CHAPTER 1- PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

1.1. Document Structure

The Forest Service has prepared this Environmental Assessment in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations. This Environmental Assessment discloses the direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental impacts that would result from the proposed action and alternatives. The document is organized into four chapters:

Chapter 1. Purpose and Need for Action: This chapter includes information on the history of the project proposal, the purpose of and need for the project, and the agency's proposal for achieving that purpose and need. This section also details how the Forest Service informed the public of the proposal and how the public responded.

Chapter 2. Alternatives, including the Proposed Action: This chapter provides a more detailed description of the agency's proposed action as well as alternative methods for achieving the stated purpose. These alternatives were developed based on key issues raised by the public and other agencies. Finally, this section provides a summary table of the environmental consequences associated with each alternative.

Chapter 3. Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences: This chapter describes the relevant resource components of the existing environment. This analysis is organized by the physical, biological, and social environments. The environmental consequences will be described as direct and indirect effects, and cumulative impacts on the environment of implementing the alternatives, for each resource.

Chapter 4. Consultation and Coordination: This chapter provides a list of preparers and agencies consulted during the development of the environmental assessment.

Appendices: The appendices provide more detailed information to support the analyses presented in the environmental assessment.

Additional documentation, including more detailed analyses of project-area resources, may be found in the project planning record located at the Forest Supervisors Office in Elkins, WV..

1.2. Background

In 2000, the Monongahela National Forest completed a watershed assessment of the Upper Williams River watershed. The watershed assessment characterized the various natural resource conditions within the watershed and identified opportunities to improve those conditions. The following environmental assessment focuses on opportunities to improve watershed and aquatic conditions.

The Upper Williams River Watershed Improvement planning area encompasses 24,800 acres in the headwaters of the Williams River. Table 1.1 displays the ownership and management responsibilities for the planning area lands.

Table 1.1: Land Ownership Within the Upper Williams Planning Area

Ownership/Management	Acres[1]	Percent of Planning Area
National Forest System	16,700	67
West Virginia (State)	770	3
Private	7,300	30

[1]Acres vary from 24,800 due to rounding.

The project area is located approximately 10 miles west of Marlinton, West Virginia in Pocahontas County (see Map 1-1). The area includes approximately 11 miles of the Williams River main stem, from the confluence of Sugar Creek upstream to its headwaters. Major drainages within the project area include Beaverdam Run, Downy Run, Mountain Lick Run, Black Mountain Run, Day Run, Big Laurel Creek, Little Laurel Creek and Sugar Creek. There are also numerous unnamed perennial and non-perennial channels in the area.

1.3. Purpose for Action

The purpose of implementing watershed and aquatic habitat improvement projects in the Upper Williams River Watershed is to improve natural resource conditions and contribute to the goals of the National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan 2006, referred to as the Forest Plan. The proposed projects were derived from a watershed assessment conducted in 2000. General findings of the watershed assessment include:

- A majority of the streams sampled in the watershed had levels of fine sediment that impair trout productivity. Roads, skid roads, and woods roads are one of the primary sources of fine sediment. Opportunities were identified to decommission and store roads to reduce erosion and sedimentation in the watershed.

- Streams have limited amounts of large woody debris (LWD), which is important to healthy aquatic ecosystems. Fish habitat quality within the watershed is reduced due to the lack of adequate LWD. Today, riparian timber stands are maturing and natural recruitment of LWD is expected to increase as trees die and fall into the stream channels. Until that time, opportunities exist to actively add wood to stream channels to facilitate recovery and improve the health of the aquatic environment.

- Riparian conditions in some areas contribute to unstable banks and poor stream shading. Actions are proposed to revegetate riparian areas and stabilize eroding banks.

