

Frank Church–River of No Return Wilderness – FEIS

SUMMARY

This summary presents an overview of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) prepared by the US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service (Forest Service) for the revision and consolidation of the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness (FC–RONRW) Management Plan, the Management Plan for the Middle Fork of the Salmon Wild and Scenic River (Middle Fork), and the Salmon Wild and Scenic River Management Plan.

To many, the FC–RONRW exemplifies the National Wilderness Preservation System and the State of Idaho. The Forest Service administrative framework for managing the National Forest System lands within the FC–RONRW is as complex as the lands themselves. The six National Forests (NFs) and two administrative Regions that administer the wilderness have worked together over the last decade to identify and propose changes to the various plans that provide management direction to forest managers.

During this period your interests and those of others have caused us to consider and evaluate a number of possible changes to the management plans that govern activities within the FC–RONRW. The resulting Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and Supplement to the Draft (SDEIS) were, as some reviewers said, confusing at best. Therefore, we have taken a hard look at our original objectives in proposing revision and have made some changes in this Final EIS designed to simplify and clarify our proposed action and alternatives examined. Some of those changes are:

Decision Framework: Revision of the FC–RONRW Management Plan is implemented through amendment of the Land and Resource Management Plans (Forest Plans) for the Bitterroot, Boise, Challis, Nez Perce, Payette, and Salmon NFs. Forest Plans are programmatic documents that establish goals, objectives and standards for management actions and are designed to provide broad direction – they do not make site-specific decisions for management actions. Therefore, we have taken a hard look at the actions and decisions proposed and evaluated in the DEIS and SEIS. Our review identified a number of actions that are not appropriately decided in a programmatic document, are not “ripe” for decision, are not within the Forest Service’s authority to issue, or should be made in accordance with the terms and conditions of special use permits or other authorizations for use and occupancy of National Forest lands. A detailed description of the revised decision framework is included in Chapter 1 of the Final EIS.

Alternatives Considered – Public comments received in response to the DEIS and SDEIS provided suggestions for alternative methods for achieving the purpose and need. A number of the alternatives considered in the previous documents were

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combined for the Final EIS, and portions of some alternatives will be decided in other ways through the revised Decision Framework.

Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences – Chapter 3 of the FEIS contains detailed descriptions of the history of the FC–RONRW and the many resources it contains. The effects of the actions are displayed in Chapter 4.

Purpose and Need for Action

The existing Wilderness Management Plan, the Management Plan for the Middle Fork of the Salmon Wild and Scenic River, the Salmon W&SR Management Plan, and Forest Plans direct management of the FC–RONRW. There is a need to consolidate this direction into a single management plan and amend the six Forest Plans to incorporate revised direction.

The majority of the current direction in these plans is still considered adequate. However, some components of these plans are outdated and need to be amended to address issues that have emerged since the plans were approved and amended. New management direction is needed for the following:

- ◆ Management of Dewey Moore, Mile-Hi, Simonds, and Vines landing strips in the Big Creek Drainage,
- ◆ Management of commercial and noncommercial float boat use on the Middle Fork and Salmon rivers,
- ◆ Management of noncommercial jetboat use on the Salmon River; and
- ◆ Management of the Painter Bar Road.

Proposed Action

As a result of the analysis and public comment associated with the DEIS and SDEIS, the Proposed Action has evolved to encompass the following actions, which were described in the SDEIS Alternative 6:

- ◆ Dewey Moore, Mile High, Simonds, and Vines, aircraft landing strips would be managed for use as public landing strips, which will require Forest Service maintenance actions at these landing strips in the future.
- ◆ Float boat trip length of stay limits for both commercial and noncommercial trips on the Middle Fork and Salmon River would vary from 6-8 days based on trip party size. These limits would apply to the Middle Fork all year and to the Salmon River only during the summer season (June 20 to September 7).

