

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

SOQUEL DITCH BRIDGE REPLACEMENT PROJECT

**U.S. FOREST SERVICE
BASS LAKE RANGER DISTRICT
SIERRA NATIONAL FOREST
MADERA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA**

BACKGROUND AND LOCATION

The Forest Service prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Soquel Ditch Bridge Replacement Project in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations. The Soquel Ditch Bridge is located in the Sierra National Forest Sky Ranch road (6S10) Section 16, Township 6 South, Range 22 East, in Madera County, California (see Figure 1).

The Soquel Ditch Bridge was built to standards that are not used today, and does not have adequate capabilities to serve current traffic demand of the area. Also, the bridge is no longer adequate to sufficiently accommodate traffic because of its structural deficiencies. The superstructure steel trusses are severely rusted, the reinforced-concrete deck has broken up and the existing lead-based paint coating has largely failed and widespread corrosion is attacking the steel trusses. In addition, the stream-right abutment is sitting on erodible rock and has been sufficiently undermined leaving the footings partially exposed. A new bridge built with greater load-bearing capacity is needed to accommodate today's typical vehicles used for all types of forest management activities including, but not limited to, forest fire suppression, timber harvest, and vegetation management.

The EA (page 6) describes the purpose and need for action, of which the key points are:

1. Improve public safety within the combine use area level 3 road.
2. Replace the functionally obsolete and structurally deficient bridge.
3. Eliminate the weight limit restriction posted on the bridge.

No issues were identified during the scoping and comment periods. Issues are points of disagreement, debate, or dispute about the potential for the Project to have adverse effects and are used to formulate alternatives to the proposed action.

DECISION

Based upon my review of the analysis documented in the EA and associated Project record, lack of comments received from interested parties, and direction from the SNF Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP), as amended, I have decided to implement alternative 2, described in detail in the EA (pages 9-11).

Alternative 2 best meets the purpose and need for providing access for future forest management, firefighting and other administrative uses. The replacement would maintain access to the dispersed camping areas and to roads popular for OHV use from Forest Road 6S10. Alternative 2 follows current guidance from the SNF LRMP and meets the Forest Service's current design standards, which follows American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) standard HS-20. Design elements that further detail management actions, mitigate environmental consequences, and establish priorities for implementation are found on pages 17-27 of the EA.

Under alternative 2, the SNF will remove the existing bridge and construct a new bridge in its place that meets Forest Service design standards for bridges. Alternative 2 requires two phases: removal of the old bridge structure and construction of the new bridge. The new bridge dimension are slightly larger and wider than the existing bridge, but it will be constructed in using the similar alignment and will be extended 10 feet to the south-end and 18 feet to the north-end of the bridge existing location. Construction activities will begin in the spring of 2015, as soon as conditions allow in May or June, and total time to complete both phases will be approximately 90-120 days. The bridge will be temporarily closed to ensure public safety during construction; detour signs will be placed at the junctions of Sky Ranch Road and 06S47Y/06S90 (southbound) and at the junction of Sky Ranch Road and 06S72Y (northbound) to direct motor vehicles.

DECISION RATIONALE

My decision to implement alternative 2 considered existing conditions, meeting the purpose and needs for the Project, environmental effects, and collaboration. My conclusion is based on a review of the record that shows a thorough analysis using the best available science. I also considered direction provided in the SNF LRMP, environmental laws (e.g. Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act), and related regulations and policies. I believe that the selection of this alternative best meets all the components of the purpose and need; considers the issues; ensures natural and cultural resource protection; and results in movement toward ecological restoration of the Project area.

The key considerations I used in making my decision include:

1. Alternative 2 meets the purpose of the Project to improve public safety on a ML 3 road. The new double lane bridge will improve the traffic flow and interaction of the well diverse road users (e.g. hunters, people riding motorcycles or ATVs, and trucks hauling trailers).
2. This alternative will also replace the obsolete and structurally deficient bridge. It will meet the FS's current design standards, which follow AASTHO standards HS-20.

3. Alternative 2 will also eliminate the weight limit restriction posted on the bridge. It will allow emergency vehicles and equipment critical for responding to fires on the northern SNF to pass over the bridge, and let any timber hauling and other vegetation management activities occur through a more direct route and, consequently, will be more cost effective.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered two other alternatives in detail. The alternatives considered but not selected are briefly described below along with the reasons for their non-selection.