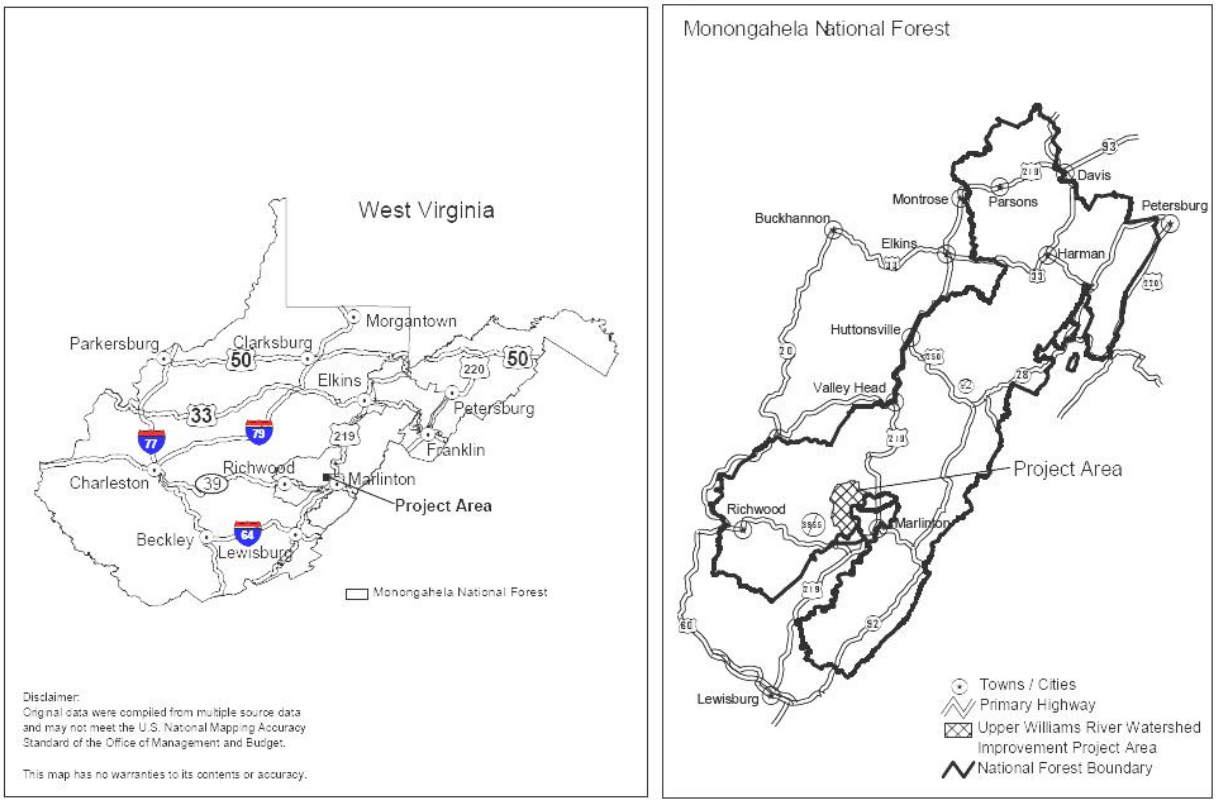
Map 1-1

Upper Williams River Watershed Improvement Project

Vicinity Map

Monongahela NF

Map 1-1



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- Roads create passage barriers for fish and other aquatic organisms. Passage problems associated with road crossings on the Williams River main stem and Black Mountain Run are addressed in this analysis.

Table 1.2. Key Forest Plan Goals and Objectives Related to the Upper Williams River Watershed Improvement Projects.

Forest Plan Management Direction		
Goal	SW31	Maintain, enhance, or restore vegetation conditions that provide: a) Ecological functions of riparian, wetland, and aquatic ecosystems. b) Canopy conditions that regulate riparian and stream temperature regimes for native and desired non-native fauna and flora. c) Natural recruitment potential for large woody debris and other sources of nutrient inputs to aquatic ecosystems. d) Bank and channel stability and structural integrity. e) Habitat and habitat connectivity for aquatic and riparian-dependent species and upland species that use riparian corridors. f) Buffers to filter sediment.
Goal	WF04	Manage cold water streams to maintain or restore suitable habitat and native aquatic communities. a) During watershed or project-level analysis, identify and prioritize opportunities to improve water temperature and other habitat conditions. b) Restore connectivity in currently fragmented habitat where the risk of genetic contamination, predation, or competition from undesired fish species is not a concern. c) Use stream improvement structures where desirable to maintain or improve pool/riffle ratios, stream cover, and bank stability.
Objective	WFO7	Reduce aquatic habitat fragmentation associated with the Forest transportation system by correcting 30-50 passage barriers, according to aquatic priorities, over the next 10 years. Correct existing passage problems with bridges, open bottom arches, or other structures that restore or simulate channel conditions that facilitate upstream and downstream passage of aquatic organisms, or remove barriers when roads are decommissioned or closed.
Objective	WFO8	Actively restore aquatic and riparian habitat conditions in 30-50 miles of stream over the next 10 years. Activities that restore or improve the natural structure and function of channel and riparian conditions may include the installation of instream structures, large woody debris loading, riparian fencing, riparian planting, and bank and channel stabilization.
Objective	RF03	Over the next decade, decommission or reclaim at least 30 miles of roads that are no longer needed for achieving access management objectives. These can include system roads and old woods roads. Actions may range from full obliteration to administratively removing a road from the transportation system as long as it poses no resource impacts without additional rehabilitation efforts.

