

**DECISION NOTICE
AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

Gold Mountain Road Repair Environmental Assessment

USDA – Forest Service, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest

Darrington Ranger District, Snohomish County, Washington

An Environmental Assessment (EA) that discusses the proposed Gold Mountain Road Repair on the Darrington Ranger District, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest has been completed. The EA is available at the Darrington Ranger District office, 1405 Emens Street, Darrington, Washington 98241 and on the Forest web site at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/mbs/projects/gold-mtn-ea/index.shtml>. The proposed project is located in Sections 4, 5, 11, 14, R.10E. T.31 N., and Section 32, R.10 E., T.32 N, within the Sauk River drainage. The proposed action addresses the need to repair flood-damaged roads and a bridge to meet access for the administration and management of forest lands, as well as provide visitor access.

Decision:

Based on my review of alternatives, it is my decision to select **Alternative B** to replace the flood-damaged White Chuck Bridge, 200 feet downstream of the existing site, and make various site-specific road repairs on Road 22, 2210, and 2211 within the Sauk River watershed. The rationale for my decision is presented, below. My decision takes into consideration the analysis and evaluation disclosed in the environmental assessment, including the manner in which each of the alternatives met the purpose and need for action and addressed the significant issues and public comments raised during analysis.

A complete description of Alternative B repairs is found in Chapter 2 of the Gold Mountain Road Repair Environmental Assessment. In summary, Alternative B will restore vehicle access to Road 22 over a reconstructed White Chuck Bridge and through various site-specific road repairs on Road 22, 2210, and 2211. This alternative will restore access to established Forest Service facilities along Road 22, the White Chuck Bench Trailhead and the White Chuck Boat Launch, and matrix lands. Access will also be restored for dispersed recreational activities, Forest administrators, law enforcement, and fire emergency.

My decision includes the following repairs:

White Chuck Bridge Reconstruction: A new White Chuck Bridge will be constructed approximately 200 feet to west (downstream) from the current bridge location, with reconstructed road approaches that bypass the flood-damaged at Site #1 (milepost (MP) 10.1) of Road 22. The collapsed bridge would be removed and a new single lane bridge with double-lane approaches would be constructed. Old bridge materials would be hauled and disposed of away from the bridge and away from the river. The channel would be dewatered¹ one side at a time to allow the removal of the old piers without working in the water, with the exception of moving heavy equipment to the work area. The total time to remove the existing piers would be about two weeks of in-channel work, per pier.

To install the new bridge, about 1.3 acres of riparian vegetation would be cleared, including second-growth trees with four large conifers over 20 inches diameter at breast height (EA pages 73 and 109). Large trees removed would be kept on-site or stockpiled for restoration projects. This area would be re-vegetated after the new bridge and approaches are completed.

¹ Water would be diverted away from the work area by using sandbags or streambed material (pers. contact Peter Wagner, USFS 2005).

To prepare the north-side road prism and approach, a portion of bedrock cliff would be removed (roughly 200 feet long by 60 feet wide and 60 feet tall), with excavator and detonating explosives. The new approach would bypass the damaged area at Site #1, with Road 22 shifted away from the White Chuck River onto bedrock (EA page 6- Bridge Replacement Drawing).

Restored vehicle Access: Alternative B will reestablish vehicle access on Road 22 with a reroute of the road system around Site #2 (m. p. 9.4) and repair the flood damaged Sites #3-#9 on Road 22, 2210, and 2211 as follows:

Site #1 (M.P. 10.1): Repair of the damaged road on the north side of the bridge will not be needed, as the new bridge and its approach will bypass this site. The new north road approach to the bridge will be located away from the White Chuck River.

Site #2 (MP 9.4): This damage site will be completely avoided. Road 22 will be rerouted on the slope above the Sauk River; the new route will use spur road 22-013, a short section of an unnamed old road/railroad grade, spur road 24-023 and a section of Road 24 (EA, Figures 5 and 11).

Table 1 - Roads and Mileage for Site #2 Reroute

Road	Miles
Road 22-013	1.15 (just beyond Site #1)
Old road/railroad grade	0.50 (between Road 22-013 and 24-023)
Road 24-023	0.50
Road 24	2.00
Total	4.15

Road 22-013 and Road 24-023, and the 0.50 connecting road/railway will all require minor reconstruction. The unnamed connecting road between Road 22-013 and 24-023 will require removal of hardwood trees and small coniferous trees (less than 6” diameter breast height).

Road 22-013 will require some widening for White Chuck Bench Trailhead parking.

Road 24 will require little or no work. Reconstruction of the intersection of Road 24 and the 24-023 spur will allow a larger turning radius for anticipated large vehicles (such as a low-boy trailer).

One wooden culvert remains from previous construction. To protect the historical value of this wooden culvert, a new culvert would be placed inside the wood culvert to support it as outlined in Mitigation Measures (EA, page 39). This portion of road will require widening and reshaping of the road prism, the addition of new culverts, and gravel surfacing.

