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Date: March 14, 2008

Dear National Forest User,

The Forest Service plans to develop a *Suiattle Access and Travel Management Environmental Assessment* for public review during the spring/summer of 2008.

We are initiating a review of roads in the Suiattle River drainage to balance access needs with resource protection and budget. This effort will determine what roads to retain, and what roads are no longer needed, and will implement a variety of road treatments in the Suiattle River watershed in an effort to align the size of the Forest Service road system with projected road maintenance budgets. We invite your scoping comments on the proposed action outlined below for the Suiattle Access and Travel Management Project. The area under consideration includes the National Forest Lands in the Suiattle River watershed that are accessed via Roads 25, 26, 27, and associated spur roads.

### Recent History

Much of the Suiattle road system has not been accessible by motorized vehicle since October 2003 when flood waters removed the fill from the south side of the Boundary Bridge (Road 25). Access over Rat Trap Pass was also eliminated by flood damage to Road 23 in the White Chuck drainage. The 2006 floods inflicted additional damage on Road 26 and 2660, and other impacts to roads are not known due to lack of access.

### Forest Plan Direction and Watershed Analysis

The 1990 Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended by the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan's Record of Decision (ROD), provides management direction for the NFS lands within the analysis area. The Suiattle River drainage is approximately 70 percent wilderness (Glacier Peak Wilderness), with another large segment of the drainage (19 percent) designated as Late-Successional Reserve (LSR). Approximately 3 percent of the Suiattle drainage is designated as matrix lands, with timber management emphasis, and 2 percent is within the Skagit Wild and Scenic River system.

The Suiattle River is also a Tier 1 Key Watershed as identified in the ROD. Aquatic conservation strategy objectives promote the maintenance and restoration of the diversity and complexity of watershed and landscape scale features. Reduction of existing road systems is one of the aquatic conservation strategies listed for key watersheds (ROD, p. B-19).

The Suiattle Watershed Analysis, completed in July of 2004, provided the following findings: There are about 138 miles of National Forest roads within the Suiattle River watershed. The WSA recommended adjustments in the Forest database of recreational use levels for many of the roads, as well as identifying roads with wildlife or aquatic concerns. The watershed analysis recommended that there be validation of the roads analysis' findings and general management strategies through a more local access and travel management assessment (drainage-wide). The watershed analysis also recommended further identification of roads to be decommissioned or



put in storage to reduce the amount of annual road maintenance needed in the drainage. Treatment of fish passage problem sites was highlighted as priority for the road fixes.

The access and travel management assessment would review road maintenance levels using the following: Aquatic Conservation Strategy (ACS) objectives, potential for watershed restoration, information from the watershed analysis and ERFO repair assessments, present and projected road management/maintenance budgets, and public and administrative access needs and/or desires.

### **Description of the Proposed Project**

The Forest proposes to identify what roads to manage at current maintenance levels, what roads to consider for reduced maintenance levels, and what roads either to put into storage (stabilizing and closing a road until needed ) or to close through decommissioning (stabilizing and closing a road). Roads without stabilization or other hydrologic needs may be assigned to storage or decommissioning by allowing the road to brush in. Roads proposed for some type of storage or closure treatment at this time are depicted in the enclosed map. A number of these roads are already non-drivable, but have not been formally removed from the road system. Additional treatments may be proposed as the environmental analysis progresses, including some road upgrading (e.g. improving drainage features), which would leave the road open. Opportunities for road-to-trail conversion will also be considered

**Purpose of the Project:** The purpose of the project is to respond to three underlying needs.

1. Based on the Regional Aquatic Restoration Priority analysis, Puget Sound has been identified as the highest priority basin for restoration in Forest Service Region 6 (Oregon and Washington). Based on the Mount Baker Snoqualmie National Forest's analysis of priorities for restoration on the Forest, the Lower Suiattle Watershed is one of the two highest priorities on the forest for aquatic restoration (the adjacent Upper Sauk is the other watershed).

