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Lolo National Forest Species of Conservation Concern Identification Process

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Introduction

This document outlines the Northern Region's approach in identifying species of conservation concern (SCC) for development of the Lolo National Forest's Revised Land Management Plan.

[The 2012 Planning Rule](#) (36 CFR 219) defines a species of conservation concern (SCC) as "a species, other than a federally recognized threatened, endangered, proposed or candidate species, that is known to occur in the plan area and for which the regional forester has determined that the best available scientific information indicates substantial concern about the species' capability to persist over the long-term in the plan area" (36 CFR 219.9).

Direction for identifying SCC is in the [Forest Service handbook \(FSH\) for land management planning](#) (i.e., the planning directives) at FSH 1909.12, chapter 10, section 12.52 and at chapter 20, section 21.22a. Also central to the SCC identification process is the use of best available scientific information (BASI), which is clarified at FSH 1909.12, Zero Code, section 07. The Northern Region considered a variety of sources in its pursuit of BASI, including but not limited to peer reviewed articles; scientific assessments; observational data; expert opinion; and other scientific information generated or managed by the Forest Service, other government agencies, tribal entities, and the public.

Process

Determine which species to consider for SCC status

During the assessment process, staff from the planning team and regional office queried spatial observation records maintained by the Montana Natural Heritage Program¹ (NHP) of all species having at least one observation record on National Forest System lands in the plan area. The biologists then queried those records for species that met at least one category in sections A-I below.

The Montana NHP observation database was used because it is the most comprehensive, reliable, and up-to-date source of documented species occurrences on NFS lands in Montana. The NHP, which is part of the international NatureServe network, manage statewide observational data, occurrence records, and other information for species and habitats of conservation interest. The Forest Service, other agencies, and the public all contribute observation records to the NHP's statewide data repository. The definitions of "observation" and "occurrence", as used in the animal and plant evaluations, are from the Montana Natural Heritage Program. An observation is a visual, specimen, genetic, or other documentation of a species at an occurrence with an assigned spatial precision during a given time period. An occurrence is a documented location of a specimen collection or species/population observation.

The categories of species to consider originate from the final planning directives at FSH 1909.12, chapter 10, section 12.52. A species meeting any one category is further considered for SCC status regardless of whether it meets any other category, provided there is at least one observation record of the species on National Forest System lands in the plan area. The categories are:

¹ This may include standalone GIS files obtained from the NHP or use of the Montana NHP's Species Snapshot tool, available at <http://mtnhp.org/SpeciesSnapshot/>

- NatureServe global (G) or intraspecific taxon (T) ranks of 1 or 2².
- NatureServe G3 ranks (plants and vertebrate animals only)¹. G3 invertebrate species are not evaluated because they often lack reliable characteristics for field identification, and commonly, there is insufficient scientific information available to indicate substantial concern (e.g., data is very limited on plan area distribution, abundance, habitat use, trends, relevant threats, and life history characteristics). Neither vertebrate nor invertebrate species with higher ranks (e.g., G4, G5) are automatically considered because they are reasonably secure at the global level, and if there is concern at the plan level, they will be identified in category I. This approach is consistent with FSH 1909.12 chapter 10, section 12.52d(3)(a).
- Montana state (S) ranks of 1 or 2.¹ The Montana state ranks, while assigned by the Montana NHP, are also reflected in the Montana Species of Concern (SOC) list by Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks and Montana NHP. Higher numerical ranks (e.g., S3, S4, S5) were not included in category E regardless of whether they are Montana SOC because they indicate relatively secure conservation status at the statewide level; concern at the plan level would be identified in category I.
- Delisted (removed) from the Endangered Species Act list within the last five years, or delisted and still monitored by the authoritative regulatory agency.³
- Positive “90-day findings” made in response to federal listing petitions.²
- Threatened or endangered designations by federally recognized tribes or the State in which the planning area occurs in².
- SCC on adjoining National Forests (i.e., Nez Perce Clearwater, Flathead, and Helena – Lewis and Clark).
- Regional Forester’s sensitive species in the plan area⁴.
- Local conservation concern due to significant threats to populations or habitats, declining trends in populations or habitat, restricted ranges or habitats, or low population numbers. This category of species may be identified through public comments and from conversations with local biologists from the Forest Service, other federal agencies, Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks, Tribes, and local groups or individuals with scientific expertise.

Determine BASI for each species

Planning team and regional office staff research and compile BASI for all species meeting one or more of the categories for consideration described above. This includes reviewing the scientific information provided by any source, including other agencies, Tribes, and the public. The information is documented in a concise, transparent format that is publicly available on completion. Information sought relates to the habitat, distribution, abundance, population and habitat trends, threats, life history, and other information relevant to the population of the species using the plan area.

² Statuses obtained from the Montana NHP. See <http://fieldguide.mt.gov/StatusCodes.aspx#msrc> for definitions and more information.

³ Statuses obtained from US Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service.

⁴ The planning directives do not require consideration of Regional Forester’s sensitive species, but these species were considered because SCC have not yet been identified for all adjoining units (i.e., Bitterroot, Beaverhead – Deerlodge, Kootenai, and Idaho Panhandle).

