

## CHAPTER 1 – PURPOSE AND NEED

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### INTRODUCTION

The Forest Service has prepared this Environmental Assessment (EA) on the potential environmental effects of proposed fuels reduction activities in the area northeast of Stanley, Idaho (Figure 1) in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) and other relevant federal and state laws and regulations. This EA discloses the direct, indirect and cumulative environmental impacts and any irreversible or irretrievable commitment of resources that would result from the proposed action and alternatives. It is prepared according to the format established by Council of Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations implementing NEPA (40 CFR 1500-1508). Planning was coordinated with the appropriate, state, and local agencies, and local federally recognized tribes. Additional documentation, including more detailed analyses of project-area resources, may be found in the project planning record located at the Yankee Fork Ranger District Office in Clayton, Idaho. These records are available for public review.

### Background

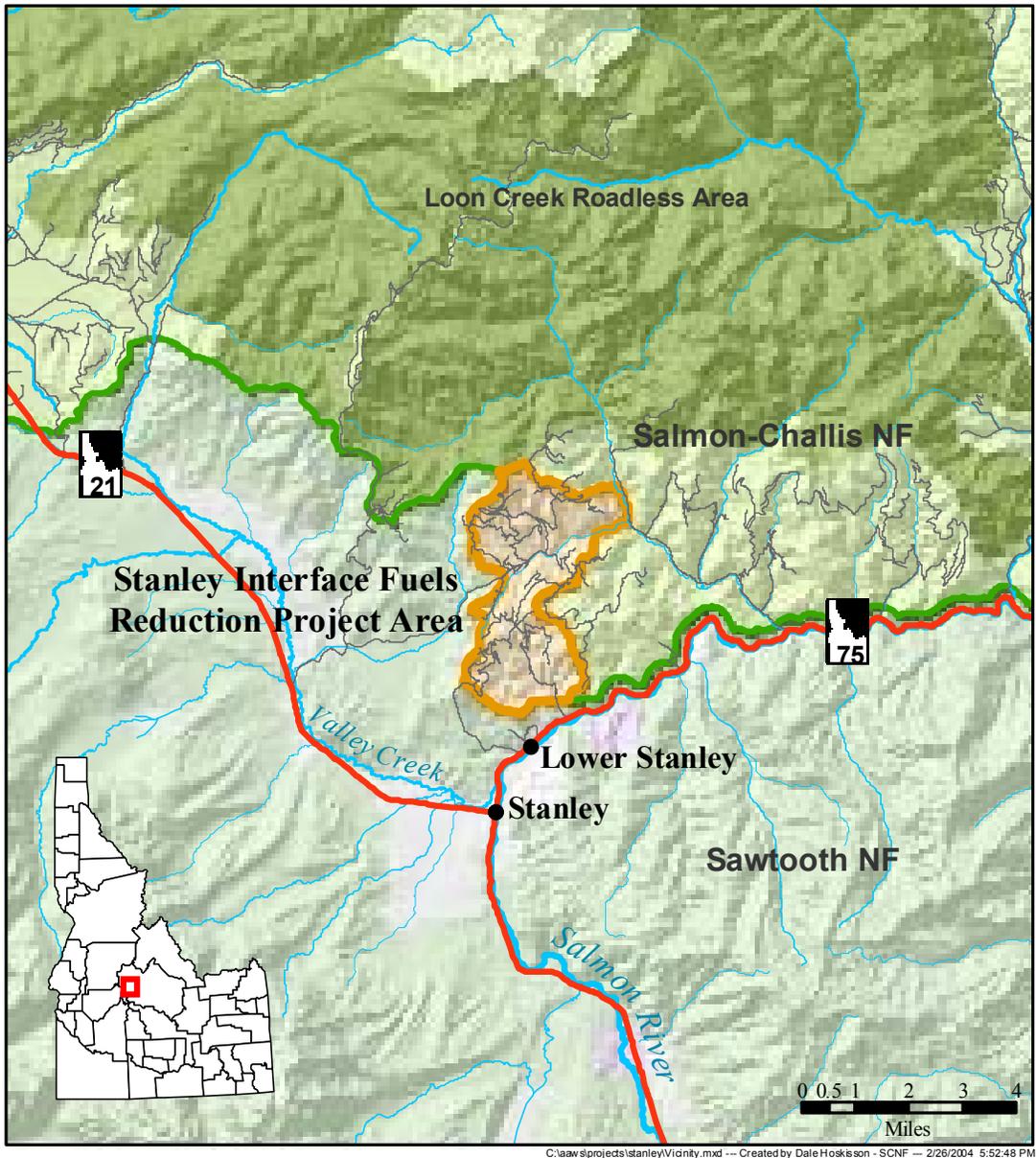
In response to the devastating fires of 2000, one of the worst fire seasons within the last 50 years, President Clinton asked Secretaries Babbitt and Glickman to prepare a report and recommend how best to respond to severe wildfires, how best to reduce the impacts of those fires on rural communities, and how to insure sufficient firefighting resources in the future. On September 8, 2000, President Clinton accepted their report *Managing Impacts of Wildfires on Communities and the Environment*.

