DECISION NOTICE AND FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
CHIP-MUNK RECOVERY AND RESTORATION PROJECT
U.S. FOREST SERVICE, PLUMAS NATIONAL FOREST,
MT. HOUGH RANGER DISTRICT
PLUMAS COUNTY, CA

LOCATION

The Chip-munk Recovery and Restoration Project (Chip-munk Project) is located approximately 5 miles west of Greenville, California near Butt Valley Reservoir and the communities of Seneca and Caribou within the Mt. Hough Ranger District, Plumas National Forest, California. The legal description includes all or portions of: T25N, R6E, sections 23, 24, and 26; T25N, R7E, sections 1, 2, 4-8, 10, 11, and 17-20; T26N, R7E, sections 1, 2, 4, 7-9, 10-19, 20-27, and 30-36; T26N, R8E, sections 2-9, 10, 11, 14-23, and 26-34; T27N, R7E, sections 22, 25-27, and 33-36; T27N, R8E, sections 20, and 28-35; Mount Diablo Base Meridian (MDBM).

BACKGROUND

The Chips Fire began on July 29, 2012, in the Chips Creek drainage in the Plumas National Forest (PNF). This fire grew to 76,333 acres, burning in both the Plumas and Lassen National Forests and on private lands. The Chips Fire was contained on August 31, 2012.

The Chips Fire burned approximately 52,106 acres on the MHRD (48,934 acres of NFS land and 3,172 acres of private land) in a mosaic of intensity including unburned or very low, low, medium, and high fire intensity. As a result, there are areas where tree mortality is 100 percent while other areas still support a green tree component. Within the boundary of the Plumas National Forest, the Chips Fire left 25 percent or 13,102 acres (12,723 acres of NFS land and 308 acres of private land) of forested land in a deforested vegetation condition, with the possibility of further mortality extending into stands with lower burn severity due to other post-fire stresses such as drought or insect attack.

The Mount Hough Ranger District proposes to conduct roadside hazard tree removal (1,788 acres), salvage dead and dying timber (3,675 acres), and site preparation and reforestation (3,675 acres) activities over approximately 5,464 acres (Figure 1). However, land designations and the landscape itself limit the areas in which treatment can be proposed. Land designations within the Plumas National Forest and the Chips Fire perimeter include: developed recreational sites, Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs), semi-primitive non-motorized vehicle areas, northern goshawk Protected Activity Centers (PACs), California spotted owl PACs, peregrine falcon eyrie, suitable willow flycatcher habitat, bald eagle management areas, Riparian Conservation Areas (RCAs), Old Forest Emphasis (OFE) areas, National Wild and Scenic Rivers, and special interest areas. Nearly the entire western half of the Chips Fire reburned in the Storrie Fire (2001) footprint and is within several land allocations that do not allow for salvage timber harvest; therefore limiting the total amount of acres included for treatment in the Chip-munk Project.