Site #3 - #6: Repairs to Road 22 include installing culverts that will accommodate a 100-year flood flow. The road will be dipped at the culvert sites to reduce the fill at each site, and the fill will be hardened with rock to further offset high volume flows.

Site #7: Repairs to Road 2210 include replacing damaged culverts, repairing heavy ditch scour with backfill, compensating for fill loss by shifting the alignment into the hill, and replacing the surfacing and riprap.

Site #8: Repairs to Road 2211 includes filling the washout and constructing a flat-bottom ditch, and cleaning an existing culvert. It also includes installing a 36-inch culvert, armoring, and stabilizing the fill slope

Site #9: This repair to Road 2210 includes unplugging pipes, removing bedload material, repairing fill failure, stabilizing fill toe with riprap, and replacing the surfacing.

Road 22 will remain open to the northwest as far as the washout in Snohomish County’s jurisdiction (approximately 1.3 miles beyond Road 2210).

Road 22-110 will be decommissioned. Approximately 0.30 mile of road on either side of Site #2 would be decommissioned and five culverts would be removed as part of this Alternative. This effort, along with decommissioning Road 22-110 would result in a net decommissioning of 1.10 miles of road.

Work taking place in the White Chuck River will be targeted for between July 15- August 15. Timing restrictions will be in accordance with Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) salmon and bull trout seasonal timing restrictions for the Sauk River (EA, pages 30, 31, 36). Adjacent upland work can be ongoing, before and after the in-water work window. Construction will be completed over two construction seasons during the summer months when rainfall is significantly less frequent than the rest of the year.

Implementation of the repairs is expected to begin in the summer of 2006 and to continue through to 2008 or 2009.

Mitigation Measures Included in the Decision (EA Pages 35-39):

My decision also includes the following mitigation measures and monitoring requirements (EA, 35-39). These mitigation measures were developed to minimize or avoid potential resource impacts, and are required actions in the implementation of this decision:

Soils/Aquatics/Fisheries:

Conservation measures include those from the Standards and Guidelines in the 1994 ROD (USDA FS 1994), Best Management Practices (USDA FS 1988), and Conservation Measures defined in the Fisheries Biological Assessment (BA) of the EA. (These documents are included in the analysis file and/or on file at the Darrington Ranger District).

Erosion control methods shall be used to prevent silt-laden water from entering the stream. Methods may include, but are not limited to: straw bales, silt fencing, filter fabric, temporary sediment ponds, check dams of pea gravel-filled burlap bags or other material, and/or immediate mulching of exposed areas. For roads where surface water has the potential to enter drainage, the roads will be treated for energy dissipation prior to closure. Treatments can include water-barring, pulling culverts, scarifying to a depth of 12 inches, and seeding with an approved seed mix. Erosion control measures must be in place prior to the normal heavy rainfall period. Streambanks will be pulled back to an angle of natural repose when removing culverts. (See Darrington District files for a description of ROD S&G RF-2, RF-3, RF-5; BMPs R-3, R-12, R-23; BA.)

Repairs along all roads will be monitored during rainy periods and when soils are excessively wet, work will be restricted as necessary to minimize the potential for downstream sedimentation into the Sauk River (BMPs R-3, 20; 13; B-1).

Roads will be minimized in Riparian Reserves; location, design, and (re)construction of necessary crossings will be based on methods that minimize disruption to natural hydrologic paths and adverse effects to aquatic resources, including avoiding sidestepping of loose material; new permanent stream crossings will accommodate at least the 100-year flood, including associated bedload and debris. Large woody material removed from an existing culvert inlet will be put back into the stream channel downstream of the culvert unless doing so will cause habitat degradation. (See District files for a description of ROD S&G RF-2, RF-4; BMPs R-1, R-6, R-11, R-12, R-14.)

Construction activities in or adjacent to perennial streams shall be conducted during summer low-flow season. Design, construction, and maintenance procedures to limit sediment delivery to streams from the road surface will be applied. Outsloping of the roadway surface is preferred unless outsloping would increase sediment delivery to streams or where outsloping is infeasible. Drainages shall be routed away from potentially unstable channels and hillslopes. Wastewater from project activities and water removed from within the work area shall be routed to an area landward of the ordinary high water line to allow removal of fine sediment and other contaminants prior to being discharged to the stream. (See District files for a description of ROD S&G RF-5; BMPs R-1, R-3, R-4, R-5, R-7, R-8, R-9, R-11, R-12, R-14; BA.)

To minimize effects to water quality, a hazardous spill plan and clean-up materials will be available on-site; any machinery maintenance involving potential contaminants (fuel, oil, hydraulic fluid, etc.) will occur at an

approved site or outside the Riparian Reserve; prior to starting work each day, all machinery shall be checked for leaks and make all necessary repairs (BMPs W-4; BA).

Any blasting to occur adjacent to the White Chuck or Sauk River will be completed during timing windows approved through consultation (BA Page 36, USFWS BO, pages 8, 41, 42, and 56. NMFS BO pages 27-30). Timing restrictions would avoid or minimize effects to species of concern, and is a measure approved by the NMFS and the USFWS.