Based on this report and from increased concerns of the impacts that fires were having, Congress directed Federal land managers to work in partnership with Western Governors on a long term strategy for the proactive restoration of fire-prone ecosystems. Their strategy set four goals that collectively emphasize measures to reduce the risk to communities and the environment from severe wildfire and that establish an effective framework for collaboration. They are: (1) improve prevention and suppression, (2) reduce hazardous fuels, (3) restore fire adapted ecosystems, and (4) promote community assistance.

The proposed Northeast Stanley Interface Fuels Reduction Project is designed under the requirements of HFRA and in response to the 10-year Comprehensive Strategy and focuses primarily on reducing hazardous fuels brought about by both a long-term fire suppression policy and a recent mountain pine beetle outbreak adjacent to Stanley, Idaho. The abundant, insect-caused tree mortality within the project area has greatly elevated the chance for severe wildfire potentially impacting this “at-risk” community as well as other surrounding lands. The project proposal concurrently addresses identified hazards and vulnerabilities described in the Custer County Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Mitigation Plan. The County Plan was developed in 2004 by collaboration between Custer County citizens, federal, state and local agencies, non-profit organizations, and the private sector.

The group formed several goals to begin mitigation of fire risk within the wildland/urban interface of which “Protect Life and Property” is foremost. Included in the list of

activities that will take place over the next five years is "...fuel reduction in the areas between the Yankee Fork Ranger District and the North East Stanley District of the Salmon-Challis National Forest".



**Figure 1. Northeast Stanley Interface Fuels Reduction Project Vicinity Map**

### **PROPOSED ACTION**

The proposed action for the Northeast Stanley Interface Fuels Reduction Project is to reduce forest fuel accumulations on approximately 1151 acres of National Forest System

Land by using a combination of mechanical treatments, hand treatments and prescribed fire. A contract would be prepared and trees meeting specified conditions would be sold. Mechanical and hand treatments would, almost exclusively, be used to remove dead and dying trees. Incidental, green trees would be removed where required for temporary road clearing and creation of skid trails and landings. Resulting slash would be removed and/or piled on site for later burning. To further reduce fuel loading and ladder fuels, post treatment activities would include lopping of understory and/or damaged trees. In addition, a low impact, low severity understory burn would be used in areas having steep slopes. Access to the project area would require construction of 2.4 miles of temporary road that would be fully obliterated at the end of activities. Roughly 9.2 miles of existing specified roads would be reconditioned and maintained, 0.6 miles of an unclassified road would be designated as classified and closed, and 0.4 miles of unclassified road would be obliterated. More information on the proposed action is discussed in Chapter 2.

### **DECISION TO BE MADE**

Based on the environmental analyses in this EA, the District Ranger will decide whether or not to reduce fuel loading as proposed within the project area in accordance with current Forest Plan goals, objectives and desired future conditions.

### **PROJECT AREA DESCRIPTION**

The Northeast Stanley Interface Project is approximately 0.6 miles north of Lower Stanley. The project area lies between roughly 2 to 6 air miles northeast of Stanley proper in the Joe's Gulch and Kelly Creek drainages of the Basin Creek Management Area #5 (Figure 1). The project area encompasses 5,117 acres and is bounded by the Sawtooth National Recreation Area (SNRA) of the Sawtooth National Forest to the south and west, the Loon Creek inventoried roadless area to the north, and the easternmost margins of the Joe's Gulch and Kelly Creek drainages to the east. The legal description is T11N, R13E, Sections 2, 3, 9-16, 21-23, 26-28, and 34, Boise Meridian.