Evaluate BASI to Identify SCC

The planning team and regional office staff, in coordination with Lolo NF staff and other experts as needed, evaluate the BASI to determine which species they recommend be identified as SCC. The initial list of potential SCC (PSCC) is published in the [Assessment](#) for the Lolo National Forest Land Management Plan and on the [Northern Region's SCC webpage](#). The evaluations are based on criteria contained in the planning directives at FSH 1909.2, chapter 10, section 12.52c. The same criteria are used for identifying both PSCC and SCC. Summary rationale are provided for all PSCC recommendations, including those species found not to meet the criteria for SCC. The recommendations are then provided to the Regional Forester for ultimate identification as SCC.

The criteria for identifying PSCC and SCC are:

- The species must be native to and known to occur in the plan area.
 - ◆ A species is “known to occur” if, at the time of plan development, the best available scientific information indicates that it is established or becoming established on NFS lands in the plan area. We applied NatureServe timelines⁵ to species observation records in the plan area to differentiate which species have sufficient information to determine they are currently known to occur in the plan area from those only known to historically occur in the plan area. NatureServe’s timelines were used as best available scientific information to establish when past observations are not enough evidence to conclude that the species is known to occur in the plan area at this time. Species with no observations from the past 40 years (since 1981) were considered historic per NatureServe.
 - ◆ A species with individual occurrences in a plan area that are merely “accidental” or “transient,” or are well outside the species’ existing range at the time of plan development, is not established or becoming established in the plan area. If the range of a species is changing so that what is becoming its "normal" range includes the plan area, an individual occurrence is not considered transient or accidental.
 - ◆ Species are removed from further consideration if they were designated by the state NHP as extirpated (SX) or historic (SH)².
 - ◆ Observation records are reviewed and excluded from further review if the point location or description was too imprecise or vague to determine whether the observation actually occurred in the plan area. These types of records most commonly originate from historical documentation that provided only broad reference to locations. However, it is important to note that exclusion of these records would only result in dropping a species from further consideration if more precise records for the species were not available within the planning area.
- The best available scientific information must indicate substantial concern about the species’ capability to persist over the long term in the plan area.
 - ◆ In general, substantial concern is best demonstrated by some combination of a decreasing population (abundance or distribution), decreasing habitat, or significant threats, particularly when greater than expected under natural variation and the population in the plan area is very small. Other factors considered during this evaluation included abundance, geographic distribution, reproductive potential, dispersal capabilities, and other demographic and life

⁵ NatureServe describes their guidelines for ranking species as historical occurrences at <https://fieldguide.mt.gov/statusCodes.aspx#msrc:rank>.

history characteristics of the species that could influence long-term persistence in the plan area. This approach is based on best available scientific information in conjunction with professional expertise of planning team and regional office biologists.

- ◆ Rarity alone typically is not considered a substantial concern unless accompanied by one or more of the three general conditions listed in (B)(i) immediately above, or there are other prominent circumstances leading to concern for long-term persistence in the plan area. Most species in any given community are naturally rare (Magurran and Henderson 2003, McGill et al. 2007), so low abundance is not necessarily cause for substantial concern.
- Rationale for not identifying species as SCC include:
 - ◆ If the species is secure and its continued long-term persistence in the plan area is not at risk based on knowledge of its abundance, distribution, lack of threats to persistence, trends in habitat, or responses to management.
 - ◆ Insufficient scientific information is available to conclude that there is a substantial concern about the species' capability to persist in the plan area over the long term. Lack of sufficient scientific information includes having limited inventory data resulting from low survey effort, lack of effective detection methods, or, in the case of purported population declines, lack of reasonably consistent monitoring methods among trend monitoring periods that would preclude meaningful comparison. The availability of information about other factors noted in the rationale spreadsheet was also considered.

The Regional Forester identifies SCC

The Regional Forester reviews the recommendations provided by planning team and regional office specialists to verify that BASI has been used in the species evaluations. The Regional Forester then identifies SCC for the plan area, through a letter to the Forest Supervisor. The letter and the evaluation documents are made publicly available on the Regional SCC webpage at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r1/landmanagement/planning/?cid=fseprd500402>

Review the documentation and the list of SCC as warranted by BASI

The SCC identification process is iterative, and any or all portions of it may be repeated in response to public comments or the availability of new scientific information. The list of species identified as SCC may change over time in response to new BASI. For example, new information received during the Assessment's public comment period resulted in additional species being evaluated and identified as SCC by the Regional Forester.

References

- Magurran, A.E., and Henderson, P.A. 2003. Explaining the excess of rare species in natural species abundance distributions. *Nature* 422 (6933): 714-716 pp. 10.1038/nature01547
- McGill, B.J., Etienne, R.S., Gray, J.S., Alonso, D., Anderson, M.J., Benecha, H.K., Dornelas, M., Enquist, B.J., Green, J.L., He, F., Hurlbert, A.H., Magurran, A.E., Marquet, P.A., Maurer, B.A., Ostling, A., Soykan, C.U., Ugland, K.I., and White, E.P. 2007. Species abundance distributions: moving beyond single prediction theories to integration within an ecological framework. *Ecology Letters* 10 (10): 995-1015 pp. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1461-0248.2007.01094.x>