

Comment Is Invited

The agency invites comments on the following: (a) Whether the proposed collection of information is necessary for the stated purposes or the proper performance of the functions of the agency, including whether the information will have practical or scientific utility; (b) the accuracy of the agency's estimate of the burden of the proposed collection of information, including the validity of the methodology and assumptions used; (c) ways to enhance the quality, utility, and clarity of the information to be collected; and (d) ways to minimize the burden of the collection of information on respondents, including the use of automated, electronic, mechanical, or other technological collection techniques or other forms of information technology.

Use of Comments

All comments, including names and addresses when provided, will become a matter of public record. Comments received in response to this notice will be summarized and included in the request for Office of Management and Budget approval.

Dated: July 23, 1999.

Robert Lewis, Jr.,

Deputy Chief for Research & Development.

[FR Doc. 99-20178 Filed 8-4-99; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3410-11-P

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**Forest Service****Quartzite Watershed Management Project, Colville National Forest, Stevens County, Washington**

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of intent to prepare environmental impact statement.

SUMMARY: The Forest Service, USDA, as lead agency, will prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) on a proposal to conduct vegetation and road management, and implement riparian and wetland management. The Proposed Action will be in compliance with the 1988 Colville National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) as amended, which provides the overall guidance for management of this area. The Proposed Action is within portions of the Thomason Creek, Sherwood Creek, and Upper Cottonwood Creek drainages on the Colville Ranger District and is scheduled for implementation in fiscal year 2001. The Forest Service invites written comments and suggestions on

the scope of the analysis. The agency will give notice of the full environmental analysis and decision making process so interested and affected people may be able to participate and contribute in the final decision.

DATES: Comments concerning the scope of the analysis should be postmarked by September 3, 1999.

ADDRESSES: Send written comments and suggestions concerning the management of this area to Catherine H. Lay, Acting District Ranger, 255 West 11th Kettle Falls, Washington, 99141.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Questions about the Proposed Action and EIS should be directed to Catherine H. Lay, Acting District Ranger, or to Ed Shaw, Planner, 755 S. Main Street, Colville, Washington 99114 (phone: 509-684-7000).

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: As a result of ecosystem analysis, the Colville National Forest is proposing watershed management activities in the Quartzite Watershed. We recently completed the Quartzite Ecosystem Analysis, an analysis that considered all lands within the Thomason, Sherwood, and Upper Cottonwood drainages. One of the key findings of the analysis is that fire exclusion has changed forest vegetation. These changes in upland forest density, understory composition, and tree species have increased forest susceptibility to insects, disease, drought and atypical fire. The objective of vegetation management proposals is to improve ecosystem integrity by moving the vegetation toward the natural range of variation; by developing forest matrix, patches and corridors that are consistent with fire landscapes; and by improving the landscape patterns of native species habitats. A second ecosystem analysis finding is that vegetation diversity and in-stream fish habitat in low elevation riparian areas has deteriorated. The objective of riparian and wetland management is to improve ecosystem integrity by increasing the diversity of vegetation, and by improving in-stream fish habitat in low elevation riparian areas. A third ecosystem analysis finding concerns roads. Forest roads provide access to conduct needed management. The benefits of forest roads are many. However, the ecosystem analysis notes that road corridors create habitat for noxious weeds that displace native plants. They also have introduced change to a variety of wildlife habitats. The connectivity of wildlife travel corridors has been disrupted in many places where roads cross riparian areas. In addition, road access has fragmented

seclusion habitat for large home range vertebrates. Objectives for road management proposals are to upgrade, maintain and develop those roads which are necessary for long-term land management and important to public access, and to eliminate unneeded roads.

The Proposed Action includes vegetation management using pre-commercial and commercial thinning and harvest on about 4,600 acres. Prescribed Fire would be used on up to 6,500 acres. A variety of road management activities are included. To increase vegetation management feasibility the proposed action includes 11.5 miles of new road construction. (The National Forest will develop alternatives to the proposed action that do not construct new roads.) To improve wildlife habitat and water quality, 1.25 miles of road will be closed in the Woodward Meadows area. And to improve public safety, a steep section (0.25 miles) of the Jay Gould Ridge Road will be closed. In addition, the proposed action would improve fisheries by applying gravel to roads and improving road drainage at seven stream crossings. The Proposed Action also includes 100 acres of riparian and wetland improvement activities in Woodward Meadows, which is located in the Upper Cottonwood Creek drainage. These activities include dechanneling previously channelled streams through the meadow (roughly 2000 feet), creating pot holes and planting native riparian plants to improve wildlife habitat.

The projects would be located approximately 2 to 10 miles east of U.S. Highway 395 near Chewelah, Washington. The Quartzite Watershed Management Projects are proposed within the Thomason Creek, Sherwood Creek, and Upper Cottonwood Creek drainages on the Colville Ranger District. This analysis will evaluate a range of alternatives for implementation of the project activities. The area being analyzed is approximately 23,300 acres, of which 10,600 acres are National Forest System lands. The other ownership areas are included only for analysis of effects. The breakdown of management emphasis on the National Forest System Lands is as follows: 2% is for old growth dependent species habitat; 3% is for recreation; 18% is for big game winter range; 20% is for scenic/winter range; 20% is for wood/forage; and 37% is for scenic/timber. The project area does not include any wilderness, RARE II, or inventoried roadless areas.

Some of the preliminary issues that were identified include: scenery, water

quality, road construction, road closures, and timber commodities.

A range of alternatives will be considered, including a no-action alternative. Based on issues identified to date, alternatives to date, alternatives to be considered include: (1) The number, sizes, and locations of areas considered for treatment; (2) the amount of road constructed for access; (3) the type of harvest and post-harvest treatments prescribed; and (4) the number, types, and locations of other integrated resource projects.

Initial scoping began in May, 1999. The scoping process will include the following: identify and clarify issues; identify key issues to be analyzed in depth; explore alternatives based on themes which will be derived from issues recognized during scoping activities; and identify potential environmental effects of the proposed Action and alternatives.

A public meeting is planned to be held at the Chewelah Municipal Building on July 28th 1999, at 5:00 pm. The Forest Service is seeking information, comments, and assistance from other agencies, organizations, Indian Tribes, and individuals who may be interested in or affected by the Proposed Action. This input will be used in preparation of the draft EIS. Your comments are appreciated throughout the analysis process.

Comments received in response to this notice, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, those who submit anonymous comments will not have standing to appeal the subsequent decision under 36 CFR Parts 215 or 217. Additionally, pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27(d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that, under the FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and where the request is denied, the agency will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address within a specified number of days.

The draft EIS is to be filed with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

and to be available for public review by March, 2000. At that time, copies of the draft EIS will be distributed to interested and affected agencies, organizations, Indian Tribes, and members of the public for their review and comment. The EPA will publish a Notice of Availability of the draft EIS in the **Federal Register**. The comment period on the draft EIS will be 45 days from the date the EPA notice appears in the **Federal Register**. It is important that those interested in the management of the Colville National Forest participate at that time.

The Forest Service believes it is important to give reviewers notice at this early stage, of several court rulings related to public participation in the environmental review process. First, reviewers of draft EIS must structure their participation in the environmental review of the proposal so that it is meaningful and alerts an agency to the reviewer's position and contentions. *Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corp v. NRDC*, 435 U.S. 519, 553 (1978). Also, environmental objections that could be raised at the draft EIS stage but that are not raised until after completion of the final EIS may be waived or dismissed by the courts. *City of Angoon v. Hodel*, 803 F. 2d 1016, 1022 (9th Cir. 1986) and *Wisconsin Heritages, Inc. v. Harris*, 490 F. Supp. 1334, 1338 (E.D. Wis. 1980). Because of these court rulings, it is very important that those interested in this Proposed Action participate by the close of the 45-day comment period so that substantive comments and objections are made available to the Forest Service at a time when it can meaningfully consider them and respond to them in the final EIS.

To assist the Forest Service in identifying and considering issues and concerns on the proposed action, comments on the draft EIS should be as specific as possible. It is also helpful if comments refer to specific pages or chapters of the draft EIS. Comments may also address the adequacy of the draft EIS or the merits of the alternatives formulated and discussed in the statement. Reviewers may wish to refer to the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act at 40 CFR 1503.3 in addressing these points.

The final EIS is scheduled to be available by August, 2000. In the final EIS, the Forest Service is required to respond to substantive comments received during the comment period for the draft EIS. The responsible official is Colville National Forest Supervisor, Robert L. Vaught. The responsible official will decide which, if any, of the

alternatives will be implemented. His decision and rationale for the decision will be documented in the Record of Decision, which will be subject to Forest Service Appeal Regulations (36 CFR Part 215).

Dated: July 26, 1999.

Robert L. Vaught,
Forest Supervisor.

[FR Doc. 99-20115 Filed 8-4-99; 8:45 am]

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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Rural Utilities Service

Information Collection Activity; Comment Request

AGENCY: Rural Utilities Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice and request for comments.

SUMMARY: In accordance with the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (44 U.S.C. Chapter 35, as amended), the Rural Utilities Service's (RUS) invites comments on this information collection for which RUS intends to request approval from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

DATES: Comments on this notice must be received by October 4, 1999.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: F. Lamont Heppe, Jr., Program Development & Regulatory Analysis, Rural Utilities Service, USDA, 1400 Independence Ave., SW., STOP 1522, Room 4034, South Building, Washington, DC 20250-1522. Telephone: (202) 720-0736. FAX: (202) 720-4120.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Title: Mergers and Consolidations of Electric Borrowers.

OMB Control Number: 0572-0114.

Type of Request: Extension of a previously approved collection.

Abstract: The Rural Electrification Act of 1936, as amended, authorizes the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) to make and guarantee loans for rural electrification. Due to deregulation and restructuring activities in the electric industry, RUS borrowers find it advantageous to merge or consolidate to meet the challenges of industry change. This information collection addresses the requirements of RUS policies and procedures for mergers and consolidations of electric program borrowers and affects three aspects of merger activities.

The first is documentation required to do business with a successor. Most mergers do not require RUS approval. However, RUS as a secured lender