In order to control and disperse water on the hillslope, waterbars or other structures would be installed on roads with spacing and number of these cross drains determined by a Forest Service representative (BMP R-1, R-2).

Wildlife

Project activities adjacent to suitable murrelet nesting habitat which generate noise above background ambient levels would be restricted between April 1 and August 5. Activities occurring between August 6 and September 15 will occur between two hours after sunrise to two hours before sunset. Timing restrictions are considered successful by eliminating sources of disturbance during the critical breeding period (Biological Opinion of the Effects of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest Program of Activities for 2003-2007 on Marbled Murrelets and Northern Spotted Owls (FWS Reference Number 1-3-02-f-1583, USDI, 2002).

Project activities adjacent to suitable spotted owl nesting habitat that generate noise above background ambient levels will be restricted between March 1 and July 15. This restriction avoids additional disturbances to adjacent stands during the critical breeding period of the spotted owl, and marbled murrelet. Timing restrictions are considered successful in eliminating disturbance during the critical nesting period (Biological Opinion of the Effects of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest Program of Activities for 2003-2007 on Marbled Murrelets and Northern Spotted Owls (FWS Reference Number 1-3-02-f-1583, USDI, 2002).

No repair work will be scheduled at the White Chuck Bridge site, MP 9.4 on Road 22 or decommissioning work on Road 22-110 during the bald eagle foraging season from November 30 through February 28 (based on local information for the Sauk River). Seasonal restrictions will eliminate the potential of work activities flushing eagles from active forage sites along the river. The effectiveness of this measure to minimizing human impacts from repair work is expected to be high since timing restrictions are considered successful in eliminating disturbance during the critical winter foraging period (Biological Opinion of the Effects of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest Program of Activities for 2003-2007 on Bald Eagles (FWS Reference Number 1-3-02-f-1583, USDI, 2002).

Down logs and concentrations of larger rotten logs would be left on-site, and left undisturbed where possible, to retain their habitat values in riparian areas. Identified areas with high wood concentrations have been successfully left in previous projects on the District, and are currently seen in the retention of the large wood from previous harvests and the diversity of habitat created by the large wood.

Vegetation/Plants

The 1999 Executive Order on Invasive Species, direction found in Forest Service Manual 2080, the National and Regional strategies for noxious weed management, and the Mediated Agreement of May 24, 1989, identify prevention as the preferred strategy for managing competing and unwanted vegetation. The alternatives analyzed for this project meet the definition for the prevention strategy as defined in these documents.

Reconnaissance of the analysis area has shown where noxious weeds exist. In addition to prevention, early control began in 2000 on these small infestations (by means of hand-pulling) and will continue during and after activities until all plants are gone and the supply of weed seeds within the soil is exhausted. In addition to treatment of known infestations, measures intended to prevent further infestations and weed spread will be incorporated into the sale contract. These measures include treatment of known weed sites before they become larger, cleaning of construction equipment, and prompt revegetation of disturbed sites using weed free plant

materials and weed free mulch. These measures come from the Forest Plan, Forest-wide Standards and Guidelines, Prevention Strategies and Best Management Practices for noxious weeds¹.

The site-specific analysis of the analysis area as described in the Mediated Agreement is located in the project file. These measures will be part of the road repair contracts, enforced by the field inspector and Contracting Officer Representative. These measures are expected to be effective because both of the noxious weeds present reproduce and spread by seed. Hand-pulling of both at the proper time typically results in removal of the entire plant or at least the flower head. In order to exhaust the supply of seeds in the soil, follow up visits and hand pulling for up to 8 years is needed (USDA FS, 2004).

Motor vehicles are effective vectors for weed seed dispersal and likely carry seeds a much greater distance than they would normally travel (Schmidt, 1989; Hodkinson and Thompson, 1997). Cleaning equipment eliminates this vector. Native plant species typically are unable to out-compete invasive plants in disturbed habitats. Seeding and mulching disturbed sites with non-invasive seed mixes reduces the chance of noxious weeds getting a foothold there (USDA FS, 2004a).

If any Sensitive or Survey and Manage species are found during project implementation, work would cease and the field inspector would contact the District Botanist to determine appropriate mitigation measures.

Noxious Weeds

When weeds are present in the project area, all equipment and gear will be cleaned before leaving the area to avoid spreading the infestation further. Cleaning can be by any method that completely removes plant seeds and plant parts from machinery.

Existing weeds in areas of construction will be pulled prior to construction activities.

Seed exposed soil with the following seed mix to prevent infestation by weed seeds; Soft white winter wheat (Cultivar of *Triticum aestivum*) @ 50 lbs per acre; Slender wheatgrass (*Elymus trachycaulis*) @ 20 lbs per acre; Annual ryegrass (*Lolium multiflorum*) @ 20 lbs per acre; Austrian winter peas (*Pisum sativum arvense*) @ 5 lbs per acre. Fertilizer is not recommended.

All straw used as mulch and all gravel, fill, quarry material, and borrow material will be from weed free sources.

Heritage Resources

The following mitigation measures were developed in order to minimize impacts to the intact features and document any historic properties. These mitigations result in *No Adverse Effect* to the Sauk River Lumber Company district.