### **PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION**

Long term fire suppression in the general project area has led to a large buildup of forest fuels and a tremendous change in vegetation composition and structure across the landscape – tree species have increased in number and density beyond natural conditions. Unnaturally dense stands of trees are undergoing intense competition for limited amounts of water, nutrients and sunlight. In the added presence of recent drought conditions they are at increased risk of unnaturally intense fires and insect epidemics. As identified by Region 4 entomologists from the Boise Area Forest Health Protection staff, the proposed project area is currently experiencing a mountain pine beetle epidemic. Beetle populations have reached outbreak levels and lodgepole pine tree mortality is high. Approximately three-quarters of the lodgepole pine trees in the project area are dead or dying and placing the watershed at risk for a stand-replacing wildfire. In the past, undisturbed watersheds have been perceived by the public and by managers as being the best landscape conditions for securing water resources. However, these undisturbed watersheds have become vulnerable to natural disasters, such as wildfire, due to an accumulation of fuels. The primary **purpose** of this action is to manage and mitigate the expected increase in ground fuel brought on by the mountain pine beetle infestation near the administrative boundary between the Salmon-Challis National Forest and the SNRA

that is adjacent to the nearby community of Lower Stanley. A primary **need** for the proposed action is to immediately decrease the current, near-term risk of a catastrophic wildland fire occurring within and spreading from the project area stands. Fire hazard is elevated immediately following tree mortality when “flashy” dead needles occupy much of the crown canopy. Removing the dead and dying tree boles and burning the associated slash would eliminate much of the flashy fuels and reduce much of the project area biomass.

### **Specific Objectives**

- Reduce the potential for wildfire starts
- Manage fuel loadings to acceptable levels for the long-term
- Restore and maintain biological and structural diversity
- Enhance and maintain a desirable recreation experience
- Provide for public safety
- Meet the public’s demand for wood products

### **RELATIONSHIP TO THE FOREST PLAN**

Activities that are planned in the National Forest System involve two different levels of decisions: a general (programmatic) decision for the entire Forest, and a site-specific decision for the project area.

The programmatic decision is the Forest Plan that provides overall direction for land management activities. The combination of the Salmon-Challis National Forests (S-CNF) in 1995 has resulted in the use of two Land Resource Management Plans (LRMPs) with differing land management objectives and guidelines. Until a combined Salmon-Challis National Forest Plan is developed, the Challis National Forest (CNF) Plan, implemented in June of 1987, is used to guide land management activities on the Yankee Fork Ranger District.

The CNF Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) contains a general cumulative effects analysis of anticipated management activities on a landscape level for resource values such as roadless areas, wildlife populations, and water quality of major drainages. The CNF LRMP also establishes standards that preclude or limit activities to protect the environment. These standards are used to develop mitigation measures for the proposed action (project). They are also used to assess an action’s effects to ensure that the project complies with the Forest Plan. In 1995, the Interim Strategies for Managing Anadromous Fish-producing Watersheds in Eastern Oregon and Washington, Idaho and portions of California (PACFISH) decision amended the Forest Plan with additional standards and guidelines for management actions occurring within habitat areas for listed anadromous fish.

This EA is a site-specific decision level document for planning activities. It is tiered to the Forest Plan FEIS to allow the EA to focus on specific resource management issues in the project area. This EA is not a general management plan for the project area or a programmatic environmental assessment. It is a site-specific linkage between the Forest Plan and the requirements established by NEPA. This decision level involves analyzing site-specific proposals as well as disclosing their environmental effects to achieve the

general guidelines of the Forest Plan. This information will be used by the Responsible Official to select a reasonable course of action for managing the project area.

The Forest Plan has forest-wide (pp IV-1 to IV-33) and management area guidelines (pp IV-45 to IV-195) that allow different land uses and resource outputs. The Northeast Stanley Interface Project area is located in the 43,923 acre Basin Creek Management Area #5 (pp IV-70 to IV-74).

### **PROJECT AREA DESIRED FUTURE CONDITION (DFC)**

Researching and using information contained in the Forest Plan, the Basin Creek Watershed Assessment, and field evaluations, the EA interdisciplinary team (IDT) developed the DFC.

