

White Mountain National Forest



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of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Eastern
Region



Eastside Road and Trail Repair Project

Lincoln, Grafton County, NH

Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact

Pemigewasset Ranger District

December 2012



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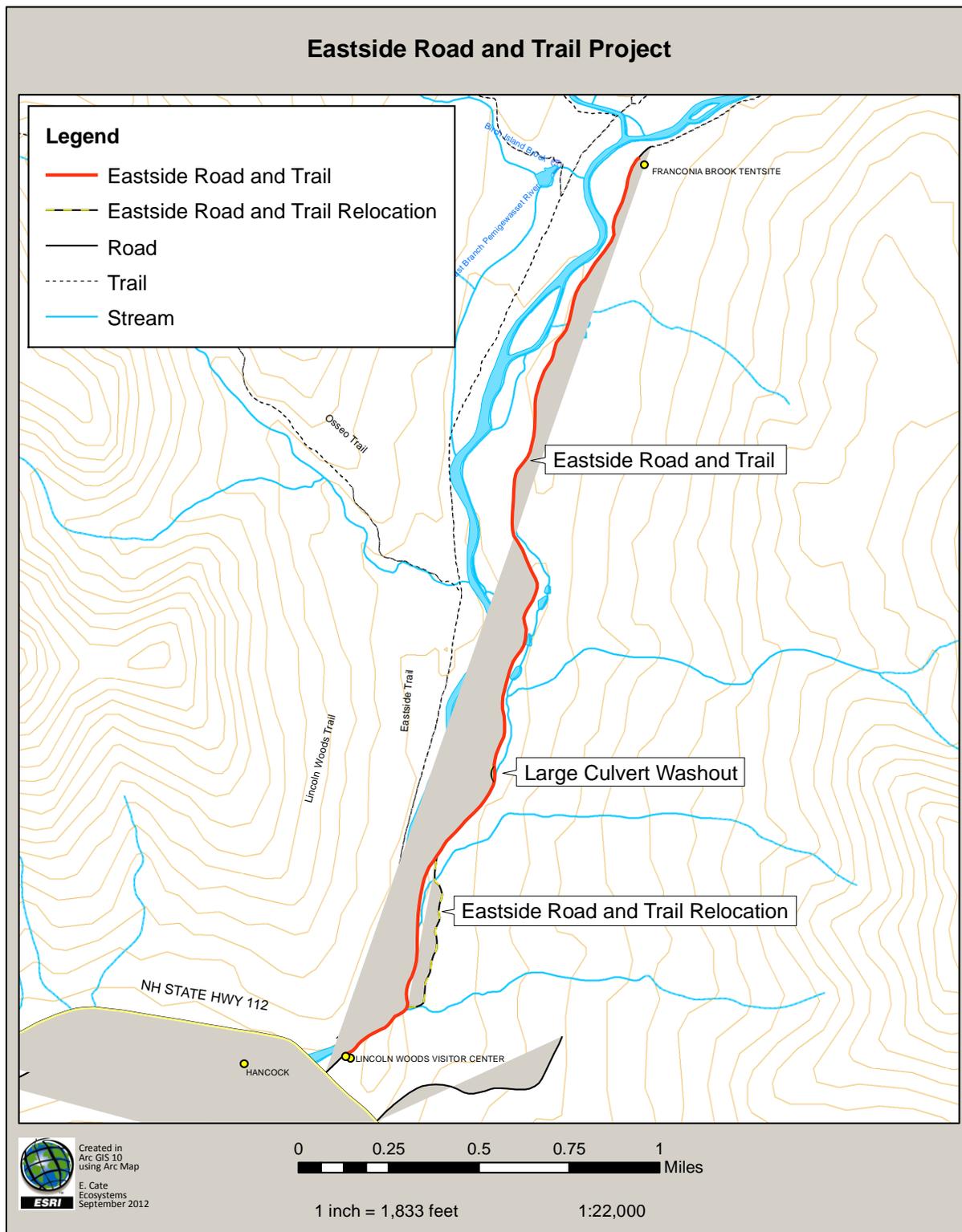
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1 Introduction

This document announces my decision to implement the Eastside Road and Trail Repair Project (Eastside Project) and my finding that this project will not have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment. This Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact incorporate by reference the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Eastside Project dated December 2012 and its supporting project record.

The Eastside Project is located along the Eastside Road, also known as Eastside Trail, which runs along the East Branch of the Pemigewasset River (East Branch) between the Lincoln Woods Visitor Center and Franconia Brook tentsite in Lincoln, NH (See map on page 4). This dual-use route is both a non-motorized trail and an administrative-access road used in managing the tentsite.

