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## Decision Summary and Rationale

### Biological Diversity – Ecological Health

Ecological health was one of the primary issues leading to significant change from the 1986 Forest Plans. The *Report on the Scientific Roundtable on Biological Diversity* served as an important source of new information for designing alternatives to address issues related to species diversity, viability, and ecosystems sustainability. My decision will continue forest restoration and change this relatively young forest toward a multi-aged, multi-layered structure.

The Selected Alternative will implement land allocations, standards, guidelines, and management area prescriptions designed to reduce risk to viability for species most at risk, increase success in maintaining species and ecosystems diversity, and maintain and/or restore components of the ecological systems important to their sustainability.

The revised Forest Plan incorporates a strategy for developing restoration of landscape ecological patterns, composition, and structure for both aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems.

### Aquatic, Riparian and Wetland Ecosystems

The revised Forest Plan provides strengthened management direction for aquatic ecosystems. The Forest Plan provides a Goal with related Objectives, for healthy aquatic ecosystems along with a variety of supporting Standards and Guidelines. It includes an *Aquatic Desired Condition* that describes a detailed long-term vision and prescription for the desired future condition for the aquatic systems, emphasizing healthy watersheds resilient in the face of natural and/or man-caused events. The desired conditions include intact riparian corridors whose structure, function, and composition are intact, that serve as landscape connectors, and that are maintained or restored consistent with the ecological capability and the sustainability of the Forests' ecosystems.

The Forests are completing an ecological classification and inventory of aquatic ecosystems. This information will provide the basis for setting more specific Goals and Objectives on spatial priorities for management and an array of aquatic ecological restoration and maintenance elements.

### Ecosystem Restoration and Landscape Pattern

The elements of my decision related to terrestrial ecological systems are based on new information about ecosystems management across a large landbase. I am adjusting landscape scale patterns and species composition on the Forests. The adjustment, over time, will change the forest landscape of relatively small blocks of contiguous forest types, which are the historic legacy of past logging, farming and catastrophic fire, to a landscape that contains larger contiguous blocks of older forest.

The two forests partially addressed ecological restoration in the 1986 Forest Plans, and thousands of acres of uneven-aged forest management have been implemented as the beginning step towards creating interior forest habitat. Now the Selected Alternative will take another step forward to incorporate large blocks of interior and longer-lived forest into the restored forest landscape. In time, the management direction based on my decision will provide increased security for species that thrive under conditions of large patches of mature interior northern hardwoods, long-lived red/white pine mixed with oak, and large patches of barrens and surrogate-barrens communities. The shift in

management toward increasing the amounts and patch sizes of these forest communities is tempered with recognition of the need to maintain aspen as part of the incumbent body of species and communities native to these Forests.

I have responded to broad concerns about biological diversity by allocating considerable acreage to the management of interior mature northern hardwoods as well as to the management of more mature oak and long-lived pines, and to pine barrens conditions as shown in Table 1:

<b>Table 1. Acres of management areas emphasizing ecosystem restoration in Selected Alternative</b>	
<b>Management Area</b>	<b>Acres in Selected Alternative</b>
2B – interior northern hardwood systems	209,000
3B – oak forest with pine component	11,000
4B – pine forest with oak component	30,000
4C – conifer; surrogate pine barrens	13,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>263,000</b>

Over the long-term, the Wilderness areas, Wilderness Study Areas, Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized areas with no timber harvest, and areas managed specifically for interior mature northern hardwoods (Management Area 2B in the revised Forest Plan) will combine to provide landscape-scale patches of interior northern hardwoods at least 20,000 acres in size. The Selected Alternative provides for 6 such core areas that total 286,400 acres and responds effectively to species viability concerns as well as to concerns for ecosystem resiliency to large disturbance events.