On a landscape scale forested and non-forested vegetation could be described as being diverse, productive, and sustainable. Forested vegetation would consist largely of Douglas-fir and lodgepole pine with minor amounts of Engelmann spruce and other conifers that are in various stages of structural and age development. Some stands of lodgepole pine would be found in pure, even-aged classes.

### **Land and Resource Management Area (MA) #5 – Basin Creek**

The LRMP provides DFC, management area emphasis, and management area direction for the Basin Creek Management Area. The DFC described in the Plan provides that “Activities and character of the land within the management area will remain unchanged. Improvements in timber stand condition will continue. Soil and watershed activities will promote improved water quality.”

### **Basin Creek Watershed Analysis**

In 1998, an analysis of the Basin Creek watershed was completed to gain an understanding of capabilities and limitations in the watershed. Opportunities were outlined to manage composition and ecosystem processes of lodgepole pine and to improve stand structure and composition, in addition to improving and age class distribution through use of prescribed fire or timber harvest. To restore the ecosystems resiliency and resistant characteristics, along with reversing ongoing and adverse trends, the use of prescribed fire to attain the desired vegetation in the sagebrush/grass, aspen, and forested communities was emphasized.

In the watershed, all streams within the project area would be in a stable condition allowing channels, riparian, and fish habitat to adjust to natural and management-caused disturbances while maintaining long-term aquatic integrity. Stream banks would be stable and support healthy vegetation. Watershed conditions would be maintained such that downstream beneficial uses are protected and compliance with State water quality standards are achieved. As conifers and aspen stands mature, fallen trees would contribute large woody debris to the stream channels. Woody debris of all sizes would provide food for aquatic insects, increase instream cover for fish, help dissipate the energy of flowing water, control bedload movement, and increase the size and number of pools. Riparian areas would have adequate vegetation or large woody debris that would dissipate stream energy during high waterflow and capture bedload, filtering sediment to aid in the development of floodplains. Late seral vegetation consisting of deep-rooted

species and willows would be present to aid in streambank stabilization and shade, leading to a riparian system that is properly functioning. Soil resources would be managed to maintain soil productivity, minimize man-caused erosion, and maintain the integrity of associated ecosystems.

In the future, habitat conditions that would contribute to population viability and recovery for threatened endangered and Forest Service sensitive species plants and animals would be given priority. Habitat for game and fish would be provided to meet objectives set by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. The numbers of resident and anadromous fish populations would increase. Populations of management indicator species would increase.

Forested vegetation would be maintained in a condition that would have a variety of tree species in the overstory where habitat conditions will support a mix of tree species. Successional and structural stages of forest stands would be represented that mimic historical stages. Insect and disease outbreaks would be at low levels, infecting mostly weakened or stressed trees. As these trees die, snags would be created on the landscape, providing a sustainable level of nesting, denning or feeding habitat for birds and small mammals.

All cultural properties within the area of potential effects will be evaluated against the National Register eligibility criteria and when properties eligible to the National Register will be adversely affected, preservation, protection and interpretation measures will be taken to reduce or eliminate the adverse effect.

Dispersed recreation opportunities would be emphasized for the Basin Creek Management Area and visual quality objectives would be maintained as seen from State Highway 21.

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

To date, the public has been invited to participate in the project in the following ways:

### **Public Mailing**

This process was initiated by listing the project in the quarterly schedule of proposed actions for 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter (April through June) 2003 and mailed to contacts on the S-CNF's mailing list. A letter providing information and seeking public comment was mailed to 118 individuals and groups that were listed on the Forest's mailing list. This included federal and state agencies, Native American groups, local municipalities, businesses, and interest groups. A total of 8 responses to this initial mailing were received. In September 2004, a second public mailing using the same mailing list as the initial request, with some additions, took place to disclose further information of the proposed activity. Two responses were received from contacts that had previously commented. The IDT reviewed the content of every response letter to search for issues and categorized the various comments based on their subject matter, context, content, and intent.

### **Local News Media**

To inform other publics not on the S-CNF mailing list about the Northeast Stanley Interface Project, a request for public comments was published in the legal section of the

Challis Messenger on November 17, 2003. Additional announcements for comments were published in the Challis Messenger on September 9, 2004 and again on December 9, 2004.

