DRAFT FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
LIGHTNING CREEK RESTORATION PROJECT

Idaho Panhandle National Forests
Sandpoint Ranger District
Bonner County, Idaho

The Sandpoint Ranger District prepared an environmental assessment (EA) to identify and evaluate potential environmental effects associated with the proposed Lightning Creek Restoration Project. The EA was prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act, the Council of Environmental Quality Regulations for Implementing the Procedural Provisions of NEPA (CEQ Regulations, 40 CFR 1500-1508) and the Forest Service Handbook (FSH 1909.15_0-60) to determine whether any actions will have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment based on the context and intensity of its impact (FSH 1909.15_05 and 40 CFR 1508.27).

The Sandpoint district ranger will make a decision regarding the Lightning Creek Restoration Project once the EA is reviewed by the public and comments are taken into consideration.

Description of Alternatives Considered in Detail

Alternative 1 - No Action Alternative

Under the no action alternative, current management of the area would continue as it is today, and the activities proposed in the EA would not be implemented. Current motorized use would be restricted to mostly OHV use on roads previously accessible to standard two-wheel-drive vehicles. Roads would not be repaired or decommissioned, and the approach to the bridge to Porcupine Lake road would not be reconstructed. No riparian or aquatic habitat improvement would occur.

Alternative 3

Alternative 3 would include reconstructing and maintaining 22.8 miles of flood-damaged road, decommissioning 3.9 miles of open road, and decommissioning 46 miles of grown-in and closed roads. About 1 mile of previously open road and about 3.4 miles of closed road would be converted to nonmotorized trails (EA, pp. 8-16 and map 3). There would be no change in the management of any other roads in the watershed or in the overall management of snowmobile use in the watershed. Alternative 3 would also include riparian and aquatic habitat improvement in Lightning Creek, Rattle Creek, and the lower reach of East Fork Creek. See EA, pp. 8-15 for a detailed description of road- and trail-related work.

Alternative 4

Alternative 4 would include reconstructing 12.8 miles of flood-damaged road, decommissioning 3.9 or 6.4 miles of open road (depending on the option selected – EA pp. 8-16 and map 5), and decommissioning 46 miles of grown-in and closed roads (EA, pp. 8-15). About 16.3 miles of road would be converted to nonmotorized trail, 7.5 miles of road would be converted to OHV trail, and 2.1 miles of motorized trail would be converted to nonmotorized trail. About 0.1 mile of a new OHV trail would be constructed for administrative access to a snow and climatic monitoring station. Alternative 4 would also include riparian and aquatic habitat improvement in Lightning

Creek, Rattle Creek, and the lower reach of East Fork Creek. See EA, pp. 8-15 for a detailed description of road- and trail-related work.

Findings

The following is a summary of the project analysis for significance, as defined by 40 CFR 1508.27 and the Forest Service Handbook 1909.15_05. "Significant" as used in NEPA requires consideration of both context and intensity of the expected project effects.

Context means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts (i.e., local regional, worldwide), and over short and long timeframes. For site-specific actions, significance usually depends upon the effects in the local setting rather than in the world as a whole. This project is limited in scope and duration. The project was designed to minimize environmental effects through road reconstruction and decommissioning at-risk road segments, bridge design and location, and design features (EA, pp. 1-18 and Appendix B). The project would be implemented during the summer and fall months over a period of six years.

Intensity refers to the severity of the expected project impacts. The following factors were considered to evaluate intensity.

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse

Both beneficial and adverse impacts have been considered in the evaluation of the environmental consequences of the proposed action and alternative actions. Beneficial effects have not been used to offset or compensate for potential adverse effects. Singularly and collectively, the resources affected by the proposed activities in all action alternatives are not expected to experience significant impacts.

The adverse impacts associated with the project include the following:

- Excavation and installation of culverts would generate some sediment during the periods of operation (EA, p. 21).
- Installation of riprap, rootwads and log vanes used to protect roads and streambanks from erosion would produce suspended sediment during periods of operation (EA, p. 21).
- Road decommissioning would result in possible short-term sediment generation (EA, p. 24).
- Reconstruction of road 1184 in its entirety would generate sediment; a long-term indirect effect of reconstructing this road is the potential for chronic sediment generation, which would affect water quality, and a risk of road failure due to its proximity to the stream and location on moderate mass failure landtypes (EA, p.24).
- An ongoing risk to watershed condition and water quality would occur associated with potential failure and the need for ongoing maintenance of at-risk culverts on tributaries to Porcupine Creek (EA, p. 25).
- Short-term potential sediment generation associated with culvert removals and upgrades, streambank stabilization, and bridge construction or removal, could have localized effects to individual fish (EA, p. 29).
- Potential for short-term negative impacts on bull trout or westslope cutthroat trout, if present, within close proximity to work sites during and immediately following project activities due to the possibility of increased sediment delivery and turbidity (EA, p. 30).