2 Purpose and Need

When Tropical Storm Irene swept through the area in August 2011, the East Branch and its tributaries swelled, carrying wood and boulders downstream, scouring streambanks, and overwhelming culverts. In some places just the intensity of the rain caused extensive trail erosion. Damage from the storm is described in the EA and project record. In short, the storm made foot travel more challenging and vehicle travel impossible.

The Eastside Trail leaves from the very popular Lincoln Woods Visitor Center and is a fairly easy hike that accesses the Franconia Brook tentsite and Pemigewasset Wilderness, so it receives a lot of use throughout the year. Repairing the trail is important to maintaining recreation opportunities on the Pemigewasset District and ensuring those opportunities are safe for our visitors. Vehicle access on the Eastside Road is necessary to allow servicing of the vault toilet at the Franconia Brook Tentsite.

Resource specialists evaluating how to restore a safe, stable road in the area identified several undersized or poorly placed culverts along the road. Some culverts are too small for even normal high flows to pass unimpeded and aquatic species are blocked from traveling into tributaries from the East Branch. Substantial work is needed to restore natural hydrology and species movement in the area.

This project has its roots in the White Mountain National Forest’s Land and Resource Management Plan, also known as the Forest Plan, which is based on extensive environmental analysis and collaboration with the public. The Plan documents the agreed-upon balance of uses and activities desired to meet society’s needs while protecting, restoring, and enhancing our natural resources. This project will help the Forest maintain a full range of recreational opportunities and implement Forest Plan direction to restore riparian and aquatic habitats, including moving roads and trails within 100’ of perennial streams (Riparian and Aquatic Habitats G-7, p. 2-25).

3 Decision and Rationale

Decision

I have seen on-the-ground conditions in the project area, considered input from the interdisciplinary team and the public, and reviewed the Environmental Assessment and Forest Plan direction. Based on all this information, I have decided to implement the Proposed Action (Alternative 2) as it is described in the EA.

This project will:

- relocate a section of the existing road away from the East Branch;
- decommission a section of the existing route;
- remove culverts from the abandoned section of road and restore streams to more natural gradient and form;
- replace several undersized culverts;
- replace the culvert that was washed downstream with a bridge and remove the old culvert from the stream;
- repair the trail surface and restore appropriate drainage features to protect the route in the future.

The new segment of trail (map, p. 4) will begin on existing Forest Road (FR) 87B, follow an old skid trail north, and gradually return to the existing trail just north of the southern end of the Pine Island Trail. Trees will be felled along part of the new route and commercial-sized trees will be sold in a small timber sale. The relocation will require two stream crossings, one of which may require removing a large boulder through blasting or other means.

Undersized or poorly situated culverts between Lincoln Woods and FR87B will be replaced with either larger culverts or short bridges to restore proper hydrology and aquatic species passage in these streams.

Decommissioning of the abandoned section of road will include removing culverts and restoring proper drainage for each stream. This may require extensive effort, as discussed in the EA. Both ends of this segment of road will be blocked and signs will be posted to alert users to the hazards of using the decommissioned trail. The new route also will be signed so the public knows how to follow the maintained trail.

A bridge and abutments will be installed where the culvert was washed downstream, which may involve demolishing a large boulder in the stream.

An undersized culvert beyond the washed-out culvert site will be replaced with a larger culvert to minimize the potential for trail erosion during intense rains.

Repairing the road surface will require spreading new surface material, clearing culverts, blading the road surface, and providing appropriate drainage structures.

My decision includes application of all mitigation measures identified in the EA.

Reasons for the Decision

Recreational use of this popular trail is not as safe as it should be due to the eroding river bank along the edge of the trail and the washed-out culvert that is currently replaced with a rock-step crossing. The Eastside Trail is intended to provide a quality recreational opportunity for people of all ages and abilities. This type of opportunity is not abundant on the Forest, given our terrain and emphasis on dispersed recreation. So it is important to me to maintain restore the Eastside Trail to a condition that allows for relatively easy hiking, biking, and skiing in a safe outdoor environment.

Proper watershed and riparian functions are critical to maintain healthy ecosystems, and are important goals in the Forest Plan. This means allowing aquatic species to move freely up and down streams, protecting water quality, and ensuring streams can flow naturally, even during flood events. Moving the Eastside Road away from the unstable river bank gives us the opportunity to improve these ecological functions along the abandoned trail route, restoring aquatic species access and natural streamflows in tributary streams, and reducing the potential for culvert failures in the future. Replacing the washed-

out culvert with a bank-spanning bridge will enable that stream to function more naturally and protect the road from future damage. And restoring vehicle access to the Franconia Brook Tentsite will ensure the toilets are maintained, which reduces the potential for human waste to be concentrated in the riparian area.

