

**DECISION NOTICE
and
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

WILDERNESS RESOURCE PROTECTION PROJECT

USDA Forest Service
Gifford Pinchot National Forest
Counties of Lewis, Pierce, Skamania and Yakima in the State of Washington

INTRODUCTION

The Wilderness Resource Protection Environmental Assessment discussed the alternatives and their effects on the Wildernesses of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. The purposes of the environmental assessment are to amend current Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines to more objectively monitor and measure resource impacts, and to address resource problems related to recreational use in the Wildernesses of the Gifford Pinchot NF. Implementation of the decision is intended to improve current resource conditions of the Wilderness.

Three Key Issues were identified in this analysis:

1. Degradation of site and/or area conditions within Wilderness from continued heavy use or increasing use.
2. Effect on the public's ability to freely access and utilize Wilderness, due to implementation of management actions and/or additional regulations.
3. Displacement of use-impacts to other areas including other Wilderness and non-Wilderness.

DECISION

It is my decision to select a modified Alternative C. This alternative includes:

1. Amendments to the Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines for Gifford Pinchot National Forest Wildernesses;
2. Use of a restrictive permit system for climbing Mt Adams and overnight camping in all Gifford Pinchot National Forest Wildernesses; and
3. Limited application of campsite designation in environmentally sensitive areas and/or heavily impacted Wildernesses.

The selected alternative differs from Alternative D by using campsite designation in a selective manner. Campsite designation confines impacts to selected areas, to facilitate restoration and/or

protection of other sites.

This decision also establishes a priority in which to consider the different types of administrative actions to aid in restoration of Wilderness sites. The priority is as follows:

1. Restrictive permits required for entry into Wilderness for overnight use.
2. Campsite designation in environmentally sensitive areas and/or heavily impacted areas.
3. Restrictive permits required for entry into Wilderness for both day and overnight use.
4. Assignments for designated campsites.

This decision applies Actions 1 and 2 in all Gifford Pinchot Wildernesses, and for climbing Mt Adams it applies Action 3. Actions 3, for general use in all remaining Wildernesses, and 4 are intended to be considered only when restrictive permits and designated campsites by themselves are inadequate in protecting or restoring site conditions under the revised Standards and Guidelines.

Public input will be an integral part of the development of the implementation of these actions, so that impacts to Forest users are minimized and Wilderness resource conditions are restored (EA page 2-30). For example, we will solicit help from the public to determine the percent of permits that can be reserved ahead of time, and length of the permit season.

This decision excludes the requirement that all existing outfitter/guide services within Wilderness will be operated by a person who is certified as a master of Leave No Trace. This will be considered further for inclusion in a later assessment or the Forest Plan Revision. It is our intention to work closely with the Washington Outfitter Guide Association in coming to a future point of inclusion of this requirement.

RATIONALE FOR THE DECISION

The selected alternative was chosen because:

1. It provides the most effective and administratively feasible means of protection and restoration of Wilderness resource conditions. Alternatives A, & B do not provide a mechanism to ensure that resource conditions would not continue to degrade despite what efforts were extended in protecting them. (Response to Comments 16 of 34, 27 of 34 to 28 of 34)
2. It has the least anticipated need for additional regulations and on-site restrictions for users. In order to achieve the necessary resource improvements, Alternatives A, & B, would require a highly complex and potentially confusing combination of closures and restrictions. (Response to Comments page 4 of 34)
3. It incorporates more effective Standards and Guidelines than the current Standards and Guidelines to meet the desired future conditions of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest Plan and the Northwest Forest Plan. It updates Wilderness management Standards and Guidelines by incorporating changes to indicators to make them more responsive to environmental

impacts. Standards were modified to make them easier to measure with consistent results. Those which were difficult to measure objectively were dropped. The updated Standards and Guidelines separate physical and social effects of Wilderness use. These changes are in response to our concern for the physical effects.

Alternative A would continue to employ existing Standards and Guidelines, some of which have been shown to have flaws or shortcomings as measures of resource conditions. (EA pages 2-19 to 2-29; Response to Comments pages 19 of 34 to 20 of 34)

4. Under the selected alternative variation in permitted use levels would be allowed on a Wilderness-by-Wilderness basis depending on information gathered through monitoring. For example, if monitoring indicated that conditions were deteriorating in spite of implemented actions, the Forest Service could reduce levels to bring conditions back into compliance with the amended Standards and Guidelines. Conversely, if trends show conditions were significantly improving, the Forest Service could allow increased use, so long as conditions remained within the amended Standards and Guidelines. (EA page 2-30)

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

Alternative A is the “No Action” alternative. It was not selected because it would not meet the needs of maintaining Wilderness conditions to current Standard and Guidelines; and it had a high anticipated need for additional regulations to meet current standards and guidelines. (EA pages 3-1 to 3-2)

Alternative B recommended changing the Gifford Pinchot NF Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines to be more effective. Alternative B was not selected because it had a high anticipated need for additional regulations to meet new Standards and Guidelines. (EA pages 3-1 to 3-3)

Alternative C recommended changing the Gifford Pinchot NF Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines, and implementing a regulatory permit system. It was not selected because it did not include campsite designation to facilitate restoration and/or protection of other sites. (EA pages 2-30 to 2-31)

