

PUBLIC SCOPING NOTICE

PREPARATION OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

UPPER LOCHSA LAND EXCHANGE - CLEARWATER NATIONAL FOREST

Introduction

In April 2006 the Forest Service received a proposal from Western Pacific Timber LLC (WPT) in which a major exchange of land was proposed. The WPT proposal included approximately 40,000 acres of former Plum Creek Timber Co. checkerboard land intermingled with the Clearwater National Forest near Powell, Idaho. These checkerboard lands are of interest to the Forest Service because they encompass the headwaters of the Lochsa River and hold outstanding values for many fish and wildlife species. The checkerboard lands also hold significant cultural resources including the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail and Nez Perce Tribe treaty area.

In September 2008 the Clearwater National Forest completed a feasibility analysis of the proposed exchange as a first level screen to; review forest management plans, identify public benefit, identify availability of resources to complete the proposed exchange, identify title and property descriptions and identify potential support and opposition. The outcome of the feasibility analysis was a recommendation to enter into an Agreement to Initiate a land exchange with WPT. The agreement, signed by both parties in September, specifies the roles and responsibilities of each party involved in the exchange.

In the proposed land exchange the Forest Service would acquire approximately 39,371 acres of former Plum Creek Timber Co. lands in the upper Lochsa River drainage in exchange for up to approximately 28,212 acres of National Forest System (NFS) land. It is anticipated that this is more than adequate federal acreage to complete an equal value land exchange. The NFS lands are located on the Clearwater, Nez Perce and Idaho Panhandle National Forests.

Public involvement is an important part of National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analyses for the Forest Service. We ask for your input to determine the issues and the scope of this environmental analysis. We appreciate your contribution of time and effort, and believe the information you share with us will lead to an informed decision.

Purpose and Need for Action

Purpose - The purpose of this proposed land exchange is to consolidate land ownership in the upper Lochsa River drainage to provide more efficient and effective resource management. This purpose can be achieved by exchanging parcels of federal lands for WPT lands.

Need – The current ownership pattern has a considerable effect on how the Forest Service manages National Forest System (NFS) lands in the upper Lochsa River drainage. Over the years, differing management practices on the private lands has influenced resource management decision on the NFS lands. The mixed ownership pattern also reduces the ability to apply ecosystem management principles across the landscape. More effective conservation and management of natural resources can be achieved by consolidating these lands and managing the ecosystem as a whole. For example, current ownership results in an inability to use fuel and topography to engage fires on a cost effective basis. More efficiency



can be gained by reducing administrative costs associated with boundary maintenance and cost share roads.

In general the land exchange provides the opportunity for the Forest Service to acquire checkerboard lands which encompass the headwaters of the Lochsa River, and hold outstanding values for aquatic and terrestrial species along with significant cultural resources including the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail and Nez Perce treaty area.

Proposed Action

The Forest Service proposes to exchange up to 28,212 acres, more or less, of National Forest System (NFS) land for approximately 39,371 acres of WPT land. The lands included in this proposed exchange are located within Benewah, Clearwater, Latah, Shoshone, Bonner, Kootenai and Idaho Counties.

The proposed federal lands are 46 scattered tracts of land ranging in size from the 6.35 acre FS district compound in Elk City, Idaho to a contiguous tract approximately 7,680 acres northeast of Elk City. Forty-three of the NFS tracts are relatively small (from 6.35 to about 1,300 acres) and for the most part are timbered. The three remaining NFS tracts are relatively large. One large block of land near Elk River on the Clearwater NF is about 6,000 acres. This is timbered land intermingled with private timber lands and has one common border with other NFS lands. Two large blocks on the Nez Perce NF near Elk City are approximately 3,200 and 7,680 acres, are timbered and are contiguous to other NFS lands except on one side which borders private timberlands or BLM. Federal lands proposed for trade are characterized by intermingled ownerships, irregular boundaries, and inholdings.

The WPT lands proposed for exchange are checkerboard lands intermingled with Clearwater National Forest lands in the upper Lochsa River drainage. For the past 50 years, WPT lands were managed primarily for timber production. For the most part these lands currently meet State Best Management Practices for timber production lands.

The proposed action would authorize the transfer of land ownership and management authority, including the mineral estate, between the two parties. The proposed action would not authorize any site-specific management activities by either party.

Alternatives

At a minimum, the following alternatives must be considered and evaluated appropriately.

- **Proposed Action** - Described Above
- **No Action** - Under this alternative the proposed land exchange between the Forest Service and WPT would not occur.
- **Purchase Alternative** - Land exchange evaluations shall consider a purchase alternative in the NEPA analysis and document the non-Federal party's position on the United States' direct purchase of all or portion of the proposed exchange parcels documented in the administrative record.
- **Deed Restriction Alternative** - An alternative that considers requiring specific deed restrictions on federal lands being conveyed to comply with legal, regulatory requirements, executive orders, policy, and/or to meet respective Forest Plan management requirements.