### **Public Meetings**

A public meeting was advertised and held on June 8, 2004 at the Stanley Community Center, in Stanley, Idaho, to provide project area information, present the proposed action, and discuss local concerns and interests that should be addressed in the project analysis. One person attended the meeting and no issues or concerns were raised.

**Correction:** During scoping the project area was described as occupying 4755 acres. That figure was recalculated and determined to be 5117 acres. The project area boundary remains unchanged.

### **SIGNIFICANT ISSUES**

An issue is a point of discussion, debate, or dispute on a physical, biological, social, or economic resource. An issue is not an activity; rather, the predicted effects of the activity create the issue. Basically, significant issues are what drive the analysis process. The Forest Service used the public involvement process to identify 5 significant issues. They display the cause and effect relationship that potential implementation of the proposed action would have on a particular resource. Each significant issue features one or more indicators that are used to measure the quantitative or qualitative effects to the natural and human environment. Related issues were combined to streamline the analysis.

#### **Issue #1 – Soil Resource:**

There is a risk that implementing the proposed activity or an intense, stand-replacing wildfire would adversely affect soil resources and cause detrimental soil disturbances.

Measurement Indicators:

Acres of cumulative detrimental soil impacts within a defined activity area

Average tons per acre of coarse woody debris retained in the project area

#### **Issue #2 – Water Resource:**

There is a risk that implementing the proposed activity would adversely affect water resources by altering the timing and magnitude of flow and increasing sediment delivery to streams.

Measurement Indicators:

Percent probability of erosion and sediment delivery

Percent of watershed in Equivalent Clearcut Acres (ECA)

Compliance with State Water Quality Standards and maintenance of beneficial water uses.

Miles per square mile of roads

Watershed Risk Rating

#### **Issue #3 – Fire - Risk to Life and Property:**

There is a risk that, by not implementing the proposed activity, a wildfire could burn to the south and threaten the community of Lower Stanley.

Measurement Indicators:

Percent of acres of high risk stands receiving treatment

Fuel loading (tons/acre)  
 Fire rate of spread (crown versus surface)

#### **Issue #4 - Wildlife Species and Habitats**

There is a risk that implementing the proposed activity or occurrence of a stand-replacing wildfire would affect Threatened or Endangered (T/E), Region 4 Sensitive (R4) or Management Indicator (MI) wildlife species and their associated habitats.

Measurement Indicators:

Percent of potential lynx habitat impacted within LAU  
 Percent of potential lynx denning habitat impacted within LAU  
 Total percent tree cover within mechanical treatment units  
 Percent overstory cover within prescribed burn treatment units

#### **Issue #5 – Fish Species and Habitats**

There is a risk that implementing the proposed activity would trigger soil movement, and resultant sediment delivery would adversely impact anadromous and non-anadromous fish species and/or their habitats.

Measurement Indicators:

Percent probability of sediment delivery

#### **NONSIGNIFICANT ISSUES ELIMINATED FROM DETAILED STUDY**

The following issues were considered and evaluated by the IDT and eliminated from further, detailed study. They are listed below as concerns along with a brief explanation about why their evaluations are not displayed in detail in this EA.

**Concern #1 – Roads and Public Access:** There is a concern that implementing the proposed activity would result in changes in road management in the project area. Road management is not a primary component or major feature of this proposed fuels reduction activity. Although a roads analysis was completed for this project there would be no road management policy changes implemented with this proposal. Additional information is contained in the project record Roads Analysis Report.

**Concern #2 - Air Quality and Smoke Management:** There is a concern that implementing the proposed activity would affect air quality and impact smoke sensitive areas. Existing laws, regulations and Forest Plan standards and guidelines address air quality standards and smoke management requirements and the Forest Service would adhere to them. Additional information is contained in the project record Fire, Fuels and Smoke Resources Specialist Report.

**Concern #3 – Spread of Noxious Weeds:** There is a concern that implementing the proposed activity would cause the spread of noxious weeds within the project and to surrounding areas potentially resulting in a loss of native plants and a decrease in habitat for wildlife. The proposed action was modified to include various design criteria to address this concern. In addition, the proposed action includes measures to survey for, eradicate and conduct follow-up monitoring of noxious weeds in the project area (Appendix C). Additional information is contained in the project record Resource Technical Report for Grazing, Riparian, Noxious Weed Resources.