The combined spatial distribution of these areas, along with Research Natural Areas, Special Management Areas, Old Growth complexes, Wild and Scenic River corridors, and areas managed for uneven-aged northern hardwoods (Management Area 2A in the revised Plan), contributes to long-term ecosystem connectivity on a landscape scale. The information available to me indicates that the balance in landscape design I have selected is sufficient for ecological sustainability of the varied systems present on the Forests. This landscape design also provides consideration of those citizens and groups interested in maintaining the amount of aspen habitat that was present on the Forests as a legacy of timber removal in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s.

A forest is always changing. The changes in a young forest that is growing into a mature forest are apparent, although it may take a lifetime for us to see the full effect. The Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forests we see now grew out of a drastically altered landscape left to us from an earlier time. If my decision is implemented over several decades it will shift the forest landscape away from the fragmented blocks left to us early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to a balanced landscape of large blocks of interior forest as well as stands of aspen and other vegetation types. My intent is to provide a greater degree of habitat security in the future for the sum-total of all the plant and animal species native to these forests.

Change in a forest takes time. During the first decade aspen habitat could potentially decrease by only a very small percentage. In the second and third decades there would be a noticeable decrease in aspen habitat. Another Forest Plan Revision will occur in 10-15 years that will position the Forest and the public for discussion and decision on the amount of aspen to retain into the future. If this decision is implemented into future

decades, I recognize the future decrease in aspen could lead to a probable future decrease in the habitats of some popular game species and other species that use aspen. I am also aware of the public concern about the social and economic effects of reducing habitat for popular game species. With that in mind, I tempered the shift in management to not significantly decrease aspen habitat in the first decade. My decision also provides 291,000 acres of Management Area 1 with primary emphasis on aspen through even-aged vegetation management. This is approximately 19% of the National Forests' acreage. The public and private forests that adjoin the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forests also provide a mix of wildlife habitats, including aspen.

## **Old Growth**

I chose 85,500 acres of Old Growth and Natural Feature complexes to be included in the Selected Alternative based on stand composition and structure that generally reflect a full complement of desired old growth conditions. I recognize that some of the old growth complexes reflect the legacy of turn-of-the-century land management activities and may be missing some composition or structural elements. The Old Growth complexes contribute to the landbase available for ecological reference and together with Research Natural Areas and Special Management Areas can provide places of refuge for species preferring such habitat. Old Growth complexes provide differing levels of habitat elements, some were more critical to retain than others.

Over the long-term it is to be expected that Wilderness areas, Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized areas not managed for timber, and forested wetlands will contribute further to the ecological function of old growth complexes as well as to the landscape available as ecological reference.

## **Wildlife**

I wanted direction for wildlife habitat protection and maintenance of native wildlife species to be integrated into all aspects of Forest management. The revised Forest Plan provides Forest-wide standards and guidelines for specific wildlife habitats and species, including Threatened and Endangered Species and Regional Forester Sensitive Species. The protection and conservation of wildlife habitats are also integrated into silvicultural prescriptions, and into the management area standards and guidelines, providing more comprehensive management guidance than the original Plans.

## **Special Land Allocations**

Part of the landscape ecological design in the revised Forest Plan includes the allocation of land to serve as ecological reference areas, areas that provide current conditions or have high potential to provide conditions that represent the array of native ecosystems. This referential foundation is made up from three types of areas: Research Natural Areas (RNAs), Special Management Areas (SMAs), and the Old Growth complexes described above. The ecological inventory done since the 1986 Plans was the primary foundation for changes in the Candidate Research Natural Areas (CRNAs) and SMAs listed in the revised Forest Plan.

I have identified 35 areas as Research Natural Areas and Candidate Research National Areas. Research Natural Areas are part of a national network of ecological areas designated in perpetuity for research and education, and to provide important components of biological diversity for the Forests. The RNAs and CRNAs on the Forests have been assigned to a management prescription that is consistent with RNA objectives. As the

Plan is implemented, we will strive to complete the required establishment reports and work to gain concurrence of the Director of the North Central Research Station for those CRNAs that are appropriate to be designated as RNAs. When these actions have been accomplished, the administrative steps required for the RNA designation will be viewed as completed.