- The possibility of temporary disturbance and displacement of grizzly bears, gray wolf, Canada lynx, wolverine, goshawk, elk, and a temporary impact to grizzly bear core habitat and security from project activities (EA, pp. 33-45).
- The possibility of disturbance to harlequin ducks and an increase in sediment delivery to streams that would temporarily reduce the suitability of the streams breeding habitat (EA, pp.42).
- The possibility of displacement and/or mortality to western toads as result project activities (EA, pp.43).
- Use of explosives to remove culverts in site-specific situations would result in a shortened duration of disturbance and sediment production (EA, p. 22).
- Permanent displacement of motorized recreation access in the drainage from road decommissioning. Motor vehicle access would be reduced and motorized trail access could change (EA, pp 46-48).
- Low risk of introduction and establishment of new weed invaders to the project area. Weed infestations may expand to inaccessible areas that were affected by the 2006 flood event; these would provide a long-term seed source for expansion elsewhere in the project area. The risk of expansion of these infestations would be low to high, depending on the location and extent of future disturbances and their proximity to existing untreated infestation (EA p. 54).

The beneficial effects of the action alternative include the following:

- Road resurfacing would have a beneficial effect to watershed and fisheries resources through the reduction of sediment, installation of streambank stabilization structures would help reduce the chronic sediment delivery to streams (EA, p. 21).
- Realignment and revegetation of road 419 would help reduce future road damage and help in the restoration of riparian areas (EA, p. 22).
- Installation of point bar structures would reduce stream energy, the recruitment of woody debris and formation of aggregates, and the creation of a stable depositional environment during high flows and increased aquatic habitat complexity, and overall improved channel stability (EA, p. 22).
- Bank stabilization would decrease bank erosion and instream sedimentation and potentially increased recruitment of woody debris and formation of debris jams, as well as improved habitat complexity contributing to a trend in improved water quality conditions (EA, p. 23).
- A reduction in hydrologic connectivity of roads to streams by reducing riparian road densities (EA, p. 23).
- Road decommissioning would create a long-term improvement of watershed condition through a decrease in road densities and a long-term reduction of chronic sediment delivery to streams (EA, p. 25).
- Long-term benefits from road improvements would trend Lightning Creek and its tributaries toward higher quality fish habitat and therefore result in higher spawning success rates and individual survival of fishes (EA, p. 30).

- Road decommissioning would increase secure habitat for grizzly bears wolverines, goshawk, and elk (EA, pp. 33-45), and trend toward providing more effective habitat for many species by reducing the miles of drivable roads and road densities (EA, pp. 36).
- A decrease in miles of roads, and groomed snowmobile routes over the existing condition in the Lightning LAU (EA, pp. 38).
- Area streams would trend toward a better aquatic condition that would be more able to support breeding harlequin ducks and improve western toad breeding habitat (EA, pp. 41-42).
- Non-motorized trails would increase (EA, pp. 48-49),
- The risk of introduction and establishment of new weed invaders to the project area is expected to be low with implementation of the required design features (EA, p. 52).

No Effect

Project design features effectively eliminated, or reduced to negligible, most of the potential impacts; therefore, implementation of any of the action alternatives would result in no effect to the following resources: threatened, endangered and sensitive plant species (EA, p.50), cultural and heritage resources (EA, Appendix B, p. 73). The Wildlife and Rare Plants reports contain a list of species that were not analyzed in detail because there would be no effects to those species from the proposed actions.

2. The degree to which the action alternatives affects public health or safety

Incorporating design features related to Engineering and Public Safety such as temporary road closures during road reconstruction and bridge construction, and placing warning signs at strategic locations, would limit risks to the public traveling on the Lightning Creek road 419 during road and bridge work and would result in no significant adverse effect on public health and safety (EA Appendix B, p. 67-69). Design features are also in place for use of explosives. The use of Forest Service Health and Safety Code Handbook's Guide for Using, Storing, and Transporting Explosives and Blasting Materials (FSH 6700) would result in no significant adverse effect on public health (EA Appendix B, p. 69).

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area

The action alternatives will not have a significant effect on unique resource characteristics. Surveys to locate heritage resources within the Lightning Creek Restoration project have been completed. No significant heritage properties have been identified within the ground-disturbing portions of the project and no concerns have been expressed by the tribes. No other unique characteristics such as prime wetlands exist in the project area.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial

As used in the Council on Environmental Quality's guidelines for implementing NEPA, the term "controversial" refers to whether substantial dispute exists as to the **size, nature or effects of the major federal action** rather than to the existence of opposition to a use. There is wide professional and scientific agreement on the scope and effects of the action alternatives on the various resources, as cited in the discussion of effects to resources and in references to specialist reports (EA, pp. 19-54). Based on the findings of the analyses, the effects of the activities in the Lightning Creek drainage on the quality of the human environment are not highly controversial.