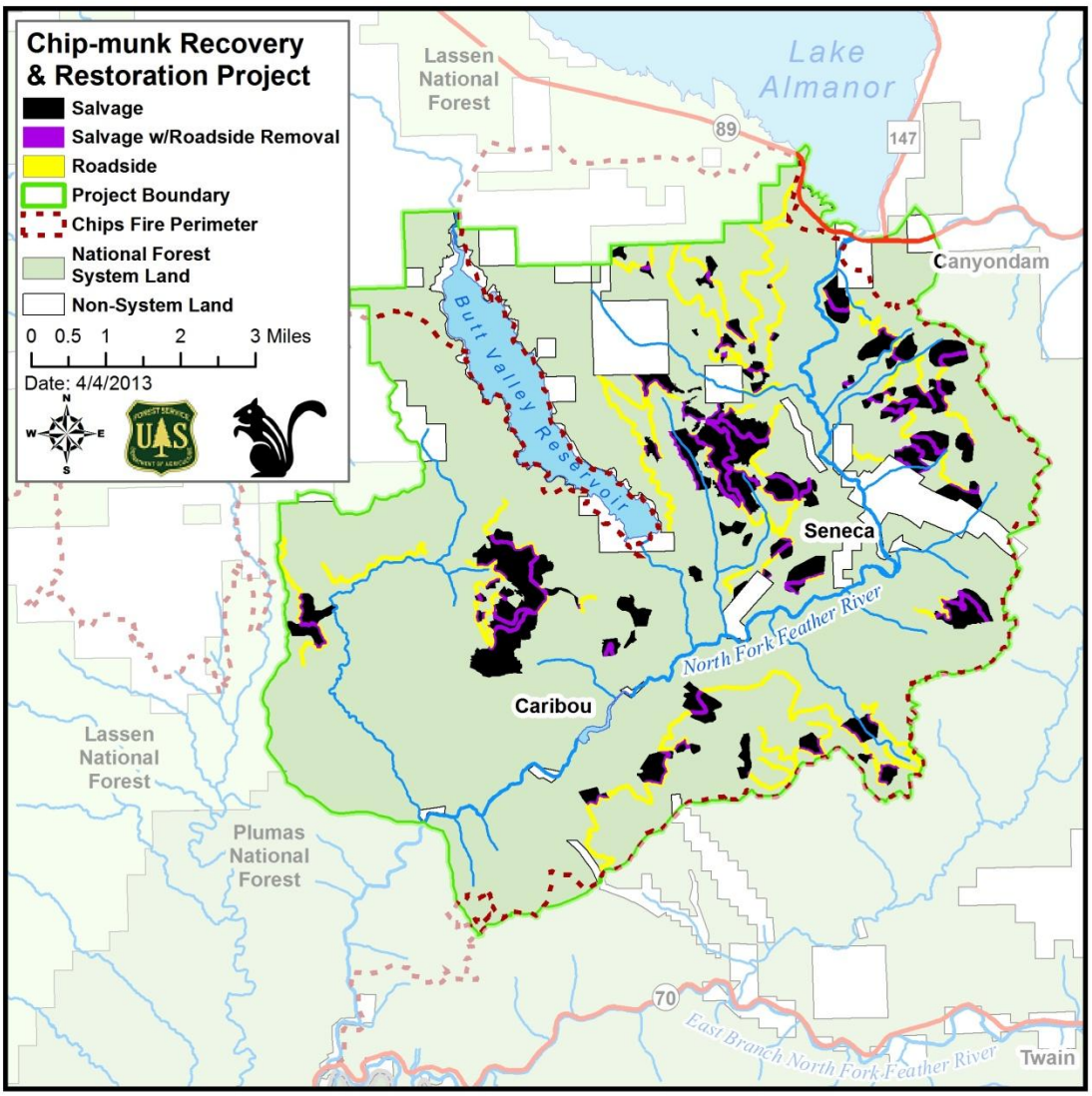

Figure 1. Chip-munk Project Activities

DECISION

Based on the analysis in the Chip-munk Project Final Environmental Assessment (Final EA) and the associated planning record, I have decided to implement Alternative A (Proposed Action) as fully described in the Final EA (Final EA, pages 5-10, 12-35) and shown in Figure 1 above. ***This includes the following additions to the original Proposed Action, which are described in the July 2013 Final EA***:

1. **Four miles of temporary roads** – Temporary road, skid trail, and landing templates and facilities are needed and used to permit the removal and utilization of material. Approximately 4 miles of temporary roads will be constructed (¼ mile was included in the EA published for public comment in April). Due to weather, restricted access, and limited personnel, road reconnaissance was limited during the initial planning phases of the Chip-munk Project. To minimize skidding sawlogs long distances (greater than 800 feet) an additional 3.75 miles of temporary roads are needed. Figure 2 was added in the Final EA to illustrate the location of these additional temporary roads (Final EA, page 8). The resource effects analysis is included in the Final Environmental Assessment.
2. **Jackpot burning included in site preparation activities within skyline salvage units** – Reforestation includes site preparation and planting of native conifer seedlings in areas of moderately high and high vegetation burn severity, up to 3,675 acres. Site preparation activities objectives include reducing and managing future fuel profiles, mitigating hazards to planting crews, and reducing competitive vegetation. The design criteria associated with site preparation was updated to include jackpot burning specifically associated with lop and scatter treatments and only within skyline salvage treatment units (Final EA, page 35). Figure 3 was added in the Final EA to illustrate the skyline treatment units that were modified to include jackpot burning (Final EA, page 10). The resource effects analysis is included in the Final Environmental Assessment.

The total activities included in this decision are:

- Roadside hazard tree removal (1,788 acres)
- Salvage timber harvest (3,675 acres)
- Site preparation and native conifer seedling planting (3,675 acres)
- Water draft source construction and reconstruction (3 sites total)
- Approximately 8.5 miles of road reconstruction and 4 miles of road construction of temporary roads
- Road improvements included in Mitigations Common to All Alternatives section

Detailed descriptions of the activities follow.

Remove Roadside Fire-killed and/or Fire-injured Hazard Trees

Fire-killed and fire-injured conifer trees will be felled and removed along roadways within the Chips Fire perimeter (up to 1,788 acres). Approximately 514 acres of Riparian Conservation Areas (RCAs) within 150 feet from the road prism and within a roadside treatment unit will be included for hazard tree removal. Refer to Table 1 in the Final EA for design criteria regarding roadside hazard tree removal (Final EA, pages 14-20).