These areas cumulatively function as important contributors for sustainable ecosystem management, including provision of a long-term increase in security of species viability and diversity. Therefore they were significant enough in my mind to be treated as a minimum management requirement in the development of alternatives. The 35,200 acres of RNAs and CRNAs, and the 63,900 acres of SMAs, as well as the Old Growth complexes in the Selected Alternative serve in the role as minimum management requirements. The decision for these special areas is shown in Table 2:

<b>Table 2. Comparison of special management areas between 1986 Plans and Revised Forest Plan</b>		
<b>Special Allocation</b>	<b>Current Plans</b>	<b>Revised Forest Plan</b>
RNA	2,500 acres	2,500 acres
CRNA	Nicolet = 71 sites <sup>1</sup> Chequamegon = 464 acres	32,700 acres
SMA	13,000 acres	63,900 acres
Old Growth Complexes	67,600 acres	85,500 acres
<sup>1</sup> The 1986 Nicolet Plan referenced Candidate Research Natural Area sites, but did not reference acres.		

## Access and Recreation

Access and recreation has steadily become a more important function of the Forests as the population has increased and as neighboring lands have been converted or fragmented by other uses. Greater use of the Forests has increased conflict among various types of recreational activities, and with other resource values such as water quality. Changes in Forest Plan direction was needed to reduce these conflicts, and to provide for higher quality recreational experiences on the Forests.

### All-Terrain Vehicles

All-terrain vehicle (ATV) access policies on the two Forests were very different under the original Plans, the Nicolet permitting essentially no access while the Chequamegon provided ATV trails, permitted access to most roads, and allowed off-trail/off-road travel (Table 3). There was also a user-developed ATV play area on the Chequamegon.

I want a more balanced policy across these Forests. To that end, I have decided to restrict ATV access to designated trails and roads on both Forests and to prohibit cross-country travel to avoid the associated resource degradation. ATV trail mileage will be increased on the Forests. The 284 miles of developed ATV trail on the Chequamegon National Forest will continue under this decision.

ATV road routes have been common on the Chequamegon. Classified roads on the Chequamegon will be posted open for ATV use except:

1. On roads where the Forest does not have the authority to designate as an ATV route; and
2. In instances where the local Ranger District identifies and closes specific routes for management issues such as safety, resource degradation, township concerns, or recreation use conflict.

Posting of open roads for ATV routes will take time and the ATV Use Transition Plan (see the section “Implementation, Monitoring, and Evaluation”) can be modified as resource management issues arise.

<b>Table 3. Comparison of ATV policy between the 1986 Plans and Revised Forest Plan</b>			
<b>ATV Policy</b>	<b>Current Chequamegon Plan</b>	<b>Current Nicolet Plan</b>	<b>Revised Forest Plan</b>
Trails	Trail construction and use allowed	Trail construction and use not allowed	Up to 85 miles of new trail on Nicolet. Up to 100 miles of new trail on the Chequamegon. Adaptive management applies
Open Road Use	Open road use allowed	Open road use not allowed	Open road use allowed where posted open
Off- trail/off-road	Off-trail/off-road use allowed	Off-trail/off-road use not allowed	Off-trail/off-road use not allowed

On the Nicolet National Forest, opportunities to open roads for ATV use will be done in consultation with local governments. I recognize that identification of ATV recreation opportunities on the Nicolet National Forest may take a longer time than identification of these opportunities on the Chequamegon National Forest. Enhancements to existing town-designated ATV routes on the Nicolet can be implemented by designating specific existing Forest system roads as ATV routes in collaboration with township governments.

New ATV trail opportunities on the Forests will be carefully identified. I direct the Forest Supervisor to identify and carefully evaluate new trails for ATV use on both Forests and strive to construct some new trails. The ATV Use Transition Plan will provide the concept for opening and closing roads for ATV use. Only after evaluation and monitoring of these new trails as well as open roads will the Forest Supervisor make the decision to continue identifying opportunities for ATV use as identified in the Selected Alternative.

