

## PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

Cumulative effects resulting from past management activity have contributed to altered watershed processes in the basin (McGreer, 2000; Swanston, 1991; Jones, 2000, Lassetre, 2001). These watershed processes often lead to decreased wildlife and instream fish habitat (Shapely, 1965; James, 1965; Lassetre, 2001). Past management effects have altered floodplain processes, hydrologic connectivity in streams, sediment delivery and timing in streams, sedimentation to stream beds, and the resulting impacts to fish and wildlife habitat has decreased (Map 2 in Appendix C). Because an interdisciplinary team has identified this underlying need for project action in the Harris River Watershed, the Proposed Action in this Environmental Assessment has targeted resource concerns (undesired conditions) resulting from past timber harvest of upslope and riparian areas, road construction, natural disturbance, and elevated public use. The proposed projects (Table 1) are intended to rehabilitate the potential ecological function within the Harris River Watershed. The range of rehabilitation needs are fully described in Appendix A, under the heading of Reach Overview for each project in this Proposed Action. Map 3 and Map 4 in Appendix C shows the location of each of these projects. An opportunity also exists for improving the visitor experience through trail improvement and interpretation.

The Forest Service is proposing this Watershed Rehabilitation in order to reduce sediment delivery, improve channel stability and improve aquatic habitat within the Harris River Watershed. The proposed action in the Harris River Watershed Rehabilitation Project Area is based on the Forest Plan and the difference between the existing and desired conditions in the project area. It responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the Forest Plan.

### Forest Plan Goals and Objectives

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The Forest Plan includes Forest-wide multiple-use goals. Incorporated here by reference, these goals include, but are not limited to the following (see Tongass Forest Plan, pages. 2-2 to 2-5):

#### **Wildlife**

Design and implement non-structural wildlife habitat improvement projects. Include a young-growth management program to maintain, prolong, and/or improve understory forage production and to increase future old-growth characteristics in young-growth stands.

#### **Fish**

Maintain or restore aquatic habitat conditions to sustain the diversity and production of fish and other freshwater organisms.

#### **Biodiversity**

Maintain healthy forest ecosystems; maintain a mix of habitats at different spatial scales; capable of supporting the full range of naturally occurring flora, fauna, and ecological processes native to Southeast Alaska.

#### **Soil and Water**

Minimize sediment transported to streams from land-disturbing activities. Perform watershed restoration projects. Maintain and restore the biological, physical, and chemical integrity of Tongass National Forest waters.

#### **Transportation**

Develop and manage roads to support resource management activities. Manage and maintain roads to protect water, soil, fish, and wildlife resources.

## **Local and Regional Economy**

Provide a diversity of opportunities for resource uses that contribute to the local and regional economies of Southeast Alaska. Support a wide range of natural-resource employment opportunities within Southeast Alaska's communities.

## **Standards and Guidelines - Desired Condition**

Additionally, the Harris River Watershed Rehabilitation Project helps move the project area towards the desired conditions as described in the Forest Plan (Forest-wide Standards and Guides pages 4-8:10, 4-53, 4-120) incorporated by reference, and highlighted here:

- Maintain or restore the natural range and frequency of aquatic habitat conditions on the Tongass National Forest to sustain the diversity and production of fish and other aquatic organisms.
- Maintain or restore optimum water temperatures for salmonids, considering both winter and summer habitat requirements, climate, and natural watershed characteristics.
- Maintain or restore the natural range and frequency of aquatic habitat conditions on the Tongass National Forest to sustain the diversity and production of fish and other freshwater organisms
- Maintain or restore water quality to provide for fish production
- Maintain or restore natural and beneficial quantities of Large Woody Debris over the short and long term
- Maintain or restore stream banks and stream channel processes and manage riparian areas for short and long-term biodiversity and productivity
- Maintain fish passage through stream crossing structures
- Operate and maintain Forest Development Roads in a manner which meets the road management objectives and ecological objectives for the landscape where the road is located. Use road closures, maintenance and other measures to keep road surface and road site erosion at low or near background levels. Maintain roads to meet Best Management Practices (BMP's) regardless of the methods used to obtain the maintenance work. Manage roads to provide cost-effective support to Land Use Designation objectives and safe travel to users of the system, while protecting the environment, adjacent resources, and the public investment.
- Continue a young-growth management program to maintain, prolong, and/or improve understory forage production and to increase future old growth characteristics in young-growth timber stands for wildlife (deer, black bear, and other species)

In regard to fish habitat improvement planning, the Forest Plan specifies:

- Improve or restore fish habitat and population objectives of the Forest Plan.

For wildlife improvement planning, the Forest Plan specifies:

- Identify habitat improvement projects to meet wildlife habitat and population objectives.

- Use silvicultural practices, where applicable, to accomplish wildlife habitat objectives.

The purpose of this Environmental Assessment (EA) is to implement Goals and Objectives of the Forest Plan and Standards and Guides as identified in the Proposed Action.

The EA will describe the environmental impacts of proposed rehabilitation projects to comply with the procedural requirements of NEPA regulations. Analysis and public comment of the EA will be used to determine a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) or initiate preparation an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). If the EA indicates that the proposed action constitutes a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment, then an EIS will be required.

Detailed background and conditions relating to historic use and watershed processes in the Harris River is presented in the Environment and Effects section of this document.

## ~~ALTERNATIVES~~

~~This chapter describes and compares the alternatives considered for the Harris River Rehabilitation project. Maps of each alternative considered are located in Appendix C. This section also presents the alternatives in comparative form, sharply defining the differences between each alternative and providing a clear basis for choice among options by the decision maker and the public. This environmental assessment will compare the impacts of the no action alternative to the proposed basin wide restoration activities.~~

### ~~Alternative Development~~

~~Two alternatives have been developed to address issues and meet the purpose and need of this project: Alternative 1 — No Action and Alternative 2 — Proposed Action. No alternatives to the Proposed Action were identified that would meet the purpose and need of the project and have meaningful differences in environmental effects. Due to fish timing windows (see Timing of Project Action), the sequence of project implementation of the proposed action meets a reasonable range of alternatives. Therefore, this EA will analyze the effects of the “Proposed Action” and the “No Action Alternative”.~~

~~Public participation in the NEPA process has been, and will continue to be, solicited and welcomed. Compliance with state and federal laws and regulations, as well as Best Management Practices and Standards and Guidelines in the Forest Plan will be carried out as detailed.~~

~~Based upon the effects of the alternatives, the responsible official will decide whether or not to authorize projects developed to address the goals and objectives stated herein and further presented in this document. The decision will enable managers to seek funding and contract work to complete individual projects. The decision will formally commit the Forest Service to the long term goal of holistic watershed rehabilitation in the Harris River.~~

### ~~Alternatives Considered but Not Analyzed in Detail~~

~~An alternative approach to watershed rehabilitation was considered based on case by case basis through sporadic projects responding to natural processes over time rather than the integrated method in the proposed action. A determination was made that such an approach would not meet~~