In the reconstruction of the road between road segments 22-013 and 24-023, fill will be used to raise the road bed to gain the minimum width necessary for today's road standards, while preserving the through-cuts of the past railroad/road construction. A Geo-tech barrier will be placed on the road/railroad grade bed prior to fill being added to raise the roadbed. This barrier will act as a marker delineating the approximate level of original grade and enable the original grade to be identified.

In locations with wooden culverts, a new metal culvert will be placed within the existing wooden culvert, with all existing elements of the wooden culvert remaining in place and completely re-buried. If removed and/or modified to accommodate the new culvert, elements will be documented through field notes and photographs.

Re-engineering the corner of Roads 24 and 24-023 (the original location of the wye switch) will be monitored. At a minimum, a survey will be conducted following vegetation removal and prior to road construction. If any

¹ Added to the Forest Plans as Amendment #14, 1999.

previously unidentified features or artifacts² are encountered during construction, reasonable steps will be taken to avoid or minimize harm until a Forest Heritage Specialist can assess the find and fulfill the requirements of the Programmatic Agreement.

Previously existing pullouts will be used as much as possible and no new pullouts would be constructed in through-cuts.

Reasons for the Decision

I have selected Alternative B because I believe that this alternative best meets the purpose and need identified in the EA (page 5), while providing the most cost-efficient option that minimizes impacts of sediment delivery to aquatic habitats, allows for the free-flowing characteristic of the Skagit Wild and Scenic River system, minimizes impacts to other resources and to the project area's cultural contributions to the Sauk River Timber Company Historic District.

I examined management of the flood damaged roads in relation to the goals and objectives outlined in the Forest Plan, as amended, which include managing the transportation system at the minimum standard needed to support planned uses and activities, and provide for public safety (USDA FS 1990, p. 4-7). I also considered the access needs and resource concerns noted in the Forest-wide Roads Analysis (EA, 47-57).

In making my decision, I also considered: responsiveness of the various alternatives to the major issues (see below); other applicable laws, regulations, and policies (DN, pages 11-12); Tribal treaty rights; public input; and the effects of the alternatives on the physical, biological, social, and economic environment (EA 115-122). I believe that Alternative B provides the best balance between resource protection, access and safety needs, and cost considerations.

Both Alternatives B and C would have similar road-related risk to aquatic systems (see below, for additional discussion). Both Alternatives B and C would avoid impacts to the free-flowing characteristics of the Wild and Scenic River, minimize impacts to historic properties and provide access to matrix lands and dispersed recreation (see EA, Alternative Comparison Table 7, (pages 42-46). *Therefore, I most closely considered the issues of access safety and ease of the route for administrative and public use, road maintenance costs, and total cost of the project considering funds available.*

How My Decision Addresses the Issue of General Access: My decision responds to the high need for this road system for a wide variety of recreation uses and to access one of the largest contiguous blocks of matrix lands on the Forest. The White Chuck Bridge and Road 22 are part of a highly-used, year around administrative and recreation route on the MBS (EA, pages 5, 54, 55).

My decision will result in reestablishing the most logical and economical haul-route from the southwest side of Gold Mountain, the White Chuck Bridge. 14,500 acres of matrix will again be accessible from Roads 22, 2210, and 2211 (EA, 42, 53-55) The alternative I have selected to implement would provide for a safer driving or haul route, with fewer miles of steep grade, and sharp corners, located at a lower elevation, out of the snow zone (EA, 42, 53, 54). This will provide better access to matrix lands during the fall and winter months, when timber harvest is often scheduled to avoid conflicts with timing restrictions to protect threatened and endangered species (EA, page 4).

Alternatives B and C have very similar road maintenance and haul costs, but my selected Alternative B will have slightly lower maintenance and haul costs; in addition, road maintenance costs will be less than the pre-flood costs (see Table 7 Comparison of Alternatives- pages 42-43).

² Isolated railroad artifacts such as spikes and rail plates do not possess interpretive value and would not require further protection or recordation.

How My Decision Addresses Other Issues

Impacts to Fish and Fish Habitat: My decision will result in a reduced risk of delivery of sediment to fish bearing waters with the removal of the damaged bridge and reconstruction of the White Chuck Bridge to span the active channel with abutments located at approximately the 100-year flood plain level, and with the reroute of Road 22 around Sites #1 and #2 (EA, Page 84-89).

My decision will result in a net decrease of 1.1 miles of permanent road located in Riparian Reserve (and no new road construction in Riparian Reserves), which is consistent with the Forest Plan, as amended Standards and Guidelines. This will also decrease road density, (a fish habitat indicators), as well as provide beneficial effects to other fish and wildlife habitat indicators (EA, pages 87, 88, 102-105).

Implementation will include removal of one partial fish-barrier culvert and reduced road fill at stream crossings at repair Sites #3 – 9, with dipped drainages and larger culverts that will meet current Forest Plan standards (EA, pages 66, 67, 85, and 86). Implementing Alternative B will provide a reduction in perched fill from unstable roads and drainage crossings. The repairs will result in a road fill at the various damage sites by 30 to 50%, which represents about 3000 to 5000 cubic yards of fill material. Hardening of these crossings with rock will help prevent washouts, and channeled diversions, yet allow debris to move down their natural channels on mobilizing flows, which are common in this terrain (EA, pages 66-67).