Implementation of the Upper Williams River watershed improvement projects is consistent with Forest Plan direction and works towards a number of goals and objectives identified in the plan. Key Forest Plan goals and objectives that provide direction for the proposed projects are listed in Table 1.2 above.

1.4. The Original Proposed Action

The Marlinton Ranger District of the MNF proposed, during the scoping period, to perform watershed, aquatic and wildlife habitat improvement projects. The following environmental analysis focuses on the watershed and aquatic habitat improvement elements addressed in the scoping document. The wildlife improvement projects will be addressed separately with documentation consistent with NEPA. Proposed treatments are designed to contribute toward meeting the project purpose and needs and the desired conditions for the area as described in the MNF Forest Plan. The original proposed action and scoping letter including maps and site-specific treatment locations are included in the project file.

A summary of the original proposed projects related to watershed and aquatic habitat conditions include the following (see map in Appendix A):

1. Approximately 21 miles of roads would be decommissioned. See Table 2.1 for a list of roads proposed to be decommissioned.
2. Approximately 1 mile of road would be put into "storage". See Table 2.1 for roads proposed for storage.
3. Aquatic species passage would be improved at two road crossings (FR 999 and FR 216).
4. Channel structure would be improved along three miles of stream in Black Mountain Run, Mountain Lick Run and a portion of the Williams River main stem by adding large woody debris.
5. Three areas of bank instability along the Williams River main stem, approximately 300-750 feet in length each, would be stabilized using boulder structures and replanting with vegetation.
6. Approximately five acres of riparian planting would occur at sites along the Williams River main stem and lower reaches of Little Laurel Creek.
7. Erosion and runoff would be corrected, if necessary, at the Black Mountain mine site, if FR 1797 is decommissioned.

1.5. Decision Framework

Given the purpose and need, the deciding official reviews the proposed action, other alternatives, and environmental consequences in order to decide whether to implement the proposed action as described; or to implement an alternative version of this proposal that addresses issues raised in scoping; to defer any action at this time; or to amend the Forest Plan. A decision on this project is anticipated in July of 2008.

1.6. Public Involvement

The ID Team conducted the following public scoping and involvement activities to determine the issues associated with the Upper Williams River Watershed Improvement Project:

- The District Ranger sent a scoping letter, dated December 19, 2006, to interested members of the public, various government agencies, adjacent landowners, environmental organizations, and the timber industry. A total of 74 scoping packages were mailed.
- A press release describing the proposed action and comment period was published in the Pocahontas Times December 19, 2006.
- The scoping letter and information packet were posted on the MNF website.
- Originally, public scoping and involvement addressing these activities were conducted during the development of the Upper Williams River Watershed Assessment and subsequent NEPA documentation. This included mailings, field trips and postings on the MNF website.
- Four comments were received agency contacted us in the form of letters, e-mails, or phone calls as a result of the initial scoping process begun December, 2006 (project file). Comments were reviewed for issues, develop alternatives, or identify environmental effects.
- We received only one response as a result of the official 30-day notice and comment period which started April 24, 2008 (project file).

1.7. Issues

Public comments received during the scoping period were reviewed for relevant and non-relevant issues. Comments were generally supportive of the proposed action and no major issues were identified through the public scoping process that would result in the development of an alternative to the proposed action. Non-relevant issues were identified as those: 1) outside the scope of the proposed action; 2) already decided by law, regulation, Forest Plan, or other higher level decision; 3) irrelevant to the decision being made; or 4) conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence. The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) NEPA regulations explain this delineation in Sec. 1501.7, "…identify and eliminate from detailed study the issues which are not relevant or which have been covered by prior environmental review (Sec. 1506.3)…" A list of non-relevant issues and/or comments and reasons regarding their categorization as non-relevant may be found in the project record. In many cases, concerns were resolved during the design of the proposal through the addition of mitigation measures or the application of Forest Plan standards and guidelines.

Although no major issues were identified during the scoping process, the proposed management activities have the potential to affect various resources and those potential effects and environmental consequences are disclosed in Chapter 3. Threatened, endangered and sensitive species, and cultural resources will be protected from potential impacts through project design, avoidance and/or mitigation measures.