Recover Economic Value of Fire-killed Timber

Fire-killed conifer trees will be felled and removed (up to 3,675 acres of which up to 2,726 acres will use ground-based logging systems and up to 929 acres will use skyline logging systems) outside of roadside hazard tree removal areas. Approximately 949 acres of Riparian Conservation Areas (RCAs) within salvage treatment units will be included to recover the economic value of fire-killed trees. Refer to Table 2 in Final EA for design criteria regarding salvage timber harvest activities (Final EA, pages 21-30). Of the 3,675 salvage acres listed above, 844 acres are salvage units that include roadside hazard tree removal. Refer to Table 1 in Final EA for design criteria regarding roadside hazard tree removal (Final EA, pages 14-20).

Temporary roads, old skid trails, and old, abandoned landings exist on the landscape and will be utilized as much as possible during project implementation. These roads, skid trails, and landings are needed and used to permit the removal and utilization of material. These existing facilities will need some reconstruction activities to meet implementation and safety standards (Final EA, pages 33-34).

Approximately 4 miles of temporary road construction is proposed. Additionally, some skid trails and landings may be required for project implementation. After project completion, these temporary features will be sub-soiled and culverts, if any, removed. Refer to Table 6 in the Final EA for design criteria regarding access (Final EA, pages 33-34).

Areas Treated Through Skyline Logging Systems

In addition to salvage of dead and dying trees using skyline systems, approximately 10 acres of live green trees will be felled and/or removed incidental to logging. Some green trees will need to be cut in order to open corridors through which the salvaged timber can be yarded to landings. These areas are planned within moderate and/or low burn severity areas and will require removal of fire-killed, fire-injured, and green trees. Refer to Table 2 in Final EA for design criteria regarding salvage timber harvest and skyline logging systems (Final EA, pages 21-30).

Water Drafting Sources

Three water sources (basins along flowing streams from which water is pumped to water trucks and utilized on project haul routes) will be constructed or reconstructed. Two of these water sources currently exist and will be reconstructed to meet Best Management Practices (BMPs). One additional new water source will be constructed. Refer to Table 7 in Final EA for design criteria regarding water source construction and reconstruction (Final EA, page 34). Refer to Figure 5 in the Final EA illustrating watershed improvement activities (Final EA, page 38).

Re-establish Forested Conditions

Reforestation includes site preparation and planting of native conifer seedlings in areas of moderately high and high vegetation burn severity, up to 3,675 acres. Areas targeted for site preparation and reforestation are identical to those areas proposed for salvage timber harvest. Refer to Table 8 in the Final EA for design criteria regarding site preparation and reforestation (Final EA, page 35).

MITIGATIONS INCLUDED IN THIS DECISION

Mitigation measures were developed to ease some of the potential watershed impacts, specifically reducing equivalent roaded acres (ERA), the proposed action may cause. These mitigation measures were included in the Mitigations Common to All Alternatives section of the EA published for public comment (Final EA, pages 37-38).

Modeling determined for the Clear Creek watershed that the 2012 Chips Fire caused the watershed to exceed the threshold of concern for cumulative watershed effects, affirming the observation that the fire is the primary disturbance that has affected watershed condition. An increase in ERA for a watershed indicates increased concentration of surface runoff, which could result in detrimental changes to sedimentation rates and stream channel condition that could subsequently have effects on downstream water quality and beneficial uses. This decision will add additional disturbance in this watershed, but project design features and Best Management Practices will assure that watershed response after treatment will be similar to the post-fire response.

Approximately 165 acres of skyline salvage units were dropped from the original Chip-munk proposal when the watershed threshold concern came to light. Additional watershed improvement activities were added to the proposal to improve water quality in the Clear Creek watershed.

These improvement activities are proposed within the Clear Creek watershed only and include:

- Specific road surfaces will be graveled at approximately 20 road/stream crossings to reduce sediment delivery from the road to the stream. Gravel will be three inches deep, compacted, and extend 90 feet on each side of each stream crossing structure.
- Currently NFS road 26N23C is closed and several culverts remain in place. This road is proposed as a haul route for the Chip-munk Project. To protect water quality, these culverts will be removed after project implementation, effectively obliterating and decommissioning NFS road 26N23C.
- The culvert currently in place at the intersection of Clear Creek and Seneca Road will be upgraded. A new, larger culvert will be installed to facilitate one of the three water draft sources as well.
- National Forest System OHV trails will be protected from impacts from logging operations. If trails are damaged, they will be repaired to return trails to a usable condition.

DECISION RATIONALE

In reaching my decision, I considered the purpose and need for action, resource specific issues, range of alternatives, environmental consequences, public comments and concerns (described below in the public involvement section), and the best available science. This project has evolved over nine months, attempting to bring together various opinions and suggestions. The Plumas National Forest provided field trips for interested parties and comment periods to find a balanced decision. This decision includes activities necessary for safety, recovery (economics), restoration (reforestation), watershed health, and the local community as well as the public at large. The Chip-munk project considered the proposed action (Alternative A), the no-action (Alternative B), and four alternatives eliminated from detailed study (Alternatives C-F)(Final EA, pages 39-41).