The new bridge location and approaches will result in increased bridge longevity, by moving the bridge away from the high pressure area that the channel is presently exerting on the original South Bridge approach bank.

The watershed scale impacts to fish will not be noticeable or measurable and are expected to improve wood routing and pool habitat (EA, pages 87); impact from sediment loading in the Sauk River from the 2003 flood event is greater than any sediment loading expected from this road repair activity. I have determined that most streams within the project area are non-fish bearing streams, and sediment delivery within the streams associated with fish-bearing waters (Tiny Kisutch Creek, Sauk River) would be minimized by conservation measures and timing restrictions. Removal of the culvert at Tiny Kisutch Creek would restore stream bank conditions (EA, pages 88). The short-term impacts to fish habitat indicators would, in the long-term, provide beneficial effects to these habitat indicators (EA, pages 86-88).

Wild and Scenic River Effects: My decision will result in removing a segment of road corridor from the floodplain of the Sauk River and allow the river to continue to meander within its channel migration zone. This would enhance the characteristics for which the river was designated under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, especially free-flow, fisheries and scenery (EA, Table 7 Comparison of Alternatives, pages 43, 93-96). The connecting roads involved in the relocation of Road 22 in my selected alternative are not visible from the river, so scenic quality will be unaffected (EA, page 95).

The repair of the White Chuck Bridge is not within the banks of the Skagit Wild and Scenic River, but near the confluence of the White Chuck with the Sauk River. Replacing the failed White Chuck Bridge with a new bridge will not influence the values of the Skagit Wild and Scenic River. The new bridge design has piers outside the stream channel (unlike the old bridge); this, along with moving the road alignment away from the river will improve the free-flow character of the river (EA, page 95). Roadwork on Roads 2210 and 2211 and at MP 4.0 on Road 22 will not involve repairs within or adjacent to the Sauk River; this, combined with the realignment of the road away from the river, resulted in the determination that a Section 7(a) Determination is not needed (Wild and Scenic Rivers, as per FSM 2354.7 and WO amendment 2300-2004-2) (EA, page 95).

Cultural Resources, Effects to Historic District: There are known historical and cultural resources in the project area, with repair options having the potential to impact sites that contribute to the Sauk River Timber Company Historic District. Both Alternatives B and C require road reconstruction techniques and mitigation measures which will reduce the road repair effects to historic properties to a rating of *No Adverse Effects*; (EA Table 7 Comparison of Alternatives, page 45). My decision includes the Mitigation Measures noted above, which were

developed in accordance with the Programmatic Agreement Regarding Cultural Resources Management on National Forests in the State of Washington (see project files) and the Washington State Historic Preservation Officer.

All Alternatives Considered in Detail

Two action alternatives and the no action alternative were analyzed in detail in the EA, along with six alternatives that were considered but eliminated from detailed study (EA, pages 26-28).

Alternative A- No Action: There would be no repairs made to the current damaged roads. Damaged roads would continue to deteriorate due to lack of access to perform maintenance. There would be portions of matrix lands not accessible, and haul routes would be longer and more expensive. I did not select this alternative for the following reasons: it would not meet the need for action; there would be no access to the White Chuck Boat Launch or the west end of the White Chuck Bench trail; and access for administration of the forest lands, fire protection, and dispersed recreation would be limited within portions of the west slope of Gold Mountain. If no action were implemented, 15 percent of the matrix lands in the Gold Mountain area would be cut off from vehicle access and timber haul cost for contractors would increase. Finally, if no action were taken, the damaged sites would pose a continued risk of increased sediment delivery into river systems containing federally-listed Threatened and Endangered fish species.

Alternative B – Selected Alternative: As described above (see Decision), implementation of this alternative would include replacing the flood-damaged White Chuck Bridge at a location 200 feet downstream of the existing site, and repairing the damaged sites on Roads 22, 2210, and 2211 within the Sauk River watershed. Road 22 would be rerouted around the damage at Site #2 (MP 9.4) via road segments 22-013 and 24-023, and the flood damage at Sites #3 – 9 on Roads 22, 2210, and 2211 would be repaired.

Alternative C: Alternative C is similar to my selected alternative; however, drivable access to the west slope of Gold Mountain would be reestablished through reconstructed and 0.6 miles of new construction of segments of road that would bypass the damage at Sites # 3 to 6. The bypassed portion of Road 22 would be decommissioned (EA, pages 33). Although Alternative C would also provide overall access to matrix lands on Gold Mountain, I did not select this alternative for the following reasons: the new/reconstructed road system would be slightly longer in distance, but would have more switchbacks, steeper grades, and would be located at a higher elevation on the hill side (in snow zone). Haul and road maintenance costs would be slightly higher than in my selected alternative (Table 7, EA pages 42 and 45). While Alternative C would allow for decommissioning an additional 2.3 miles of road, it would involve 0.6 miles of new road construction and reconstruction of about 1.8 miles of road that are currently in storage (EA, pages 34) for a total of 2.4 miles of road in active management.