The ATV play area on the Washburn District will be closed. The degradation of the steep sandy slopes and plant life caused by user-developed trails in this area is unacceptable. This area is immediately adjacent to the Moquah Barrens Wildlife Management Area and a potential progressive expansion of user-developed trails into this wildlife area would be unacceptable. I recognize that the play area on the Washburn District has strong support among ATV users, especially local users and they perceive that loss of this play area would restrict their access to a recreation experience that is not available elsewhere on the Forests at this time. However, the resource damage cannot continue and I direct the Forest Supervisor to also seek opportunities to rehabilitate this area.

The existing 4-Wheel Drive trail (Pipeline Trail) will be maintained, however, should maintenance methods prove ineffective and monitoring confirm unsafe conditions or unacceptable resource damage, the existing 25-mile trail will be closed and relocated to another location, provided agreements with non-Forest entities cover future maintenance and monitoring.

### **Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized (SPNM) Areas**

The revised Forest Plan provides for an increase in quality of SPNM experience over time. I did not choose to greatly modify the amount of acreage allocated to SPNM areas in the original Plans, but chose instead to increase the quality of experience found in those areas.

My approach to improving semi-primitive recreational opportunities focused on more than acreage. With regard to Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized areas, I focused change on increasing the quality of the experience available to the people who use them. The current Plans permit timber harvest within SPNM areas, and people who use these areas have commented over the past years that it is difficult to tell the difference between hiking in forests primarily managed for timber and hiking within an SPNM area. To respond to this concern, eight of the nineteen areas designated SPNM in the revised Forest Plan are not in the suited timber base, and harvesting is not permitted, with a few exceptions for special circumstances. Relatively continuous late successional hardwood forests characterize these areas, which have characteristics conducive to the feeling of being alone in the deep woods. These areas will also contribute to interior northern hardwood forest core areas, and to ecological connectivity across the landscape, as described above under Biological Diversity.

The other 11 SPNM areas permit timber harvest and are within the suited timber base, but emphasize a limited time frame for vegetation treatment during any ten-year period. This contributes to the experience of quiet remoteness in these forested areas for most of each decade. There are also limitations on the percentage of an area that may be harvested within a ten-year period, and limitations on clearcut size, in order to further differentiate between the recreational experience within these areas, and the recreational experience within other suited timberlands.

The proposed Wilderness Study Areas (described below), when added to the acres of SPNM areas, provides an increase in opportunity for this type of recreational experience.

### **Wilderness**

I reviewed the inventory and evaluation of all areas on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forests suited for consideration as potential Wilderness. A total of nine areas met National Wilderness criteria, and after evaluation, there were eight areas considered suitable for potential Wilderness. I have chosen three areas totaling 15,500 acres to be recommended as Wilderness Study Areas: Flynn Lake, Porcupine Addition, and Spring Brook. All three areas are located on the west side of the Forests, and would be an addition to the approximately 44,000 Wilderness acres already present. Motorized access to Wilderness Study Areas will be permitted only for private land access, for access to existing gravel sources until alternative sources are located, and in emergency situations. If designated as Wilderness, these additions would provide a 36 percent increase in the Wilderness acreage on the Forests.

I recognize that local county governments, as well as Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources and local tribes, did not express support for additional Wilderness. The local

populace is divided on this issue as well. There is interest in increased Wilderness designation expressed by national interest groups. As the population of the country increases, areas where recreationists can experience solitude and remoteness are becoming increasingly rare.

I decided to represent the national level need for, and interest in, Wilderness by a recommendation for these Wilderness Study Areas. This decision also recognizes the local perspective that has appeared to be primarily in favor of no additional Wilderness, by proposing only a moderate increase. Only those three areas having the combination of excellent recreation qualities as well as excellent potential for naturally occurring ecological restoration and for providing ecological reference were selected for recommendation as Wilderness Study Areas.