The EA demonstrates that the Proposed Action will meet these goals without adversely affecting biological or cultural resources. The relocation will affect the user's experience, taking them farther from the river. However I believe the trail will continue to provide an enjoyable experience and the benefits of improved safety and resource conditions make the trade-off worthwhile.

This decision is based on my review of the project EA and the supporting documentation in the project record, including input from the public and appropriate resource specialists. I am satisfied that the interdisciplinary team conducted a thorough analysis of the two alternatives and that we effectively involved the public.

Alternatives Considered but not Selected

The interdisciplinary team evaluated one other alternative in detail in the Environmental Assessment.

Alternative 1

Analysis of this alternative provides a baseline for evaluating the effects of action alternatives. Under this alternative, none of the activities proposed in the Eastside project would occur at this time. Custodial resource protection, such as law enforcement and periodic trail maintenance would be the only management occurring in the project area.

I did not select Alternative 1 because it would not meet the purpose and need for the project in any way. The trail would continue to be impacted as the East Branch erodes its bank; the toilets at the tentsite would eventually have to be closed; and riparian function would continue to be limited by undersized and poorly aligned culverts. While many recreationists would enjoy the views and sounds of the river, users would have to cross a stream on rocks that are often wet or even submerged and some users would be turned back by the challenge of that crossing. Overall, this alternative would not move the Forest toward the desired condition for this recreation site or our water and riparian resources.

Alternatives Considered but Not Fully Evaluated

Several other alternatives were considered but not analyzed in detail for reasons explained in the EA:

- Establish a very short reroute that only avoids the stretch of trail currently being undermined by the river.
- Reroute the trail onto a slight terrace between the existing route and the proposed route.
- Reroute the road outside the floodplain almost all the way to the tentsite.

4 Public Involvement

This project was listed on the quarterly White Mountain National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) beginning in January 2012, and will remain on the SOPA until after this decision is signed.

On July 30, 2012, a legal notice announcing the availability of the 30-Day Comment Report was published in the *New Hampshire Union Leader*. The report or notification of its availability online was sent to eight people who had asked to be on the project mailing list, state and local agencies, local partners, and others known to have an interest in this project. The 30-Day Comment Report was posted to the Forest's website on July 26, 2012. Flyers announcing the proposed project and inviting people to comment were posted at the Lincoln Woods Visitor Center and on the Eastside Trail to try to reach those who use the trail but are not likely to be reached by Forest Service mailings or the legal notice.

One member of the public asked for additional information but did not provide comments on the project. The only comment received was from the Town of Lincoln. The Town expressed support for the proposed action because it would improve the trail and maintain an important recreation opportunity in the town.

Issues

An issue is a point of debate, dispute, or disagreement regarding anticipated effects of implementing the proposed action. Issues are usually identified by the interdisciplinary team based on comments from the public or other agencies. Occasionally issues arise within the interdisciplinary team if the concerns of all resources cannot be addressed in a proposal. For this project, the only public comment received was supportive of the proposal and all resource concerns

were addressed in the proposed action. Therefore no issues were identified.

5 Findings Required By Other Laws and Regulations

My decision will comply with all current, applicable laws and regulations. I have summarized some pertinent ones below.

National Environmental Policy Act

This Act requires public involvement, and consideration and disclosure of potential environmental effects. The Eastside Road and Trail Repair project environmental analysis was conducted following the procedures and requirements contained in this Act. An interdisciplinary team fully evaluated and disclosed the environmental effects of the proposed project based upon field study, resource inventory and survey, the best available science, and their professional expertise. The entirety of documentation for this decision demonstrates compliance with this Act.

Forest Plan Consistency (National Forest Management Act)

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) requires that all site-specific project activities be consistent with direction in the applicable Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). This project implements the White Mountain National Forest Plan. As required by NFMA Section 1604(i), I find this project to be consistent with the Forest Plan including goals, objectives, desired future conditions, and Forest-wide and Management Area standards and guidelines.

Clean Water Act

The beneficial uses of project area streams would be maintained during and following project implementation. As the soil and water resources and aquatic species and habitat sections of the EA make clear, application of Forest Plan standards and guidelines, best management practices, and project design features will ensure protection of water resources. In fact, this project is designed reduce erosion and sedimentation in the long-term.

Executive Orders 11990 (Wetlands) and 11988 (Floodplains)

As discussed in my decision rationale and several sections of the EA, this project is designed to move an existing road out of the floodplain, restore natural hydrology to several streams, and improve the ability of local streams to deal

with high flows during future storm events. During implementation, wetlands and floodplains would be protected through the use of Forest Plan standards and guidelines and best management practices. Therefore this decision is in compliance with these Executive Orders.