Chronic sediment inputs with hillslope failures are occurring as a result of poor road location, undersized culverts, and inadequate road maintenance, and this is leading to degradation of aquatic habitat (aquatic specialist report, District files, 2008).

The Lower Suiattle River watershed is also a Key Watershed in the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) (USDA, USDI 1994). The NWFP also included Standards and Guidelines for reducing road mileage in key watersheds (p. C-7).

*There is a need for closed and stabilized roads, or upgraded roads and stream crossings, which do not pose a substantial risk to riparian and aquatic conditions.*

2. The Mt Baker-Snoqualmie Forest Plan (USDA-FS 1990), as amended, directs the Forest to provide a broad spectrum of recreation opportunities, with an emphasis on those that require a natural setting (Forest Plan, p. 4-2). At the same time, it directs the Forest to maintain transportation facilities to the minimum standard needed to support planned uses and activities, and to provide for public safety (pp. 4-7, 4-140).

Since the late 1990s the Forest has received insufficient funding to maintain the existing road system to minimum standards. Consequently, road failures have occurred, resulting in

reduced access and increased sedimentation into aquatic systems. Furthermore, roads to popular recreation sites often have potholes, brush encroaching on roadways, and inadequate directional signing, which contribute to safety concerns.

*There is a need for a smaller system of roads that can be maintained closer to desired standards with the expected level of future road maintenance funding.*

3. The Mt Baker-Snoqualmie Forest Plan provides direction to the Forest to allow for access to American Indian religious and cultural use areas including cemeteries, cedar areas, and ceremonial flora and plant areas (p. 4-197).

*There is a need for continued Tribal access to these sites, without disclosing their existence or location, and without increased general access or degradation of the sites.*

**Decisions to Be Made:** An interdisciplinary team of specialists will conduct an environmental analysis of the current proposed road treatments that now consists of roads to be retained open for vehicle access, roads in storage (non-drivable), and roads to be decommissioned. The decisions to be made by the District Ranger with the Suiattle Access and Travel Management project are:

- Roads to retain open (Maintenance Level 2—Level 3)
- Roads to retain or put in storage (Maintenance Level 1)
- Roads to be decommissioned
- Road-to-trail conversions, and
- Under what specific conditions and mitigations the repairs and decommissioning will be conducted.

**Proposed Action:** The Proposed Action consists of roads in the Suiattle to be maintained in the following status (see enclosed map, and Enclosure 1 for a more detailed description of all proposed road treatments).

- Approximately 60 miles of roads to remain open (Maintenance Level 2 and Level 3) – roads colored red in the enclosed map

The proposed action would maintain approximately 60 miles of roads for administration and the general public recreation access – this is approximately 70% of the 86 road miles which were accessible prior to the flood damage in 2003. These roads will maintain access to all developed campgrounds and trailheads with one exception – flood-damaged access to the trailhead on upper Tenas Creek road (Road 2660) would not be restored. Opportunities for driving access to high elevations for berry-picking, scenic driving, and high-elevation hunting would be maintained in the Grade Creek (Roads 2640/2642) and Green Mountain (Road 2680) areas.

- Approximately 30 miles of road to retained or put in storage ( Maintenance Level 1) – roads colored orange in the enclosed map

Roads to be retained in storage or put into storage include much of the timber management lands in matrix or where there is potential for stand treatments to further Late-Successional Reserve conditions. This includes Road 2660 on the lower slopes of Huckleberry Mountain, Road 2650 which accesses Big Creek, and a portion of roads 2510, 2511, and 1512 that access the lower slopes of Prairie Mountain.