## **Total and Open Road Density**

The revised Forest Plan retains the current Plans' Forest-wide goals of reducing total road densities on the Forests to an average of 3 miles of road per square mile of forest. Management guidance on spatial allocation of open road densities is also provided. I decided to continue reducing the amount of total roads and the amount of open road to resolve conflict with quieter forms of recreation, impacts on streams, and effects on some wildlife species.

Areas of the Forests are assigned specific long-term open road density goals to improve opportunity for recreational experiences with less intense motorized activity. Some areas are designated as non-motorized areas with full vegetation management. The roads in these areas will not be open for motorized use by the general public, but the lands are part of the suited timberlands, and will be fully managed for forest products. These areas occur primarily in aspen areas and provide quality non-motorized hunting opportunities.

Another set of areas is designated for an open road density of 2 miles per square mile. These areas are managed to provide a semi-primitive motorized experience in areas smaller than 2,500 acres, or are managed for predominantly natural appearing settings with some probability of experiencing isolation.

The entire combination of all of the various road density reductions (general forest, SPNM, Wilderness Study Areas, non-motorized areas with full vegetation treatment and those smaller areas providing a semi-primitive motorized experience) all result in a cumulative reduction of the number of open roads across the Forests. I recognize the strong public opinions on both sides of the road density issue. Monitoring and evaluation during Plan implementation will provide information on the effects of implementing this goal.

## **Timber Production**

### **Timber Production**

The revised Plan identifies 862,000 acres of suited timberlands on the two National Forests. The Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ), for the first decade of the planning period, is 720 million board feet for the Chequamegon and 590 million board feet for the Nicolet. The improved determination of ASQ, based on lessons learned during 17 years of Plan implementation, and better identification of suited timberlands are resolutions to the need for change from the current Forest Plans. I have provided direction in the revised Forest Plan for sustainable timber harvest to be applied on the landscape, blended with ecological restoration and achieving biological diversity on a landscape level. This should

alleviate past problems with the Forests' inability to provide both species and product outputs on a sustained basis due to past standards and guidelines that were not well integrated and hesitation to enter areas under study for the revised Forest Plan.

This plan improves the species product projections as well as the health and viability of forest ecosystems. With the improvements in determining suitable forestland and growth and yield projections, the species product mix were re-evaluated to provide better reliability for timber sale offerings. The identification of special silvicultural prescriptions to achieve ecosystem restoration led to better estimations of the Forests' ability to produce timber products.

I recognize the issues surrounding the level of the Forests' ASQs, including the concern of local communities and industry most directly affected by this decision. The two National Forests have consistently provided timber to local communities and industry for decades but did not ever provide the full amount of timber outlined in the ASQ for the current plans. Although the amount of timber offered has decreased in recent years due to a variety of reasons, this revised Forest Plan provides the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forests the opportunity to continue timber harvest offerings within the new ASQ.

Therefore, while I recognize that the combined ASQ (1.31 billion board feet) of the revised Plan is lower than the combined ASQ (1.67 billion board feet) of the original Plans, I also recognize that the revised Forest Plan still provides the potential for a program that can contribute to this economic sector within the State of Wisconsin and at a national level.

### **Special Forest Products**

The revised Forest Plan added a Goal of ensuring that harvest of special forest products such as birch bark, maple syrup, conifer boughs, and various forms of club mosses over the long-term is within sustainable levels. The current Plans do not address this issue and the growing interest in collecting special forest products led me to provide guidance. I also recognize that establishment of a Goal as well as Standards and Guidelines for these products will increase our knowledge and understanding of the role these species play in forest ecosystem. I address the concern for the increased harvest of special forest products by including guidance to determine sustainable levels of harvest by monitoring use of special forest products.

### **Tribal Rights**

I recognize the Forest Service's trust responsibility and treaty obligations toward Indian Tribes. Management direction contained within the revised Forest Plan emphasizes the importance of Tribal treaty-rights and interests. Nothing in this revised Forest Plan is intended to affect the Tribes' treaty-guaranteed hunting, fishing, and gathering rights. Tribal consultation is expressly emphasized as important to site-specific implementation of the Forest Plan.