Public Involvement

Government-to-government consultation and tribal notification was initiated in January 2004; the public was notified in February 2004. This proposed action was mailed along with other flood related proposed actions to 9 Tribes, and over 457 individuals. Twenty-nine articles regarding the flood damaged roads, trails, and meetings appeared in local newspapers. Two public meetings were held with a total of 50 people in attendance (EA, pages 22). The public was asked to provide any information that would help the agency in developing this project proposal. The Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie website also presented information regarding the 2003 floods, maps, and contact information.

Many useful written comments were received from the following organizations and individuals: Chris Detrick of the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife, Steve Hinton of the Swinomish Tribe and the Sauk-Suiattle Tribes, Thomas O’Keefe of American Whitewater, Connie Kelleher-American Rivers, Devin Smith-Skagit River Systems Cooperative, Eric Myren-Washington Recreational River Runners, Marc Bardsley, North Cascades Conservation Council, Katherine Johnson-Pilchuck Audubon Society, Shari Brewer-Off the Beaten

Path, Steve Hinton-Swinomish Tribal Community and Sauk-Suiattle Indian Tribe. Individuals included Bob Boyd, Jim Scarosborough, Alex Kuo, Kevin Geraghty, Mr. and Mrs. McIlrath, and Paul Wagner (see project files).

Generally, respondents were interested in the effects of the road repairs on fish habitat, especially related to the bridge replacement, future flood events, culvert replacement, and sedimentation hazards. Some commented that consideration should be given to decommissioning Road 22 entirely. Others expressed concern over the roads location in the Wild and Scenic River corridor. Recommendations regarding future flood events and the prevention of more road damage included adding log jams in the river to divert water away from the road. Some felt that only pedestrian access to the area is desirable. A number of respondents supported expedited repairs to restore access for recreation, including driving, fishing, mushrooming, Christmas tree cutting, and hiking. Other commenters supported a return of access to the existing boat launch or to an alternate launch.

Public comments were considered throughout the process of developing the preliminary EA. Both action alternatives include levels of decommissioning as part of the planned repairs. In addition, Road 22 was purposefully moved away from the Wild and Scenic River corridor at Site #2. The bridge construction site was relocated and designed in such a way that it would have less impact to instream and riparian conditions, as well as being less vulnerable to washouts. Consideration was given to public uses of the area, including hiking, gathering forest products, boating, and driving for pleasure.

The Preliminary EA was made available for public review and comment for a 30-day period from April 30, 2005 through May 31, 2005. The complete document was also made available on the MBS website.

Seven letters and e-mails were received during this comment period from the following organizations and individuals: Katherine Johnson of Pilchuck Audubon Society, Tina Myren-Washington Recreational River Runners, Joe Moribe-NOAA Fisheries, Thomas O'Keefe-American Rivers, Devin Smith of the Skagit River Systems Cooperative. Individuals responding included: Tina and Eric Myren, and Kevin Geraghty (see project files).

I have reviewed and considered all substantive comments received in response to the Preliminary EA, and have used these comments to enhance the project analysis. Selected comments and how my decision responds to those viewpoints are noted below. See EA, Appendix A for a table of all substantive comments received.

Several commenters felt a new bridge design that would span the 500-year floodplain should be analyzed in detail. This alternative was examined, but not in detail (EA, Appendix A page 129): my decision includes a replacement bridge that will meet current Forest Plan, as amended, standards. It will accommodate at least the 100-year flood, including associated bedload and debris, and with no piers in the river. In addition, all replaced culverts would meet Forest Plan standards and provide fish passage at fish-bearing streams (Standard and Guidelines RF-4 and RF-6, USDA, USDI 1994, (EA, pages 16).

Some respondents felt that a boat launch site on the Mountain Loop Highway side of the Sauk River should be analyzed. I considered the safety and parking problems associated with the current temporary boat launch, and reviewed and considered exploratory field reconnaissance of permanently replacing the White Chuck Boat Launch at another location along the Mt. Loop Scenic Highway. I agree with exploratory findings that development of an alternate boat launch site would be difficult, expensive, and have many resource concerns (including new construction in Riparian Reserve). Costs would included a commitment of additional funds of \$200,000 or more. Therefore, I have determined that reestablishing access to the existing boat launch would best meet the access, safety, and parking needs of the boating public, and address resource concerns.

Finding of No Significant Impact

I have determined through the environmental analysis that the activities included in my decision (Alternative B) are not a major federal action, individually or cumulatively, that would not significantly affect the quality of

the human environment; therefore, an environmental impact statement is not needed. This determination was made considering the following factors:

In terms of context (40 CFR 1508.27(a): this project is site-specific to the Gold Mountain Road Repairs and by itself, does not have international, national, region-wide or statewide importance. Resource commitments include rock for the road, which is a common use on the MBS, and was the only irreversible or irretrievable resource (EA, page 121).