- Approximately 35 miles of road segments are proposed for decommissioning (taken off the road system)- roads colored green in enclosed map

There have been approximately 15 miles of roads decommissioned or stored in the Suiattle River drainage since the mid-90's (roads colored in gray hatching in the enclosed map). Roads to be decommissioned include various spur roads no longer identified for administrative needs as well as roads that are reported to have high aquatic risks. Roads for decommissioning include a number of roads in the Grade Creek drainage, many no longer drivable such as the upper portions of Roads 2640 and 2643. Other roads for decommissioning include: the 2703 road that accesses upper Circle Creek, the 2660 road that accesses the Boulder Lake trailhead, and the upper portion of Road 2510 that accesses the ridge between Prairie Mountain and White Chuck Mountain.

- 0 Miles of roads to trails

At this time there are no roads proposed for conversion to trails. A walkable tread would be retained on Road 2660 in the Tenas Creek drainage beyond the damaged Tenas Creek Bridge site.

The proposed action would treat all road segments that pose a high risk to aquatic resources (approximately 25 miles) either by upgrading the road to make it more stable and less susceptible to hillslope failure, or by decommissioning or placing the road in storage. Major upgrades will be needed at 12 stream crossings costing approximately \$500,000, and up to 2.6 miles of road would be relocated costing up to \$800,000 dollars. In addition, 15 miles of roads will require drainage upgrades costing approximately \$700,000. Storage and decommissioning of 27 miles of roads that were drivable in 2003 is expected to cost up to approximately \$675,000. This work will be funded through aquatic restoration grants, Forest Service aquatic restoration program dollars, and Federal Highways Administration flood-damaged-road restoration funds (ERFO, for Emergency Relief for Federally Owned Roads).

Based on average costs per mile, by reducing open road mileage and reducing the road maintenance objective level to Level 2 on all roads except the main Suiattle Road (Road 26), the predicted annual cost to maintain the roads in the proposed action to standard is approximately \$73,000. This is a 42% reduction in cost to maintain the 86 miles of open roads which were open in 2003 to standard (\$125,000). These funds have not been available, and \$73,000 is also not available annually. Therefore, the road system will continue to be maintained in a substandard condition, but will meet all requirements for public safety, if not for public comfort.

**Preliminary Issues:** The following preliminary issues have been identified by the interdisciplinary team and through plan-to-project dialogues with public groups. When finalized, significant issues from continued scoping and interdisciplinary work may be used to modify the alternatives or form a new one, develop management requirements and mitigation measures, or track environmental effects.

1. The retention of Road 26 and other open roads may have adverse effects to aquatic integrity, Riparian Reserve conditions, water quality, and fish habitat.
2. The retention of Road 27 and other open roads may leave those roads subject to future slide impacts and future repairs, and therefore would not be cost effective in the long-term
3. Road decommissioning would limit both motorized and non-motorized recreational access into portions of the Suiattle River drainage.
4. Road decommissioning would decrease the amount of area accessible for day use within the Suiattle River drainage, with less potential for dispersal of use.
5. Roads to be retained as "open" would not be adequately maintained given projected road maintenance budgets.

### **Request for Comments**

We are asking for your comments on issues raised by the proposed action on road maintenance levels with the Suiattle River drainage (above).

The Environmental Assessment is projected to be available for public comment in early summer year 2008. A decision is expected in the summer of 2008. The Deciding Official for this project will be the District Ranger.

In order to ensure your issues and comments are considered in the analysis process, please comment by April 15, 2008. Written comments should be sent to Phyllis Reed at the Darrington Ranger District at 1405 Emens Street, Darrington, WA 98241. Comments may also be faxed to 360-436-1309, or e-mailed to [plreed@fs.fed.us](mailto:plreed@fs.fed.us). If you have questions on the project, feel free to contact me or my staff for additional information at 360-436-1155. Office hours are between 8:00 am and 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday.

Comments received in response to this letter, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be part of the Project Record and available for public review.

Your concerns and comments on our proposed actions are important to us. I would welcome a meeting if you should so desire. Please feel free to contact me at any time.

Sincerely,

PETER FORBES  
District Ranger

Enclosures (2)