control methods.
Public involvement is legally mandated by the National Environmental Policy Act and other public policies.	Goes beyond legal requirements, and puts more emphasis on *how* decisions are made. There is more meaningful participation among stakeholders, including Tribes and local governments.

Availability of Project Documents

Below is a list of documents that you can expect to see in the next couple of months.

The following documents will be mailed to those who checked it on their request form and returned it to us last year, or who have subsequently requested copies by phone or mail:

Eastside and Upper Columbia River Basin Draft Environmental Impact Statements
(approximately 1,300 pages).
Mailing to begin in late May.

Assessment of Ecosystem Components in the Interior Columbia Basin and Portions of the Klamath and Great Basins
(two volumes, approximately 1,600 pages). Mailing to begin in June.

Evaluation of EIS Alternatives by the Science Integration Team
(approximately 1,100 pages).
Mailing to begin in early June.

The following two documents will be mailed to everyone who receives a copy of this newsletter:

Considering All Things, Summary of the Draft Environmental Impact Statements
(approximately 60 pages).
Mailing to begin in mid-May.

An Abbreviated Summary of Scientific Findings: Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project
(approximately 40 pages).
Mailing to begin in late May or early June.

For those who would like to have copies of the Draft EISs sooner, you can purchase xerox copies at the following two locations:

BLM Public Room, (503) 952-6001,
1515 SW 5th Avenue,
Portland, OR,
or
Walla Walla Xerographic, (509) 522-5401,
2 E. Rose Street,
Walla Walla, WA

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