In terms of intensity ((40 CFR 1508.27(b):

1. Environmental consequences of the action discussed in the EA (page 47-121) are both beneficial and adverse; however, the impacts are not significant and on balance, the effects will be beneficial. There are short-term potential impacts to fish and wildlife species during repair road repair and bridge construction from noise disturbance and potential concussive impacts (see BA Page 36, USFWS BO, pages 8, 41, 42, and 56. NMFS BO pages 27-30, and Biological Opinion of the Effects of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest Program of Activities for 2003-2007 (FWS Reference Number 1-3-02-f-1583, USDI, 2002). Beneficial effects include the removal of a partial fish barrier culvert on Road 22-110 in an area used by bald eagles (EA page 87 and 108). The decommissioning of 1.1 mile of road in the riparian area of the Sauk River, the removal of the bridge debris that has been constructing the White Chuck River, the construction of a longer White Chuck Bridge to span the active channel and remove the piers from the active channel will better allow for free flow of the river in the migration zone of the Skagit Wild and Scenic River, and candidate river (EA pages 66-67, 95). This will also provide for re-establishing administrative and recreational use of Road 22 with the north approach to the bridge shifted to construction on bedrock so as to minimize future impacts of the road on river movements.(EA pages 66-67, 95)
2. My decision will not adversely affect public health or safety. Roads restored and/or upgraded to public access should benefit the public safety of those who use them. Other roads will be treated to reduce the risk of failures and associated sedimentation into streams, also a public health and safety benefit.
3. My decision will not adversely affect unique characteristics of the geographic area such as historical or cultural resources, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas. The action is in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act under the terms of the 1997 Programmatic Agreement between the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation, the Washington State Historic Preservation Office, and the Forest Service (report located in project file). Effects on the Skagit Wild and Scenic River have been avoided with the design of the road reroute at MP 09.4; there will be no impact to the free flowing characteristics of the Sauk River (EA, page 95).
4. The effects of the projects, including cumulative effects, are only somewhat controversial among a small segment of the local population ((EA Appendix A pages 125-133); however, the effects are well understood.
5. The possible effects on the human environment do not involve any highly uncertain, unique, or unknown risks. The effects on wildlife habitat and aquatic system components are disclosed in the EA (pages 58-59, 97-111) and are based on sound scientific research, as well as previous experience in the basin and on the Forest. The effects on access and resources are clearly disclosed in the EA (pages 47-57).
6. The action is unlikely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or to represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. This action is not unusual and does not lead to further action that is unique.

7. The effects of the action were evaluated in relation to other actions with individually insignificant effects (EA pages 144-148). There are not significant cumulative effects between this project and other projects implemented or planned (EA pages 144-148).
8. My decision will not adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places and will not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources (EA pages 114-116). Also see factor #3.
9. Fish and Wildlife Biological Assessments and consultations were completed with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in August 2005 and with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) in November of 2005 (documentation located in project file). There was concurrence on an effect determination of “*Likely to Adversely Affect*” bull trout and Puget Sound Chinook salmon due to instream work to remove the White Chuck Bridge from the river and potential impacts from road repairs (blasting) in the riparian area adjacent to the bridge. There was an effect determination of “*Likely to Adversely Affect*” marbled murrelet due to noise disturbance, “*Not Likely to Adversely Affect*” bald eagle and spotted owl, and “*No Effect*” on grizzly bear, gray wolf, or lynx. (There is a potential benefit to grizzly bear and bald eagle from road decommissioning.) The project will have “*No Effect*” on Chinook salmon critical habitat, or spotted owl and marbled murrelet Critical Habitat Units.

As described below, my decision does not threaten any violations of Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment.

Other Findings Required by Law or Regulation

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA): NEPA establishes the process and content requirements of environmental analysis and documentation for projects such as the Gold Mountain Road Repair EA. I find that the entire process of analysis and preparation of this EA was undertaken in accordance with the regulations outlined in 40 CFR Parts 1500-1508, FSM 1950 and FSH 1909.15. There were a number of opportunities for public involvement during the course of the analysis (EA, pages 21-22), and Public Involvement, above). I used the comments received during scoping and in response to the Preliminary EA to make my decision.

National Forest Management Act (NFMA): I have reviewed the project and find Alternative B to be consistent with the goals, objectives, standards and guidelines of the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest (Forest Plan), as amended (see EA, pages 13-14) for major amendments). The action would not alter the multiple-use goals and objectives for long-term land and resource management.

My decision is consistent with applicable Riparian Reserve standards and guidelines (EA, pages 73-75). Watershed analyses have been completed for the Tier 1 Key Watersheds: Sauk River and Sauk River Forks Watershed Analysis, USDA Forest Service 1996, and the White Chuck Watershed Analysis; USDA Forest Service 2004 (EA page 19). Relevant information and recommendations from these analyses were used the design and assessment of this project. A total of 1.1 miles of road (all in Riparian Reserves) will be decommissioned, and repairs at all damage sites will result in reduced sediment delivery risks to fish-bearing waters (EA, page 73-75). I find that the selected Alternative B is designed to contribute to maintaining and restoring the fifth-field watershed over the long term, and will contribute to meeting the objectives of the Aquatic Conservation Strategy.