6 Finding of No Significant Impact

Findings

Based on my review of the Eastside Road and Trail Repair project EA and documentation, I have determined that the activities included in Alternative 2 will not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment. Therefore, preparation of an environmental impact statement is not required. This finding is based on the context and intensity of the actions (40 C.F.R. § 1508.27) as explained below.

Context

The significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts and varies with the setting. In the case of a site-specific action, significance usually depends on the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Both short- and long-term effects are relevant (40 CFR 1508.27).

This decision and the project EA are tiered to the Forest Plan Record of Decision and incorporate by reference the Forest Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), which analyzed and disclosed effects of potential Forest management at a larger scale. The activities planned in the Eastside project are similar to others completed on the White Mountain National Forest and are within the range of effects anticipated in the Forest Plan FEIS.

The environmental effects of this project are analyzed at varying scales (e.g. the project area, watershed, or town), as described for each resource in Chapter 3 of the EA. I have reviewed the cumulative effects of past management, combined with this project and reasonably foreseeable future actions as they are analyzed in Chapter 3 of the EA, and feel that the context of this decision is limited to the land in and adjacent to the project area. The project's relatively small scale limits its effects. The analysis in Chapter 3 indicates that project design and application of Forest Plan standards and guidelines and best management practices will minimize negative impacts to all resources. Given the short-term and localized nature of impacts described in the EA, the Eastside project will have no

measurable effects at the regional or national levels and consideration of significance will focus on the local setting.

This decision, and the environmental assessment and effects analysis on which it is based, applies only to this local area. After a thorough review of the effects analysis contained in the EA, I find that this project does not establish a local, regional, or national precedent, nor does it have any substantial applicability beyond the bounds of the White Mountain National Forest.

Intensity

Intensity is a measure of the severity, extent, or quantity of effects, and is based on information from Chapter 3 of the EA and the project record. I have determined that the interdisciplinary team considered the effects of this project appropriately and thoroughly with an analysis that is responsive to concerns and issues raised by the public. They took a hard look at the environmental effects using relevant scientific information and their knowledge of site-specific conditions gained from numerous field visits. My finding of no significant impact is based on the intensity of effects using the ten factors identified in 40 CFR 1508.27b.

- 1. Impacts that 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.***

As described in the EA (Chapter 3), there are likely to be both beneficial and adverse effects to certain resources from taking the actions proposed in Alternative 2. In reaching my finding of no significant impact, I did not ignore or trivialize negative effects by “offsetting” them with beneficial effects. The EA demonstrates that, due to careful project design that incorporates protective measures (Forest Plan standards and guidelines, best management practices, and site-specific design features), the possible negative effects are minor and of short duration, and are not directly, indirectly, or cumulatively significant.

- 2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.***

As discussed in the EA and Recreation specialist’s report, this project was designed, in part, to reduce an existing risk to public safety. As long as there is no crossing where the large culvert washed downstream, users of the trail will have to cross the stream using a rock-step ford. While rocks for this ford have

been carefully placed to provide a stable crossing, it still requires users to go down and up the streambank and cross on rocks that are often wet. Alternative 2 will restore a stable, dry crossing at this location.

In addition, a short stretch of the Eastside Trail is currently eroding into the East Branch of the Pemigewasset River. While the trail remains quite wide at this point and footing is secure, it is likely the river will continue to erode away the trail over time. The reroute in my decision will take the public away from this unstable section of trail.

The existing trail would remain open during construction of the reroute, providing the public with a safe trail away from construction activity. Construction at the ends of the reroute and the new bridge location will be timed and implemented in a way to minimize hazards to trail users.

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.

This project is on a trail leading to the Pemigewasset Wilderness, but would not occur in the Wilderness. All road and bridge construction activity will be more than a mile from the Wilderness boundary so noise should not alter the wilderness experience. The reroute and new bridge at the culvert wash-out also are outside Roadless Area Conservation Rule inventoried roadless areas and areas that were included in the Forest Plan revision roadless inventory. Noise from these activities may be audible in inventoried roadless areas, but it would be short in duration and would not alter the potential for these areas to be part of the next inventory. Nor would trail tread repair, which would occur in an area that was part of both inventories, affect consideration of the area in future inventories.

The East Branch of the Pemigewasset is identified in the Forest Plan as eligible for designation under the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act. The stretch of river in the project area is considered eligible for classification as either a recreational or scenic river. As discussed in the EA, this project will not adversely affect any resource and will result in benefits to the East Branch and its floodplain. Therefore I find that my decision will not affect the eligibility of this river for designation under the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act.