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- ◆ On the Salmon River, float boat trip length of stay limits for both commercial and noncommercial trips in the winter and spring will be limited to 10 days. In the fall, length of stay will be limited to 14 days. Party size for all trips during the winter, spring, and summer is 30 people. During the fall, the party size limit is 20 people. During winter, spring, and fall there is no limit to the number of float boat launches per day. Assigned, but unused commercial launches will be reallocated.
- ◆ Noncommercial jetboat use during the summer season (June 20 to September 7) is increased from the current 15 BUDs per week to 20 BUDs, and 20 launches is established as the maximum number of launches per week. Outside of the control season, (September 8 to June 19) the number of jetboats and launches are not limited. Jetboat trip length of stay limits for trips in the winter and spring will be constrained to 10 days. In the fall, length of stay will be limited to 14 days. Party size for all trips during the winter, spring, and summer is 30 people. During the fall, the party size limit is 20 people. There will be no differentiation of use levels above or below Ludwig rapid at any time during the year.
- ◆ Commercial jetboat use would remain at current permitted levels for number of outfitters, number of boats, and mix of authorized activities. In the fall, length of stay will be limited to 14 days. Party size for all trips during the winter, spring, and summer is 30 people. During the fall, the party size limit is 20 people.
- ◆ The Painter Bar Road will be closed from the eastside of Mackay Bar Campground to Painter Bar Homestead to motor vehicles and other forms of mechanical transport from June 20 to September 7 annually.

Decisions being made

The FC–RONRW Management Plan is a programmatic document that provides general direction for management of the Wilderness. This plan was incorporated into the six Forest Plans. The primary purpose of this EIS is to provide a “full and fair discussion of significant environmental impacts and . . . inform decision makers and the public of the reasonable alternatives which would avoid or minimize adverse impacts or enhance the quality of the human environment (40 CFR 1502.1).” As the lead agency for this EIS, the Forest Service will document their decisions pertinent to actions on National Forest lands in a Record of Decision (ROD).

In the ROD for this EIS, the Forest Supervisors for the Bitterroot, Nez Perce, Payette, and Salmon-Challis NFs will result in revisions to the FC–RONRW Management Plan and incorporate the revised management plan into the respective Forest Plans, including the Boise National Forest. Specific changes being decided are:

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- ◆ Management of Dewey Moore, Mile-Hi, Simonds, and Vines aircraft landing strips for public and/or emergency use;
- ◆ Management within the river corridors on the Salmon and Middle Fork Rivers, including:
 - Number of launches, maximum party sizes, and length of stay;
 - Reallocation procedures for unused commercial float boat launches;
 - Noncommercial jetboat use levels; and
- ◆ Management of motorized use on the Painter Bar Road.

Decisions and actions discussed in the DEIS and SDEIS that will not be made in this Final EIS include:

- ◆ Site-specific decisions that are beyond the scope of this programmatic EIS.
- ◆ Decisions that can be made within existing management authorities.
- ◆ Decisions on issues not identified in the purpose and need for this EIS.
- ◆ Decisions that are within the purview of, or shared with, other governmental agencies.

Issues and Concerns

NEPA requires that the public and agencies be involved from an early stage in the decision making on federal lands. An important part of this strategy is public scoping, which the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations describe as the process for determining the... “scope of the issues to be addressed and for identifying the significant issues related to the proposed action”... (40 CFR 1501.7). This process of identifying issues helps determine the direction and level of detail of the analysis. There has been an extensive effort to solicit comments from the public and other federal, state, and local agencies and tribes that were identified to be interested in or affected by the Proposed Action. Information and written comments received from the public and agencies during the scoping process for the DEIS used by the Forest Supervisors to identify the issues and define the scope of that analysis. Comments received during the comment period for the SDEIS did not identify additional issues that were not already considered in the DEIS. The Final EIS will represent another opportunity for the public to comment about this analysis and in particular about the Preferred Alternative, Alternative D.