My decision is consistent with current direction contained in the January 2001 Record of Decision that amended the standards and guidelines for Survey and Manage plant and animal species (including protection buffer species and other mitigation measures), as modified or amended as of March 21, 2004. The last modification was the December 2003 Interagency Annual Species Review. (This 2001 ROD was reinstated via U.S. District Court order on January 9, 2006.) Botanical surveys of the project area were completed to current protocol (EA, page 112) and there will be no effects to these species (EA, page 112-113). For Survey and Manage animals, the project is within the range of one species (EA, page 101), but the proposed repair sites do

not contain suitable habitat. Nor does the proposed activity result in an adverse effect on species habitat. As per Survey Protocol for Survey and Manage Terrestrial Mollusk Species from the Northwest Forest Plan Version 3.0 (USDA, USDI 2003), surveys are not required at projects where activities are limited to the existing road prism, previously disturbed sites, and other areas not considered suitable habitat. Therefore, no surveys were necessary for this project. The Gold Mountain Road Repair is not within the suspected range of the Larch Mountain or Van Dyke's salamanders; therefore, the area was not surveyed and there would be no potential impact on known sites of these species.

Endangered Species Act: Fish and wildlife biological assessments and consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) have been completed (documentation located in project file). **Alternative B** is “*May Affect, Likely to Adversely Affect*” Federally-listed bull trout and Puget Sound Chinook salmon, due to activities associated with the removal of the old, damaged White Chuck bridge and construction of the new bridge (also, see Factor 9, FONSI, above). The project is “*Likely to Adversely Affect*” marbled murrelet due to noise disturbance, “*Not Likely to Adversely Affect*” bald eagle and spotted owl, and is “*No Effect*” on grizzly bear, gray wolf, or lynx. (There is a potential benefit to grizzly bear and bald eagle from road decommissioning.) The project will have “*No Effect*” on Chinook salmon critical habitat, or on spotted owl and marbled murrelet Critical Habitat Units.

National Historic Preservation Act: Cultural resource surveys have been completed and Alternative B is in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act under the terms of this Programmatic Agreement. As mitigated (see above), the project will have *No Adverse Effect* to the historic properties (EA, pages 114-115).

Clean Air Act: Practices which could degrade air quality below health and visibility standards are not proposed.

Clean Water Act: Alternative B will benefit objectives of the Clean Water Act through road treatments that will reduce surface erosion and sedimentation into streams and rivers (EA, page 70). Implementation of my decision action will incorporate Best Management Practices (BMPs) to improve water quality conditions; these BMPs are described in mitigation measures (EA pages 35-37, and above, Decision Notice). On National Forest System Land, no portions of the Sauk or White Chuck Rivers, or their tributary streams, have been listed by the Washington State Department of Ecology as impaired for some aspect of water quality under the Clean Water Act (303(d)) (EA pages 64).

Managing Competing and Unwanted Vegetation Final Environmental Impact Statement: Vegetative manipulation will comply with the requirements of 36 CFR 219.27(b). Best Management Practices for noxious weed management, included as mitigation measures (EA pages 38-39) and included as Forest-wide Standards and Guidelines, will be followed.

Opportunities for additional management practices would remain available, based on future site-specific analysis and consistency with all relevant laws and regulations.

FSM 7712.15 provides that decisions made after January 12, 2002, must be informed by a roads analysis unless the Responsible Official determines that such analysis is not needed. I have reviewed the roads analysis and potential environmental and access effects associated with this project (EA Pages 20, 21) and have determined that I was sufficiently informed (Forest-wide Roads Analysis, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, 2003).

Appeal Rights and Implementation

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to Forest Service regulations at 36 CFR 215.7. Appeals must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 215.14 (Content of a Notice of Appeal), and must provide sufficient evidence and rationale to show why the Responsible Official's decision should be remanded or reversed. A written notice of appeal must be submitted to the Appeal Deciding Officer within 45 days of the date of publication of this notice. Business office hours are 8:00 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday. The acceptable format for

appeals filed electronically is WORD or RTF format with signature, attached to an e-mail message. Publication of this notice in the Everett Herald is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal and no other dates or timeframes should be relied upon. The Appeal Deciding Officer is:

Forest Supervisor, ATTN: 1570 Appeals,
21905 64th Avenue West
Mountlake Terrace, WA 98043-2278

FAX 425-744-3255, e-mail: appeals-pacificnorthwest-mtbaker-snoqualmie@fs.fed.us

Implementation of this decision may begin on the 5th business day following the close of the appeal-filing period (36 CFR 215.9) if no appeal is filed within the 45-day time period. If an appeal is filed, the decision would not be implemented before the 15th business day following the date of the last appeal disposition.

For Further Information, contact Phyllis Reed, Darrington Ranger District, 1405 Emens Street, Darrington, WA 98241, (360) 436-1155.

PHYLLIS REED
Interim District Ranger

Date