Alternative 1 (No action)

The No Action alternative was not selected because it does not meet the purpose and need of providing a bridge that meet's the Forest Service current design factors and that can be used by larger vehicles used for variety of forest management activities. The EA documents the environmental analysis and conclusions upon which this decision is based (EA, pg. 8-9).

Alternative 3

Alternative 3 (short bridge) was considered in an effort to have the less impact and disturbance on the area. This alternative would have replaced the bridge with a shorter bridge. This bridge would require larger concrete footings, abutments, and wing walls. It would also require heavy equipment to access the streambed of the Siphon Mid Ditch. Additional costs associated with larger quantities of concrete would be incurred (EA, pg. 12).

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The Project was originally listed in the December 2013 issue of the SNF Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA). The SNF distributes the SOPA quarterly and it is available on the internet [<http://www.fs.fed.us/sopa/forest-level.php?110515>].

A mailing list was compiled of federal, tribal, state, and local agencies, as well as individuals and organizations interested or determined to be potentially impacted by the proposed project. Scoping documents that include a discussion of the proposed project, a map showing the project location, and a scoping comment form were send on December 24, 2013, to 87 individuals, organizations, agencies, and tribes on the mailing list. An announcement was also posted on the SNF website. At the end of the scoping period, no responses had been received.

On April 09, 2014, the EA was released for 30-day public comment period and a legal notice was published in The Fresno Bee. Interested individuals, organizations, agencies, and tribes were notified of the availability of the EA by letter and email. No responses were received during the official 30-day comment period. Due to the lack of comments, no party had standing for objection and therefore no objection period took place.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACTS

After considering the environmental effects of my decision described in the EA (pg. 17-26), I determined that my decision will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment, considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27); therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I relied on the Soquel Ditch Bridge Replacement Project EA and Project record in making this determination. I base my finding on the following:

Context

The Project is a site specific action that by itself does not have international, national, region-wide, or statewide importance. The Project is located on 0.4 acres within the SNF. The discussion of significance criteria that follows applies to the intended action and is within the context of local importance in the area associated with the Bass Lake Ranger District.

Intensity

I considered the following ten elements of impact intensity (40 CFR 1508.27b) in assessing the potential significance of the Project effects.

1. **Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse.** My FONSI is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action. All practical means to avoid or minimize environmental harm have been adopted (EA, pg. 17-26). Biological Evaluations (BEs), Biological Assessments (BAs) and specialist reports prepared for this Project are available upon request in the Project record (unless noted in the Project record index). Those documents provide the basis for the following determinations.
 - a. Alternative 2 may result in noise impacts to terrestrial wildlife species, but they are not expected to be significant because of the limited location of activity. (EA, pg. 17-18).
 - b. The implementation of alternative 2 will result in a minimal direct effect in transportation but will be only during the construction time. Traffic will be diverted to adjacent roads (EA, pg. 15).
 - c. Water quality will have short-term effects in the form of increased sedimentation. (EA, pg. 15-16).
2. **The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.** Implementation of Alternative 2 will improve public safety by improving the traffic flow in the area, eliminating the load restriction of the bridge, and improving access to emergency vehicles and heavy loads to the area. There will be no significant effects on public health and safety because implementation of bridge replacement activities will be conducted in a safe manner to protect the public. Construction associated with the bridge replacement will be completed using professional project design and implementation.
3. **Unique characteristic of the geographic area, such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, wild and scenery byways, or ecologically critical areas.** Unique characteristics for this Project are defined as: proximity to historical or cultural sites since these are the only relevant unique geographic areas with the Project area. This was concluded after the existing bridge was inventoried and determined not to be eligible for listing under the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA).