**Concern #4 - Economics – Cost of treatment/roads:** There is a concern that implementing the proposed activity would not be cost efficient. Economics isn't an issue, rather it's a social science and the results of analyses may serve as an aid in evaluating the environmental consequences. However, in this particular case a cost-benefit analysis isn't relevant to the choice between the no-action and single, action alternative being considered. Additional information is contained in the project record Specialist Report for Economic Analysis.

**Concern #5 – Heritage Resource:** There is a concern that implementing the proposed activity or occurrence of a stand-replacing wildfire in the project area would adversely affect heritage resources determined to be eligible on the National Register of Historic Places. Existing laws, regulations and Forest Plan standards and guidelines address heritage resource management requirements and the Forest Service would adhere to them. Also, the proposed action was modified to include various design criteria and mitigation measures to address this concern. Additional information is contained in the project record Heritage Resources Specialist Report.

**Concern #6 - Visuals and Recreation:** There is a concern that implementing the proposed activity would adversely affect visual quality and general recreational experiences within the project area. Potential effects were evaluated and adverse effects were determined to be minimal. Potential adverse visual effects when viewed from highway 75 would be short term and negligible, if noticed. Additional information is contained in the project record Recreation Assessment Report.

**Concern #7 – Grazing:** There is a concern that implementing the proposed activity would result in a displacement of cattle from the project area. Potential effects were evaluated along with project mitigations and design changes and it was determined that there would be no adverse impacts to allotment grazing use. Available suitable range would remain constant. Additional information is contained in the project record Resource Technical Report for Grazing, Riparian, Noxious Weed Resources.

**Concern #8 - Old Growth (in Management Area 5):** There is a concern that implementing the proposed activity would have an adverse impact on old growth trees in the project area. Recent photo imagery-derived GIS data indicates that there are no groups of trees having old growth characteristics within or adjacent to any of the proposed treatment units. Old growth characteristics show correlation with cover type stand structures. These findings were ground-truthed. Potential effects of project implementation were evaluated and it was determined that there would be no adverse impacts to old growth and there would be no net gains or losses affecting this resource. Forest Plan Standards require maintenance of a minimum of 10 percent of the acres of conifer timber stands as habitat for old-growth-dependent wildlife species within a Management Area (USDA, 1987). Photo imagery-derived data indicates that 22 percent of total Management Area 5 acreage currently exhibits old growth characteristics. All old growth areas are located outside of the project analysis area. If the proposed action were implemented, potential old growth characteristics would be enhanced following underburnings and removal of ladder fuels. Additional information is contained in the project record Specialist Report for Current Forested Vegetation Conditions.

**Concern #9 - Inventoried Roadless Area and Unroaded Areas:** There is a concern that implementing the proposed activity would have an adverse impact on the Loon Creek Inventoried Roadless Area (IRA) and/or may forego the opportunity to reclassify adjacent, unroaded areas. None of the proposed treatment areas are within or immediately adjacent to either the Loon Creek IRA or any unroaded areas. Potential effects were evaluated and it was determined that there would be no adverse direct, indirect or cumulative impacts to the IRA or nearby unroaded areas – existing characteristics would remain unchanged. Additional information is contained in the project record Specialist Report for Roadless and Unroaded Areas.

#### **APPLICABLE FEDERAL LAWS AND EXECUTIVE ORDERS**

Shown below is a partial list of federal laws and executive orders pertaining to project-specific planning and environmental analysis on federal lands. While most pertain to all federal lands, some of the laws are specific to Idaho.

- Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act (MUSYA) of 1960
- National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (as amended)
- Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, amended 1986
- National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 (as amended)
- Clean Air Act of 1970
- Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973 (as amended)
- Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 (as amended)
- National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 (as amended)
- Clean Water Act of 1977 (as amended)
- American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978
- Archeological Resource Protection Act of 1980
- Cave Resource Protection Act of 1988
- Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003
- Executive Order 11593 (floodplains)
- Executive Order 11990 (wetlands)
- Executive Order 12898 (environmental justice)
- Executive Order 12962 (aquatic systems and recreational fisheries)
- Executive Order 13112 (invasive species)
- Executive Order 13186 (migratory birds)