

DECISION NOTICE
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
AND
FINDING OF NON-SIGNIFICANT AMENDMENT UTMLEA2003-01
OF THE
MANTI-LA SAL NATIONAL FOREST LAND AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT
PLAN
MANAGEMENT INDICATOR SPECIES CHANGE
USDA FOREST SERVICE
Manti-La Sal National Forest
Southeast Utah

Decision and Reasons for the Decision

Background

The Manti-La Sal National Forest (hereafter referred to as the Forest Service) is currently faced with the problem of addressing a shortage of data surrounding one of its Management Indicator Species (MIS), the blue grouse. The 1986 Manti-La Sal Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) designated blue grouse as the MIS for mature conifer/mixed conifer habitats. However in the early 1990's the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (LMRP pg II-33) who had been monitoring blue grouse populations, decided to discontinue collecting this data. The resulting data gap and the implications for MIS monitoring requirements were highlighted in litigation on the South Manti Timber Sale in 2002.

This situation prompted the Forest Supervisor to direct an evaluation (Environmental Assessment, Appendix B) of whether continuing with blue grouse as the MIS for the mature conifer/mixed conifer habitat component and reinitiating data collection was a desirable and practical approach to meeting the intent of the regulations. Other species tied to this habitat for which population data might be more readily available needed to be considered as well. Guidance for MIS is provided in 36 CFR 219 subsection 19, which sets forth the requirements for monitoring wildlife habitat and the use of MIS within the context of developing, adopting, and revising land and resource management plans for the National Forest System (as required by the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974, as amended). 36 CFR 219.19 requires that viable populations of native and desirable non-native vertebrate species be maintained at the planning area level (generally considered to be a National Forest). The regulations require the use of MIS populations to reflect the effects of management activities on habitats and population trends.

Decision

Based upon my review of the Environmental Assessment and supporting documents, I have decided to implement **Alternative 2: Use Northern Goshawk as a MIS**. This alternative would replace the blue grouse with the northern goshawk as a Management Indicator Species for mature conifer/mixed conifer habitats in the Manti-La Sal Forest Plan.

Monitoring requirements for northern goshawks were previously adopted in the March, 2000 Utah Northern Goshawk Project Forest Plan Amendment (Appendix A) and consistent with the Conservation Strategy and Agreement for the Management of Northern Goshawk Habitat in Utah (Utah National Forests et al.1998, pages 9-10).

When compared to other alternatives, Alternative 2 clearly best achieves the purpose and need of meeting requirements for monitoring wildlife habitat and the use of MIS (36 CFR 219 subsection 19). Since the northern goshawk is specifically dependent on mature conifer/mixed conifer in all of its life stages, it is sensitive to management changes that may affect this habitat type which meets the intent of Management Indicator Species. The northern goshawk has monitoring requirements and a standard survey protocol in place and data is available from 1992 to present making it possible to evaluate management effects and population trends. It is not a hunted species, eliminating this as a factor affecting population changes. It is high on the food chain reducing the role of predation in population changes. In addition, all other National Forests in Utah, as well as National Forests in adjoining states are also monitoring goshawks providing context for site-specific analyses and data for broad-scale assessments. This alternative closes the data gap for the existing MIS (blue grouse) intended to represent mature conifer/mixed conifer, increases the ability to draw cause-effect relationships for this habitat, and employs a standard protocol necessary for scientifically credible monitoring. In addition it is a practical and cost-effective solution to the current problem of lacking data.

Other Alternatives Considered

Three other species were considered initially as possible MIS to replace blue grouse; gray jay, three-toed woodpecker, and red squirrel. None of the three species were selected since all three species have nests that are difficult to locate making monitoring unnecessarily expensive and impractical and none have standard survey protocols. In addition, the gray jay nests in *young* spruce making it more difficult to tie impacts in mature conifer/mixed conifer to population trends and three-toed woodpecker populations fluctuate with beetle numbers making it more difficult to differentiate effects of management activities from natural disturbance process effects.

The Environmental Assessment focused on the selected Alternative 2, and the required No Action Alternative 1 Keep Blue Grouse as a MIS. With this Alternative blue grouse would remain as a Management Indicator Species for mature conifer/mixed conifer habitat types. The Forest Service would need to establish and implement a monitoring protocol for blue grouse to collect data previously obtained from the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources. Based on the evaluation completed (Environmental Assessment, Appendix B) and effects disclosed, this Alternative presents problems with meeting the purpose and need of compliance with requirements for monitoring wildlife habitat and the use of MIS (36 CFR 219 subsection 19). Blue Grouse use a number of different habitat types and are not dependent on mature conifer/mixed conifer for breeding success making it difficult to tie population changes to effects of management on this habitat. Blue grouse populations are also affected by hunting, predation, and weather patterns adding complexity and making it difficult to discern the cause-effect relationships between population trends and management activity effects on habitat. Since data collection on blue grouse by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources was discontinued in the early 1990's, there is no current data available for population trends of this species. The task of

developing a protocol for monitoring and re-initiating data collection on blue grouse would require time and resources that are already scarce. Given the weaknesses identified for blue grouse in meeting the real intent of MIS, investing in a new monitoring protocol would be unwise.

Public Involvement

A proposal to replace the Blue Grouse with the Northern Goshawk was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions on February 2003. The proposal was provided to the public, other agencies, organizations and individuals (244 mailings) for comment during scoping February 18 to March 21, 2003. Public comment did not surface any issues that had not already been identified as part of developing the Proposed Action. Two issues were identified during the evaluation directed by the Forest Supervisor and validated by public comments as follows:

Issue 1: The Manti-La Sal Forest Plan does not have adequate MIS data to evaluate effects on wildlife populations in mature conifer/mixed conifer habitats as required by 36 CFR 219.19. The current MIS for this type, blue grouse, is affected by a number of factors that make a cause-effect relationship with forest management activities difficult or impossible to determine.

Issue 2: It is not possible currently to accurately evaluate changes in grouse population because there is no standard protocol for monitoring.

To address these concerns, the Forest Service considered the alternatives described above.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the Environmental Assessment, I have determined that this action will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

The disclosure of effects in the EA found the actions limited in context. The project area is limited in size and the activities limited in duration. Effects are local in nature and are not likely to significantly affect regional or national resources.

1. There are no adverse environmental impacts nor or there beneficial environmental impacts although the change in MIS will provide for improved understanding of relationships between management actions and specific habitats.
2. This action has no bearing on public health or safety since it is simply a change in what species will be monitored for the purpose of correlating wildlife population trends with effects of management activities on habitat.
3. This action has no effect on unique characteristics of the geographic area (historic, cultural resource, park land, prime farm lands, wetlands, or wild and scenic rivers) because which species is monitored to meet MIS requirements will not result in any impacts to these resources.

4. The effects of this action on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial because there is no effect on the human environment. The effect is one of improving the use of wildlife population monitoring to understand effects of management activities on habitats.
5. The effects of this action are not highly uncertain nor do they involve unique or unknown risks because monitoring of northern goshawk has been conducted successfully for a number of years.
6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects because the action is to choose a species for monitoring that is well-suited to the purposes stated for Management Indicator Species. The effects of this monitoring are expected to be a better understanding of effects of management activities on habitat and population trends and no precedent for future actions with significant effects is established.
7. This action is not related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts because this change in MIS will result in improved compliance with 36 CFR 219 but will have no environmental effects.
8. The action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, because the focus of the decision is to remove the monitoring requirement in the forest plan for the blue grouse and replace it with the northern goshawk. Monitoring requirements for the goshawk have been in place since 2000. The action will also not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources because it is about which species to monitor for evaluating effects of management activities on habitats and populations and results in no environmental effects.
9. The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species act of 1973 because there is no effect other than the potential for improved understanding of effects of management activities on habitats and populations.
10. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. This action amends the Manti-La Sal National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

The National Forest Management Act regulations at 36 CFR 219.10(f) state: “Based on an analysis of the objectives, guidelines, and other contents of the forest plan, the Forest Supervisor shall determine whether a proposed amendment would result in a significant change in the plan.” The Forest Service Handbook (FSH 1909.12) provides a framework for consideration, and section 5.32 lists four factors to be considered when determining whether a proposed change to a forest plan is significant or not significant: (a) timing; (b) location and size; (c) goals, objectives, and outputs; and (d) management prescriptions. I have evaluated the proposed

amendment and concluded that it does not constitute a significant amendment of the Manti-LaSal Forest Plan.

(a) Timing: The timing factor examines at what point, over the course of the forest plan period, the Plan is amended. In most cases, the later the change, the less likely it is to be significant for the current forest plan. Since the Manti-LaSal Forest Plan is 16 years old and Forest Plan revision is already underway (revised plan expected in 2005), the timing factor implies that this amendment is non-significant.

(b) Location and size: The key to location and size is context, or “the relationship of the affected area to the overall planning area.” The change in MIS has no direct effect on any specific area of the Forest, however for purposes of this determination the mature conifer/mixed conifer habitats could be considered as the affected area. The acres of these habitats (EA Section 3.1) total approximately 402,500 or about 28 percent of the Manti-La Sal National Forest. In terms of location and size, the action of monitoring and evaluating MIS related to this amendment does not result in a significant change in the plan.

(c) Goals, objectives, and outputs: This factor involves the determination of “whether the change alters the long-term relationship between the level of goods and services in the overall planning area”. This amendment will not result in any change to levels of goods and services because it simply exchanges one species for another for purposes of monitoring and evaluating management effects on habitats and populations.

(d) Management prescriptions: This factor involves the determination of (1) whether the change in a management prescription is only for a specific situation or whether it would apply to future decisions throughout the planning area” and (2), “whether or not the change alters the desired future condition of the land and resources or the anticipated goods and services to be produced.” This amendment does not change any management prescription, nor does it change desired future conditions or anticipated goods and services. With regard to these factors it can also be determined to be a non-significant amendment.

Based on review of the Environmental Assessment and supporting documents and considering the above guidance and findings, it is my determination that this amendment does not result in a significant change to the forest plan and is therefore a non-significant amendment.

Implementation Date

This project will be implemented 7 days after the decision has been published and the appeal period has begun.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 217.3. A written appeal must be postmarked or received in duplicate by the Appeal Reviewing Officer within 45 days (time period begins the day after the notice is published) of the date of publication of the legal notice regarding this decision in Sun Advocate, Price, Utah. Appeals must meet the content

requirements of 36 CFR 217.9 and be mailed to: Regional Forester, USDA, Forest Service, 324 – 25th Street, Ogden, Utah 84401.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Michael Davis, Forest Environmental Coordinator, Manti-La Sal National Forest, 599 West Price River Drive, Price, Utah 84501 (435) 636-3550.

/s/

MELISSA BLACKWELL
Acting Forest Supervisor
Manti-La Sal National Forest

13 June 2003
Date

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