5. *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or known risk*

Analysis of the action alternatives considered the effects of past actions and events, as a frame of reference in conjunction with scientifically accepted analytical techniques, available information, and best professional experience and judgment to estimate effects to the human environment. Mitigation listed in the EA, Appendix B pp. 67-73 and in the project file is based on science and/or past monitoring, and is incorporated into the design of all action alternatives. There are no uncertain or unique characteristics in the project area that have not been previously encountered or that would constitute an unknown risk to the human environment.

6. *The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or presents a decision in principle about future consideration*

The action alternatives consist of activities that are not new or unique in type, size or intensity and are consistent with all laws, regulations and policy including management direction in the Forest Plan. All future actions, except those analyzed and incorporated into the action alternatives, would be analyzed on their own prior to implementation. Implementation of any of the action alternatives would not establish a precedent for future actions.

7. *Whether the action is related to other actions with individual insignificant but cumulative significant impacts*

According to the Council on Environmental Quality (NEPA) regulations "cumulative impact" is the impact on the environment which results from the incremental impact of the action alternatives when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions regardless of what agency (Federal or non-Federal) or person undertakes such actions (40 CFR 1508.7).

The relevant boundaries and projects assessed for cumulative effects vary by resource. Each resource cumulative effects analysis area can be different and possibly larger or smaller. Relevant cumulative effects are discussed for each resource in the EA (Watershed and Hydrology pp. 21, 27; Fisheries pp. 29, 30-31; Wildlife pp.35, 36, 38, 40, 42, 43, 44, 45; Roads and Transportation pp. 49-50; Threatened and Endangered Plants p. 51; and Weeds pp. 53-54). Each cumulative effects analysis for each environmental component or resource area is guided by and consistent with the Cumulative Effects Considerations of Past Actions (40 CFR 1508.7) in accordance with the Council on Environmental Quality Guidance Memorandum on the "Consideration of Past Actions in Cumulative Effects Analysis" dated June 24, 2005. A listing of relevant related past, present and future management activities in the Lighting Creek Restoration project is provided in the EA (p. 19) and in the project file.

The effects of the action alternatives combined with the effects of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions will not have any significant cumulative effects. The action alternatives would have no effect on some resources (see #1 above) and no cumulative effects.

8. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highway structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources*

There are no known cultural sites that would be impacted with any of the action alternatives (Appendix B, p. 73). Consultation with the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho, Kalispel Tribe of Indians, Coeur d'Alene Tribe, and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes on this project was done by our North Zone Heritage manager. No concerns were expressed about the proposal (project file).

9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973

Bull trout – The implementation of any of the action alternatives is likely to adversely affect bull trout because of the potential for short-term disturbance or displacement during project activities but not likely to adversely affect designated critical habitat (EA, p. 31).

Westslope cutthroat trout - Due to the potential for short-term disturbance or displacement, the implementation of any of the action alternatives may impact individuals or habitat, but would not likely contribute to a trend towards Federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species (EA, p. 31).

Grizzly Bear - The implementation of any of the action alternatives is likely to adversely affect grizzly bears or their habitat during project activities because of the potential for short-term disturbance or displacement associated with the project. However, the proposed actions would not likely cause direct mortality of any individuals. There would be a temporary impact to core habitat and security from project activities, but no reduction in the amount of core, and only a temporary reduction in security. There would be a short-term impact to grizzly bear core habitat and security that could potentially disturb and displace grizzly bears (EA, p. 35).

Gray wolf - The implementation of any of the action alternatives may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect the gray wolf, due to the potential for short-term disturbance to individuals that may utilize the area as transients during project activities. Project activities could potentially temporarily cause a disturbance or displacement of wolves (EA, p. 36).

Canada lynx - The implementation of any of the action alternatives may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect Canada lynx because of the potential for short-term disturbance or displacement associated with the project. There would be a possibility of disturbance and temporary displacement of lynx during project implementation. The increased noise and activity levels above natural conditions within or in close proximity to lynx habitat during the implementation of the project could potentially temporarily displace lynx from the affected area. The probability of this occurring is expected to be low because of the low density or absence of lynx within the affected area (EA, p. 38).

10. Whether the action alternatives threaten a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment

Both action alternatives meet federal, state, and local laws for water quality, fisheries, wildlife, road and recreation, threatened and endangered species, noxious weeds as referenced through the individual resource reports (EA, pp. 22-54). Heritage resources or cultural sites located in (Appendix B, p. 73). It also meets National Environmental Policy Act disclosure requirements (Lightning Creek Restoration EA and DRAFT Finding of No Significant Impact).

Conclusion

Based on the information presented in the environmental assessment and associated specialist reports, the Lightning Creek Project would not have a significant effect on the human environment; therefore, an environmental impact statement does not need to be prepared.