I have also considered the 1988 Plumas National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (PNF LRMP), as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement Record of Decision (SNFPA FSEIS ROD), documents incorporated by reference,

including resource specialist reports and public comments submitted in regards to the Chip-munk Project Final EA and proposed action. The Chip-munk Project Final EA and specialist reports document the environmental analysis and conclusions upon which this decision is based.

I have decided to implement Alternative A, as modified, because the selected alternative: 1) responds to the purpose and need; 2) provides a comprehensive, rigorous, and thorough set of project design criteria, Best Management Practices (BMPs), and Standard Management Requirements (SMRs) (Final EA, Tables 1-8, and Appendices B and C) that are specifically designed to minimize adverse environmental effects; and 3) best responds to the public comments received.

Purpose and Need

Safe Travel along Roadways

As a result of the fire, many trees along National Forest System (NFS) and Plumas County roads were damaged and could fall into the roadway, posing a safety and access hazard to area residents and landowners, Forest Service personnel and contractors, special use permit holders, and the visiting public. It is not uncommon for high, gusty winds associated with winter or summer storms to suddenly blow down many hazardous trees at one time, posing an unacceptable risk to area residents, forest workers, and visitors. It is important to remove these hazardous trees in a timely, efficient, and cost-effective manner so that safe access to affected areas can be restored and normal National Forest operations can be resumed.

The Forest Service is required to maintain roads for access and safety, and the agency routinely removes hazardous trees as part of road maintenance (23 CFR 500.108; 36 CFR 212.4; FSM 7700; FSH 6709.11 27.62d; Hazard Tree Guidelines for Forest Service Facilities and Roads in the Pacific Southwest Region, 2012; Plumas National Forest: Mt. Hough Ranger District Marking Guidelines for Fire-Injured Trees within the Chip-munk Roadside Safety and Hazard Tree Designation, 2013).

Roadside hazard trees will be abated along 95 miles of road or 1,788 acres of NFS land among mixed vegetation burn severity. Roads treated for roadside hazard trees will provide safe access for Forest Service personnel, contractors, special use permit holders, and visitors to the NFS and private lands.

Raw Material for Wood Products Manufacturing

The Forest Service plays a role in providing a wood supply for local manufacturers and sustaining a part of the employment base in rural communities [SNFPA Record of Decision (ROD) 2004, page 4]. The SNPFA provides for salvage logging following wildfires for the objective of recovering economic value from fire-killed trees (SNFPA ROD 2004, page 52).

Salvage timber harvest will be implemented on 3,675 acres including ground-based and skyline logging systems, and within moderately high and high vegetation burn severity. The estimated sawlog volume is from 46 to 65 mmbf and a value, with costs deducted, and estimated at $8.4 million. Alternative A will allow for 158 potential direct and indirect jobs and an associated potential employee income of $5.5 million.

Healthy, Sustainable, Forest Conditions

The Chips Fire burned thousands of acres with high severity resulting in deforested conditions where seed source of desired species is insufficient to naturally regenerate these areas. Without human

intervention, shrub species will dominate these areas for decades and delay re-establishment of forested conditions. The early establishment of conifers through reforestation will expedite forest regeneration and the development of forested conditions.

In addition, as it relates to wildfires, it is current Agency policy (FSM 2471 and 2472) to consider post-fire salvage harvest the functional equivalent of a regeneration harvest and to make a best effort to re-establish forested conditions within five years after salvage harvest.

Site preparation and reforestation will occur on 3,675 acres (treatment units identical to those proposed for salvage timber harvest). Reforestation will be accomplished through planting and natural regeneration. Areas that burned with moderately high to high vegetation burn severity resulting in inadequately stocked forest land will receive preference for planting. The additional work (jackpot burning and 4 miles of temporary roads) increased the project costs by $100,000. Site preparation and reforestation costs are estimated at $1.8 million.

Project Design Criteria, Standard Management Requirements (SMRs), and Best Management Practices (BMPs)

When implementing this project, we will adhere to standards and guidelines to protect important natural and cultural resources, ensuring that any disturbance is eliminated or minimized and mitigated. These measures have been demonstrated to be effective in mitigating potential effects of the proposed activities. The selected alternative and the project design criteria, BMPs, and SMRs reflect a cooperative effort by the Forest Service, other public agencies, and interested members of the public as to the appropriate actions to be taken in order to meet the need for action. Design criteria, BMPs, and SMRs are incorporated into Alternative A to minimize potential harm caused by this project (Final EA, Alternatives, Including the Proposed Action, Design Criteria, pages 14-35; Appendices B and C). Tables 1 – 8 in the Final EA display design criteria for the proposed action and include criteria for actions such as roadside hazard tree removal, salvage timber harvest activities, Riparian Conservation Areas (RCAs), access, and water drafting sources. The criteria identified in the tables include requirements for vegetation burn severity; marking guidelines; ground-based and skyline logging systems; RCA equipment restraints; snag retention; downed woody material retention; landing piles and fireline; RCA buffers for equipment exclusion zones and horizontal slope restrictions in roadside and salvage treatment units; temporary roads, landings, and skid trails; construction and reconstruction of and approaches to water drafting sources; reforestation, site preparation, tree species, and planting spacing. Appendix B includes SMRs for several resources including wildlife, fisheries, hydrology and soils, botany, noxious weeds, and heritage. Appendix B also includes water drafting plans, limited operating periods (LOPs), BMPs, soil and water quality standard protection measures, and monitoring for three resource areas. Appendix C includes Riparian Conservation Objectives (RCOs) and provides justification for entering RCAs for treatment activities. Appendix C provides linkage between design criteria, SMRs, and BMPs and the activities included in this decision. Means to avoid or minimize environmental harm from this decision have been adopted.