Nature of Decision to Be Made

In the decision, the Forest Supervisor will answer the following questions based on the environmental analysis:

- Whether the proposed action will proceed as proposed, as modified by an alternative, or not at all?
- Whether the project requires any Forest Plan amendments?

This decision will be documented in the Record of Decision for the Upper Lochsa Land Exchange EIS. If the decision that is made would require an amendment to any of the Forest Plans, the analysis and documentation for the amendment will be included. The decision will be subject to appeal in accordance with 36 CFR 215.

Public Involvement

The Forest Service is seeking information, comments, and assistance from individuals, organizations and federal, state, and local agencies that may be interested in or affected by the proposed action. The Clearwater National Forest has scheduled the preparation of an EIS to disclose the environmental effects of the proposed project and determine whether the proposed land exchange meets Forest Plan objectives. Public comments will be considered and disclosed in the environmental analysis documented in the Upper Lochsa Land Exchange EIS. The EIS will evaluate the proposed action, no action, purchase and deed restriction alternatives along with other alternatives that may be developed during this process.

Public involvement is being initiated by sending this scoping notice to parties on a mailing list prepared by the Clearwater National Forest. Public participation is being solicited by notifying in person and/or by mail known interested and affected parties. A notice of intent (NOI) to prepare an EIS is being placed in the Federal Register and will be used to inform the general public of the proposed project and request public comments. Announcements in area newspapers will be used to give local notice of planned public meetings. A legal notice in the Lewiston Tribune and Spokesman Review, the newspapers of record for the Clearwater, Nez Perce and Idaho Panhandle National Forests, will be used to give the public general notice of the scoping period. The first formal opportunity to comment is to respond to the NOI or this scoping notice, which initiate the scoping process (40 CFR 1501.7). Scoping includes: (1) identifying potential issues, (2) narrowing the potential issues and identifying significant issues from those that have been covered by prior environmental review, (3) exploring alternatives in addition to no action, and (4) identifying potential environmental effects of the proposed action and alternatives.

Preliminary Issues

The Forest Service has identified the following potential issues. No determination has been made as to which issues will be examined in detail in the environmental analysis. Your input will help identify additional issues related to the proposed action that may not be listed here.

- Impacts to Idaho County tax base from increased federal lands
- Treaty Rights
- The loss of the Elk City Forest Service compound and associated impacts to the Nez Perce NF and the community of Elk City
- Cultural Resources
- Threatened and Endangered Species
- Public Access
- Timber Management

Responsible Official

Thomas K. Reilly, Forest Supervisor Clearwater National Forest

Public Meetings

Open houses will be held from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. on Monday, November 17, 2008, at the Andrew Bloom Community Center on the corner of 2nd Street and Main Street in Elk River; on Tuesday, November 18, at the Job Service conference room, 1350 Troy Road in Moscow and on Wednesday, November 19, at the Forest Service office in Elk City. Forest Service and WPT representatives will be available to explain the project and answer questions.

Comments

Comments are invited on the proposed action, possible alternatives and issues that should be considered. The Forest Service is asking for public comment by **January 5, 2009**. Please address your comments to:

Tom Reilly, Forest Supervisor
Clearwater National Forest
c/o Teresa Trulock, Project Manager
903 3rd Street
Kamiah, Idaho 83536

Comments may be submitted by telephone to Teresa Trulock at 208-935-4256. Electronic comments may be sent to comments-northern-clearwater@fs.fed.us. The subject line must contain the name of the project “Upper Lochsa Land Exchange”. Acceptable formats are MS Word or RTF.

If you decide to comment on the Upper Lochsa Land Exchange proposal, please include the following: (1) your name, address, and organization represented, if any; (2) title of the project for which comments are being submitted; and (3) specific facts and supporting reasons for the Responsible Official to consider. Those who respond to this public scoping notice will be put on the project mailing list. Those who do not respond will not receive any further documentation on this project.

Additional Information

The enclosed map identifies the federal and non-federal lands involved in the exchange. The gold boxes on the map identify additional detailed maps that can be viewed on the Clearwater National Forest website, along with additional exchange information, which can be found at: http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/clearwater/Projects/Upper_Lochsa_LEX/Upper_Lochsa_LEX.htm.

Please direct any questions or requests for further information to Teresa Trulock, Project Manager, at 208-935-4256.

The Draft EIS is expected to be available in Summer 2009 and the Final EIS is expected to be available in Spring 2010.