Alternative D recommended changing the Gifford Pinchot NF Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines, implementing a regulatory permit system, designating campsites, and assigning them to visitors. It was not selected because it was determined that assigning campsites was not currently required to maintain and restore Wilderness conditions at this time on a Forest-wide basis. The impact on the public of Alternative D was also deemed greater, at this time, than the situation warranted. (EA pages 3-5 to 3-7)

NFMA AND OTHER FINDINGS

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) and implementing regulations require specific findings to be made when implementing the Forest Plan. This decision is consistent with and follows the procedure for amending the Gifford Pinchot National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan

and will not significantly alter the multiple-use goals and objectives for long-term land and resource management of the Gifford Pinchot Forest Plan. It is also consistent with the Wilderness Act of 1964, the Endangered Species Act, the Washington Wilderness Act of 1984, and the “Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement on Management of Habitat for Late-Successional and Old-Growth Forest Related Species within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl” (Northwest Forest Plan).

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

I have determined through the Wilderness Resource Protection Environmental Assessment that this is not a major federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment, and since it is a further implementation of the Gifford Pinchot Forest Plan, an Environmental Impact Statement is not needed. This determination is based on the following:

1. The selected alternative does not involve ground disturbing activities so there would be no effect on Survey and Manage species. If, after implementation, ground-disturbing follow-up activities are proposed, such as site restoration work, the effect on Survey and Manage species would need to be analyzed and a management strategy adopted. (EA, pages 3-14 and 3-15)
2. This decision does not alter existing treaty rights with American Indians. All actions will enlist tribal collaboration for achieving management objectives. No significant impact to cultural resources is anticipated under the selected alternative. (EA, page 3-15)
3. The selected alternative establishes limits that would be administered through a regulatory permit system. The established limits would reduce the potential for increased impacts to wetland or riparian areas due to human use. (EA, page 3-15)
4. There would be no irreversible or irretrievable commitment of resources as a result of implementation of the selected alternative. Changes in WRS allocations in this alternative would change the acreage allocations for the Pristine, Primitive, Semi-primitive and Transition allocations. Those changes, however, would not lead to significant changes in conditions in those allocations since the proposed allocations have been drawn using current conditions as the foundation for achieving non-degradation objectives. No ground-disturbing activities are proposed in any of the alternatives. (EA, page 3-15)
5. There is no prime farmland within the analysis area. Some grazing allotments still exist in some Wildernesses; however, they would not be affected by the selected alternative. (EA, page 3-16)
6. The selected alternative establishes limits that would be administered through a regulatory permit system. Since the limits would be placed at or near current levels, there would be no impact to businesses that cater to recreational and/or other Wilderness uses. While it is likely some people will be unable to obtain a permit for entry into a particular Wilderness

- for a specific time period, the implementation of this alternative does not affect the civil rights, privileges, or status quo of consumers, minority groups, women or American Indians. (EA, page 3-16)
7. There would be no unusual energy requirements associated with implementing any alternative. (EA, page 3-16)
 8. No violations of Federal, State, or local law, or other requirements for protecting the environment will occur.
 9. The environmental analysis does not identify any short-term, long-term or cumulative impacts involving unique or unknown risks. All effects identified are those that would be expected to occur with the implementation of a limited entry permit system and related management activities in respect to the restoration, rehabilitation, hardening and closure of campsites within Wilderness. (EA, pages 3-3 to 3-14)
 10. There are no physical environmental effects to mitigate. (Response to Comments page 8 of 34)
 11. The selected alternative is consistent with the Aquatic Conservation Strategy. Conditions within Gifford Pinchot NF Wildernesses will be maintained or improved under the selected alternative. (Response to Comments 12 of 34)
 12. The selected alternative would arrest degradation of site and/or area conditions within Wilderness from continued heavy use or increasing use, and would provide for a long-term improvement of conditions. (EA pages 3-3; Response to Comments pages 4 of 34 to 5 of 34)

PUBLIC RESPONSES TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

The environmental analysis prompted 82 responses. Public comments were reviewed and discussed internally, and substantive comments are responded to in the attached Response to Comments document. Many respondents commented that increasing the supply of opportunities for recreation outside of designated Wilderness should be a primary emphasis to help relieve pressure within designated Wildernesses. One of our main objectives for the next revision of the Gifford Pinchot NF Forest Plan is to address recreation use in non-Wilderness. We look forward to working with those interested in developing and redefining our Forest recreation strategy in that process.

IMPLEMENTATION OF DECISION

This decision can take effect five business days from the close of the appeal filing period

ADMINISTRATIVE APPEAL RIGHTS

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant 36 CFR Section 215.7. Any written Notice of Appeal must meet the content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14. Any written appeal must be filed with the Appeal Deciding Officer:

Regional Forester Robert W. Williams
ATTN: 1570 Appeals
P.O. Box 3623
Portland, OR 97208-3623

within 45 days of the date the legal notice of this decision appears in the Columbian newspaper, Vancouver, Washington.

Implementation of this decision may occur five business days from the close of the appeal filing period.

For further information, contact Kevin Cannon (Wilderness Coordinator), Cowlitz Valley Ranger District, 13068 US Highway 12, Packwood, WA 98361, telephone 360-494-0622.

TED C. STUBBLEFIELD
Forest Supervisor

Date