How Comments Were Considered

Environmental concerns that were raised by the public during the scoping and public comment period include black-backed woodpeckers; California spotted owls; reforestation; cultural and historical site protection; and motorized routes. The selected alternative addresses these concerns by incorporating

appropriate project design features, SMRs, and BMPs. Approximately 370 acres of snag retention areas will be retained within salvage timber harvest treatment units, in addition to thousands of acres that remain untreated within the Chips Fire perimeter. These large and small patches of untreated burned vegetation will provide habitat for specialized wildlife species. A variety of snag types, sizes, and decay classes will be present on the landscape post treatment. There is a balance between the cumulative acres treated and untreated within the Chips Fire perimeter, where untreated acres greatly exceed those treated. California spotted owl protected activities centers (PACs) will remain untreated, with the exception of felling 100 percent dead roadside hazard trees. In addition, Limited Operating Periods (LOPs) will be applied to PACs where appropriate (Appendix B) and will minimize adverse impacts.

We received public comments concerning post-project retention of burned forest habitat for wildlife species (black-backed woodpecker, California spotted owl, northern goshawk and two bat species). The black-backed woodpecker serves as the Forest Management Indicator Species for snags in burned forest habitat. Our analyses indicated the Chips Fire created approximately 11,561 acres of potentially suitable black-backed woodpecker habitat (greater than 25 percent basal area mortality), and 64 percent of this area burned at high severity (greater than 75 percent basal area mortality). The Chip-munk Project proposes to treat hazard trees and conduct salvage operations on approximately 2,767 acres of potentially suitable black-backed woodpecker habitat. Project design features were developed by the interdisciplinary team to partially abate habitat loss and fragmentation resulting from proposed treatments. Proposed treatments are restricted within 474 acres of potentially suitable black-backed woodpecker habitat along stream corridors (Riparian Conservation Areas), and snag retention areas will maintain an additional 370 acres of potential woodpecker habitat. Further, potential woodpecker habitat within roadside hazard treatment units (243 acres) will still provide foraging habitat post-project implementation. These design features also will mitigate adverse effects to other wildlife that use burned forest habitat (e.g., spotted owl, goshawk, and bats). In particular, prioritizing the placement of snag retention areas near owl and goshawk nesting sites will facilitate access to burned forest habitat for nesting birds, and aside from retaining snags for woodpecker foraging and nesting opportunities, salvage restrictions along stream corridors also will ameliorate fragmentation of burned forest habitat across the project area.

By electing to narrow down the project to treatments that provide the most important restoration and recovery and avoid important habitat areas, my decision will minimize effects to resources. Within the entire Chips Fire area on the Lassen and Plumas National Forests, only 14 percent of the total lands will receive treatment (Final EA, Table 38).

Strategies, questions, and suggestions received through public comments and field trips include: expediting the planning process to implement before deterioration rates increase, use and interpretation of the 2004 SNFPA FSEIS ROD, firewood collection opportunities, and implementation restrictions. The Chip-munk Project planning process was rigorous, thorough, and took a hard look at the proposed activities and the associated effects while expedited. The need to reach a decision for the Chip-munk Project before deterioration rates increase is critical to the overall success of the project. The PNF LRMP, as amended by the 2004 SNFPA FSEIS ROD guides the Chip-munk Project with standards and guidelines, desired conditions specific to land allocations, and overall salvage direction. The Forest Plan is the Plumas National Forest's current management direction. Firewood collection opportunities will be available throughout the project area and will become available to the public once the timber sales are closed. Project specific design criteria address most implementation restrictions and include justifications and source for the restrictions. For example, the allowance of skidding on roads is provided in the Final EA, in Table 1, design criteria for roadside hazard activities, specific to ground-based logging

systems. Those implementation comments not addressed in this NEPA process are incorporated into contract provisions and clauses.

Conclusion

My decision provides for treatments that will have beneficial effects and any potential negative resource impacts have been carefully considered, including additions to the Proposed Action described earlier. As described in the Final EA and specialist reports, the long term benefits of safety, economic recovery, and re-establishing forest conditions outweigh the short term impacts of this project.