There are no park lands, prime farmlands, research natural areas, or ecologically

critical areas in or near the project area, and therefore none would be adversely affected. The interdisciplinary team spent many days in the project area and designed the project to protect wetlands, riparian areas, and cultural resources. As a result, the EA clearly demonstrates there will be no significant effects to any of these resources (EA Chapter 3). The selected alternative will not violate standards set for Outstanding Resource Waters for New Hampshire (EA, Soil and Water Resources section).

4. *The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.*

In the context of the National Environmental Policy Act, controversy refers to a substantial dispute in the scientific community regarding the effects of an action, not social opposition. Our contacts with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and State Historic Preservation Office did not identify any scientific controversy regarding the direct, indirect, or cumulative effects of this project (see project record). The interdisciplinary team for this project considered available scientific literature (see project record) and found no controversy related to the predicted effects. Based on these factors, and the analysis provided in the EA and project record, I have concluded that the effects of Alternative 2 on the quality of the human environment are not controversial.

5. *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.*

The White Mountain National Forest has considerable on-the-ground experience with the types of activities to be implemented in this project, under similar conditions. The range of site characteristics are similar to those taken into consideration and disclosed in the Forest Plan FEIS, Chapter 3, and the effects of this project are within the range anticipated in that FEIS and the Forest Plan Record of Decision. The effects analysis (EA Chapter 3) demonstrates that the effects of these activities are not uncertain or significant and do not involve unique or unknown risks. The body of knowledge gained through years of project-level and programmatic monitoring, contract inspections, and review of applied research (see project record) provides a basis for the effects analysis in the EA and supports my determination that there will be no highly uncertain effects or unique or unknown risks associated with this project.

6. *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.*

This is not a precedent-setting decision. Similar actions occur regularly across the Forest. The effects of implementing Alternative 2 disclosed in Chapter 3 of the EA are within the range of effects of these similar actions. They also are within the range of effects disclosed in the Forest Plan FEIS. The implementation of Alternative 2 does not make a commitment to do anything in other areas on the White Mountain National Forest or any other national forest. It will not set a regional or national precedent. For these reasons, I have determined this action does not establish a precedent for future actions with significant impacts. All actions are consistent with the Forest Plan so this is not a decision in principal.

7. *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.*

Chapter 3 of the EA discloses the combined effects of this project with other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions. None of the actions included in the Proposed Action would create significant impact alone or when considered with other actions. The interdisciplinary team chose cumulative effects analysis areas and timeframes that would most thoroughly examine and predict effects (see project record). Based on the analysis in the EA, and incorporating by reference the range of effects predicted in the Forest Plan FEIS, I have determined that implementing the Proposed Action will not result in significant cumulative effects.

8. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.*

Surveys were conducted for archaeological sites and historic properties or areas that might be affected by this decision (project record). The only known cultural site potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places in the Project Area is the spur line of the East Branch & Lincoln logging railroad. A road already exists where the relocated road would cross this spur line, so there would be minimal impact on the spur line. The findings and recommendations

from the inventory and report were submitted to the New Hampshire State Historic Preservation Office, and they concurred with our finding that there would be no adverse impacts to any cultural resources. Therefore I find that this decision complies with the National Historic Preservation Act and the Archaeological Resources Protection Act.

9. 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 Endangered Species Act requires that federal activities not jeopardize the continued existence of any species federally listed or proposed as threatened or endangered, or result in adverse modification to such species' designated critical habitat. As required by this Act, potential effects of this decision on listed species have been analyzed and documented in a Biological Evaluation (see project record). As disclosed in the Biological Evaluation, this project will have no impact on any Regional Forester's Sensitive plant or animal species. It "may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect" individual Canada lynx and is consistent with direction in the WMNF Plan for protecting Canada lynx habitat.

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

All applicable laws for the protection of the environment are incorporated into the standards and guidelines in the White Mountain National Forest Plan. Alternative 2 complies with the Forest Plan. I find that none of the actions in this decision threatens to violate applicable Federal, State, or local laws or other requirements to protect the environment.

7 Administrative Appeal, Implementation Date and Contact

In accordance with 36 CFR 215.12(e)(1), this decision is not subject to appeal. Therefore implementation of this decision may begin immediately.

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Stacy Lemieux at email: slemieux@fs.fed.us, or by phone at (603-536-6222), or by FAX (603-536-3865). Additional information about this decision also can be found on the White Mountain National Forest web page at:

<http://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/whitemountain/landmanagement/projects>.

SARAH HANKENS
Acting District Ranger
Responsible Official

Date