Environmental issues that were identified through the public scoping process and agency review were used to either guide the analysis or develop alternatives to the Proposed Action. Those issues driving alternative development include:

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- ◆ Aviation: Maintenance level at Dewey Moore, Mile-Hi, Simonds, and Vines landing strips
 - Management of the four landing strips in the Big Creek drainage. This issue is related to aviators who believe that Dewey Moore, Mile-Hi, Simonds, and Vines landing strips are not adequately maintained by the Forest Service in order to provide an emergency level of service.
- ◆ River Recreation.
 - River Use. This issue is tied to the effects associated with the increase in people using the rivers to recreate on, particularly float boat and jetboat use.
 - Conflicts and Crowding between Users. This issue is related to the conflicts between different types of user groups and/or conflicts between the same user groups based on individual perceptions of a wilderness experience.
 - Jetboat use on the Salmon Wild River. This issue is related to the appropriate level of motorized use allowed on a designated wild and scenic river within a designated wilderness area.
 - Campsite Capacity and Condition in the Middle Fork and Salmon River Corridors. This issue is related to the limited number and size of campsites available and is tied to the effects of increased river use.
 - Balance between commercial and noncommercial launches. This issue is related to the belief there is inequity in the allocation of float permits between commercial and noncommercial float boat groups.
- ◆ Painter Bar Road.
 - Management of Painter Bar Road. This issue is related to compatibility of a motorized road within a designated wilderness area and a wild and scenic river corridor.

The following environmental issues were addressed by evaluating the effects on each resource:

- ◆ Cultural Resources - Potential impacts of increased users within the Middle Fork and Salmon River corridors to the cultural resources.
- ◆ Fisheries - Potential impacts to anadromous fish species and their habitat.
- ◆ Wildlife Species - Projected effects to critical wildlife habitat from human activities.
- ◆ Air Quality - Potential effects from motorized use within the Salmon River corridor.

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- ♦ Soil and Water Quality, and the potential effects from increasing human use within both river corridors.

Alternatives

Key Changes between the Draft and Final EIS

Alternatives to the Proposed Action were developed to respond to the environmental issues. The DEIS was issued with five alternatives in January 1998. Comments from the public stated the range of alternatives considered was too narrow and all alternatives restricted use below current management plan levels, which was not perceived to be appropriate. Public comments supported an aggressive noxious weed treatment strategy, but expressed concern that the Forest Service was attempting to fix recreational use problems that did not exist.

In August 1999 the Forest Service issued a Final EIS and ROD for Noxious Weed treatment within the FC–RONRW. The issue of weed control was considered too urgent to delay during the completion of the Management Plan EIS. Since the Noxious Weed Treatments EIS was issued, approximately half a million acres were burned during the fires of 2000. The fires created many more acres of susceptible habitat and have resulted in a more rapid spread of noxious weeds than predicated. A Supplement to the Noxious Weed treatment EIS will be issued to address treatment options for these additional acres and the potential use of a new herbicide that has become available.

In September 1999 the Forest Service issued a SDEIS for the Wilderness Management Plan that added 6 additional alternatives (for a total of 11). These alternatives reflected issues of concern to a specific user group, but did not integrate all of the decisions necessary to meet the purpose and need.

Because the alternatives presented in the DEIS and SDEIS were not fully integrated and included items beyond the scope of this analysis, Alternatives 1 through 11 have been consolidated into Alternatives A through E in the FEIS. Alternatives A through E include the range of actions displayed in the DEIS and SDEIS, address only those actions being carried forward for decision, and represent an integrated set of management actions. Alternatives were renamed to reduce confusion with the original alternatives.

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from further Detailed Study

During the scoping process, two alternatives to the Proposed Action were suggested by public comment. These alternatives were considered but not selected for detailed analysis for different reasons, they were outside the scope of this analysis, or duplicated

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other alternatives considered in detail. Alternatives considered but eliminated from detailed analysis include:

- ◆ Maximize Wilderness Preservation by Drastically Reducing Use Levels
- ◆ Minimize Wilderness Preservation by Allowing Unrestricted Use

Alternatives from DEIS and SDEIS dropped from further consideration

Draft EIS Alternatives 4 and 5 and SDEIS Alternatives 7 and 8 were dropped from further consideration. Listed below is a brief summary explaining the rationale for dropping these four alternatives:

- ◆ Alternative 4
 - Management of Dewey Moore, Mile-Hi, Simonds, and Vines landing strips is the same as Alternative E
 - River float boating for Alternative 4 specified a variable trip length during the summer season to emphasize access and has approximately the same PAOT for both rivers, which is the same as Alternatives D and E.
 - For noncommercial jetboaters, Alternative 4 has the same emphasis on access to the Salmon River, plus a wider range of BUDs and launches opportunities as Alternative C.
 - Painter Bar Road in Alternative 4 is the same as Alternative A.
- ◆ Alternative 5
 - Management of Dewey Moore, Mile-Hi, Simonds, and Vines landing strips is the same as Alternative D.
 - Launch, party size and length of stay levels are also analyzed in Alternatives B, D, and E.
 - Continuing the 15 BUDs per week limitation for noncommercial recreation jetboats is the same as Alternative A.
 - Alternative 5 proposed Painter Bar Road management the same as Alternative D.
- ◆ Alternative 7
 - Management of Dewey Moore, Mile-Hi, Simonds, and Vines landing strips is the same as Alternative E.
 - Launches; party size and length of stay for float boats are managed as Alternative A.

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- Noncommercial jetboaters management is the same as Alternative A.
- Alternative 7 did not address management of the Painter Bar road.
- ◆ Alternative 8
 - Management of Dewey Moore, Mile-Hi, Simonds, and Vines landing strips is the same as Alternative E.
 - Noncommercial float boat recreation use decisions have been deferred pending additional studies of alternative allocations systems.
 - Noncommercial jetboaters management is the same as Alternative A except for a provision to curtail jet backs. Curtailing jet back use is covered in Alternative B in the Final EIS.
 - Management of the Painter Bar road is the same as Alternative A.

Following is a brief summary of the five alternatives analyzed in detail in the recently completed FEIS and their relationship to the alternatives displayed in the DEIS and SDEIS.

Alternative A: No Action

Alternative A is the same as DEIS Alternative 1, the No Action Alternative which would continue management under the existing management plans for the FC–RONRW, including the Programmatic Agreement standards and guidelines. Alternative A provides the baseline by which to compare the other action alternatives. The current management strategy would continue to manage the four landing strips as emergency use only, commercial and noncommercial use on the Salmon and Middle Fork Salmon Rivers using the existing number of launches, party size, and maximum length of stay and the Painter Bar Road would remain open.

Alternative B: Primitive Emphasis

Alternative B provides for a more primitive wilderness experience by strongly emphasizing opportunities for solitude wilderness-wide. Use restrictions are focused on areas where use is greatest, specifically the Middle Fork and the Salmon Rivers. The four landing strips would not be maintained for public aviation use. Float boating would be severely reduced, and noncommercial recreational jetboat use would be limited to the 1978-jetboat use levels. Painter Bar Road would be closed to motorized use and rehabilitated to serve as a trail.

Alternative B incorporates the no maintenance strategy for Dewey Moore Mile-Hi, Simonds, and Vines landing strips from DEIS Alternatives 1, 3, and SDEIS Alternative 9; the Middle Fork and Salmon Rivers float boat launches, party size and length of stay

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from DEIS Alternative 2; the noncommercial jetboat strategy from SDEIS Alt 9; and the Painter Bar Road management strategy from DEIS Alternative 2 and SDEIS Alternative 9.

Alternative C: Access to the Wilderness

This alternative provides increased use and access to the wilderness for different groups by providing an emphasis on private party float boat use on the Middle Fork River and emphasis on private jetboat use on the Salmon River. Commercial jetboat use on the Salmon River and float boat use on both rivers stayed essentially the same as the existing condition. The Painter Bar Road would remain open as in Alternative A; and the four landing strips would be maintained for use as public landing strips.

Alternative C incorporates the maintenance strategy for Dewey Moore Mile-Hi, Simonds, and Vines landing strips from SDEIS Alternatives 6, 7, and 8; the Middle Fork Salmon River float boat strategy from SDEIS Alternative 10 and the Salmon River float boat launches, party size and length of stay from the SDEIS Alternative 11; the noncommercial jetboat strategy from SDEIS Alternative 11; and the Painter Bar Road management strategy from DEIS Alternative 1.

Alternative D: Preferred Alternative

This is the Preferred Alternative and is a modification of SDEIS Alternative 6, which was based on public comment on the DEIS. Under this alternative, the four landing strips would be maintained for emergency use only. The main emphasis for the Middle Fork River is on float boating with opportunities for a primitive recreational experience while the Salmon River strategy would emphasize float boat use during the summer control season and jetboat use during the other three seasons. The Painter Bar Road would be closed to mechanized or motorized transport during the control season from June 20 to September 7.

Alternative D includes the maintenance strategy for Dewey Moore, Mile-Hi, Simonds, and Vines landing strips from DEIS Alternative 5; the Middle Fork and Salmon Rivers float boat launches, party size and length of stay from SDEIS Alternative 6; public comments received on the SDEIS were used to develop a noncommercial jetboat strategy for this alternative; and the Painter Bar Road management strategy from SDEIS Alternative 6.

Alternative E: Proposed Action

Alternative E is SDEIS Alternative 6, which was designed to reflect public comment received on the DEIS. Under this alternative, the four landing strips would be maintained for use as public landing strips. Float boat use would continue to increase while party

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sizes and lengths of stay would remain the same as Alternative A. Noncommercial jetboat use opportunities would increase. The Painter Bar Road would be closed to mechanized or motorized transport during the control season from June 20 to September 7.

Comparison of Alternatives

Table 2.24 in the FEIS provides a comparison by decision of Alternatives A, B, C, D, and E.

Existing Condition

Chapter 3 of the Final EIS describes current human uses and biophysical resource conditions within the planning area. This information provides the baseline for assessing and comparing the potential effects of the alternatives. This section is subdivided into 13 areas/disciplines, which allows readers to target those resources or disciplines of greatest interest to them. It also allows readers to compare information presented in Chapter 4 - Environmental Consequences of the Alternatives with corresponding current conditions.

Human uses discussed in Chapter 3 include aviation, recreation, Middle Fork and Salmon Rivers and associated use levels, non commercial jetboat use, jetboat use for private land access, Painter Bar Road, economics, and cultural resources. The biological resources addressed in this chapter include river campsite conditions and capacity, water quality, fisheries, wildlife and plants, including Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive species, and air quality.

Environmental Consequences

Chapter 4 of the Final EIS provides a comprehensive scientific and analytical comparison of the potential environmental consequences for Alternatives A through E. In order to facilitate comparison of information provided in Chapters 3 and 4, the Environmental Consequences section is subdivided into subsections as Chapter 3. Using the baseline established in the Existing Condition section, each subsection in Chapter 4 details the possible direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of each alternative. At the end of the resource subsections, an assessment of unavoidable impacts that arise from implementing each alternative is disclosed.

Forest Service Preferred Alternative

Section 1502.14(e) of the NEPA regulations requires that the lead agency “identify the agencies preferred alternative if one or more exists in the Final statement...” The Forest Service’s preferred alternative is believed to fulfill the agency statutory mission and

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responsibilities, giving consideration to economic, environmental, technical, and other factors. Therefore, the Forest Service has identified Alternative D as the Preferred Alternative. However, the final Forest Service decision that will be documented in the ROD will be based on public comment received on the FEIS.

Public Involvement

On January 15, 1998, the Notice of Availability for the DEIS was published in the Federal Register, initiating the 90-day comment period. A special issue of *Frankly Speaking* newsletter containing a copy of the Executive Summary of the DEIS and the Draft Programmatic and Operational Management Plan was distributed. There were also numerous open house meetings held during the formal comment period and written and oral comments were recorded.

Due to an overwhelming number of requests to extend the comment period, the Forest Service extended the comment period to December 1, 1998 and again extended it until February 1, 1999. Based on the number of comments received and the need to clarify information and expand the range of alternatives, a SDEIS was prepared and distributed September 7, 1999 with a 150-day comment period.

Consistent with NEPA regulations, (40 CFR 1503.4(b)), all substantive comments on the DEIS and SDEIS received a response. Substantive comments include those that challenge the information in the DEIS and SDEIS as being inaccurate or inadequate, or which offer specific information that may have a bearing on the decision. Comments that merely expressed an opinion for or against the project were not identified as a comment requiring a response. In cases where the comment was not substantive, but appeared to indicate that information in the DEIS or SDEIS was either misunderstood or unclear, a response was prepared to clarify the information. Comments received on the DEIS and the Forest Service Response to those comments were included in the SDEIS Chapter 3. Comments received on the SDEIS and the Forest Service response to those comments is found in Chapter 5 of the Final EIS.