My conclusions are based on a thorough review of the best available science, consideration of responsible opposing views, and the acknowledgement of incomplete or unavailable information, scientific uncertainty, and risk. I have determined that this project achieves an appropriate balance between safety, benefits to the local economy, maintaining appropriate forest cover, and protection of forest resources. This environmental analysis process was conducted in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the direction provided in the Forest Service Manual. This decision is consistent with the goals and objectives of the PNF LRMP, as amended.

I recognize that there is controversy surrounding salvage logging in burned forests, as well as re-planting, particularly over effects on wildlife habitat and watersheds. The alternatives were evaluated against all three of the purposes and needs for this project: safe travel along roadways, raw materials for wood products manufacturing, and healthy, sustainable forest conditions. This project was designed to ensure protection of forest resources from significant long-term impacts through implementation of project design criteria, SMRs, BMPs, and monitoring. In addition, timber harvest for salvage will not occur on the majority of public land in the Chips Fires under alternative A, providing important habitat for wildlife species that depend on snags and burned forest, and allowing for a natural shrub successional stage in these untreated areas. Also, the early establishment of conifers through reforestation will expedite forest regeneration and the development of forested conditions, and accelerate the development of habitat structure benefitting old-forest species.

I requested an emergency situation determination (ESD) be made for this project because risk to human health and safety and substantial loss of economic value to the federal government will occur if implementation of this decision is delayed (Request for Emergency Situation Determination (36 CFR 215.10(b)), Chip-munk Recovery and Restoration Project, Plumas National Forest, Letter of April 25, 2013). The Code of Federal Regulations (36 CFR 215.2) defines an emergency situation as “a situation on National Forest System lands for which immediate implementation of all or part of a decision is necessary for relief from hazards threatening human health and safety or natural resources on NFS or adjacent lands; or that would result in substantial loss of economic value to the federal government if implementation of the decision were delayed.”

Delay of implementation will result in substantial timber deterioration before it can be removed. Due to increased deterioration rates, the majority of operations need to be started in the summer of 2013, if we are to recover economic value. The ability of the Plumas National Forest to accomplish the purpose and need for the project is therefore strongly tied to the timing of the salvage harvest treatments, which in turn is dependent upon the project planning timeline. The economic loss of stumpage receipts to the government is estimated at $333,425 to $833,100, if implementation were delayed until 2014 (Request for Emergency Situation Determination (36 CFR 215.10(b)), Chip-munk Recovery and Restoration Project, Plumas National Forest, Letter of April 25, 2013).

This value, while substantial, does not adequately reflect the importance of this project to the local community and to the larger picture of forest management on the Plumas National Forest. By recovering economic value of burned timber in a portion of the Fire area, the Chip-munk Project plays a

vital role in the local economy and will help sustain the infrastructure that is necessary to the management of National Forests. This project is vitally important to help sustain the local industry and needed infrastructure to carry out our fuels reduction and forest health objectives, while protecting forest resources.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

As part of the public involvement process, the agency announced community field trips and meetings to capture public concerns prior to the start of project planning. Two community field trips to the Chips Fire area were held in the fall of 2012. Community meetings were held in Greenville, Quincy and at Gansner Bar in the Feather River Canyon during October 2012.

The proposal was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions in April 2013 and was updated periodically during the analysis. The proposal was put on the Forest Service website and provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping in January and February 2013. The Mt. Hough Ranger District received nine scoping comment letters from individuals, organizations, and interested parties. Using the scoping comments from the public, the interdisciplinary team developed a list of issues to address. A compilation of the scoping comments and a summary of the issues analysis is located in the project record at Mt. Hough Ranger District in Quincy, CA. Using the comments from the public and other agencies, there were no issues identified.

After completing the analysis of impacts, the Final EA was distributed to the public and the comment period began on April 24, 2013 with a legal notice in the *Feather River Bulletin*. A total of three written comments letters on the Final EA were received during the comment period. All comments received and the responses to these comments are contained in the project record. Some comments were incorporated into alternatives eliminated from detailed study in Chapter 2 of the final EA.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

After considering the environmental effects described in the Final EA, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

CONTEXT

The local context of this action is limited to the Chip-munk Project area, on the Mt. Hough Ranger District, Plumas National Forest (Figure 1). Project activities focus on removing roadside hazards; removing salvage timber; constructing and reconstructing of water drafting sources and temporary roads, landings, and skids trails; and site preparation and reforestation in the project area (described in Final EA, pages 5-10, 12-35). The extent of ground disturbance will be limited to 5,464 acres of roadside hazard and salvage timber removal. Site preparation and reforestation will occur within salvage timber harvest treatment units. The total area impacted within the Chips Fire perimeter is 14 percent (Final EA, Table 38). When considering the context of the activities expected to take place within the Chips Fire perimeter, there are no significant effects.