4. **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. No comments were received by the public or any interested party on this Project. For this project, we integrated studies, monitoring results, and published research findings to support our analysis. I find that the best available science was used and that the effects on the quality of human environment are not likely to be highly controversial from a scientific or technical standpoint. The effects are documented in the EA (pg. 17-26).
5. **The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.** The SNF has considerable experience with construction improvements similar to the proposed action and utilize the corresponding mitigation measures. The analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk (EA, pg. 17-26).
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.** Alternative 2 is project-specific and not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects as the project area and construction activities are confined to the bridge site at Siphon Mid Ditch. Any future projects will need to consider all relevant scientific, site-specific information available at that time, and complete an independent analysis of environmental consequences. Alternative 2 does not involve future connected actions that have not already been addressed in this document.
7. **Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.** Based on the cumulative effects analysis noted in the EA (i.e., hydrology, special status aquatic and plant species, cultural resources and transportation) and documented in each specialist report available in the Project record, there will be no significant cumulative effects (EA, pg. 17-26).

Alternative 2 will increase public safety within the area, increase traffic flow and reduce the chances of an accident. There will be short-term cumulative adverse effects to water quality in the form of increased sedimentation but based on the scale of these activities, the cumulative effects will not be significant to this resource.

8. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, 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 effect on districts, sites, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) because alternative 2 will comply with the Regional Programmatic Agreement. In addition, design criteria are included in alternative 2 to eliminate or reduce the level of effects. With compliance with this agreement and the implementation of design criteria (EA, pg. 9-10) alternative 2 will have no effect to cultural and historic resources.
9. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect an Endangered or Threatened species or its habitat 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. It has been determined that either of these species' elevation ranges do not include the project area; or the species' geographic ranges do not encompass the project area; or the project area does not contain the habitat required by these species (EA, pg. 19).

10. **Whether the action threatens to violate Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.** Alternative 2 is in compliance with federal, state, and local laws and other requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

The FS Manual (FSM) provides additional National Forest Management Act (NFMA) management direction, regarding species viability. FSM 2670.32 provides direction to avoid or minimize impacts to species whose viability has been identified as a concern.

Based on the water resource report, alternative 2 complies with the Clean Water Act by implementing the Best Management Practices BMPs (EA, pg. 12-14). The cumulative water effects analysis (CWE) determined that alternative 2 would not degrade water quality relative to the existing condition (EA, pg. 21-22).

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS OR REGULATIONS

The planning and decision-making process for this project was conducted in accordance with all applicable laws, regulations, policies and plans. The Project conforms to the SNF LRMP by incorporating appropriate Standards and Guidelines and desired conditions.

NATIONAL FOREST MANAGEMENT ACT AND 36 CFR REGULATIONS: Alternative 2 complies with the SNF LRMP. This Project incorporates all applicable forest-wide standards and guidelines and management area directions as they apply to the project area. This Project is also in compliance with the SNF Forest Plan goals and objectives. All required interagency review and coordination have been accomplished.

Effects on sensitive species and Management Indicator Species (MIS) that have potential habitat in the project area were also considered. A Wildlife Report and Biological Evaluation for threatened, endangered, and sensitive species were prepared for this project; effects are summarized in the EA (pg. 17-21). It was determined that Alternative 2 is not likely to result in a trend toward federal listing of loss of viability for sensitive species and will not contribute to a change in the forest-wide population or habitat trends for MIS.

NATIONAL HISTORICAL PRESERVATION ACT (NHPA); ARCHEOLOGICAL RESOURCES PROTECTION ACT; AMERICAN INDIAN RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT; EXECUTIVE ORDER (CULTURAL RESOURCES): Cultural resource surveys within the Project area were conducted in accordance with inventory protocols approved by the State Historic Officer. Native American tribes and communities were consulted during public scoping. No comments were received.

ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT: Endangered Species Act (ESA) requires that Federal agencies consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), as appropriate, to ensure that our actions do not jeopardize the continued existence of species listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA, or destroy or adversely modify designated critical habitat. A Wildlife Report and BA for threatened and endangered species was completed. The Wildlife Specialist determined that there are no threatened or endangered species and their habitat that would be adversely affected as a result of the Project (EA, pg. 17-21).

CLEAN WATER ACT: Alternative 2 complies with the Clean Water Act. By employing soil and water mitigation measures, the Alternative 2 will have no long-term or adverse effects to perennial waters or watersheds.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW (APPEAL) OPPORTUNITES

As no comments were received during the official 30-day comment period, this decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12. Implementation may begin immediately.

CONTACT

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Antonio Cabrera, Engineer, Sierra National Forest Supervisor's Office, 1600 Tollhouse Road, Clovis CA 93611. Phone (559) 297-0706 Ext. 4842.



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