INTENSITY

The intensity of effects was considered in terms of the following:

1. **Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that, on balance, the effect will be beneficial.** My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action (Final EA, Chapter 3). Project benefits include providing: safe access for Forest Service personnel, contractors, special use permit holders, and visitors to the NFS and private lands (Final EA, pages 44-48), economic value of fire-killed trees, contributing to potentially 158 jobs and $5.5 million in employee income (Final EA, page 56), and re-establish forest conditions. No significant adverse direct or indirect effects to the environment from this project were identified during the environmental effects analysis. No significant irreversible or irretrievable commitments of resources, such as loss of soil productivity, water quality, or recreational opportunities, will result from this project. Project design features, SMRs, and BMPs will mitigate adverse effects (Final EA, pages 14-30; Appendices B and C).

   The Chip-munk Project will have no significant effect to economic or social environments because the wood provided to local manufacturers will be sustained for 3-5 years, which in turn is predictable for a project of this nature (Final EA, page 59). The project will have no significant effects because although salvage timber harvest activities will alter vegetation types, site preparation and reforestation activities will return these areas to conifer stands (Final EA, pages 110-111).

2. **The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety**. There will be no significant effects on public health and safety (Final EA, pages 44-48, 362-366). The project involves routine work that has occurred and continues to occur within and near the project area on NFS lands. Signs will be used to warn public users of project activities such as vehicles using roads, vegetation cutting, and equipment usage (required in contract provisions and clauses). Roadside hazard and salvage timber harvest will involve cutting trees, skidding, loading, and hauling with mechanical equipment and logging trucks. Water drafting sources and temporary roads, landings, and skid trails will involve incidental amount of cutting of trees and soil movement, and mechanical equipment. Site preparation and reforestation will involve hand piling, mechanical equipment, and other various treatment options. Watershed improvement activities are routine utilizing mechanical equipment. Roads, trails, and campgrounds within the project area may be closed to the recreating public on a temporary basis for safety reasons during project implementation. These closures are of limited duration (during felling, skidding, loading, hauling, watershed improvement activities, and water drafting source construction or reconstruction)(Final EA, pages 362-366).

3. **Unique characteristics of the geographic area, such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.** There are no park lands or prime farmlands within the project area. The North Fork of the Feather River (NFFR) is categorized as a Wild and Scenic Eligible River, this project is not expected to affect the Wild and Scenic eligibility of the NFFR, and is consistent with maintaining the values of the NFFR (FSM 2354.42d). Unique characteristic of the area include wetlands, riparian conservation areas (RCAs), and historic and cultural resources (Final EA, pages 311-323, 355-362). By using Best Management Practices (BMPs) and RCOs (Appendices B and C), the Chip-munk Project provides protection to wetlands and riparian conservation areas (RCAs) and meets the requirements of the 2004 SNFPA ROD (Final EA, pages 282-287; Appendices B and C).

Furthermore, mitigation measures for watershed improvement activities such as graveling road surfaces, road decommissioning, and culvert replacement (Final EA, pages 37-38).

The Chip-munk Project will not have significant effects on historic or cultural and botanical resources because sites will be avoided by flagging and requiring contractors to exclude these areas from any activity (Intensity factor #8 below; Final EA, pages 355-362, and Appendix B). These mitigations will minimize the effect of the project on soil and water resources such that none of the impacts will be significant.

3. **The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.** The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. The activities included in this decision are routine road, forest vegetation, and watershed management activities and there is no known credible scientific controversy over the impacts of the proposed action. Based on comments received during the public involvement process, there is no substantive scientific controversy related to the effects of the proposed treatment on the human environment (Final EA, pages 44-48, 362-366). Public involvement with interested and affected individuals and agencies throughout the environmental analysis identified concerns regarding the environmental effects of implementing the proposed actions, particularly with regard to implementation, decision timing, and impacts on wildlife species (Final EA, pages 11-12). The Final EA adequately addresses these concerns and discloses the associated environmental effects.

4. **The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.** The Forest Service has considerable experience with actions like the one proposed. The analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk. The possible effects of implementing Alternative A are neither highly uncertain nor will they present unique or unknown risks. The consequences of these actions are known, as described in specialist reports (project record and summarized in the Final EA, Chapter 3).

5. **The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.** The action will not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because it conforms to all existing PNF LRMP direction and is applicable only to the project area (Final EA, pages 4-5). No significant effects are identified (Final EA, Chapter 3), nor does this action influence a decision in principle about any future considerations.

6. **Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.** There are no known significant cumulative effects between this project and other ongoing or planned projects in or adjacent to this project. The effects of other foreseeable future actions as well as past actions and ongoing actions including other ongoing and foreseeable future activities within the Chips Fire perimeter, were included in the specialists' analyses (EA, pages 42-48, 58-59, 62, 80-85, 88-89, 95-97, 100-101, 106-109, 121-127, 104-141, 148-150, 154-156, 161-164, 168-170, 177-179, 187-189, 207-209, 213-214, 218, 221, 237-239, 241-265, 272-281, 289-291, 298, 323, 327, 329, 330-332, 334-335, 339, 343-346, 348, 352, 354, 355, 359-361, 365-367, 369-370, 372-373). Within the entire Chips Fire area on the Lassen and Plumas National Forests, only 14 percent of the total lands will receive treatment (Final EA, Table 38).

7. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed, or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause**

loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. The action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, nor will it cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources because all cultural resources will be avoided by flagging sites and requiring contractors to exclude these areas from any activity. (Final EA, pages 355-362; Appendix B). Furthermore, mitigation factors described above in #3 will minimize the effect of the project on cultural resources such that none of the impacts will be significant.

8. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.** The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species act of 1973, because no federally listed terrestrial, or aquatic wildlife, or botanical species or critical habitat for such species exists within or adjacent to the project area (Final EA, pages 128, 132, 137, 151, 165, 183, 195, 197, 198, 223-224, 275, 336-338, and 340-342).

9. **Whether the action threatens to violate Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment**. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the Final EA (Final EA, pages 4, 63-65, 111-112, 116, 132-134, 282-287, 337-339, 357, and 364). The action is consistent with the 1988 Plumas National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (PNF LRMP), as amended by the 2004 Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment Final Supplemental EIS Record of Decision.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

In addition to the FONSI, I find that this project is consistent with the standards and guidelines for land management activities described in the 1988 Plumas National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (PNF LRMP) as amended by the 2004 Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (SNFPA) FSEIS and ROD. Therefore, this project is consistent with the requirements of the National Forest Management Act of 1976. In addition, the Chip-munk Project complies with the Endangered Species Act (Final EA, pages 132, 137, 183, 198, and 337), the Clean Air Act (Final EA, pages 122-128), the Clean Water Act (Final EA, page 284-286, 335-336), the National Historic Preservation Act (Final EA, page 356-362) and other federal, state, and local laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment (Final EA, Chapter 3).

Administrative Review (Appeal) Opportunities

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to the regulation 36 CFR 215.

The appeal must be filed (regular mail, fax, email, hand-delivery, or express delivery) with the Appeal Deciding Officer: Randy Moore, Regional Forester, USDA Forest Service, Regional Office Region 5, 1323 Club Drive, Vallejo, CA 94592. Appeals may be submitted by FAX (707) 562-9229 or by hand delivery to the Regional Office at the address shown above.

The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered appeals are: 8:00 am to 4:00 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic appeals must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), portable document file (.pdf), or Word (.doc or .docx) to appeals-pacificsouthwest-regional-office@fs.fed.us [Subject: Chip-munk Recovery and Restoration Project]. In cases where no identifiable name is attached to an electronic message, a verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature is one way to provide verification.

Appeals, including attachments, must be filed within 45 days from the publication date of the legal notice of this decision in the Feather River Bulletin, the newspaper of record. Attachments received after the 45-day period will not be considered. The publication date in the Feather River Bulletin, newspaper of record, is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Individuals or organizations who submitted comments during the comment period specified at 36 CFR 215.6 may appeal this decision. The notice of appeal must meet the appeal content requirements at 36 CFR 215.14.

Implementation Date

Implementation may begin immediately upon publication of the legal notice of this decision, because the project involves an emergency situation. The Code of Federal Regulations (36 CFR 215.2) defines an emergency situation as “a situation on National Forest System lands for which immediate implementation of all or part of a decision is necessary for relief from hazards threatening human health and safety or natural resources on NFS or adjacent lands; or that would result in substantial loss of economic value to the federal government if implementation of the decision were delayed.”

Chief of the Forest Service, Thomas L. Tidwell, recognized the importance and urgency of this project in determining that an emergency situation exists for the entire project area as provided for in 36 CFR 215.10 (Emergency Situation Determination, Chip-munk Recovery and Restoration Project, Letter to Regional Forester, Region 5, June 4, 2013).

CONTACT

The Chip-munk Project Final EA and supporting documents are available for public review at the Plumas National Forest, Mt. Hough Ranger District, 39696 Highway 70, Quincy, CA 95971, (530) 283-7619, and online at: http://www.fs.fed.us/nepa/fs-usda-pop.php/?project=41149. It is also possible to navigate to the project website via the Plumas National Forest webpage (www.fs.fed.us/r5/plumas). Select the "Land and Resources Management" tab, then select "Browse through the Forest Projects," and then find the project name. For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Katherine Carpenter (kacarpenter@fs.fed.us), Chip-munk Project Interdisciplinary Team Leader, at 530-283-7619.

Earl W. Ford — 7/30/13

Earl W. Ford
Forest Supervisor
Plumas National Forest

Date

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Persons with disabilities who wish to file a program complaint, please see information above on how to contact us by mail directly or by email. If you require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) please contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD).