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Record of Decision

Sequoia National Forest
Land Management Plan

Fresno, Kern, and Tulare Counties, California

Cover images: (Clockwise starting at upper left)

Poppies: Looking down the North Fork of the Kern River. Photo credit: Alfred Watson.

Little Kern Looking South: Adventures await you south on the Little Kern. USDA Forest Service Photo

Big Meadow: Not all water flows directly to the ocean. Water at Big Meadow infiltrates the forest floor to help replenish the ground water supply in California. USDA Forest Service Photo.

Young women looking toward Bull Run creek drainage. Photo credit: Forest Howell-Gilbert.

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Record of Decision for the Sequoia National Forest Land Management Plan

Fresno, Kern, and Tulare Counties, California

Lead Agency: USDA Forest Service

Responsible Official and contact for more information:

TERESA BENSON,
Forest Supervisor
Sequoia National Forest
220 East Morton Avenue
Porterville, CA 93257
(559) 784-1500

Acronyms

CAA	Clean Air Act
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
CWA	Clean Water Act
DEIS	Draft Environmental Impact Statement
ESA	Endangered Species Act
FEIS	Final Environmental Impact Statement
GIS	Geographic Information System
MMCF	Million cubic feet
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NFS	National Forest System
NFMA	National Forest Management Act
NHPA	National Historic Preservation Act
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NOI	Notice of Intent
ROD	Record of Decision
SCC	Species of Conservation Concern
SHPO	State Historic Preservation Office
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USDOI	United States Department of the Interior
USFS	United States Forest Service
USFWS	United States Fish and Wildlife Service

Contents

Table

Figure

Introduction

This Record of Decision (ROD) documents my decision and rationale for approving the Sequoia National Forest Revised Land Management Plan (referred to as forest plan, or plan). The decision implements the Forest Service's 2012 Land Management Planning Rule at 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 219 and advances goals of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, including facilitating rural prosperity and economic development and fostering productive and sustainable use of our National Forest System lands.

The Inyo, Sequoia, and Sierra National Forests began revising their forest plans in 2012 with the assessment phase. In May 2016, the Inyo, Sequoia, and Sierra National Forests released a joint draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) disclosing the effects of revising their plans. The intent was for all three forests to move forward to the next stages of the planning process.

However, tree mortality caused by the extended and severe drought conditions from 2011 to 2018, among other conditions, substantially changed ecological conditions on the Sequoia and Sierra National Forests. When considering the ecological changes caused by tree mortality, and reviewing comments received by interested stakeholders on the DEIS, we chose to update and revise the Sequoia and Sierra forests' DEIS while the Inyo moved forward with developing a separate final environmental impact statement (FEIS) and a final revised forest plan. The revised DEIS (RDEIS) for the Sequoia and Sierra forests was released for public comment in June 2019. While we were examining public comment received on the RDEIS and integrating new information about drought-related tree mortality, the plan area experienced multiple large, high-severity wildfires in 2020 and 2021. These changing conditions have emphasized the importance of implementing a management strategy focused on maintaining our forests and restoring them to a more resilient condition.

The forest plan and analysis focus on three revision topics:

1. **Fire management**, including establishing more strategic fire management zones that help reduce the risk of large and severe wildfires. In addition, incorporates management direction to increase the agency's ability to safely manage wildfires to meet resource objectives that help reduce fire risk, maintain resilient wildlife habitat, and reduce smoke and air quality impacts to communities.

2. **Ecological integrity**, including building adaptive capacity in our ecosystems as conditions change and restoring the resilience of our ecosystems to disturbances such as wildfire, drought, insect and disease infestations, and climate change. This also includes restoring terrestrial, aquatic, and riparian habitat to make them more resilient to stressors to maintain the diversity of plant and animal species and support their persistence in the plan area.

3. **Sustainable recreation and designated areas**, including establishing ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable and diverse recreation opportunities that consider population demographic changes and reflect the needs of local, economically invested communities. There is also a focus on leveraging partnership opportunities and volunteerism to achieve a balance between managing for quality visitation at popular sites and reducing the potential for impacts from overcrowding on cultural resources, natural resources, settings, and scenery.

The forest plan provides strategic, program-level guidance for management of the national forest, including its natural resources and uses, over at least the next 15 years. This decision applies to the National Forest System lands within the Sequoia National Forest, *outside of* the Giant Sequoia National Monument. The Giant Sequoia National Monument plan was approved in 2012, and there is no need to

change that plan direction, except related to wild and scenic river eligibility and recommended wilderness in the Monument, which is addressed in this decision. The area within Giant Sequoia National Monument will continue to be managed under the 2012 Monument Plan.

After careful consideration, and to best respond to the need for change, I have decided to select alternative B-modified as described in the FEIS and the accompanying Sequoia forest plan based on the rationale described below. The Sequoia forest plan, FEIS, and associated documents are available on the Sequoia and Sierra forest plan revision website at https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r5/landmanagement/planning/?cid=stelprdb5444003.

The FEIS was prepared jointly with the Sierra National Forest; however, this decision is specific to the Sequoia forest plan. As part of plan revision, I revisited and fully considered the topics addressed in the 1990 Mediated Settlement Agreement (an agreement related to the previous forest planning effort).

Forest Setting

The Sequoia National Forest is located at the southernmost end of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, in southeastern California (figure 1). The Forest encompasses approximately 1.1 million acres, including the Giant Sequoia National Monument, which is home to the largest living trees on Earth. The Sequoia is within an hour's drive of the San Joaquin Valley metropolitan area and provide vital water resources for agricultural development in the valley. Two of the nation's largest population centers—the greater Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay Area metropolitan areas—are within a half-day's drive of the Forest.

The Sequoia National Forest's timber resources, recreation opportunities, and biological values directly contributes to the quality of life and economic vitality of over 20 million people living in surrounding communities and the broader region. The Forest provides opportunities for outdoor motorized and nonmotorized recreation, solitude, and stewardship, which support the spiritual and physical well-being of visitors. The Sequoia is a destination for local, state, national and international visitors. The river and lakes on the forest provide summer recreation activities for visitors needing a break from summer heat and stress. The Kern River drainage contains numerous camping, fishing, hiking and whitewater recreation opportunities. The Kern Plateau and Piute Mountains provide hunting and motorized and nonmotorized recreation opportunities. The Forest includes 47 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail in its south and east areas. The Sequoia National Forest provides special use activities such as organized camps, cabins, and the Alta Sierra ski area, and it is the social and economic gateway to the neighboring Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Park. Together with the Giant Sequoia National Monument, Sequoia National Forest directly contributes about $91.2 million each year in labor income for wage earners and local businesses and supports about 1,700 jobs annually.

Watersheds in the Sequoia National Forest drain into the San Joaquin Valley and contribute to municipal water supplies, agricultural uses, recreation, warm and cold freshwater habitat, groundwater recharge, and freshwater replacement. About 855,000 acre-feet of water per year comes from the forest, which equates to over 278 billion gallons having a wholesale market value of over $80 million.

Several communities are within or adjacent to the Sequoia National Forest, including those surrounding Lake Isabella (Kernville, Lake Isabella, Wofford Heights, Mountain Mesa, and many smaller communities), several small foothill and mountain communities located on the Kern Plateau (Kennedy Meadows), and in the Greenhorn Mountains (Johnsondale, Alta Sierra, Sugarloaf, and Bear Trap). The forest supports families with direct jobs from logging, grazing, non-timber products, and other benefits such as clean air and water, recreation opportunities, species habitat, and energy development. In addition, forest staff work with a broad spectrum of volunteer groups, educational institutions, other land

management agencies and individuals that participate in and support management activities including campground and trail operation and maintenance, clean-up of recreation sites, scientific data collection and monitoring of natural areas and wilderness areas.

The three distinct geographic units—the Sierra Nevada, San Joaquin Valley, and Tehachapi Mountains—give a sense of unique ecological diversity to the region and provide a unique spectrum of topographic, geologic and soils conditions. This variety influences precipitation and temperature regimes providing distinct biophysical conditions in the forest. Elevations on the forest range from 790 feet in the Lower Kern River Valley to 11,873 feet in the Golden Trout Wilderness.

There are six designated wilderness areas either wholly or partially within the administrative boundary of the Sequoia National Forest. These areas include Domeland (shared with the Bureau of Land Management), Golden Trout (shared with the Inyo National Forest), Jennie Lakes, Kiavah (shared with the Bureau of Land Management), Monarch (shared with the Sierra National Forest), and South Sierra (shared with the Inyo National Forest). There are 224 miles of designated wild and scenic rivers that are either in whole or in part on the Sequoia National Forest's administrative boundary. Congress designated the North Fork Kern River and South Fork Kern River and the South Fork of the Kings River as wild and scenic rivers in 1987. In addition, in 1991, the Sequoia National Forest determined that segments of the Little Kern River, Kern River, North Fork Tule River, North Fork Middle Fork Tule River, and Kings River were eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

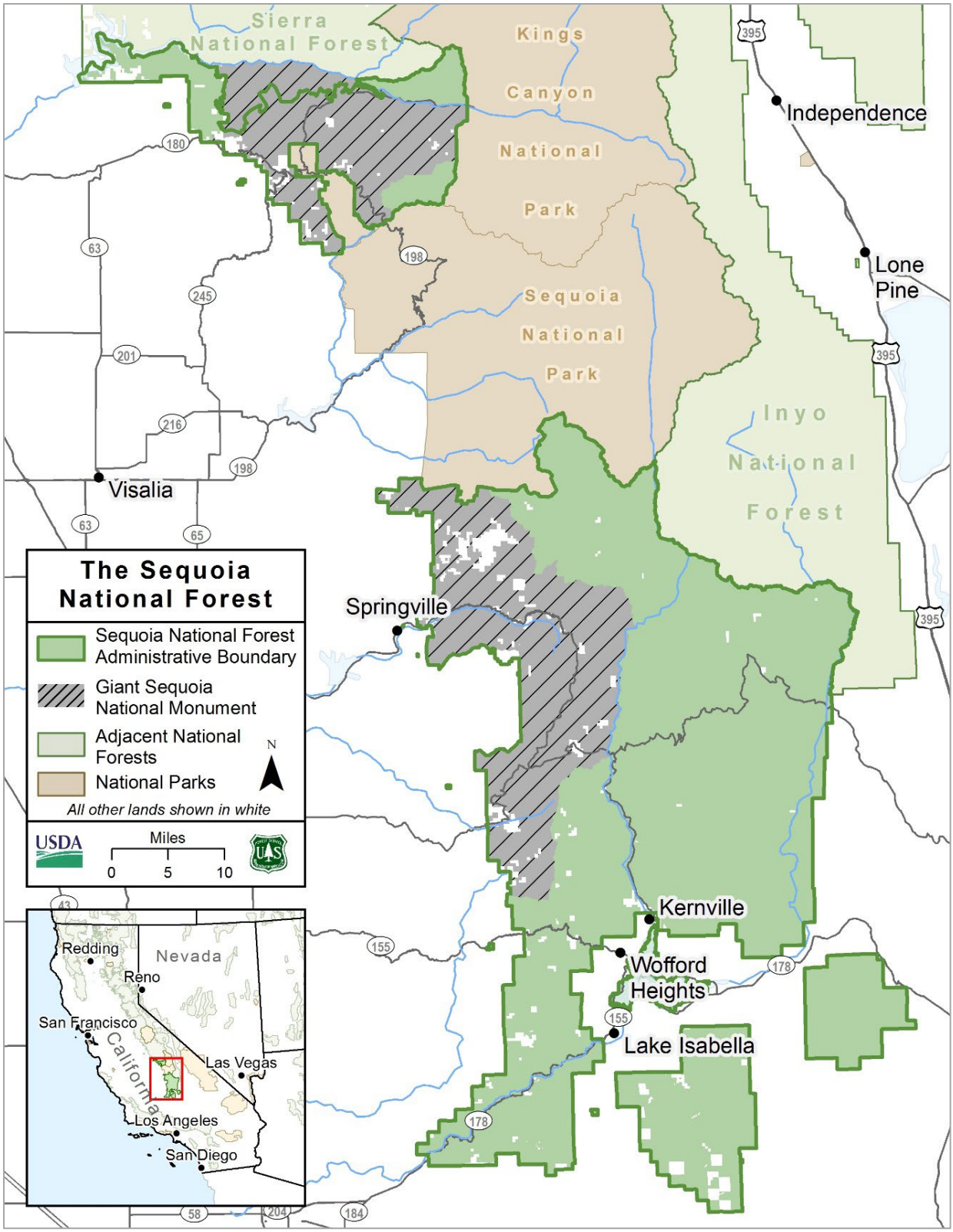

Figure 1. Vicinity map of the Sequoia National Forest

Need for Change

This decision revises and replaces the 1988 Sequoia National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, the 1990 mediated settlement agreement and subsequent plan amendments. The Giant Sequoia National Monument will continue to be managed under the 2012 Monument Plan, except as related to wild and scenic river eligibility and recommended wilderness, which is included in this decision.

Over the last 30 years, the social, economic, and ecological conditions on the Sequoia have changed, so that the current forest plan is no longer responsive to the needs of local communities and the relevant land management challenges for the area. For example, the Forest is experiencing rapidly changing environmental conditions that warrant innovative and collaborative approaches to land management. Prolonged severe drought and consistently higher average temperatures over the past 30 years have reduced water availability in terms of overall amounts, and seasonally because of reduced precipitation falling as snow that runs off gradually through the warmer months. Water scarcity leaves Forest ecosystems vulnerable to other stressors.

The most striking outcomes of these changing environmental conditions is tree mortality and the frequency and extent of high-severity wildfires. Scientists estimate, based on data collected between 2012 and 2019, that there are now approximately 60.2 million dead trees in the Sierra and Sequoia national forests killed by drought, insects, and diseases. Projections are that tree mortality will continue and potentially worsen over the coming decade. This dramatic change in forest conditions and climate is contributing to more frequent and severe wildfires throughout the California and southern Nevada forests.

The following describes the need for change by the three revision topics.

Revision Topic 1: Fire Management

Over a century of fire suppression, along with historical logging impacts and climate change including rising temperatures and more extreme droughts, have significantly increased the frequency and intensity of large wildfires in California within recent years. Extreme fire behavior, such as rapid rates of fire spread and frequent short- to long-range spotting, have become more commonplace because of these combined stressors. At the same time, California's population has expanded and developed in previously rural or remote locations in high-risk wildfire zones. There are now greater risk of human-caused fire starts and a dangerous combination of dead trees and high fuel loading that threaten communities, infrastructure, and natural resources throughout the region.

There is a need for updated management direction to increase the agency's ability to reduce the risk of large, high-intensity wildfires to communities, their businesses and homes, and other assets such as recreation sites and infrastructure. There is a need to change management direction to increase the agency's ability to safely manage wildfires to meet resource objectives that protect communities and critical infrastructure, while promoting forest resilience and restoration of fire-adapted landscapes.

Revision Topic 2: Ecological Integrity

A history of fire suppression and past forest management activities combined with rising temperatures and prolonged drought have radically altered our ecosystems, leaving them vulnerable to human-caused fire starts and uncharacteristic disturbances such as insect and disease infestations and large, high-intensity wildfires. Altered fire regime can also result in ecosystem type conversion across large landscapes. For example, the large and severe wildfires, coupled with climate change, can convert forested ecosystems to brush. The 2012 Planning Rule emphasizes the management of ecosystems and ecological conditions to

maintain the diversity of plant and animal communities and support the persistence of most native species in the plan area.

There is a need to change management direction to enhance our ability to build adaptive capacity in our ecosystems, restoring the resilience of terrestrial, aquatic, and riparian ecosystems to severe fire, drought, insect and pathogen outbreaks, invasive species, air pollution, and climate change.

Revision Topic 3: Sustainable Recreation and Designated Areas

Recreation is a conduit that connects people with nature. Changes in population size and cultural shifts in recreationists and uses demonstrate that people choose to connect with nature in increasingly diverse ways, from recreating in solitude or as part of a social group to choosing motorized or nonmotorized recreation opportunities. For example, camping in a large, undeveloped area with few facilities offers a sense of solitude, challenge, and self-reliance. In contrast, camping in an area that is accessible to conventional motorized vehicles and provides developed facilities, such as restrooms and tables, offers more comfort, convenience, security, and opportunities for social interaction. A Forest Service goal is to provide opportunities for people to have satisfying recreational experiences by offering a range of choices in terms of the types of settings and activities.

There is a need to change management direction to establish ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable and diverse recreation opportunities that consider population demographic changes and reflect the needs of local, economically invested communities. There is a need for management direction that increases volunteerism and partnership opportunities to achieve a balance between increasing visitation of renowned recreation sites with the related consequences of cultural resource impacts, overcrowding or conflicts in use, and impacts to natural resources, settings, and scenery.

Engagement with American Indian Tribes, State and Local Governments, other Federal Agencies, and the Public

Our outreach and engagement efforts included a variety of Tribal, government, and public participants throughout this multi-year plan revision process (2012 through 2022). We created engagement opportunities to provide transparency, understanding of the planning process, and regular dialogue among different groups. These efforts are described in further detail below. Engagement throughout the planning process resulted in a forest plan that is responsive to and seeks to balance the concerns of American Indian Tribes, State and local governments, other Federal agencies, and the public. The revised forest plan for the Sequoia National Forest represents over a decade of hard work and shared commitment by many groups to the present and future management of our public lands. Into the future, we will continue working together to reach these goals.

American Indian Tribes

Local tribes and communities depend on the economic, social, and ecological benefits provided by the Sequoia National Forest. The Forest supports jobs and economies, local traditional ways of life, healthy wildlife and botanical populations, and clean air and water, among other benefits. Many of the issues and concerns facing the Sequoia such as wildfire, require a cohesive management approach across the landscape. It is therefore essential that the representatives of local Tribes are actively involved in the plan revision process. In addition to the opportunities described in the section on public engagement below,

which included Tribes and governmental entities, the Forest worked directly with American Indian Tribes, both federally recognized and not federally recognized, throughout the planning process.

We engaged with Tribes and Tribal organizations or associations during the development of the revised forest plan (per 36 CFR 219.4). In December 2013, I sent potentially interested Tribes a letter announcing the start of the revision process and the dates for the first round of Tribal forums. Information sharing continued throughout the plan revision process, both in written correspondence and face-to-face meetings.

We have hosted quarterly Tribal forums since 2008 to share information between the Forest and Tribes. Tribal forums have helped meet the needs of Tribes and Forest leadership by allowing everyone the opportunity to meet at annual forecasted dates and times to discuss topics of mutual interest, including forest plan revision. As the responsible official, I regularly met with federally recognized American Indian Tribes at Tribal forums, discussed the plan revision process and draft plan content, and engaged in consultation as needed or requested. Sequoia staff and I met with Tribal elders, government representatives, and community members. A description of the Tribal consultation and engagement process for forest plan revision can be found in the Forest Plan Revision Collaboration, Tribal and Public Involvement Plan in the project record.

Through this process, we gained a better understanding of Tribal interests and concerns related to plan revision. Broad categories of concern include protection of and access to sacred sites, gathering areas, and ceremonial areas; traditional land uses and management, including the role of fire on the landscape; Tribal economies; traditional knowledge and education; conflict between recreation uses and traditional Tribal activities; and overall forest resilience and sustainability. Consultation with affiliated tribes ensured the revised plan components addressed the above Tribal concerns and needs with respect to the Sequoia National Forest. I will continue working with and developing relationships with Tribal communities.

State and other Federal Agencies

Throughout the plan revision process, Sequoia staff and other Forest Service personnel coordinated and consulted with a broad range of Federal and State agencies. Collaboration with Federal and State agencies included face-to-face meetings with agency leaders and presentations at agency meetings throughout the planning process. We actively engaged State and Federal agencies and county governments to assess compatibility of the forest plan with other local land use plans and policies (per 36 CFR 219.4).

The Sequoia National Forest shares borders with Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks and manages lands that serve as the gateway to these parks. The Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior administer these lands as part of a diverse block of contiguous Federal land in the Sierra Nevada Mountain range. These lands provide a wide range of uses and recreation opportunities and drive much of the tourism in the region. Visitors frequently recreate on lands in multiple jurisdictions during a single visit. At these shared borders, a large portion of the lands on both sides are existing designated wilderness and as such are managed under similar frameworks, as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. These shared borders provide opportunities and responsibilities for close coordination between the agencies, which has been ongoing and will continue into the future.

The Forest Service signed a memorandum of understanding with one cooperating agency for this plan revision effort: the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). A cooperating agency is a State, Federal, or local agency which has jurisdiction by law or special expertise with respect to any environmental issue (40 CFR §1501.6). We developed the memorandum of understanding with the EPA to share on-going revision progress and get feedback on the environmental impact statement (EIS) alternatives, Tribal Relations and Consultation, and how fire management was being addressed in the

forest plan revision. The EPA was supportive of efforts to increase the pace and scale of restoration while still addressing the needs of at-risk species and concurred with the overall approach to the forest plan. The EPA also provided comments on the EIS, encouraging us to look at management approaches that best address high-intensity fire impacts and identify stewardship opportunities for watershed restoration to provide the greatest opportunity for riparian and watershed health.

Engagement with such agencies as the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as we developed the forest plan allowed us to address key issues early in the revision process. Such issues identified by State and Federal governments included: drought and fire impacts on forests and communities; restoring forests to healthy and resilient conditions; impacts of smoke to air quality; managing forests for multiple uses to support local economies; and the species of conservation concern list.

Through collaboration, we addressed these issues by identifying strategic management zones based on fire risk; developing plan components that emphasize an increase in pace and scale of active management to meet restoration objectives; developing plan components that address economic contributions of the national forest; identifying species of conservation concern; and including more detailed plan content for at-risk species such as the fisher and California spotted owl.

I along with planning team members and other Forest staff have engaged State and local representatives, congressional leadership, and agencies. In general, these governmental representatives support the work of the Forest and appreciate the transparent communication and the dedication of the Sequoia National Forest toward public land stewardship.

Local Governments and Organizations

We also actively engaged representatives from county governments and other local agencies and organizations throughout the plan revision process. Input from Fresno, Tulare, and Kern Counties helped inform my decision on several sections of the plan, including comments from Fresno County regarding management approaches to increase the pace and scale of active management in the selected alternative. The counties remain in overall support of the revised plan.

Additionally, the 2012 Planning Rule regulations (36 CFR 219.4(2)) require national forest planners to review the planning and land use policies of local governments and Tribes, where relevant to the plan area. The Sequoia National Forest occurs within Fresno, Kern, and Tulare Counties. Considerations for incorporation into the forest plan included: (1) the objectives of local governments, as expressed in their plans and policies; (2) opportunities for the forest plan to address the impacts identified or to contribute to joint objectives; and (3) opportunities to resolve or reduce conflicts, within the context of developing the forest plan's desired conditions or objectives. Appendix G: Consistency with Other Planning Efforts in volume 5 of the FEIS describes in detail how the county plans were addressed in the forest plan and addresses consistency with available Tribal plans. We referenced these plans as a source of information on the history of land use within the region, patterns of development, desired conditions, and current county and Tribal land use goals, objectives, and policies.

County land use within the planning area ranges from traditional uses such as farming and ranching in rural areas to denser concentrations of residential, industrial, and commercial uses in and around suburban and urban areas. One of the common themes is how, and whether, private owners and public land managers can manage the competing priorities of resource conservation and economic development; in particular, how to cope with the growing demands for housing and recreation while ensuring conservation of a rapidly changing natural resource base that contributes to the southern Sierra Nevada's highly valued

rural character. The following is a brief overview of our consistency review findings for each county in the planning area:

- ***Fresno County:*** Policies in many elements of the Fresno County General Plan were found to be relevant to the Sequoia revised forest plan. These policies were reviewed for consistency with the revised forest plan. No conflicts between the Fresno County Plan elements and the components of the revised plan were discovered.
- ***Kern County:*** Policies in many elements of the Kern County General Plan were found to be relevant to the Sequoia revised forest plan. These policies were reviewed for consistency with the Forest's revised plan. No conflicts between the Kern County Plan elements and the components of the revised forest plan were discovered.
- ***Tulare County:*** The Sequoia National Forest falls within the Open Space designation in the Environmental Resource Management Component of the Tulare County General Plan. Elements were identified in the Environmental Resource Management Component, which was considered in this revision process. Portions of the Forest also fall within watersheds found within Tulare County, which was identified in the Water Resource Component of the General Plan. No conflicts between the Tulare County Plan elements and the components of the revised forest plan were discovered.

In summary, the forest plan is consistent with the county plans and incorporates elements of the following topics: providing for restoration via active forest management; opportunities for economic development and growth; providing continued tourist and recreation opportunities; addressing the need to provide for public safety regarding wildland fires; providing for forest and wetland health and habitat for aquatic and terrestrial species; and maintaining multiple uses, including motorized and nonmotorized access, within the Sequoia National Forest.

Public Involvement

Public involvement began in December 2011, before the formal initiation of plan revision, with a "Sierra Cascades Dialog" public engagement session held in Sacramento, California, on the topic of "Preparing for Forest Planning." This was followed with additional dialog sessions on collaborative planning, adaptive management and recreation, social and economic opportunities and impacts, and monitoring. Based on public and Tribal input during the Sierra Cascades Dialog meeting in 2011, the Forest Service Pacific Southwest Research Station produced a science synthesis (Long et al. 2014) to examine the current science for a set of topics that were determined to have changed since the 1996 Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project (Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project 1996). In addition, although not required, the Forest Service prepared a Bio-Regional Assessment (USDA Forest Service 2014) to provide the context for examining resources across the entire Sierra Nevada range.

In 2013, we held a Sierra Cascades Dialog session to discuss the science synthesis, and two dialog sessions to discuss the Bio-Regional Assessment. To allow the public to directly provide information about conditions and trends for 18 resource topics outlined in the 2012 Planning Rule, we prepared both the Bio-Regional Assessment and the national forest assessments using an open wiki site called the Living Assessment. We used public input received between January and September 2013 to create the Bio-Regional Assessment, the Inyo National Forest Assessment, the Sequoia National Forest Assessment, and the Sierra National Forest Assessment, which were all released in December 2013.

Following the assessments, we issued a notice to initiate plan revision on December 26, 2013, and developed a preliminary document outlining the need for changing the forest plans. We held Tribal forums and public workshops in mid- to late-January 2014 in Fresno, Bakersfield, and Bishop to present

and collect feedback on the preliminary need for change. Based on public feedback, we revised the need for change and presented an updated version along with draft desired conditions. We collected feedback at another set of Tribal forums and public workshops in mid-June of 2014 in Fresno, Lake Isabella, and Bishop.

On August 29, 2014, we announced a 30-day public scoping period, which marked the start of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process for forest plan revisions on the Inyo, Sequoia, and Sierra National Forests. We hosted Tribal forums and public meetings in Fresno, Porterville, and Bishop in mid-September 2014 to provide an update on the revision process and seek public input on the development of alternatives for the DEIS. We received over 7,200 scoping comments. In mid-November 2014, we held a set of Tribal forums and public meetings in Fresno, Porterville, and Bishop to share a preliminary summary of the comments received and an initial set of conceptual alternatives, which were subsequently refined into the range of alternatives analyzed in the 2016 DEIS for Revision of the Inyo, Sequoia, and Sierra National Forests Land Management Plans.

A notice of availability was published in the *Federal Register* on May 27, 2016, announcing the availability of the DEIS and 90-day comment period for the Revision of the Inyo, Sequoia, and Sierra National Forests Land Management Plans. We held Tribal forums and public meetings in Bishop, Mammoth Lakes, Porterville, Clovis, San Francisco, Bakersfield, and Los Angeles. Additionally, a webinar was held online. We received over 30,000 comments on the DEIS and revised forest plans for the three national forests.

Because of public comment and changing vegetation conditions due to drought-related tree mortality on the Sierra and Sequoia National Forests, it was decided the Inyo National Forest would release a separate FEIS, while the Sequoia and Sierra National Forests would prepare a revised DEIS (RDEIS). Comments on the DEIS also identified other needed changes, for example, related to recreation and aquatic conservation; ultimately this input informed and helped improve the forest plan.

The RDEIS and revised draft Sierra and Sequoia forest plans were published in June 2019. The Environmental Protection Agency published a notice of availability of the RDEIS in the *Federal Register* on June 28, 2019, initiating a 90-day public comment period. We hosted virtual webinars to provide a venue for planning team members to connect with the public in real time and respond to questions on the revised draft planning documents during the comment period. Planning team members clarified forest management issues, assisted the public in navigating the revised draft planning documents, and encouraged the submission of formal written comments to help inform the EIS and final forest plans. Planning outreach activities during the comment period also included public workshops for each forest, one in Bakersfield on August 20, 2019, and the other in Clovis on August 21, 2019.

We distributed the RDEIS or made it electronically available to over 3,300 individuals and groups. In addition, we sent copies of the document or, in some cases, made it electronically available to Federal agencies, Tribes, State and local governments, and organization representatives who asked to be involved in the development of this analysis.

We received a total of 7,340 submissions; 634 of these were considered unique submissions, the others were standardized campaign letters from 36 separate organizations and groups, most of which were identical to the master letter. We appreciate that commenters invested considerable time and effort to submit comments on the revised DEIS. We developed a comment analysis method to ensure that all comments were fully considered, as directed by the NEPA. Formal written comments collected in 2019 and informal conversations held with stakeholders in 2020 to clarify their submitted comments informed the FEIS and my decision.

On February 19, 2021, we reached out to interested parties to provide an update on the plan revision process. We emailed an update to the plan revision mailing list of over 25,000 contacts, outlining major plan revision process steps completed and remaining, providing an overview of the response to comments process, describing impacts from 2020 fires on forest conditions, and outlining the remaining plan revision timeline.

The draft decision for the forest plan was subject to a pre-decisional administrative review, or objection process (36 CFR 219 Subpart B) initiated in June 2022. The objection process provided an opportunity for those who participated in a formal public comment period to have their unresolved concerns reviewed prior to issuing this final decision. The objection process is described in more detail later in this decision.

In the months leading up to the objection process (February 2022 through June 2022), we published a series of newsletters. The newsletters provided a summary of how we reviewed and responded to comments on the RDEIS. They also summarized key changes related to water resources, sustainable recreation, at-risk species, the recommended wilderness process, the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail, and Wild and Scenic River Eligibility studies. We also shared a newsletter summarizing next steps and the objection process (see below). The newsletters were sent electronically to the plan revision mailing list and published on the plan revision website.

During the objection filing period, on July 12 and 13, 2022, we held virtual public meetings to provide information about the release of the pre-objection FEIS, forest plans, and draft records of decision for both Sierra and Sequoia National Forests, as well as the administrative review (objection) process. The presentations from these meetings, as well as a Questions and Answers document that shares the public questions received as part of these meetings are available on the plan revision website.

Decision and Rationale for the Decision

Decision

I have selected alternative B-modified as described in the FEIS and the accompanying Sequoia forest plan.

The revised forest plan approved by this decision, replaces all previous forest plan direction, including the 1988 Land and Resource Management Plan, the 1990 Mediated Settlement Agreement, and plan amendments *outside of* the Giant Sequoia National Monument. With respect to the Giant Sequoia National Monument, the area within the monument will continue to be managed under the 2012 Monument Plan, except for the management area direction for recommended wilderness and eligible wild and scenic rivers. The forest plan components for these two management areas apply to the Giant Sequoia National Monument.

The 1990 Sequoia National Forest Mediated Settlement Agreement (MSA), entered into as a settlement of administrative appeals to the 1988 land management plan record of decision, provided guidance and interim management direction for the Sequoia National Forest pending formal consideration of certain proposed plan amendments. While largely addressed in the 2001 Sierra Nevada Framework and the 2012 Giant Sequoia National Monument Management Plan decisions, some remaining agreements in the Mediated Settlement Agreement were considered during preparation of the FEIS and forest plan, to the extent those topics were still appropriately addressed in forest plan revision. As identified in the letter to the Mediated Settlement Agreement partners dated March 8, 2002, from Sequoia National Forest

Supervisor Art Gaffrey, the specific Mediated Settlement Agreement topics that were to be addressed by this plan revision include:

- Suitable Lands, Timber Management, and Allowable Sale Quantities (MSA pp. 66–67,78–88)
- Fisheries-Recreation Aspects (MSA pp. 64–66)
- Special Areas (MSA pp. 75–78)
- Changes to Recreation Management Prescriptions (MSA pp. 104, 108)

The project record includes an itemized list of the interim direction from the Mediated Settlement Agreement related to these topics, and how each item is addressed by this plan revision or why, in some cases, the item is not appropriate for incorporation at the forest plan level. The Mediated Settlement Agreement itself provided that "This agreement terminates at such time as the Plan is revised in accordance with 36 CFR § 219.10(g)" [now codified at 36 CFR § 219.7(a)]. Thus, this plan revision terminates the Mediated Settlement Agreement and supersedes it in its entirety.

The revised forest plan includes forestwide (chapter 2) and area-specific (chapter 3) plan components, including desired conditions, objectives, suitability, standards, guidelines, and goals that meet the social, economic, and ecological sustainability requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule. It also includes an updated monitoring plan (chapter 4).

My decision approves the following key elements[1]:

1) Recognition of Native American needs and viewpoints and emphasis on fostering robust relationships with federally and non-federally recognized Tribes and related groups. Addresses resources of Tribal importance and encourages working with Tribes to manage those resources through the inclusion of plan content. Supports access and use by Tribes for traditional, ceremonial, and medicinal purposes.

2) Encourages application of a variety of strategies and tools to increase the use of private, public, and Tribal partnerships and volunteers. Long-term partnerships are a key element to accomplish management actions on the Sequoia.

3) Identification of four strategic fire management zones based on a fire risk analysis including: community wildfire protection zone (70,003 acres), general wildfire protection zone (60,492 acres), wildfire restoration zone (211,379 acres), and wildfire maintenance zone (469,170 acres). Emphasizes an increase in pace and scale of management and managing naturally ignited wildfires to meet resource objectives, where safe to do so.

4) Establishes plan content for the management of wildlife habitat that considers both the threat posed by large and severe wildfire, as well as the potential near-term risks to some species from forest management actions designed to increase resilience to future wildfires. Revised plan content for species with declining populations such as California spotted owl and fisher is focused on supporting multiple uses while also providing conditions for successful reproduction and persistence of at-risk species on the Sequoia.

[1] Note: Acreages presented below are approximations based on best available mapping data at the time this decision was prepared. These estimates have been updated, where appropriate, to reflect current corporate data, and therefore, may vary from the acreages estimated in the FEIS, which was based on older data.

5) Establishes a wildlife habitat management area (227,375 acres) and associated plan components to conserve old-forest-dependent species, including California spotted owl, fisher, marten, great gray owl, and northern goshawk, and includes clarified direction for managing post-disturbance landscapes in the wildlife habitat management area.

6) Maintains riparian conservation areas and establishes conservation watersheds (381,257 acres) and associated plan components to protect and restore aquatic and riparian habitat, and conserve aquatic at-risk species.

7) Identification of 88 segments on 48 rivers, streams, and creeks (363.8 miles), located in both the Sequoia National Forest plan area and the Giant Sequoia National Monument as eligible for inclusion in the Wild and Scenic Rivers System and plan components associated with their management.

8) Recommendation of one area for the National Wilderness Preservation System: Monarch Wilderness Addition – South (4,734 acres) within the Giant Sequoia National Monument, contiguous with the existing designated Monarch Wilderness.

9) Identification of three distinct recreation management areas that focus management where it is most needed and manages recreation based on an area's distinct desired conditions, such as high concentration versus low density. These include destination recreation areas (25,380 acres), general recreation areas (207,7186 acres), and backcountry terrain recreation areas[2] (270,654 acres).

10) Identification of desired recreation opportunity spectrum classes. Existing travel management decisions, as reflected on the Sequoia National Forest Motor Vehicle Use Map, specifically motorized trails within areas classified as semi-primitive non-motorized, may proceed unchanged per FSH 1909.12 Chapter 23.23l.

11) Establishes a management area for the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail (20,896 acres) that includes the area that is visible from the trail's centerline, extending up to one-half mile from the centerline on each side of the trail. Includes plan components for the management area outside of designated wilderness, as well as inside of designated wilderness.

12) As required by the National Forest Management Act, suitability of lands for timber production was evaluated (forest plan appendix D). It is important to note that timber harvest as a management tool to achieve desired conditions is not constrained by what areas were determined to be suitable for timber production.

Nature of the Decision

The purpose of the forest plan is to guide future projects, practices and uses, to assure sustainable multiple-use management on the Sequoia National Forest over at least the next 15 years. The forest plan establishes plan components in the form of desired conditions, goals, objectives, standards, guidelines, and suitability to provide for ecological integrity, contribute to social and economic sustainability, and provide for multiple uses of the Sequoia National Forest. The forest plan also includes potential management approaches, which are optional plan content used to describe the principal strategies and

[2] Backcountry terrain recreation areas were referred to as "challenging backroad areas" in the EIS and pre-objection versions of the plan and record of decision. In response to objections, we changed the name of "challenging backroad areas" to "backcountry terrain recreation areas."

program priorities that may guide management activities under the forest plan. Development of plan components and the forest plan monitoring program incorporated best available scientific information and created an adaptive management framework. The architecture and components of the forest plan are intended to enable adaptation to new social and economic opportunities that arise as well as new information that comes to us through science and monitoring.

The forest plan is strategic in nature. It does not authorize projects or activities, commit the Forest Service to take action, or dictate internal operations, such as personnel matters, law enforcement, budget, or organizational changes. Management direction will be implemented through site-specific projects and activities that must be consistent with the forest plan (36 CFR 219.15), along with other regulatory requirements such as the Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act, and National Historic Preservation Act.

Existing authorized facilities will be managed consistent with needs of public and personnel safety, and in compliance with applicable laws and regulations. Where there is conflict in meeting other plan direction (such as terrestrial vegetation, aquatic, and at-risk species plan components) the deciding official may deviate from meeting plan direction to achieve compliance with law, regulation, and policy.

Rationale for the Decision

I have reviewed the environmental analysis disclosed in the FEIS, the planning record, comments from our local government partners, other agencies, American Indian Tribes, and the public. And I considered how the revised forest plan meets the identified need to change and the requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219).

I chose alternative B-modified, because it best balances input from other government agencies, American Indian Tribes, and stakeholders. It provides for active management for fuel reduction, habitat restoration, and forest products, as well as at-risk species, a variety of recreation opportunities and settings; unique ecological conditions; and wild and scenic rivers

An explanation of my decision rationale is also found below, organized by the three revision topics.

Topic 1: Fire Management

Wildfires have been growing in size, duration, severity, and destructiveness over the past 20 years. Within California, all but 2 of the top 20 largest wildfires have occurred since 2000. I have personally witnessed this increase in the size and severity of fires on the Sequoia. In 2021, the Castle, French, Walkers, Windy and KNP Complex fires totaled almost 400,000 acres, of which over 240,000 acres occurred on the Sequoia National Forest. Much of this acreage was stand-replacing fire, burning at moderate and high intensities. The need to increase the pace and scale of restoration to restore forest health and resilience has never been more pressing. In January 2022, the Forest Service announced a 10-year strategy to address what is being called a wildfire crisis (USDA Forest Service 2022). I considered this decision in light of that strategy, which I believe builds on our long-standing work. This decision aims to focus fuels and forest health treatments more strategically and at the scale needed to more effectively restore the health, diversity, and productivity of our forest landscapes.

My decision authorizes increased use of fire to manage the landscape. I decided to make this change in forest plan direction to promote the use of fire as a management tool to improve forest resilience. Fire management philosophies have evolved over the last few decades away from a suppression-focused approach toward a more balanced approach that focuses on re-establishing natural fire regimes. My decision provides direction to increase use of managed wildfire (that is, wildfires managed to meet

resource objectives), brings about needed change to ecosystem management that incorporates fire as an essential ecological process, and provides for community safety. Managed wildfires reduce fuels and restore forest ecosystem integrity, limit the intensity and behavior of future fires, protect critical public utilities and infrastructure, protect communities and natural resources, constrain smoke production, and reestablish natural fire regimes as a key ecological process.

The forest plan incorporates an approach to managing wildfire that is consistent with the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy. The three primary goals of this strategy are addressed in the forest plan, and they are: restoring and maintaining landscapes, creating fire-adapted communities, and responding to wildfires safely and effectively. My decision incorporates a two-pronged approach to address these goals: increasing pace and scale of restoration and establishing fire management zones based on fire risk to highly valued resources and assets, such as communities.

The forest plan authorizes an increase in the pace and scale of restoration in the form of fuel reduction treatments (such as mechanical thinning and prescribed burning) with an emphasis in operationally strategic locations across the landscape. This increase in pace and scale of restoration would also be accomplished by managing naturally ignited wildfires to meet resource objectives when it can be safely done. The long-term goal of this fire management approach is to move toward conditions more in line with the natural range of variation for fire regimes, which would allow fire to play its essential role as an ecological process.

The four strategic fire management zones established by my decision address the need to return fire to its ecological role on the landscape, while providing for community safety, minimizing impacts to critical infrastructure and reducing risk to sensitive natural resources. The fire management zones are identified as management areas in the forest plan (with associated plan components) and incorporate a risk-based approach to managing fire. This approach overlays highly valued resources and assets, including homes, public utilities infrastructure, and key wildlife habitat, and uses large fire simulations to quantify wildfire hazards across the landscape. The zones are based on areas with different levels of risk (low, moderate, and high) to assets and sensitive natural resources. By identifying these zones and assessing the level of risk in advance, my decision will allow managers to prioritize fuels treatments and identify wildfire response strategies, such as when and where wildfires can be managed to meet resource objectives and achieve desired conditions.

Conversely, the previous forest plan (alternative A) does not use the risk-based management approach but rather uses the distance-based approach of prioritizing treatments in the wildland-urban intermix defense zone with a quarter-mile buffer around structures. Alternatives C and E use a combination of risk-based and distance-based approaches. These alternatives also focus treatments on the wildland-urban intermix defense zone with a quarter-mile buffer around structures; and they also include a risk-based zone similar to alternative B-modified. The distance-based method does not consider the vegetation type (which directly affects fire behavior) or consider the potential benefits or damages to other resources or assets. The four zones identified in alternatives B, B-modified, and D provide a better strategic and risk-based approach by assessing the effects of wildfire to highly valued resources and assets. Alternative D provides additional flexibility for implementing vegetation and fuels management; however, its emphasis on long-term outcomes does not provide sufficient assurance that near-term needs of at-risk species, specifically those with declining or small and isolated populations, are also provided for. By choosing alternative B-modified, I have chosen the alternative that best provides for community safety and protects sensitive natural resources, while allowing fire to be restored to its essential ecological role.

Topic 2: Ecological Integrity

The Sequoia National Forest is situated at the crossroads of several distinct floristic regions. While the Forest is principally within the foothills and high Sierra Nevada, it abuts and is influenced by floras of the San Joaquin Valley, Mojave Desert, Tehachapi Mountains, and the Great Basin. As a result, the Sequoia has high plant diversity with some unique plant combinations. Elevations across the Forest range from 790 feet in the Lower Kern River Valley to 11,873 feet in the Golden Trout Wilderness. The flora of the plan area is diverse, reflecting the complex geology, topography, and climate that creates possible genetic isolation. As a result, the area has a high level of endemic species (unique to a place or region) relative to other regions of the United States (California Native Plant Society 2015). The southern Sierra Nevada subregion also supports some pinyon pine and sagebrush, found in the arid shrublands and woodlands of the lower southeastern portions of the Sequoia. Special habitats include rocky outcrops, talus, and carbonate soils.

Key ecological processes, such as natural fire regimes, vegetation succession, and carbon cycling, are essential to maintaining the integrity of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems on the Sequoia, especially in the face of interacting stressors such as climate change.

Terrestrial Ecosystems

Climate change and associated ecosystem stressors, such as drought, high-severity wildfire, and insect and disease outbreaks, as well as lingering effects from past management activities including fire suppression, have pushed vegetation composition and structure and associated ecosystem function on the Sequoia outside the natural range of variation. My decision addresses this condition by incorporating desired conditions and other plan components for the individual types of terrestrial ecosystems on the forest. These plan components strive to re-establish natural fire regimes and other key ecological processes (such as pollination, natural forest succession, carbon cycling and sequestration, landscape habitat connectivity, nutrient cycling) by restoring vegetation composition and structure to within the natural range of variation and implementing an increased pace and scale of vegetation treatments and other restoration projects.

Specifically, my decision incorporates plan direction that restores vegetation composition and structure by emphasizing active vegetation management. My decision authorizes a forest plan on the Sequoia whereby vegetation treatments are conducted for the purposes of increasing forest resilience, improving ecosystem function, reducing fire hazards, or improving public safety by removing hazard trees. This decision also seeks to increase the pace and scale of those treatments. The revised forest plan provides management flexibility to use various methods, such as mechanical and prescribed burning treatments, along with post-disturbance salvage. While active vegetation management has the potential for environmental effects and social conflicts, it is necessary to restore vegetation composition and structure to within natural range of variation. Salvage may be necessary post-disturbance to allow for safety of communities, to remove dead fuels to prevent another large fire, or to allow reforestation. I am confident plan components that will guide management of these areas are sufficient to mitigate and minimize the potential adverse environmental effects of actively managing the Forest.

As part of my decision, the Sequoia will continue to produce timber (saw logs) and locally important forest products such as fuelwood, and forest products important for Tribal uses. The forest plan allows for the provision of these societal goods while ensuring that management activities are maintaining and moving the Forest toward desired conditions.

My decision incorporates into the forest plan specific management direction for unique vegetation and habitat types on the Sequoia, such as meadows, riparian areas, and habitat associated with native plant

species and species of conservation concern. In the final forest plan, we made a stronger distinction regarding our restoration strategy for oak woodlands, conifer woodlands, upper montane vegetation types and low-elevation grass and shrub vegetation types. In addition, emphasis is provided for improving ecological conditions and reducing threats to habitat associated with at-risk plant species including Springville clarkia and Bakersfield cactus. Invasive species management is also a priority for maintaining ecological effectiveness and forestwide vegetation desired conditions.

Similar to alternative B-modified, alternatives B, C, D and E also focused on reducing the potential for large and severe wildfires and moving ecosystems closer to their natural range of variation. I did not choose alternative C or E because they emphasize a management approach to restore fire as an ecosystem process, primarily by using prescribed fire and natural disturbance processes to achieve desired conditions. The analysis in the FEIS shows that without mechanical treatments, the risk of large, high-intensity wildfires would be too great and would lead to unacceptable consequences such as loss of large tracts of mature forests and increased danger to local communities and firefighters. Also, the lack of sufficient mechanical treatment prior to prescribed burning would either reduce the amount of prescribed burning that occurs or would increase the severity of prescribed burns to the point that ecosystem desired conditions would not be met.

Compared to alternative B-modified, alternative D would increase intensity of vegetation treatments and the amount of area treated using mechanical methods, particularly within focused areas. I did not choose alternative D because while this greater intensity and acreage of active vegetation management may lead to a more rapid attainment of vegetative desired conditions, it has the potential to cause unacceptable near-term effects that would threaten the persistence of some at-risk species in the plan area. I did not choose alternative A, B, C, or E because they also do not include enough restoration to meet desired conditions for terrestrial ecosystems or forest resilience.

Aquatic and Riparian Resources

Climate change and other ecosystem stressors, such as drought and wildfire are negatively affecting aquatic and riparian resources on the Sequoia. My decision addresses the condition of aquatic and riparian resources by incorporating desired conditions and other plan components with the goal of increasing resilience of these resources to these stressors. My decision addresses aquatic and riparian resources through the inclusion of plan components for watersheds, riparian conservation areas (including rivers, creeks, lakes, ponds, seeps, springs, meadows, and fens), and conservation watersheds (subset of watersheds selected to provide for continued high-quality water sources and the long-term persistence of at-risk species).

My decision includes forestwide plan components for watersheds that protect the water and soil resources at the watershed scale. My decision also includes riparian conservation areas, which are management areas that are established as a buffer along streams and other aquatic features. My decision includes plan components for watersheds and riparian conservation areas that provide for the maintenance and restoration of the ecological integrity of aquatic systems primarily through protective measures intended to decrease negative impacts from management activities and increase resilience to natural events.

My decision also incorporates the conservation watershed approach into the forest plan. Two large-scale watersheds are identified as conservation watershed management areas (Upper South Fork Kern River and Lower Kern River). There are plan components for these management areas with a focus toward desired conditions and the broader landscape. I included functioning watersheds as conservation watersheds with the intention of prioritizing aquatic and riparian restoration in these watersheds to benefit at-risk species and ensure that high-quality water for beneficial uses is available over the long term. The

locations of wilderness and inventoried roadless areas were considered when establishing conservation watersheds with the intended result of positive synergistic effects for species and habitats across a broader landscape. The intent with these areas is to better provide ecological conditions for at-risk species, and to strengthen habitat connectivity for both aquatic and terrestrial wildlife. Within conservation watersheds, recreation activities like fishing, and rangeland livestock grazing would be permitted to continue.

While alternatives C and E are similar to alternative B-modified in terms of forestwide plan components for watersheds and plan components for riparian conservation areas, they differ in that they include critical aquatic refuges and alternative B-modified does not. Critical aquatic refuges occur at a smaller spatial scale than conservation watersheds and plan components in alternatives C and E for both of these management areas are more prescriptive than plan components related to conservation watersheds in alternative B-modified. I am choosing alternative B-modified and the use of conservation watersheds to provide for management of at-risk species at a larger, landscape scale, and to encourage active restoration, as needed, to benefit aquatic habitat and support maintaining the functionality of these watersheds over the long term. For those at-risk species that would be covered under critical aquatic refuge plan direction in alternatives A, C, and E, I believe that the selected alternative provides better integrated forestwide plan direction related to protection and management around waterbodies while still providing the conditions necessary for the persistence and/or recovery of at-risk species in the plan area. This plan direction provides for protecting streambanks from excessive disturbance from livestock grazing and managing near-stream vegetation to benefit aquatic habitat. Given that alternative B-modified takes this more balanced overall strategy for aquatics management, I believe it is the best alternative to include in the revised forest plan.

Providing for Plant and Animal Diversity, including At-risk Terrestrial and Aquatic Species

As a land management agency, the Forest Service provides for plant and animal diversity, including at-risk terrestrial and aquatic species, primarily by managing habitat for the species. At-risk species include species listed under the Federal Endangered Species Act, species that are proposed or candidates for Federal listing, as well as species of conservation concern for the Sequoia. A total of 84 at-risk species occur on the Sequoia. Of these 84 at-risk species, the regional forester identified 22 as terrestrial or aquatic wildlife species of conservation concern, and 57 as plant species of conservation concern. For species of conservation concern, the Forest Service is required to provide the ecological conditions to maintain a viable population of each species of conservation concern within the plan area. For federally listed species, the Forest Service is required to carry out programs for their conservation and recovery. At the project level, the Forest Service is required to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on any actions that may affect federally listed species and ensure that actions are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of federally listed species or result in destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat.

The Sequoia National Forest is home to nine federally listed species. Several of these species have designated critical habitat on the Forest. California condor, least Bell’s vireo, southwestern willow flycatcher, western yellow-billed cuckoo, Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep, fisher, mountain yellow-legged frog, Little Kern golden trout, and the plant species Bakersfield cactus are all federally listed species that occur on the Sequoia. Four species have been proposed to be federally listed: California spotted owl, foothill yellow-legged frog, Kern Canyon slender salamander, and relictual slender salamander. In addition, fringed myotis (bat species), Townsend’s big-eared bat, Sierra marten, bald eagle, great gray owl, Kern red-winged blackbird, Mount Pinos sooty grouse, northern goshawk, tri-colored blackbird, willow flycatcher, four different species of butterflies, and Fairview slender salamander are identified as terrestrial species of conservation concern.

At-risk aquatic species on the Sequoia include the following species of conservation concern: Kern Plateau slender salamander, California golden trout, Central Valley hitch, hardhead, Kern River rainbow trout, and western pearlshell (an invertebrate); and the federally listed mountain yellow-legged frog and Little Kern golden trout. Little Kern golden trout was federally listed in 1978; it is endemic to Little Kern River and designated critical habitat is almost entirely within Golden Trout Wilderness. The Forest has long-standing management direction to protect and recover Little Kern golden trout and the revised forest plan carries forth this direction in species-specific plan components. Mountain yellow-legged frog and Little Kern golden trout may be impacted by livestock grazing, recreation, and fire and fuels management. The revised forest plan provides ecosystem-level plan components that ensure projects or permits approved under the forest plan are developed in a manner that minimizes potential adverse effects to these federally listed species. For mountain yellow-legged frog, plan content developed for alternative B-modified is best aligned with current programmatic and project-level consultations, which should improve the speed and efficiency of the required Endangered Species Act consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Land management planning occurs at a programmatic level, and therefore, it cannot ensure that projects developed under it would have no effect or that all actions would be discountable, insignificant, or beneficial to federally listed species. Even restoration actions with long-term beneficial impacts to species populations could have short-term adverse impacts to individuals of the species. For this reason, for all alternatives, the Endangered Species Act determination for all federally listed species and designated critical habitats in the plan area would be "may affect, likely to adversely affect." The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released a programmatic-level biological opinion in May 2022, agreeing with our findings and determining that adopting the revised forest plan would not jeopardize the continued existence of these species and would not adversely modify designated critical habitat. We provided additional information to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service after changes were made in response to the administrative review (objections) process and confirmed successful completion of our Endangered Species Act section 7 consultation requirements. Future projects that may affect federally listed species will be developed consistent with the forest plan programmatic-level biological opinion and approved through project-level consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service prior to implementation.

Carrying out vegetation management projects to improve forest resilience on the Sequoia not only involves challenges due to the inherent physical and economic constraints, but also requires consideration of these many different native species and habitats, over short and long timeframes. For several species, such as the endangered fisher, the greatest risk to persistence is widespread habitat loss due to increasing frequency, intensity, and size of large-scale wildfire disturbances. This makes the suitability and sustainability of remaining habitat on the Forest even more critical for species like fisher, who rely upon closed-canopied forests with large denning and resting trees for at least some aspects of their survival. Our vegetation restoration treatments are critical for long-term maintenance of these habitats yet can cause near-term effects to the species' reproductive success and persistence in the plan area. Therefore, we must carefully design and implement these important projects to meet the needs of these federally listed species, along with all the other plan, regulatory, and safety requirements inherent in this work. I have concern that, in some cases, important forest resilience projects would be stalled or canceled because it is simply not possible to meet all of these competing yet relevant requirements. For this reason, I sought to only include plan components that restrict vegetation treatments where it was absolutely necessary. My decision incorporates plan components that are intended to both address ecosystem stressors that are negatively impacting habitat for at-risk species over long timeframes, as well as direction that avoids or minimizes potential near-term effects of management actions to provide conditions for the persistence of at-risk species.

A primary difference between alternative B-modified and the other alternatives is more detailed plan content for California spotted owl, a species recently proposed for Federal listing. Alternative B, the preferred alternative from the RDEIS, was developed with the intention to implement the best available scientific information regarding California spotted owl protection and management by aligning with management recommendations of the Forest Service's California spotted owl strategy.[3] However, as raised in public comment and further internal review, some important details about how site-specific actions should be designed to achieve consistency with the California spotted owl strategy are not addressed in the forest plan content for alternative B. Alternative B-modified plan direction was developed with both the biologists who developed the California spotted owl conservation strategy, and foresters and fuels managers with experience implementing forest restoration projects on the Sequoia. I tasked this team to produce plan components that sufficiently manage for persistence of California spotted owl on the Sequoia, while providing more flexibility than under the current forest plan (alternative A) for vegetation treatments designed to improve forest resilience across the landscape. This plan direction includes less restrictions, as compared to alternative A, particularly where there is low likelihood of management actions disturbing breeding or rearing for California spotted owls or adversely affecting their suitable habitat. I find that alternative B-modified provides both ecosystem-level plan components to improve forest resilience and maintain habitat, and species-specific plan components that avoid potential near-term adverse impacts to breeding spotted owls and their habitat. I find that alternative B-modified provides direction to create the ecological conditions to maintain a viable population of California spotted owl in the plan area.

As required under the 2012 Planning Rule, these forest plan components will provide the ecological conditions necessary to maintain a viable population of each species of conservation concern in the plan area, and this finding is supported by and based on the persistence analysis for species of conservation concern. For species of conservation concern, integrated ecosystem-level plan components are included to address species habitat needs. If those were not found to be sufficient to maintain viability (within the capability of the forest), species-specific plan components were added. The persistence analysis (summarized in FEIS appendix D) concludes that the plan components address ecological conditions and threats and contribute to the persistence of each species.

There are some threats to species that are not entirely within the control of the Sequoia's management actions. One example is the disease risks to bighorn sheep populations from domestic sheep on adjacent private lands. In these cases, the plan components are focused on addressing the threats that are within the Forest Service's ability to address or influence and that will maintain or restore ecological conditions within the plan area to contribute to maintaining a viable population of the species within their range, as required in 36 CFR 219.9(b)(2).

I did not choose alternative C, D, or E because they do not balance the short-term and long-term beneficial and adverse effects to species as well as alternative B-modified does. Alternatives C and E would not allow sufficient mechanical treatment to move ecosystems toward desired conditions for at-risk species. Alternative D would have higher risks of near-term impacts to at-risk species and their habitat; impacts that may threaten their long-term persistence.

[3] https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r5/plants-animals/wildlife/?cid=STELPRD3854419

Topic 3: Sustainable Recreation and Designated Areas

Sustainable Recreation

The planning process confirmed the importance of outdoor recreation and tourism to Sequoia National Forest stakeholders. There are many ways visitors recreate on the Sequoia, seeking experiences ranging from challenging to more tranquil. Most visitors to the Forest originate from California's Central Valley and the extensive urban areas of southern California and the San Francisco Bay Area. For these visitors, the higher elevations and bodies of water offer a cool retreat from hot summer temperatures, and a reprieve from the stress of urban living. National and international visitors are drawn to iconic natural features such as the giant sequoia groves in the Giant Sequoia National Monument, 60 miles of world-class whitewater opportunities on the Kern River and climbing destinations on granite monoliths. The tourism resulting from recreation on the Sequoia is important in contributing to the economic sustainability of local communities.

The Sequoia is a recreation destination forest that directly contributes to the quality of life and economic vitality of over 20 million people living in surrounding communities and the broader region. A large and diverse population recreates on the Sequoia National Forest, along with its neighbors, including Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, and the Sierra and Inyo National Forests. As the population continues to increase, there are competing public values for many areas and uses and the potential for crowding and resource impacts in popular areas. Visitor use patterns will continue to evolve and likely reflect increases in culturally diverse populations.

Without proactive management, our efforts may not be appropriately responsive to the types, locations, and intensities of use. Unmanaged recreation, including development of rock-climbing routes at newly discovered climbing areas, user-created mountain bike trails, dispersed camping in sensitive ecosystems such as riparian areas, and motorized vehicle use outside designated travel routes are particular concerns. To ensure recreation is sustainable on the Forest, adaptive management along with investments in restoration, partnerships, and facility development is necessary. The continuing evolution in recreation equipment and technology is likely to change access patterns, types of use, and popular locations across the region. These changes may alter recreation experiences in areas where new use patterns are not compatible with different visitors' expectations and could lead to crowding or conflicts. With increasing visitor use, this plan direction will provide a framework for managing visitor use and a diversity of recreation opportunities now and into the future.

In response to extensive public comments on plan direction for sustainable recreation, the action alternatives were developed to include a "zoned" approach for sustainable recreation management. Since the 1960s, the Forest Service has used the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum ("recreation settings" or "ROS classes") as a tool to manage recreation. The contemporary needs of managers led to the development of other frameworks over the decades, such as Limits of Acceptable Change and Visitor Experience and Resource Protection, which address visitor use beyond simply managing for settings. The approach in the action alternatives complements the recreation opportunity spectrum foundation. The plan includes components for three spatially distinct recreation management areas ranging from developed and concentrated use (Destination Recreation Areas) to general use (General Recreation Areas), to undeveloped and remote uses (Backcountry Terrain Recreation Areas).

At any given location on the Forest, there is an underlying ROS class (see ROS maps for details, forest plan appendix A, figure 23). The primary distinction among ROS classes is the density of motorized and nonmotorized use. As a result, ROS does not provide sufficient proactive management direction for managing visitor use as uses continue to evolve and conditions change over time. So, on top of the ROS

foundation, the recreation management areas provide a complementary overlay, with plan components that address management topics not covered by ROS. The primary management topics covered by recreation management areas are related to visitor use management. In particular, plan components articulate the overall vision for future recreation planning, development, and use beyond motorized versus nonmotorized use. ROS and recreation management area maps both provide management direction for future projects. For example, see sample maps of recreation management areas in the Sustainable Recreation, Consequences Specific to Alternatives B and B-Modified, Visitor Use section (FEIS, chapter 3) that show how recreation management area boundaries typically contain multiple ROS classes. Also, see the tables at the beginning of each recreation management area section (forest plan, chapter 3, Sustainable Recreation) that show the number of acres of each ROS class within each recreation management area type.

In the no-action alternative (alternative A), as visitor use challenges emerge, management decisions would be reactive and generally involve incremental changes. Over time, this may lead to more recreation development, with limited integrated planning to determine where development makes the most sense. Use conflicts, crowding, and resource impacts associated with visitor use may occur as recreation use increases and visitor use patterns and popular activities continue to evolve. Without proactive management, the types, locations, and intensities of use may not be predictable to Forest visitors.

In the action alternatives, implementing a "zoned" approach creates clear expectations to help the public understand where recreation opportunities can be found to meet the needs of a wide variety of activities that visitors have come to expect on the Sequoia. The recreation management areas provide a well-defined approach for managing visitor use as uses and conditions change over time. The public would have more clarity and certainty about how lands would be managed for recreation uses. Alternative B-modified has the most Backcountry Terrain Recreation Areas among all alternatives, which would be maintained for low visitor use and density. They would be generally in remote areas with few amenities and limited recreation management.

Alternatives B and B-modified are similar; there are small differences in locations of the recreation management areas (such as corrections and refinements). The primary difference in alternative C is that lands that are recommended wilderness would not be allocated to any one of the three recreation management area types. Alternative D has the most General Recreation Areas (areas of active land management, multiple uses, and dispersed recreation) among all the alternatives. Destination Recreation Areas would be larger than under alternatives B and B-modified. Alternative E has distinct Backcountry Management Areas, and recommended wilderness, but no Destination Recreation Areas or Backcountry Terrain Recreation Areas. Current recreation uses and access, including motorized recreation and mechanized transport on existing routes, would not be restricted in Backcountry Management Areas of alternative E. In general, recreation would be managed for less development and less concentration of use.

I believe the allocation of recreation management areas in alternative B-modified is the best approach for sustainable recreation because it is flexible and most likely to align with future recreation patterns and lead to visitor use management strategies that are locally adapted, well-supported, and provide for social and ecological sustainability.

Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail and Management Area

The Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail provides for outstanding journeys on foot or horseback along the Pacific mountain ranges, from Mexico to Canada. One of 11 congressionally designated national scenic trails, the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail is one of the longest (2,650 miles) and wildest (over 54 percent of it is in designated wilderness). There was a wide range of public comments on the EIS

regarding public use and management activities allowed within the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Management Area. I chose plan components that will help implement the National Trails System Act requirements to "protect the nature and purpose of the trail and to provide for the conservation and enjoyment of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, and cultural qualities of the areas through which the trail passes," including plan components both for the trail tread itself and its broader management area.

With respect to the trail tread, the plan refers to the approximately 24-inch width of the trail tread. With respect to the broader management area, the plan refers to the area with boundaries that are up to one-half mile from the trail's centerline, along a line perpendicular to the trail. The specific boundaries of the management area are based on criteria used in the scenery management system and depend on topography. In general, not accounting for turns in trail, the maximum distance between two boundaries of the management area is one mile, along a line perpendicular to the trail.

The trail tread is open to foot and horse travel and closed to motorized[4] and mechanized travel.[5] The management area is intended to protect the nature and purposes of the trail and to be responsive to the specific needs of the Sequoia. Of the 47 miles of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail on the Sequoia, 34 miles (about 72 percent) are within designated wilderness. The three areas of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail that are outside wilderness are: Piute Mountains (9.2 miles), Scodie Mountains (2.3 miles), and Kennedy Meadows (1.3 miles). These areas are within General Recreation Areas and Backcountry Terrain Recreation Areas, both of which are less developed than Destination Recreation Areas.

Motorized Travel and Travel Management

In particular, I wish to address the topic of motorized travel within the management area, highlight specific plan components, and provide clear direction for future travel management planning. The forest plan does not make site-specific decisions regarding travel management within the management area because travel management decisions are made at the project level (36 CFR 212). There are 6.7 miles of roads and trails within the Pacific Crest Trail Management Area that are currently designated for motorized travel. No roads or trails would be opened or closed in this forest plan decision.

[4] The National Trails System Act prohibits the use of motorized vehicles by the general public along any national scenic trail and established a general requirement for uses along the trail to not substantially interfere with the nature and purposes of the trail.
[5] 36 CFR 212.21 and Regional Order 88-4.

Table 1. Allowed and prohibited motorized travel in the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail (PCT) and Management Area

Allowed Within the PCT Management Area Outside Designated Wilderness	Prohibited Within the PCT Management Area Outside Designated Wilderness
Motorized travel on designated motorized routes and in designated motorized areas (MA-PCT-STD 04).	Motorized travel on the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail tread year-round (National Trails System Act, MA-PCT-STD 03).[1]
	Motorized travel along the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail year-round (National Trails System Act, MA-PCT-STD 03).[1]
	Motorized travel that substantially interferes with the nature and purposes of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail National Trails System Act, (MA-PCT-STD 04).[2]
Travel management decisions, including decisions about designation/removal, location, design, and management of motorized routes and areas (MA-PCT-STD 03, 04).	Travel management decisions without public involvement (36 CFR 212).
[See below for more information about travel management decisions.]	Travel management decisions based only on whether a motorized route or area is located within or outside the management area (MA-PCT Introduction).
Designation of unauthorized routes through site-specific travel management decisions (MA-PCT-STD 04).[3]	Creation of unauthorized motorized routes (36 CFR 261.13).
Designated motorized routes and areas across the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail tread (MA-PCT-STD 07).	Designations for motorized routes and areas across the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail tread that do not comply with the management direction in the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Management Plan (USDA Forest Service 1982) (MA-PCT-STD 07).
Closure of designated motorized routes or areas (MA-PCT-STD 04).	Automatically mandating closure, re-route, removal, blocking, or naturalizing routes or areas because they area within the management area (MA-PCT-STD 04)
Re-route of designated motorized routes to locations outside the management area, or to other locations within the management area (MA-PCT-STD 04).	
Removal, blocking, or naturalizing unauthorized routes (MA-PCT-STD 04).	

[1] Exemptions include where the trail crosses or is located on designated motorized routes or if approved on a case-by-case basis to meet emergency purposes, including search and rescue.

[2] Exemptions include where required by law to provide access to private lands, or where it is the only prudent and feasible option for such access. Exemptions also include where the trail crosses or is located on designated motorized routes or if approved on a case-by-case basis for management of the trail or for administrative or emergency purposes, including search and rescue.

[3] For unauthorized routes to be designated, they must be evaluated in site-specific travel management analysis that is outside the scope of this forest plan revision analysis.

Key Points About How Plan Components Relate to Travel Management Planning

Travel Management decisions:

- are made at the project level (36 CFR 212);
- are not based only on whether a route or area is located within or outside the management area (MA-PCT Introduction);
- are not automatically determined for all routes or areas within the management area, including unauthorized routes which must be evaluated in site-specific travel management analysis that is outside the scope of forest plan revision (MA-PCT-STD 04);
- must protect the nature and purposes of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail;
- must be consistent with the National Trails System Act, specifically, motorized travel on or along the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail, or that substantially interferes with the nature and purposes of the trail, is prohibited year-round[6];
- must comply with the management direction in the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Management Plan;
- must be based on multiple factors (36 CFR 212);
- must include public involvement (36 CFR 212);
- must consider the local circumstances which affect the impacts of motorized travel and affect management options (MA-PCT-STD 06);
- may designate motorized routes within the management area if travel management planning determines that motorized travel within the management area would not occur on or along the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail and motorized travel would not substantially interfere with the nature and purposes of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail (MA-PCT-STD 04);
- must include rationale for the specific selected locations of motorized routes/areas within the management area and the widths of motorized route/area crossings of the trail and must explain how routes/areas designated within the management area are consistent with the prohibition of motorized travel on and along the trail and the prohibition of motorized travel that would substantially interfere with its nature and purposes (MA-PCT-STD 04); and
- may include the following, if necessary, to ensure motorized travel does not substantially interfere with the nature and purposes of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail—however, such actions are not automatically mandated for all routes or areas within the management area (MA-PCT-STD 04):
  - ♦ closure of designated motorized routes or areas within the management area;
  - ♦ re-route of designated motorized routes within the management area to locations outside the management area, or to other locations within the management area; or
  - ♦ removal, blocking, or naturalizing unauthorized routes within the management area.

Travel Management Planning in the Piute Mountains

Within the Piute Mountains, numerous miles of unauthorized trails are not designated on the Sequoia National Forest Motor Vehicle Use Map but are of interest to the motorized recreation community, and some are within the management area. Unauthorized routes cross the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail

[6] See exemptions in Table 1 notes.

in more than 10 places. Advocates for off-highway vehicle and motorcycle riding have expressed their desire to have many of these routes or crossings added to the designated system. For these unauthorized routes to be added to the designated system of trails, they must be evaluated in a site-specific travel management analysis that is outside the scope of this forest plan revision analysis. Plan components and the clarifications provided above will help establish a clear framework for future travel management decisions.

Key Points About Piute Travel Management

- Sequencing of the Piute Travel Management Planning project relative to forest plan revision has been of great interest to the public. I expect scoping for that project to begin soon after this forest plan decision is signed.
- Public outreach regarding the route designation process and associated NEPA analysis will engage interested parties.
- Public input from previous travel management planning efforts in the Piutes will be considered in the upcoming travel management project for this area. The Forest Service will engage with adjacent landowners and public land agencies to acknowledge private property access and for contiguous travel management planning.

Temporary Locations of Trail Segments

The Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Management Plan (1982) allows for the full range of the recreation opportunity spectrum to be experienced, with rural and urban sections of the trail "generally be(ing) as short as necessary to allow passage across or under highways and railroads or passage through developed areas." There are sections of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail where the trail tread is located in an interim location to have a continuous path from Mexico to Canada. Some of these temporary locations are on motorized road shoulders or motorized trails with the long-term objective of relocating the trail to an optimal, nonmotorized location. For example, in the Sequoia National Forest, the portion of National Forest System Road 27S11 (Horse Canyon) that is surrounded by the Kiavah Wilderness is open to motorized vehicles, and the interim location of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail is on part of the road. The long-term objective is to relocate the trail to a nonmotorized location. While re-location of such segments is not included in forest plan revision, it is important to note that such interim locations may continue to affect recreation opportunities for trail and motorized route recreationists.

1981 Sequoia National Forest Section Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Management Plan

The 1981 Sequoia National Forest Section Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Management Plan (alternative A: existing plan direction), which identifies trail construction and communications objectives, as well as Sequoia National Forest segment-specific direction (for issues such as trail camps, water, litter disposal, interpretation, and signing), is superseded in its entirety[7] and replaced with the management area direction in the revised forest plan. The 1981 Sequoia National Forest Section Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Management Plan did not include scenery, lands special uses, vegetation management, or fuels treatment-related direction. The management area in the revised forest plan provides a more comprehensive and modern suite of potential responses to effectively manage the impacts of increases in the numbers of visitors on the trail. For example, while past visitor use planning focused centrally on carrying capacity, the science of recreation management has evolved considerably in the last 40 years.

[7] This would include supersession of the social carrying capacities identified in the 1981 Sequoia National Forest Section Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Management Plan as well as the adoption of any elements of the 1981 Sequoia National Forest Section Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Plan in any other planning decisions.

Managers will implement visitor use management strategies to minimize impacts to desired conditions for natural resources and visitor experiences through education (such as increasing visitor contacts), site management (such as relocating a facility), regulation (such as initiating a permit system), and enforcement (such as prohibiting access at a particular time) (MA-PCT-GDL 06).

Conclusion

The management direction for the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Management Area integrates the direction and guidance provided by the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Management Plan (USDA Forest Service 1982) and is responsive to local issues, concerns, and opportunities.

Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail management direction will not override wilderness management direction but will be complementary.

Per the National Trails System Act and Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Management Plan, outside designated wilderness the trail is located to avoid substantial human modifications of the natural environment. Some sections of the trail outside designated wilderness travel through unmodified areas. However, there are sections of the trail outside designated wilderness that necessarily travel through modified areas, including utility corridors, highways, railroads, intensively managed farms and forests, or urban areas. These sections of the trail are as short as necessary to allow for safe use.

The no-action alternative A provides direction for the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail focused on the trail tread and immediate surroundings, through the 1981 Sequoia National Forest Section Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Management Plan and the 1982 Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Management Plan. There is limited specific plan direction to guide activities that may impact the scenic and recreational values of the trail. In alternative B-modified, management area boundaries are determined by applying the narrative description of the management area to site-specific analysis:

> "The Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Management Area includes the area in the visual foreground landscape zone encompassing resources, qualities, values, associated settings, and primary uses. The visual foreground landscape zone is the area that is visible from the trail's centerline at a height of 5 feet above the ground, extending up to one-half mile of the centerline, where visibility is not obscured by terrain."

Alternative C applies forest plan direction to a management area up to 4 miles wide and alternative D applies that direction to a management area up to one-half mile wide. An up-to-4-mile-wide management area would include too many areas that would have little bearing on the experience of visitors on the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail, and an up-to-one-half-mile-wide management area would not include enough of the areas, which may impact the nature and purposes of the trail. The up-to-1-mile management area in the forest plan encompasses the visual foreground for Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail, and therefore, I found it to best guide those management activities that could most affect the experience of visitors on the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail.

Preliminary Administrative Recommendations

Recommended Wilderness

Twenty-seven percent of the 1.1 million acres of the Sequoia National Forest is within the Giant Sequoia National Monument. Outside of the Giant Sequoia National Monument, another 27 percent of the Forest is designated wilderness. In addition, outside of the monument, 24 percent of the Sequoia is inventoried roadless area. In total, about 78 percent of the 1.1-million-acre Sequoia National Forest is within the

Giant Sequoia National Monument, designated wilderness, or inventoried roadless area. The Giant Sequoia National Monument, designated wilderness, and inventoried roadless areas offer solitude and vast open space, including parts of one of the largest contiguous blocks of wilderness in the continental United States.

In total, Congress has designated six wilderness areas that are either in whole or in part within the Sequoia National Forest's administrative boundary (Domeland Wilderness, Golden Trout Wilderness, Jennie Lakes Wilderness, Kiavah Wilderness, Monarch Wilderness, and South Sierra Wilderness). In addition, the Forest Service has a multiple-use mission that also includes managing for a wide range of other Forest benefits, from timber, Tribal and cultural uses, minerals, energy, and grazing to fire, water, fish, and wildlife, as well as mechanized and motorized recreation.

National forests are required by the 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219.7(2)(v)) to "identify and evaluate lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System and determine whether to recommend any such lands for wilderness designation." Any lands recommended for wilderness designation through forest plan revision are preliminary administrative recommendations and are referred to as "recommended wilderness." FSH 1909.12, Chapter 70, outlines a wilderness recommendation process to guide implementation of the planning rule; it includes four steps (inventory, evaluation, analysis, and recommendation) and each step includes Tribal and public engagement. We have followed this process closely, shared our progress regularly, and have benefitted from significant input from stakeholders.

I heard from a wide range of stakeholders on multiple occasions. I heard perspectives about the need to protect ecosystems through wilderness recommendation and associated forest plan content, including ecosystems that are "underrepresented" in the National Wilderness Preservation System. I heard perspectives that recommended wilderness would be beneficial to the Sequoia by protecting watershed values and ecological and elevational diversity and protecting species migration corridors. I also heard from stakeholders, including Tribal leaders, that they wanted more road access for a variety of purposes including transporting elderly or less able-bodied people to the Forest. In addition, I heard from recreation groups that want to recreate in ways that conflict with wilderness recommendation, who are not supportive of recommending wilderness. I also heard concerns about adequately maintaining trails within recommended wilderness without motorized equipment, in addition to trails in existing designated wilderness. In other words, some do not want recommended wilderness because they believe management and access in recommended wilderness is too restrictive and some want to see more wilderness recommended.

In these decisions, we seek to provide an appropriate balance of opportunities and uses in response to the broad range of public values. I looked at the Sequoia National Forest as a whole, including the balance of recreation opportunities across the Forest and across the range of recreation interests. The new recreation management areas and the recreation opportunity spectrum both represent ways to visualize the allocation and balance of different recreation opportunities across the Forest. I also considered the context of the Sequoia within the larger geographic area where we are situated.

Based on our analyses and input from local governments, stakeholders, Tribes, and the public, I have determined that recommending one area for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System on the Sequoia National Forest, the Monarch Wilderness Addition – South (about 4,734 acres), within the Giant Sequoia National Monument, best balances overall management tradeoffs across the Forest, as described below. Therefore, I selected alternative B-modified, with one recommended wilderness area, for the forest plan. I understand the value and benefits of recommended wilderness areas for both human and ecological benefits. The evaluation and analysis documented in EIS appendix B describe the "wilderness

characteristics" of the areas analyzed in alternatives C and E (not to be confused with the "wilderness character" of existing designated wilderness).

This recommendation is a preliminary administrative recommendation that will receive further review and possible modification by the Chief of the Forest Service, the Secretary of Agriculture, and the President of the United States. Congress has reserved the authority to make final decisions on wilderness designation. Forest plan implementation is not dependent upon subsequent action-related recommendations for wilderness designation. Plan direction for recommended wilderness identifies authorized uses and provides direction to allow for some activities needed for the administration of the area and for ecological restoration of at-risk species. I am mindful that there is no obligation to make a recommendation and only Congress can designate wilderness areas. My recommendation is ultimately only my most thoughtful recommendation to Congress for what it should consider for designation and ultimately Congress may decide to designate more or fewer acres than I recommend.

Decisions about whether to recommend areas as wilderness are not solely the result of a technical inventory process, where all areas that meet certain specifications are recommended. Instead, decisions result from considering all input and balancing overall management tradeoffs and needs across the Forest. All lands proposed by the public for recommended wilderness are included in an alternative in the FEIS, but some are only included in an alternative considered but eliminated from detailed study because they lack wilderness characteristics; had substantially noticeable human impacts; represented a departure from apparent naturalness due to improvements; had pervasive impacts that would influence a visitor's opportunity for solitude, including pervasive sights and sounds from outside the area; or are unmanageable to preserve their wilderness characteristics. EIS appendix B documents the rationale for not including each of those areas in an alternative considered in detail.

I carefully considered tradeoffs and input on managing areas as recommended wilderness. Tradeoffs include restrictions on fuels management, wildland fire management, post-fire recovery, and climate change resilience activities. I believe such uses and options for future uses and management provide valuable contributions to the multiple-use mission of the Forest Service and should continue. In this decision, my aim is to ensure that the Sequoia National Forest provides access for a wide range of recreation experiences including all anticipated types of uses and numbers of recreationists, while integrating values related to wilderness with the other values and benefits that the Forest provides.

Management Direction for Lands Not Recommended

Inclusion in the inventory, evaluation, or analysis is not a designation that conveys or requires a particular kind of management (FSH 1909.12, Chapter 70). Of the 20 polygons (263,963 acres) recommended as wilderness in alternative C or E or both, one area is recommended as wilderness. However, in alternative B, the Monarch Wilderness Addition – South (4,906 acres) does not include 563 acres that are included in alternative C (5,469 acres). I decided not to recommend those 563 acres as wilderness so that the boundary does not extend beyond the inventoried roadless area. Since those 563 acres are all within the Giant Sequoia National Monument, management direction is provided in the Giant Sequoia National Monument Management Plan. In the final selected version of alternative B-modified, the Monarch Wilderness Addition – South (4,734 acres) boundaries were modified to better follow easily identifiable landmarks (waterways, ridgelines, trails), and set back farther from existing motorized routes. As a result, the recommended area does not include 172 acres that are included in alternative B. These acres are all within the Giant Sequoia National Monument as well, so management direction is provided in the Giant Sequoia National Monument Management Plan. In addition, approximately 77,521 other acres recommended as wilderness in alternative C or E or both are also within the Giant Sequoia National Monument.

Alternatives C and E include 180,973 acres recommended as wilderness that are not within the Giant Sequoia National Monument. In alternative B-modified, approximately 83 percent (150,610 acres) of those acres are classified as Backcountry Terrain Recreation Areas. These areas will retain their current conditions in terms of recreation, special uses, providing forest products, and protecting species and ecosystem diversity, while still allowing low levels of other uses. In alternative B-modified, approximately 14 percent (25,132 acres) are classified as General Recreation Areas and approximately 2 percent (3,189 acres) are Destination Recreation Areas (portions of Cannell Peak and Saturday Peak near the Kern River). The remaining 1 percent (2,042 acres) already have other land classifications, such as designated Wild and Scenic River corridor. Further, approximately 79 percent (143,642 acres) of the 180,973 acres recommended as wilderness in alternative C or E or both, that are not within the Giant Sequoia National Monument, are within inventoried roadless areas. I determined that this management direction balances the many uses, tradeoffs, and values associated with these areas.

Conclusion

In the Sequoia National Forest, we are fortunate to have a broad inventory of lands that provide for a vast diversity of uses, including iconic, undeveloped lands, in accordance with our Forest Service Mission. Not counting designated wilderness within the Giant Sequoia National Monument, about 27 percent of the Sequoia is existing designated wilderness. In addition, not counting inventoried roadless areas within the Giant Sequoia National Monument, 24 percent of the Sequoia is within designated inventoried roadless areas. I feel confident that the undeveloped character of these inventoried roadless areas will continue to be protected while allowing for some activities and uses that would be restricted in recommended wilderness areas. Recreation opportunities outside of designated wilderness offer options for diverse public interests with varying access needs and preferences. For example, some areas provide for quiet recreation, solitude, and wildlife habitat, while remaining open to mechanized recreation (such as mountain biking on designated routes) and access that would otherwise be prohibited in recommended wilderness. These decisions balance many uses and values in a manner that provides benefits to as many people as possible, while maintaining the existing high-quality natural character of the land.

I want to clarify how I understand active management in recommended wilderness. I recognize that the DEIS included some statements that indicated no active management is allowed in the recommended wilderness. While this was the case with the direction in the draft forest plan, we modified the language in the final plan components to allow for what might be considered inconsistent uses of a temporary nature for the purposes of ecological restoration. I recognize now, in reviewing the analysis, that there were some errors in the effects analysis related to active management in recommended wilderness. In the FEIS, staff corrected these errors.

In summary, I believe there will be some constraints on active management in recommended wilderness due to the limitations on motorized equipment and mechanized transport. These constraints could be eased for projects designed specifically to restore at-risk species habitat. However, in general, there would be limitations on motorized equipment and mechanized transport for vegetation management projects not designed specifically to restore at-risk species habitat. I have modified the language in the final forest plan to provide more clarity on this issue. In selecting the area to recommend as wilderness, I have carefully assessed the allowances and the constraints of this forest plan direction. In the end, the decision concerning recommended wilderness weighs many factors, and is a balance of values and tradeoffs around these areas. I am confident the balance we have reached comes with a clear understanding of the constraints and allowances in plan direction.

Wild and Scenic River Eligibility

Congress has designated three wild and scenic rivers that are either in whole or in part within the Sequoia National Forest's administrative boundary (105.3 miles, including portions of the North Fork Kern River, the South Fork Kern River, and the South Fork Kings River). Congress has not made a final determination on an additional river segment (approximately 1.3 miles of the South Fork Kern River) that was previously studied for suitability, was recommended by the Forest Service for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System and is within the Sequoia National Forest's administrative boundary.

National forests are required by the 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219.7(c)(2)(vi)) to "identify the eligibility of rivers for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, unless a systematic inventory has been previously completed and documented, and there are no changed circumstances that warrant additional review." The planning rule also requires the Forest Service to manage eligible and suitable rivers to protect the values that provide the basis for their inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System. FSH 1909.12, Chapter 80, outlines a wild and scenic river eligibility study process to guide implementation of the planning rule; it includes three required steps (inventory, eligibility determination, and preliminary classification) and a fourth optional step (suitability). We have followed this process closely, shared our progress regularly, and have benefitted from significant contributions from stakeholders, including multiple recreation user groups. Suitability was not completed as part of the current forest plan revision process.

Seven river segments were determined to be eligible in previous wild and scenic river studies and have not yet been studied for suitability (58.6 miles, including portions of the Kern River, Little Kern River, North Fork Middle Fork Tule River, and North Fork Tule River). These segments also were included in the inventory and were reviewed to determine if there were any changed circumstances or new information.

We released inventory, eligibility, and preliminary classification findings at multiple times throughout the plan revision process. We used input from the public, stakeholder groups, and local agencies to add segments to the inventory, inform "outstandingly remarkable value" findings, and used information provided by those groups to help determine eligibility. We also addressed stakeholder concerns by better describing the inventory and eligibility process and the effects of an eligibility determination. We shared revised findings regularly, to ensure the public could see changes made and have a chance to provide input on those changes.

The wild and scenic rivers study process and detailed study results are documented in the FEIS appendix C. Eligibility findings are based on whether a river is free flowing, and whether it has at least one outstandingly remarkable value. Because these findings are based on existing conditions, the process of determining eligibility and the eligibility findings did not vary by alternative. Eighty-eight river segments (approximately 363.8 miles) were identified as eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System, including 83.8 miles within the Giant Sequoia National Monument. Eligibility findings apply until an Act of Congress or a change in eligibility or suitability status from a future study.

I assigned each eligible wild and scenic river segment a preliminary classification: wild (175.3 miles), scenic (83.9 miles), or recreational (104.6 miles). These preliminary classifications are based on the condition of the river and the development level of adjacent lands at the time of the study. Classifications are preliminary until a river is designated and subsequently, a Comprehensive River Management Plan is completed, or until a change in eligibility or suitability status from a future study. The preliminary classifications are the same for all action alternatives.

Management direction in the forest plan will protect the values that provide the basis for their inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. Any site-specific projects and activities on National Forest System lands within Forest Service-identified eligible or suitable river corridors (one-quarter mile from the normal high-water mark on each side of the river segment) that a responsible official authorizes must be consistent with the "interim protection measures" in FSH 1909.12, Chapter 80, Section 84.3. This ensures the free-flowing character of eligible and suitable rivers, protects the identified outstandingly remarkable values, and maintains the preliminary classifications until an Act of Congress or a change in eligibility or suitability status from a future study.

In other words, the requirements are to protect the outstandingly remarkable value(s) and maintain the condition of the river and the development level of adjacent lands that was present at the time of the study. In practice, this means that if a river segment has a geologic or recreation outstandingly remarkable value and a preliminary classification of wild, a project or activity will be designed and executed to protect the specific geologic or recreation value identified for that segment in the eligibility study (EIS appendix C), as well as maintain the wild classification.

For example, the 9.9-mile Brush Creek segment from T.23S. R.34E. Sec.7 south of Mosquito Meadow at 9,500 feet elevation to its confluence with the North Fork Kern River (River Segment "2.30"), has recreation outstandingly remarkable values related to the series of falls, slides, and pools that is popular for whitewater kayaking and a geology outstandingly remarkable value related to vertical relief, outstanding diversity of geologic bedrock and features, continuous granite pools, and the prominent marble band ridge and its preliminary classification is scenic because there are roads and a campground. I expect that protecting these outstandingly remarkable values and maintaining the preliminary classification would be relatively straight forward, not overly restrictive, and beneficial to a wide range of stakeholders.

Forest plan direction regarding eligible wild and scenic rivers does not apply to lands outside of the Sequoia National Forest. My finding a river segment eligible for wild and scenic designation is not a recommendation or a decision about the river's status. It simply means that it meets the criteria of being free-flowing and possessing one or more outstandingly remarkable value. Recommendations do not occur until the suitability study is completed.

I do not anticipate that there would be adverse impacts on our ability to manage the eligible river corridors. The impacts on our ability to manage eligible river corridors would likely be negligible because they include a relatively small portion of the total rivers and area in the Forest and allow for some use and development within the corridors for river segments preliminarily classified as scenic or recreational—and the river segments preliminary classified as wild are within the boundaries of designated wilderness or inventoried roadless areas. No motorized routes would be proposed for closure due to eligible wild and scenic rivers. On the other hand, protecting the numerous and diverse outstandingly remarkable values and maintaining their preliminary classifications will provide a wide range of benefits and ensure that these river segments remain eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

Requirements of the Planning Rule

The forest plan has been prepared in compliance with the 2012 Planning Rule at 36 CFR Part 219. It meets the specific requirements at sections 219.8 through 219.11 as follows:

219.8 Sustainability

The forest plan contributes to social and economic sustainability by:

1) Facilitating opportunities for local employment and economic development associated with recreation and restoration activities. It would increase economic benefits related to current conditions (forest plan, Local Communities and Volunteers, Interpretation, Partnerships, and Stewardship sections).
2) Providing drinking water to millions of people, as well as other beneficial uses of water that contribute to economic growth and ecosystem integrity (forest plan, Watersheds section).
3) Establishing plan components that support a wide variety of recreation opportunities for local, national, and international visitors. Over 25,000 acres would be within the "destination" recreation areas and almost 270,000 acres would be within "backcountry terrain" recreation areas. (forest plan, Management Areas – Sustainable Recreation section).
4) Providing for Tribal use for artisan and craft materials, medicines, fuel, traditional foods, and heritage tourism and recreation (forest plan, Tribal Relations and Use).
5) Providing Tribal communities with opportunities for traditional ceremonies and religious practices that strengthen the communities' sense of place and self and providing gathering activities on the national forest that contribute to Tribal social, economic, familial, and religious well-being (forest plan, Tribal Relations and Use).
6) Providing for the continuation of traditional land use activities, including livestock grazing, which contribute to the sense of place and provides a window into the rich history of the southern Sierra region (forest plan, Range section).
7) Improving safety of local communities and firefighters, by increasing the pace and scale of fuels treatment, to help reduce the size and severity of wildfire (forest plan, Fire and Terrestrial Ecosystems sections).

The forest plan provides for ecological sustainability by:

1) Providing for ecological integrity by having the desired conditions, objectives, standards, and guidelines to maintain and restore diverse terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems in the Sequoia. Many desired conditions are based on the ecosystem natural range of variation to promote structural heterogeneity, habitat diversity, and ecological resilience to stressors (forest plan, Terrestrial Ecosystems section).
2) Promoting key ecological processes, such as natural fire regimes, which maintain and restore the composition, structure, function, and connectivity of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems in the Sequoia (forest plan, Fire and Terrestrial Ecosystems sections).
3) Developing strategic approaches to address ecological resilience of Sequoia ecosystems, including through ecosystem management and climate adaptation strategies, strategic fire management zones and a sustainable recreation framework that provide for flexibility and adaptability while considering issues such as health, safety, and access (forest plan, Watersheds, Terrestrial Ecosystems, Animal and Plant Species, Invasive Species, Fire, and Sustainable Recreation sections).
4) Incorporating a strong focus on maintaining and restoring ecological conditions across aquatic and terrestrial habitats over the long term through plan direction linked to an aquatic and riparian conservation strategy and to strategic fire management zones. Strategies are based on an increasing body of best available scientific literature, supported by current geospatial information (forest plan, Fire – Strategic Fire Management Zones section).

5) Providing the range of ecological conditions needed for many at-risk species across the landscape, including through species-specific plan direction (see next section).

6) Including standards and guidelines to protect air, soil, and water quality over the long term (forest plan, Air and Watersheds sections).

7) Providing desired conditions, goals, and objectives that maintain and improve watersheds at a landscape scale to improve resilience in the face of disturbance events like fires and flooding (forest plan, Watersheds section).

219.9 Diversity of plant and animal communities

The forest plan provides for a diversity of plant and animal communities by:

1) Addressing key threats to species and habitats from large-scale catastrophic events, invasive species, and climate change. Focusing on habitat and landscape level restoration and resilience, under the assumption that creating plan components to address key threats to species and habitats from large-scale catastrophic events, invasive species, and climate change, will improve resilience of diverse habitats (forest plan, chapter 2).

2) Providing ecosystem-level plan content intended to provide the ecological conditions necessary to support persistence of most native species in the plan area. This includes nine listed threatened and endangered species: one plant, one fish, one amphibian, two mammals, and four bird species; four species proposed for listing: one bird species and three amphibian species. In addition, the Regional Forester identified 79 species of conservation concern: 22 animal and 57 plant species (forest plan, Animal and Plant Species section).

3) Developing species-specific plan components needed to ensure continued persistence for bats, bighorn sheep, fisher, Sierra marten, California spotted owl, great gray owl, northern goshawk, willow flycatcher, golden trout, Little Kern golden trout, and at-risk plants. Plan content provides the additional ecological conditions necessary to contribute to recovery of federally listed species, conserve proposed and candidate species, and maintain a viable population of each species of conservation concern (forest plan, Animal and Plant Species section).

219.10 Multiple uses

The forest plan provides for integrated resource management for multiple uses (219.10(a)) by:

1) Providing management for sustainable recreation settings and opportunities that are economically, ecologically, and socially sustainable and compatible with other land uses (forest plan, chapter 2 Sustainable Recreation section and chapter 3 Management Area Direction for Sustainable Recreation).

2) Establishing desired conditions for forest products and management that provide for predictable and sustainable forest product yields, while meeting the needs of the desired pace and scale of ecological restoration over the next several decades (forest plan, Timber and Other Forest Products section).

3) Including plan components that direct Forest Service management of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail and optimize the unique recreation setting and trail-based opportunities associated with the trail (forest plan, Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Management Area section).

4) Directing the ongoing sustainable management of grazing allotments that contribute to the well-being and economic sustainability of local economies in Fresno, Kern, and Tulare Counties (forest plan, Range section).

219.11 Timber requirements based on the National Forest Management Act

The revised forest plan meets the timber requirements in the planning rule by (see forest plan, appendix D)[8]:

1) Identifying lands suitable for timber production.
2) Identifying lands not suited for timber production, which include non-forested lands, wilderness, recommended wilderness, eligible wild river segments, riparian conservation areas, and California spotted owl protected activity centers.
3) Specifying that timber harvest, including some harvest with a secondary objective of timber production, can be used to move toward or maintain desired conditions and restore or maintain ecological integrity.
4) Specifying that timber harvest may occur on some lands not suitable for timber production to protect multiple-use values other than timber production, including restoration toward desired conditions, and for salvage, sanitation, or public safety.
5) Providing for sawtimber harvests at a level likely to sustain local sawmill infrastructure while supporting restoration toward desired conditions, as well as harvests of other products including fuelwood to support local demand and biomass in response to opportunity.
6) Identifying the Sequoia's sustained yield limit is 15.9 million cubic feet per year and the projected annual timber sale quantity is 0.8 to 1.2 million cubic feet, or 4 to 6 million board feet.
7) Including numerous standards and guidelines that limit timber harvest as required for resource protection including a standard that prohibits even-aged regeneration harvests such as clearcuts, in lieu of specifying the maximum opening size that may be used in even-aged regeneration harvests.

Monitoring Program

The Sequoia plan monitoring program (forest plan chapter 4) includes monitoring questions and associated indicators that track relevant changes in the plan area and measure management effectiveness and progress toward achieving or maintaining specific desired conditions, objectives, goals, and standards. Details of the plan monitoring program—including monitoring and analysis protocols, data collection schedules, responsible parties, data management, and adaptive management strategies—are part of a separate monitoring guide that is available on the Sequoia and Sierra forest plan revision website at https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=3375.

A biennial monitoring evaluation report will be prepared to indicate whether a change to the forest plan, management activities, or monitoring program may be needed, or whether a new assessment may be warranted based on the monitoring information. The biennial monitoring evaluation report will be made available to inform the public and encourage feedback on the monitoring methods, appropriateness of adaptive management strategies in meeting the established monitoring goals, and our progress in meeting forest plan goals. Not every monitoring question is answered on a biennial schedule; some data are available at intervals longer than two years and some trends are best evaluated at longer intervals due to high year-to-year variation or time needed to observe ecological responses or both. The time intervals for

[8] Note: Acreages presented below are approximations based on best available mapping data at the time this decision was prepared. These estimates have been updated, where appropriate, to reflect current corporate data and therefore may vary from the acreages estimated in the FEIS which was based on older data.

data collection and reporting for each monitoring question and indicator are described in the monitoring guide.

The monitoring program addresses the eight monitoring topics required under the 2012 Planning Rule; some questions address multiple topics. The monitoring program is implemented at the forest level, focusing on key ecological and socio-economic conditions described in the plan components. By focusing on key conditions, monitoring attention and forest resources can be directed to those priority management questions, especially those with a high degree of uncertainty. Some of the key conditions evaluated as part of the Sequoia National Forest plan monitoring program include, but are not limited to, old forests with large-diameter trees, habitat for at-risk species, fire-adapted (pine) ecosystems, meadow and riparian ecological conditions, local community economic conditions and Forest contributions to economic opportunities, access to and satisfaction with National Forest System lands, trends in Forest partnerships, and the continuing effects of fire and drought on the landscape.

Some additional key conditions important to the Sequoia National Forest are monitored as part of the Region 5 broader-scale monitoring strategy.[9] The broader-scale monitoring strategy was released by the regional forester in 2020 and is intended to complement the plan monitoring programs in the region by evaluating questions and indicators common to multiple plan areas. The strategy evaluates the status and trends in some key conditions and species like macroinvertebrates, the spatial extent of major vegetation types and forest structure, meadow condition, climate change, insects and disease, wildfire, economic conditions, and key animal species. For example, the broader-scale monitoring strategy monitors the status and trend in the distribution of species like the California spotted owl and Pacific fisher, wide-ranging species whose habitats are influenced by management activities and ecological processes and disturbances like wildfire and drought. Monitoring these species at this broad scale, including where management and wildfire/drought effects occur, can provide insight at a meaningful spatial scale, and help the relevant forests modify management action in response to observed trends. Broader-scale monitoring results are made available to the forests and public every five years. Information from the broader-scale monitoring strategy and plan monitoring program will be used together to evaluate whether a change may be needed to the forest plan, management activities, or monitoring program.

We made several changes to the forest plan monitoring program during the plan revision process. Changes were prompted to improve clarity, to accurately reflect the capabilities of existing and new data sources and tools, and in response to public comment. We released the preliminary draft monitoring program in 2015, before the DEIS was released, and asked for public input. We also presented monitoring information at the Sierra Cascades Dialogs and received questions and comments to help shape the monitoring program. The draft monitoring program was circulated in May 2016 with the DEIS and draft forest plan, again in June 2019 with the revised DEIS and draft forest plan, and finally with the pre-objection forest plan and FEIS. Some notable changes to the forest plan monitoring program included:

- Removed a monitoring question for macroinvertebrates that are being evaluated as part of the Region 5 broader-scale monitoring strategy.
- Consolidated two overlapping monitoring questions and clarified indicators for meadow and riparian vegetation condition. The original intent of the two questions is retained, including evaluating riparian condition following management activities. The previous indicators were mis-stated and duplicative in some instances. The new, consolidated indicators now more accurately reflect the data that are collected as part of the multiple monitoring efforts.

[9] https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r5/landmanagement/planning/?cid=FSEPRD587108

- Modified the indicator for select terrestrial ecological conditions and wildfire monitoring questions to measure change at the scale of an ecological zone rather than an ecosystem type. This minor modification better suits the capabilities of our data sources and tools and more appropriately ties trends to plan desired conditions.
- Revised the monitoring question and indicators for trends in forest budget in response to public comment. The question and indicators were revised to clarify the desire to understand trends in the forest budget (not compare to cost projections) as it relates to the ability to accomplish objectives and engage in valuable partnerships to help accomplish work.
- Broadened the forest-based uses and ecological services monitoring question to reflect the potential for changing forest uses and ecological services over the life of the plan. Removed carbon sequestration from this question because changes in carbon stocks are being evaluated as part of the Region 5 broader-scale monitoring strategy. The associated indicators were changed to reflect new and improved data sources.
- Replaced the indicator evaluating management effects on soil productivity to reflect the actual metrics measured by forest protocols and align with the financial and technical capabilities of the Forest.
- Added monitoring questions and indicators for California spotted owl and at-risk plant species habitat, in response to the administrative review (objection) process (discussed further below).

The forest plan monitoring program and broader-scale monitoring strategy recognize the important role of the public, partners, and stakeholders in this monitoring program. These groups provide essential feedback to improve the program and help us evaluate our adaptive management approaches. Many of our partners help us accomplish the monitoring. We are grateful to have these meaningful relationships and hope to expand upon them in the future to improve our approach to monitoring our public lands.

Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, we considered five other alternatives in detail, which are discussed below. Alternative B-modified was the environmentally preferred alternative. A more detailed comparison of these alternatives can be found in the FEIS near the end of chapter 2.

Alternatives Analyzed in Detail

Alternative A: Existing Plan Direction

Under the no-action alternative, current management plans would continue to guide management of the planning area. The no-action alternative would not adequately address the need for change or the rapidly changing environmental conditions and changing visitor use patterns on national forests that warrant innovative, collaborative approaches to land management.

Alternative B: Original Proposed Action

Alternative B addresses the needs for changing the forest plan, as well as to carry forward existing forest plan direction that is still relevant. This alternative considers the changed condition with respect to the tree mortality which occurred contemporaneously with the development of the 2016 draft forest plan. Alternative B focuses on improving ecological fire resilience and restoring fire as an ecosystem process at the landscape level, while protecting wildlife and their remaining quality habitat and balancing those needs with the need for more active management.

Alternative B would recommend including one area of the Sequoia National Forest in the National Wilderness Preservation System: 4,906 acres within the Giant Sequoia National Monument, contiguous with the existing designated Monarch Wilderness. Alternative B would create a management area for the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail.

Alternative B-Modified: Selected Alternative

Alternative B-modified, the selected alternative, is similar to alternative B. Alternative B-modified was developed in response to public comments on the RDEIS, and to provide for better alignment with contemporary conservation and/or recovery strategies for several at-risk species including California spotted owl, fisher, and rare plants. We needed to provide additional detail in the plan content for several at-risk species to ensure that the plan direction provides for the ecological conditions necessary to contribute to the recovery of federally listed threatened and endangered species, conserve proposed and candidate species, and maintain a viable population of each species of conservation concern within the plan area.

In light of the increasing trend of habitat loss due to large and severe wildfires, this alternative has higher objectives for vegetation treatments and restoration. It also provides more detailed plan direction related to constraints around these treatments than alternative B. This further refined plan content for several at-risk species provides important guidance that clarifies how we will minimize the potential near-term impacts of forest management activities. For management activities in riparian conservation areas, small adjustments to plan content with alternative B-modified make it less detailed and provides slightly more flexibility for implementation.

Alternative B-modified is the same as alternative B for recommended wilderness and the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail management area.

Alternative C

Alternative C was developed to focus management on vegetation treatments and restoration in the wildland-urban intermix zone with limited treatments elsewhere. It emphasizes the use of prescribed fire, over mechanical treatments, to reduce fuels and increase forest resilience. Plan content related to vegetation management would be the most restrictive, and would not provide exceptions for actions nearest communities, as compared to alternatives B, B-modified, and D. The intent was to further avoid potential adverse impacts on at-risk species from vegetation treatments. Alternative C would also include the most area for recommended wilderness and increase the size of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail management area.

Alternative D

Alternative D emphasizes increased pace and scale of vegetation treatments to improve forest resilience and to better address stressors such as fire, drought, climate change, insects, and diseases, while enhancing economic and social sustainability. To a greater degree than alternatives B and B-modified, it emphasizes long-term habitat conservation and ecosystem resilience, accepting potential short-term impacts on at-risk species to reduce the risk of habitat damage or loss from large and severe wildfire or other large-scale disturbances such as drought and insects and disease. This alternative would use focus landscapes to strategically use fire and vegetation treatments over large areas to achieve resilience objectives. Alternative D would not include any new recommended wilderness and would decrease the size of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail management area.

Alternative E

Alternative E was developed to respond to concerns over the effects that mechanized and motorized uses would have on recommended wilderness. Alternative E shares a similar overall framework to alternative C. Alternative E proposes different locations and overall less recommended wilderness areas than alternative C, and the inclusion of backcountry management areas, which would not restrict current uses and access, including motorized uses and mechanized transport on existing routes. With respect to the other alternatives that were considered in detail, alternative E would manage recreation for less development and less concentration of use.

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study

As required by the NEPA, we did rigorously explore and objectively evaluate all reasonable alternatives and discuss in the FEIS the reasons for eliminating any alternatives that were not developed in detail (40 CFR 1502.14). Nine other alternatives, summarized below, were considered but eliminated from detailed consideration. See FEIS, chapter 2 for discussion of why these alternatives were eliminated from detailed study.

- *Restore over half of the landscape within 10 to 15 years*
- *Include all areas identified by the public as recommendations for additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System*
- *Identify critical aquatic refuges around all areas of high aquatic species diversity*
- *Evaluate an alternative that has minimal active management and "let nature take its course"*
- *Apply the Aquatic Conservation Strategy from the 2001 Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment*
- *Consider the document "National Forests in the Sierra Nevada: A Conservation Strategy" as an Alternative*
- *Allow Motorized and Mechanized Uses to Continue in Recommended Wilderness*
- *Modifications to Existing Wilderness*
- *Discontinue Livestock Grazing in the Forests*

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations require agencies to specify the alternative or alternatives that were considered to be environmentally preferable (40 CFR 1505.2(b)). Forest Service NEPA regulations define an environmentally preferable alternative as: "the alternative that best promotes the national environmental policy as expressed in the NEPA's section 101. Ordinarily, the environmentally preferable alternative that causes the least harm to the biological and physical environment; it is also the alternative that best protects and preserves historic, cultural, and natural resources" (36 CFR §220.3).

Within alternative B-modified, all practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm from this alternative have been adopted. Through the selected alternative's desired conditions, standards, guidelines, goals and management strategies, environmental harm is minimized. Through the monitoring plan (forest plan, chapter 4) the effects of minimizing impacts will be reviewed periodically as required by the 2012 Planning Rule.

I find, based upon the laws and regulations guiding National Forest System management, that alternative B-modified is the environmentally preferred alternative. When compared to alternatives A, B, C, D, and

E, it best contributes and moves the Forest toward ecological, social, and economic sustainability, which will benefit future generations. The planning record for the forest plan contains further documentation on how section 101 of the NEPA was considered and evaluated.

Best Available Scientific Information

The 2012 Planning Rule requires the responsible official to document how the best available scientific information was used to inform the assessment, plan decision, and the monitoring program (§§219.6(a)(3) and 219.14(a)(3)). In doing so, the responsible official shall determine what is most accurate, reliable, and relevant to the issues being considered. This summary provides an overview of the process used to identify and incorporate the best available scientific information. More detail on this process and supporting products are available in a reference document on the plan revision website at https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=3375, and in the project record.

Assessment

The primary sources of scientific information used to develop the Sequoia National Forest Assessment (2013) include the Science Synthesis to Support Socioecological Resilience in the Sierra Nevada and Southern Cascade Range (Long et al. 2014), Sierra Nevada Bioregional Assessment (USDA Forest Service 2014), and relevant topic papers from the Living Assessment. Other sources of information like the Natural Range of Variation Assessments (e.g., (Safford and Stevens 2017, Meyer and North 2019)) produced by the Forest Service Region 5 Ecology Program were valuable contributions to the Assessment. Information from the Living Assessment was also valuable because these chapters were developed through direct engagement with interested stakeholders. These primary sources of scientific information as well as the Sequoia National Forest Assessment (2013) contain introductory sections describing the processes the authors used to evaluate the most reliable, accurate, and relevant information. Those processes are summarized here.

The Science Synthesis was written by a team of scientists and reviewed by scientists from outside the Forest Service. The Synthesis focused on published, peer-reviewed research that occurred in the synthesis area or in forest ecosystems with relevant ecological or social conditions.

The authors of the Bioregional Assessment characterized the best available science as those sources that have clearly stated scientific questions, well designed investigations, logically analyzed results, and documented clearly and subjected to peer review. The Bioregional Assessment also recognized additional sources of scientific information like agency published and unpublished reports, expert opinion, and Tribal knowledge where appropriate and applicable.

In developing the topic papers for the Living Assessment, Forest Service experts provided information supported by publications, scientific assessments, Federal agency inventory and monitoring data, and other sources of scientific information, such as expert opinion where available and which addressed the 15 assessment topics included in 36 CFR 219(b). Stakeholders provided feedback on the content of the topic papers, including by providing alternative or conflicting data sources and information to help us evaluate conflicting views on conditions and trends. The topic papers were revised, and a snapshot was taken by the Forest during the summer of 2013 so that a fixed set of information could be evaluated for use in developing the Sequoia National Forest Assessment.

During the development of the Sequoia National Forest Assessment (2013), information from the primary scientific sources was evaluated to determine if it was relevant to the scope and scale of the question at hand, if it was accurate, and if it was reliable. High-quality and valid scientific information was considered particularly valuable. This type of information is characterized by clearly defined and well-

developed methodology, logical conclusions, reasonable inferences, adequate peer review, suitable quantitative methodology, proper spatial and temporal context, and the use of relevant and credible citations.

To be relevant to the Assessment, the information must pertain to the conditions and trends of the 15 assessment topics included in 36 CFR 219(b), or to the sustainability of social, economic, or ecological systems (36 CFR 36 219.5(a)(1)), at spatial and temporal scales appropriate to the plan area.

Accuracy and reliability of relevant information was determined by comparing the scientific certainty and quality of information. Information from the relevant chapter from the Living Assessment without appropriate supporting citations or references was considered less certain. If information appeared to be of comparable scientific certainty but had conflicting conclusions, then both points of view were carried forward and a data gap was identified as to the final conclusions.

Plan Content

Forest plan content was developed using the current best available scientific information. The landscape in the plan area is changing rapidly due to a variety of disturbances like wildfires and drought. The science evaluating the effects of these stressors (as well as management intervention) are constantly being updated in new publications and reports. We are learning every day. As a result of the fast pace of change on the landscape and new science, it is difficult to ensure that the land management planning effort is perfectly contemporary. Nevertheless, the planning team was diligent in incorporating newly published and produced science into the analyses and refinement of plan components throughout the entirety of the planning process. Additionally, new science will be evaluated as projects are developed in the future.

Scientific sources used to develop the forest plan include, but are not limited to, the following:

- products developed during the assessment phase,
- the need-to-change document (prepared after the Assessment),
- various general technical reports for ecological conditions,
- Federal, State, and non-governmental organization data,
- peer-reviewed published literature,
- grey literature, and
- species-specific recovery plans and conservation strategies/assessments.

The planning team systematically evaluated the scientific information to determine the accuracy, reliability, and relevancy of the sources. During the comment period for the RDEIS, the public asked for additional information on our process for determining the most accurate, reliable, and relevant scientific information during the planning phase. The public also submitted a variety of scientific references for consideration, including during the administrative review (objection) process. The process the team used to evaluate the accuracy, reliability, and relevancy of the scientific information, particularly the controversial sources submitted by the public and interested stakeholders, is similar to the process described for the Assessment. The team evaluated a potential source to determine if the scientific methods were sound, well-developed, and clearly articulated; if reasonable inferences and supported conclusions were drawn and placed in an appropriate ecological context; and if the reference was applicable in space and/or time to the planning area.

The team developed several tables of scientific references that were used to develop the draft plan and DEIS (USDA Forest Service 2016), revised draft plan and RDEIS (USDA Forest Service 2019b), and

final forest plan (USDA Forest Service 2023b) and FEIS (USDA Forest Service 2023a). For the final (pre-objection) plan and FEIS, the team also prepared a table of those references that were not considered to be the most accurate, reliable, and/or relevant. The tables developed in support of the final (pre-objection) plan and FEIS emphasize references for conflicting viewpoints that were submitted by the public during the comment period. The tables also include references that became available since the publication of the revised draft plans and RDEIS. These tables are available in the project record.

I sought assistance from the scientific community to review our interpretation of the best available scientific information. Following the publication of the DEIS, a panel of U.S. Forest Service and external scientists prepared a Science Consistency Review Report (Ritchie 2016), again in response to comments on the RDEIS, we consulted these scientists to confirm our appropriate use of best available science. This review evaluated: (1) scientific relevance; (2) accurate and reasonable interpretation of scientific information; (3) acknowledgement and documentation of scientific uncertainty; and (4) identification of relevant management consequences. Within this report, each reviewer provided specific ratings on these topics, along with clarifying comments. Feedback in the report was incorporated into the forest plan between the draft and final stages.

Reconciling Conflicting Scientific Viewpoints

My decision to take an intentional and proactive forest management approach, including in California spotted owl habitat, is based on the best available scientific information. I understand how important full consideration of the best available scientific information is to fulfill the Forest Service mission of sustaining the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.

There are conflicting scientific viewpoints centered around wildfire, active forest management such as mechanical fuels reduction, and habitat for wildlife species like the California spotted owl. These differing points of view and my reconciliation of the resulting conflict for this forest plan decision are described in detail below. It is important to note that my decision to select alternative B-modified is based not only on the best available scientific information but also takes into consideration an evaluation of the risks to National Forest System lands and local communities that rely on public lands.

Natural Range of Variation for Fire Severity and the Need for Active Forest Management

There was controversy about the characterization of the natural range of variation for fire severity in the Sierra Nevada montane forest ecosystems. The current scientific consensus expresses the view that under the natural range of variation (prior to 1850), Sierra Nevada yellow pine and mixed conifer forests were highly heterogeneous, structurally complex, and characterized by frequent (burning every 10 to 15 years, on average), primarily low- to moderate-severity fire regimes. These fire regimes were also characterized by relatively low proportions of high-severity fire (3 to 15 percent of a burned landscape) that produced relatively small (generally less than 10 acres and rarely exceeding 200 to 250 acres) high-severity patches mostly distributed in a "salt and pepper" pattern.

The current scientific consensus is based on a large volume of best available scientific information summarized in several essential information sources (Safford and Stevens 2017, Meyer and North 2019, Long et al. 2014, North 2012, North et al. 2009). This scientific consensus is supported by many independent lines of evidence (e.g., historical forest inventory data, stand reconstructions, fire scar chronologies, historical accounts and photos, contemporary reference studies, fire and vegetation succession models, species' adaptations to fire, traditional ecological knowledge) from several hundred

published scientific studies and reports accumulated over the last half century or more (Safford and Stevens 2017).

There is an alternative viewpoint to the scientific consensus that has arisen in recent years. The view states that the natural range of variation in Sierra Nevada yellow pine and mixed conifer forests is characterized by relatively high proportions of high-severity fire (often 30 to 40 percent or more of a burned landscape) that may occur in very large patches, often greater than 1,000 acres in size and upward of 23,000 acres (Baker 2014, Odion et al. 2014). This view further asserts that recent fire severity patterns in Sierra Nevada yellow pine and mixed conifer forests are not increasing over time (Hanson and Odion 2014, DellaSala and Hanson 2019), despite the occurrence of recent large and severe wildfires such as the 2013 Rim Fire, 2014 King Fire, 2015 Rough Fire, 2020 Creek Fire and SQF Complex, and 2021 Windy Fire and KNP Complex.

This alternative viewpoint heavily contrasts with the scientific consensus that recognizes a significant departure of current Sierra Nevada fire regime and forest ecosystem conditions from the natural range of variation. Under the scientific consensus, there is a clear need to actively manage and restore many Sierra Nevada forest ecosystems (with an emphasis on yellow pine and mixed conifer forests) to address the underlying issues associated with more than a century of fire exclusion and historical logging impacts, as well as the negative effects of altered fire regimes, insect and pathogen outbreaks, climate change, air pollution, invasive species, and other interacting stressors.

I reconciled the conflict represented by the alternative viewpoints by conducting a comprehensive and objective review of the best available scientific information. Based on this evaluation, I concluded that the best available scientific information was overwhelmingly in support of the scientific consensus regarding natural range of variation and management approaches to promote ecological integrity. Moreover, I concluded that minimal to no forest management, specifically less mechanical treatment, as advocated by the alternative viewpoint, would result in unacceptable risks to and substantial degradation of terrestrial ecosystems and the ecosystem services they provide on the Sequoia National Forest, the Sierra Nevada bioregion, and broader western North American forests.

California Spotted Owl Habitat Management and Fire

There is generally scientific consensus that dense forest conditions are at higher risk of landscape-level disturbance from high-severity wildfire. These dense forests sometimes include, or are interspersed with, areas with large trees and high canopy cover that are preferred by the California spotted owl. There are opposing scientific views regarding the impact of high-severity wildfire to spotted owl habitat and owl persistence (Ganey et al. 2017). One view is that high-severity wildfire is a primary threat to spotted owls due to landscape-level loss of large trees and high canopy cover, and that fuels reduction treatments that successfully reduce the risk of high-severity wildfire can aid in sustaining desired habitat conditions for spotted owls (Jones et al. 2016). An opposing view argues that high-severity wildfire was relatively common in many forest types occupied by spotted owls and does not pose an immediate threat (Bond et al. 2016, Lee 2018), and further maintains that fuels reduction treatments may degrade owl habitat (Tempel et al. 2015) and do not reduce the extent of high-severity fire.

There is a scientific consensus regarding California spotted owl habitat requirements and population declines. However, there is uncertainty regarding the causes of population declines as well as the magnitude and duration of the effects of mechanical thinning within owl habitat. There is evidence suggesting that population declines for California spotted owls may be attributed to long-term impacts from prior management activities that included the removal of large-diameter trees (Jones et al. 2018). These areas of uncertainty lead to differing views regarding how to manage forests with the intent of

retaining habitat for California spotted owls. In a recent synthesis of research focused on California spotted owls, Peery and others (2017) explained that one scientific viewpoint emphasizes the spatial extent of high severity fire as the primary threat to spotted owl persistence and therefore recommends vegetation treatments to reduce the spatial extent of high-severity fire and drought-induced mortality. This scientific viewpoint asserts that the benefit of vegetation treatments in terms of retaining habitat (by reducing the loss of high-quality habitat to high-severity fire) outweighs the risk of near-term negative impacts to owl habitat. This scientific viewpoint aligns with the scientific consensus regarding natural range of variation for fire severity. However, there is an alternative viewpoint that mechanical treatments may have greater negative effects on owls and habitat than wildfire.

The 2019 Conservation Strategy for the California Spotted Owl (2019 CSO Strategy (USDA Forest Service 2019a)) in the Sierra Nevada provides management recommendations to address both scientific viewpoints, aiming to balance the need to conserve essential habitat elements around sites occupied by California spotted owls while simultaneously restoring resilient forest conditions at the landscape scale (USDA Forest Service 2019a). The forest plan content fully aligns with the intentions of the 2019 California spotted owl strategy by emphasizing habitat restoration toward the natural range of variation and identifying species-specific plan components to address near-term needs for California spotted owl survival and reproduction. The species-specific plan components emphasize retaining critical habitat elements within the highest quality and best available nesting and roosting habitat.

I reconciled the conflict represented by the set of alternative viewpoints by evaluating the best available scientific literature (see the summary on the forest plan website) that supports strategically managing owl habitat, especially given the current rate of habitat loss or modification to recent large and severe fires. I also incorporated the 2019 Conservation Strategy for the California spotted owl into species-specific plan components to guide the protection of critical habitat elements during management. As with the conflict related to wildfire, I concluded that less forest management, including within California spotted owl habitat, would result in unacceptable risks to owl habitat in the long term. Keeping in mind that many areas of the Forest will have limited vegetation management due to plan content constraints and other statutory and regulatory requirements (such as wilderness, inventoried roadless areas, riparian conservation areas) and physical conditions (such as steep areas or areas lacking access), it is important that my decision facilitates management to achieve improved forest resilience wherever that is consistent with at-risk species conservation and other regulatory requirements.

Finally, I engaged scientists with the U.S. Forest Service Pacific Southwest Research Station to review the accuracy, reliability, and relevancy of multiple references related to the California spotted owl and forest management, wildfire, and post-fire habitat management. I asked the scientists to review the references because the references were controversial, represented opposing scientific viewpoints, and/or required a technical review of scientific methods. The scientists followed the same review procedure as the internal planning staff in which they answered a series of questions about the methods, analyses, and conclusions of each reference. Results of the scientific review were used to classify the references as accurate, reliable, and relevant or not. I believe that this process has provided for proper consideration of best available science, which was used to guide development of forest plan direction.

Monitoring

Many of the monitoring questions and associated indicators were developed with the same sources of scientific information used to develop the relevant forest plan components, including the Science Synthesis, Bioregional Assessment, and Sierra Nevada Natural Range of Variation Assessments. Some monitoring questions and indicators come from existing national protocols and frameworks that are based

on standardized principles of scientific research (e.g., Forest Inventory and Analysis National Program, National Visitor Use Monitoring Program, and Watershed Condition Framework).

Where differing scientific viewpoints exist, the plan monitoring program and the Region 5 Broader-Scale Monitoring Strategy (2020) evaluate the status and trend in those conditions. For example, the plan monitoring program and the broader-scale monitoring strategy evaluate the severity, extent, and return interval of wildfires at the Forest and regional spatial scales, a topic for which there are conflicting scientific viewpoints. The monitoring program is attentive to these areas of conflicting scientific viewpoints or uncertainty. Similarly, there is a great deal of scientific debate about the California spotted owl and the influence of management action and wildfire on the species. In partnership with university researchers, the Region 5 Broader-Scale Monitoring Strategy tracks the status and trend of the California spotted owl, including where treatment and wildfire have occurred. The results of this monitoring will improve our understanding of trends in the species; these results will be made available to the Sequoia National Forest.

The Sequoia National Forest is committed to conducting a monitoring program that is based upon and evolves with advances in the best available scientific information. The data sources for each of the monitoring questions and indicators reflect current best available data collection methodologies that range from standard scientific data collection protocols (such as Proper Functioning Condition Assessments and Stream Condition Inventory) to forest-specific scientific techniques (such as forest-adapted soil disturbance monitoring protocol). The monitoring program emphasizes the use of remote sensing data and seeks to learn more from the capabilities of emerging science-based models and tools.

Pre-decisional Administrative Review and Objections

The forest plan was subject to the pre-decisional administrative review (objection) process identified in 36 CFR Part 219 Subpart B (219.50 to 219.62). People who were involved in the plan revision process had 60 days to object to the Forest Service's proposed decision. The objection process was completed together with the Sierra National Forest and provided one more opportunity for the public to work with the Forest Service to resolve any outstanding issues with both forest plans prior to final decisions. The 60-day objection filing period on the draft records of decision, forest plans, and final EIS for both Sequoia and Sierra National Forests, was initiated on June 14, 2022, concurrently with an objection filing period for the regional forester's species of conservation concern lists for each forest. The reviewing officer for the forest plan decisions, Deputy Regional Forester Jody Holzworth received 27 eligible objections.

The Forest Service Pacific Southwest Regional Office convened a review team of resource managers and specialists to review the project record related to those issues raised by objectors. After this internal review, interested parties and objectors attended a resolution meeting with the reviewing officer November 15–17, 2022, in Visalia. The reviewing officer issued a written response to the objection issues on December 16, 2022. The written response contains the findings of the review and sets forth instructions to the responsible officials of both forest plan decisions. The written response is the final decision by the U.S. Department of Agriculture on the administrative review. The reviewing officer found that the project record was adequate and complied with law, regulation, and policy related to some issues, and found the record to be incomplete or unclear regarding other issues. The following is a summary of changes that were made in response to those key findings and the associated instructions. I ensured that our team completed all applicable instructions before finalizing this record of decision.

The following section describes changes made to the forest plan or FEIS or both as a result of the administrative review. As described below, most but not all of these changes were due to reviewing

officer instructions on specific objections. All changes made to forest plan content following the administrative review period are summarized in FEIS chapter 2, description of alternative B-modified, and more details are provided in the project record.

Species of Conservation Concern Lists

As part of the concurrent objection process for the regional forester's species of conservation concern list, objectors requested that several more botanical species, as well as the black-backed woodpecker, be added to the species of conservation concern list. Those objections were reviewed by the reviewing officer for the Chief of the Forest Service, who found for the botanical species that additional documentation and assessment needed to be conducted for each species listed in the objection. For the black-backed woodpecker, the reviewing officer found that based upon evidence and best available science, this species does not meet the criteria at FSH 1909.12 Ch. 10, 12.52 (c) (2), and therefore, cannot be a species of conservation concern for the Sequoia. For the botanical species that were reevaluated but not added, the most common reason was that there is no documented occurrence in the plan area.

The following botanical species were added to the species of conservation concern list: Palmer's mariposa lily (*Calochortus palmeri* var. *palmeri*), Tulare cryptantha (*Cryptantha incana*), unexpected larkspur (*Delphinium inopinum*), two-colored monkeyflower (*Erythranthe discolor*), pygmy hulsea (*Hulsea vestita* ssp. *pygmaea*), Madera leptosiphon (*Leptosiphon serrulatus*), Tehachapi or flaxlike Monardella *(Monardella linoides* ssp. *oblonga*), and chickweed oxytheca (*Sidotheca carophylloides*).

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed that four species previously included on the species of conservation concern list be federally listed under the Endangered Species Act. These species remain at-risk species but, as specified by the 2012 Planning Rule, they no longer meet the criteria to be species of conservation concern. Therefore, these species have been removed from the species of conservation concern list. The four species are: California spotted owl, foothill yellow-legged frog, Kern Canyon slender salamander and relictual slender salamander. Because these species were addressed in the forest planning process as species of conservation concern, the plan was designed to provide the ecological conditions that support their persistence.

At-risk wildlife species

The forest plan provides a multiple-tier framework of management direction to provide the ecological conditions necessary to contribute to the recovery of federally listed threatened and endangered species, conserve proposed and candidate species, and maintain a viable population of each species of conservation concern within the plan area.

The forest plan provides direction in the form of plan content ranging from "ecosystem-level" to "species-specific." Ecosystem-level plan content may apply forestwide (such as the riparian conservation area direction), for specific ecological types or zones, or to specific areas such as the wildlife habitat management area. While generally broad, these plan components provide for ecosystems and habitat conditions that will be resilient to disturbance (both natural and human-caused) and the interrelated effects of climate change. For some species, species-specific plan content was also developed to meet specific ecological needs of the species or address key threats to persistence of the species.

Many objections were related to at-risk species management, including concerns about ecosystem-level plan content such as for the wildlife habitat management area, as well as concerns about species-specific content such as for California spotted owl and fisher.

Ecosystem-level plan content changes

Wildlife Habitat Management Area

An overarching objection was raised that the wildlife habitat management area did not convey plan content sufficient to achieve its stated goals of supporting persistence for old-forest-associated species including northern goshawk, fisher, Sierra marten, and great gray owl. After review, the reviewing officer instructed me to update plan content for this management area to support persistence of these species.

The wildlife habitat management area is a mapped management area. Plan content specific to this area is in the forest plan in chapter 3. In response to objection instructions, wildlife planning specialists made changes to enhance and clarify guidance for this area to better provide for essential habitat and landscape connectivity for old-forest-associated species. We also added plan content to convey clear direction for all vegetation management actions, whether they would occur in post-disturbance landscapes or not. Plan content related to snag retention and habitat connectivity was added. My team updated the introduction in this section to better describe how the wildlife habitat management area is intended to provide for the ecological conditions to support persistence of old-forest-dependent species, especially in light of recent and likely future large-scale disturbances (such as large, severe wildfires). We updated desired conditions, including a new table, to clarify targeted conditions for the wildlife habitat management area. Finally, we added four potential management approaches to highlight management strategies I intend to use to achieve desired conditions. Wildlife planning specialists reviewed and updated the persistence analysis for species associated with old forests, including consideration of contemporary best available science.

Riparian Conservation Areas

Based on objections, I made a few corrections to plan content for riparian conservation areas. I modified a standard to clarify the restrictions for storage of fuels and refueling within riparian conservation areas. I also adjusted language in a plan component to better align with State best management practices and regulatory requirements for facilities in riparian conservation areas.

Species-specific plan content changes

In response to objections, my team provided clarification to the fisher plan content for the size of the area that is referred to as “fisher home range size area.” In addition, the final EIS now provides more information about the scientific rationale behind the 25-acre habitat block size that is referred to in a fisher plan component.

We also made minor adjustments to the Sierra marten plan content to better align with best available science and to update references to the best available habitat information for the species. We also made relatively minor changes to plan content for California spotted owl, great gray owl, and willow flycatcher, as described in the sections below.

California Spotted Owl Plan Content

In response to objections, I ensured several updates to forest plan content occurred to provide more clarity and detail related to California spotted owls. Because species-specific forest plan content for the California spotted owl applies plan direction specific to whether an activity is to occur in dry or moist mixed conifer habitat, my planning team provided details about how moist and dry conifer habitats were delineated as part of plan development and analysis. We added a new appendix to the forest plan (appendix H) to provide details about how the Landscape Management Unit Version 2 Tool (Information Center for the Environment [ICE] 2013) was used at the broad scale to estimate vegetation types across the landscape. Wildlife planning specialists also modified California spotted owl plan content to clarify

the prioritization of best available nesting and roosting habitat, thresholds for desired conditions within territories with dry or moist vegetation types, and the limitations on how often the limited operating period requirement could be waived. We updated a summary table related to constraints on vegetation treatments within protected activity centers and territories to show which plan components are applicable. My team added information in the FEIS persistence analysis regarding the threat of post-fire timber harvest to ecological conditions necessary for California spotted owls and clarified how plan content addresses this threat.

I added a question to the forest plan monitoring program in response to the reviewing officer's instruction to ensure the monitoring program is adequate for tracking relevant changes, testing relevant assumptions, and monitoring management effectiveness in providing ecological conditions for California spotted owls on the Sequoia. The added question will inform our ongoing efforts to conserve habitat for the species; specifically, it will evaluate trends in the status of ecological conditions that are important to the persistence of this species on the Forest.

Great Gray Owl and Willow Flycatcher Plan Content

I updated the definition of protected activity centers and corrected an inconsistency regarding the number of existing great gray owl protected activity centers. I clarified the threat to this species related to vehicle strikes and added a potential management approach with options for mitigating this threat. A potential management approach for the willow flycatcher was modified so that it provides a meaningful prioritization for meadow restoration.

At-Risk Botanical Species

In response to objections that plan components for at-risk plants do not provide sufficient direction to ensure that threats are adequately addressed to provide for their persistence, I strengthened the plan components by adding standards and modifying potential management approaches, using the plan content from the Inyo National Forest as a guide. The Inyo forest plan has been implemented for several years now and has proven to be effective in addressing key threats to at-risk botanical species.

I also added a question to the plan monitoring program to evaluate trends in the extent and condition of suitable habitat types for at-risk plant and lichen species. Understanding these trends will enable the Sequoia to adaptively manage as needed to maintain suitable habitat for at-risk plant and lichen species.

Best Available Scientific Information

In response to objectors who submitted references for the Forest's consideration, my planning team reviewed the literature submitted with an emphasis on recently released (2020–2022) references as well as those references objectors identified as lacking from our evaluation. We determined whether the reference was previously submitted and reviewed during the comment period, and whether a reference was the best available scientific information (most accurate, reliable, and relevant scientific information, see 36 CFR 219.6(a)(3) and 219.14(a)(4)), using the same process established during the planning phase and as described in the project record. The documentation showing the newly identified best available scientific information and the references that we did not consider to be best available scientific information, and the explanation for those determinations, is included in the project record and posted on the plan revision website at https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=3375.

Fire and Fuels

During administrative review, my fuels specialist identified the need for some updates to the Fire section in the forest plan. These adjustments were made to emphasize current priorities and proactive strategies for reducing fuels across the landscape. I want to ensure that the forest plan clearly directs fuels treatments on the Sequoia in a manner that complements fuels reduction across ownerships. These adjustments in the final forest plan Fire section help to emphasize our critical fuels reduction work and partnerships toward increasing defensible space and community protection efforts.

Pace and Scale of Fuels Treatments

In response to objections, the reviewing official instructed me to review prescribed fire objectives to ensure they are consistent with the Forest Service's "Confronting the Wildfire Crisis" 10-year Strategy. We are in our second year of carrying out this 10-year strategy and our goal is to help safeguard communities and the resources they depend on by increasing fuels treatments over time, promoting community readiness, and supporting postfire recovery and restoration.

I took a fresh look at the vegetation treatment estimates and scenarios that were used to develop and analyze the revised forest plan, including the objective for restoring low- and moderate-severity fire mosaics, which includes both prescribed fire and managed wildfire (Objective TERR-FW-OBJ-02). I considered my agency's commitments articulated in the 10-year strategy to include increased financial investments for hazardous fuels reduction projects, increased capacity through partnerships, and increased efficiencies such as modernizing our grants and agreements system and expanded use of emergency authorities. These national commitments are also reflected in our Region-wide 2020 USFS-CalFire MOU Agreement for Shared Stewardship.

Understanding the complexities and challenges inherent in managing fire on the landscape, I want the forest plan and decision to appropriately reflect the urgent need to promote and even maximize the use of fire to reduce hazardous fuels and achieve restoration goals and desired conditions. I reviewed the range of fire-based treatments analyzed in the FEIS and consulted local fire managers about contemporary conditions on the ground as well as the logistical challenges of managing fire on our landscapes today. In many places, the need for sufficient mechanical treatments prior to successfully using wildfire as a tool to restore the landscape cannot be overlooked. Also, the social-political decisions around wildfire management can be outside of our control locally and certainly influence what we can accomplish. I want to acknowledge that uncertainties remain in the feasibility of treatment rates associated with prescribed fire implementation and opportunities for using managed fire to meet resource objectives. Some of the complex factors affecting this important work are changing fuel conditions due to climate stressors, decreased availability of burn windows within the fire year, operational hazards created by the recent mortality and wildfire events, limitations related to many species and habitat protections, as well as potential air quality constraints.

I considered increasing the forest plan objective for restoring low- and moderate-severity fire mosaics, along with the feasibility of implementing more prescribed burning on the Sequoia. I believe that given the uncertainty presented by logistical, climatic, and political challenges inherent in this work, it would not be prudent to increase the forest plan objective at this time. That said, as described in our 10-year strategy and Shared Stewardship agreements, right now the Forest Service and our State and local partners are ramping up investments to address the wildfire crisis. Given these contemporary partnerships and funding focused on increasing the use of fire for restoration, I intend to maximize the use of prescribed fire when and where it can be used safely in pursuit of desired conditions across the Forest. I

believe and hope that our near-term collective work with partners and stakeholders may yield results in restoring low- and moderate-severity fire mosaics that meet or exceed that forest plan objective.

Pacific Crest Trail Management Area

In response to objection reviewing officer instructions, I worked with my staff to correct errors and clarify documentation, including:

- Correcting references to the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Management Plan (1982) in appendix G of the forest plan.
- Changing the few areas within the Pacific Crest Trail Management Area that had a scenic integrity objective of "moderate" to "high" to be consistent with MA-PCT-GDL 01.
- Adding the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Foundation Document to the preamble for the Pacific Crest Trail sections of the forest plan.

I also revised plan components MA-PCT-STD 03, 04, and 05 to be more consistent with law, regulation, and policy, and added footnotes to illustrate consistency with law, regulation, and policy.

Recommended Wilderness

The reviewing officer committed that I would review the recommended wilderness boundary in the selected alternative to consider whether it can be adjusted to better avoid areas with existing motorized uses. I worked with district staff and made several adjustments to Monarch Wilderness Addition - South boundaries. We made these changes to better follow easily identifiable landmarks (waterway, ridgelines and trails) and set back further from existing motorized routes. This resulted in a small net reduction in size, with a final recommended wilderness acreage of 4,734 acres.

Roads and Trails

As discussed throughout the objection resolution meeting, partnerships have become increasingly important to stewardship of the Sequoia. I made several additions to plan content regarding trail maintenance, both to clarify plan objectives and to emphasize partnerships. I modified the plan objective related to trail maintenance to clarify that 25 percent of the designated trail system miles meet National Quality Standards annually, and that this would increase to above 25 percent with added capacity (Objective REC-FW-OBJ-01)**.** I also modified a plan goal to emphasize partnerships in providing stewardship and interpretive services, including collection of trail use data (Goal REC-FW-GOAL-05).

My team also added tables to chapter 3, Sustainable Recreation, Recreation Settings section to explain the differences in acres of each recreation opportunity spectrum class among the current forest plan, alternative A, and the revised forest plan.During the objection process, I heard concerns from several objectors about motorized and nonmotorized access, and specifically related to the Sirretta Peak Trail. The reviewing officer included instructions to provide clarification on the allowable public uses and route locations for both the Sirretta Peak Trail and the Cannell Meadow National Recreation Trail. My staff updated the FEIS, chapter 3, Recreation Access, Affected Environment section to provide more detail about route locations and where these trails provide motorized opportunities and where they are designated for nonmotorized use. For the Cannell Meadow National Recreation Trail, the corporate GIS data was updated to reflect the location of the trail, and the updated map in the plan now shows allowable uses.

The topic of allowable uses on the Sirretta Peak Trail has generated controversy among motorized and nonmotorized recreationist groups for many years, including during the previous forest planning effort that culminated with the 1988 Sequoia National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. This trail, in addition to several others, was specifically addressed in the 1990 Mediated Settlement Agreement. In 2005, several years after the Mediated Settlement Agreement was signed, the Forest Service enacted the Travel Management Rule (36 CFR Part 212), which governs site-specific travel management planning decisions on National Forest System lands. Sirretta Peak Trail, No. 34E12, is currently classified as open to "motorcycles only" on the Forest's motor vehicle use map, which was published in 2010 in accordance with the Travel Management Rule. Trails open to motorcycles only are generally also open to nonmotorized use and that is the case with Sirretta Peak Trail. As part of this plan decision, I am maintaining the semiprimitive nonmotorized classification for the larger area that includes the Sirretta Peak Trail and confirming that, per FSH 1909.12 Chapter 23.23l, the existing travel management designation for motorcycle use on the Sirretta Peak Trail, as reflected on the Sequoia National Forest Motor Vehicle Use Map, may proceed unchanged.

Sustainable Recreation

The reviewing officer's response letter included a commitment to change the name of Challenging Backroad Areas to reflect the purpose of the areas more accurately. In response, I updated the name Challenging Backroad Area to Backcountry Terrain Recreation Area in the plan and this record of decision. I believe this name better reflects the purpose of these areas, which includes both motorized and nonmotorized recreation opportunities. As described in the introduction to this section of the forest plan, Backcountry Terrain Recreation Areas are maintained for low visitor use and density. These areas provide recreation opportunities that are challenging, due to terrain and low density of roads and trails.

Tribal and Heritage

In response to comments on the RDEIS, my staff added content to FEIS appendix G, Consistency with Other Planning Efforts, following release of the pre-objection FEIS. This additional content identifies known Tribal plans that may be relevant to the Sequoia. I believe that the Sequoia forest plan is generally consistent with Tribal land use policies and that it appropriately recognizes and prioritizes Tribal interests and goals in the context of management of the national forest.

Wild and Scenic River Eligibility

In response to objection reviewing officer instructions, I worked with my staff to correct clerical errors and clarify documentation in the Wild and Scenic Rivers Eligibility Study. These updates resulted in about 12 additional miles of eligible river segments on the Sequoia and additional outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs) for some eligible segments. See the summary below and FEIS appendix C for more details.

New eligibility:

- Grasshopper Creek (GIS Number 2.88), 3.8 miles, Fish Population and Habitat ORVs, Wild Preliminary Classification.
- Peppermint Creek (GIS Number 2.169), 8.1 miles, Fish Population and Habitat ORVs, Recreational Preliminary Classification.

Additional ORVs:

- Kern River (GIS Numbers 2.104.4, 2.104.6, 2.104.8), Recreation ORV.
- Kings River (GIS Number 2.106.1), Geology, Botany, Fish Population and Habitat ORVs.[10]
- Kings River (GIS Number 2.106.2), Geology and Fish Population and Habitat ORVs.[10]
- Kings River (GIS Number 2.106.3), Fish Population and Habitat ORVs.[10]

In the FEIS, we added text to chapter 3, Sustainable Recreation, Access section that explains the context for areas where eligible wild and scenic river corridors overlap with existing designated motorized routes and the relationship between interim protection measures and motorized recreation.

Finally, the phrase "river corridors" was added to MA-EWSR-STD 01 and the definition of "river corridor" was added to the plan glossary.

Findings Required by Other Laws

The Forest Service manages the Sequoia National Forest in conformance with many laws and regulations. I have considered the statutes specific to individual resources as described in the FEIS, and I find that this decision meets the Forest Service's current statutory obligations. Following are summaries of how the revised forest plan addresses the relevant laws and regulations.

American Indian Religious Freedom Act

Federal agencies must make a good faith effort to understand how American Indian religious practices may come into conflict with other forest uses and consider any adverse impacts on these practices in their decision making. Portions of the Sequoia National Forest are within the respective territories of the Dunlap Band of Mono Indians, Kitanemuk and Yowlumne Tejon Indians, Mono Nation, North Fork Mono Tribe, Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation, Tejon Indian Tribe, Tubatulabel Tribe of Kern Valley, Tule River Indian Tribe, Waksachi Tribe, Santa Rosa Rancheria – Tachi Yokuts, Bishop Paiute Tribe, Big Pine Paiute Tribe of the Owens Valley, and Lone Pine Paiute-Shoshone.

No effects on American Indian social, economic, or subsistence rights are anticipated as a result of the revised forest plan. The Forest Service is required to consult with Tribes when management activities may impact treaty rights and/or cultural sites and cultural use. Desired conditions for areas of Tribal importance for the forest plan include acknowledging and supporting the need for Tribal access to traditional sites. Consultation would occur to identify concerns and adjust management so that adequate access for agency management or public use does not compromise cultural practices at traditional, cultural, and spiritual places. Therefore, I find the revised forest plan complies with this act.

Archaeological Resources Protection Act

This act provides protection to archaeological resources found on public lands and American Indian lands of the United States. The legislation provides civil and criminal penalties for those who remove or

[10] For the purpose of the current study, the Kings River and all rivers in the inventory north of the Kings River and Monarch divide are included in the Sierra National Forest section of the study in compliance with the proclaimed forest boundaries. However, the administrative boundary between the Sierra and Sequoia National Forests is actually south of the Kings River.

damage archaeological resources in violation of the prohibitions contained in the act. The act prohibits the removal of archaeological resources on public lands or American Indian lands without first obtaining a permit from the affected Federal land manager or Tribe and requires Federal agencies to develop plans to survey lands under their management to determine the nature and extent of archaeological and cultural resources.

Forest plans are strategic and programmatic in nature, providing guidance and direction to future site-specific projects and activities. Compliance with section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and 36 CFR 800 regulations requires assessments to document the presence of historic properties within the area of potential effect for any site-specific activities and to meet the intent of this act. The Forest will also continue to consult with Tribes during site-specific management activities that may impact cultural sites and cultural use. The plan components in the forest plan include provisions that take into consideration American Indian rights and interests and cultural resources. Therefore, I find the revised forest plan complies with this act.

Clean Air Act

In accordance with the Clean Air Act of 1990 and the Organic Administration Act of 1897, the Forest Service has the responsibility to protect the air, land, and water resources from the impacts of air pollutants produced within the boundaries of National Forest System lands and to work with states to protect air resources from degradation associated with the impacts of air pollution emitted outside of National Forest System lands. The FEIS addresses and discloses potential impacts from program activities that are approved by the forest plan, including the use of prescribed fire (FEIS, chapter 3, Revision Topic 1: Fire Management – Air Quality).

The forest plan includes desired conditions and strategies for maintaining air quality and monitoring questions for gathering information. Smoke management would be practiced actively with all prescribed fire and wildfires managed to meet resource objectives. This would include smoke prediction modeling, smoke monitoring, and close coordination with the local air districts. While we recognize that the level of smoke emissions from large wildfires is expected to double over the next 50 years, given current vegetation conditions and trends in climate and fire ignitions, smoke management opportunities are limited during large wildfires.

Conformity determinations and more detailed air quality impact analyses will be made at subsequent levels of planning and analysis where emissions can be more accurately quantified and reasonably forecasted, and local impacts can be assessed. Therefore, I find the revised forest plan complies with the Clean Air Act.

Clean Water Act

The Clean Water Act (33 United States Code (U.S.C.) § 1251 et seq.) establishes the basic structure for regulating discharges of pollutants into the waters of the United States and regulating quality standards for surface waters.

Implementing this revised forest plan is expected to maintain and improve water quality and satisfy all State water quality requirements. This finding is based on direction contained in the forest plan, application of best management practices specifically designed to protect water quality, and the discussions of water quality and beneficial uses addressed in the FEIS, chapter 3, Revision Topic 2: Ecological Integrity. Management direction protecting water quality can be found in many locations throughout the forest plan, including Aquatic and Riparian Ecosystems, Wildlife, Aquatic, and Plant

Species, and Sustainable Recreation. Project-level analysis required for forest plan implementation will be required to demonstrate compliance with the Clean Water Act. I find that the revised forest plan complies with this act.

Endangered Species Act

The purpose of the Endangered Species Act is to provide for the conservation and recovery of endangered species by conserving the ecosystems these species rely on. Section 7(a)(1) of the act requires Federal agencies to carry out programs for the conservation and recovery of listed species. In addition, the Endangered Species Act requires Federal agencies to ensure that any agency action does not jeopardize the continued existence of the species (Endangered Species Act, section 7(a)(2)). The act also requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Forest Service to base their biological opinion and subsequent agency action, respectively, on the use of the best scientific and commercially available information (16 U.S.C. 1536(a)(2)).

The revised forest plan includes desired conditions, standards and guidelines, and objectives, and provides broad management direction that meets our responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act section 7(a)(1). Specifically, the plan components that were developed jointly with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, are designed to ensure our compliance with the Endangered Species Act, including implementation of associated recovery plans for each federally listed species.

In accordance with section 7(c) of the act, we worked together with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to identify and consult on how the revised forest plan may affect the listed and proposed threatened, endangered, or candidate species that may be present on the Sequoia. During summer 2021, in the face of ongoing changing conditions due to wildfires, we worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to agree upon biological assessments for the revised forest plans for both Sequoia and Sierra National Forests. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued a biological opinion for each forest plan decision in May 2022. The final biological opinion determined that adopting the forest plans would not jeopardize the continued existence of federally listed species and would not adversely modify designated critical habitat. We provided additional information to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service after we made changes in response to the administrative review (objection) process and confirmed successful completion of our Endangered Species Act section 7 consultation requirements. For these reasons, I find this revised forest plan to comply with the requirements of the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

Environmental Justice

Executive Order 12898 (Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations) directs the Forest Service to identify minority and low-income populations that are present in the areas surrounding the forest.

Of the six census county divisions comprising the Sequoia National Forest's area of influence, the Woodlake-Three Rivers census county division in Tulare County and the Bakersfield census county division in Kern County have minority populations over 50 percent. In addition, a relatively large proportion of the population around the Tule River Indian Reservation and South Lake identified as American Indian or/Alaska Native. About 60 percent of the population in the Visalia-Porterville metro area are estimated to be part of a minority population.

None of the six census county divisions that respectively comprise the Sequoia National Forest's area of influence have substantially greater percentages of people who are below poverty compared with county levels. However, certain areas within or near Wofford Heights, South Lake, Tehachapi, Bakersfield, and

the Visalia-Porterville metro area have relatively large low-income populations compared with county levels.

All alternatives considered in the FEIS would contribute to social and economic sustainability by providing benefits to environmental justice communities, improving the quality of life, and providing opportunities for income and jobs. The Forest would continue to provide for traditional, cultural, and spiritual values that are of particular interest to Native American Tribes. No populations in the plan area would experience significant adverse human health impacts or environmental effects due to management actions proposed under any of the alternatives considered. Therefore, I find that the revised forest plan complies with this Executive order.

Federal Land Policy and Management Act

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act allows for the granting of easements across National Forest System lands. Forest plans are strategic and programmatic in nature. They provide guidance and direction to future site-specific projects and activities. Forest plans do not create, authorize, or execute any site-specific activity, although they do provide for the consideration of granting easements and rights-of-way. Therefore, I find that the revised forest plan is consistent with this act.

Invasive Species

Executive Order 13751, which amends Executive Order 13112, directs Federal agencies to prevent the introduction of invasive species; to detect and respond rapidly to and control populations of such species in a cost-effective and environmentally sound manner;, to monitor invasive species populations accurately and reliably; to provide for restoration of native species and habitat conditions in ecosystems that have been invaded; to conduct research on invasive species and develop technologies to prevent introduction; to provide for environmentally sound control of invasive species; and to promote public education on invasive species and the means to address them. All these actions are subject to the availability of appropriations to support this work. Forest Service Manual 2900, Invasive Species Management, sets forth Forest Service policy, responsibilities, and direction for the prevention, detection, control, and restoration of effects from aquatic and terrestrial invasive species (including vertebrates, invertebrates, plants, and pathogens).

The forest plan is strategic and programmatic in nature, providing program-level guidance and direction for future site-specific projects and activities. The forest plan does not create, authorize, or execute any ground-disturbing activity, although it does provide for the consideration of certain types of activities that may have the potential to affect the dispersal of invasive species. The forest plan includes forestwide desired conditions, objectives, and management approaches that stress the use of best management practices to limit the introduction of new species and limit the spread of existing populations due to management activities. Additionally, other direction provides protection of watershed, soil, riparian, and aquatic conditions in ways that will reduce management-related disturbances that might introduce new populations or increase existing ones. Forest plan monitoring also includes indicators associated with invasive species, and the effectiveness of treatments. Therefore, I find that the revised forest plan is compliant with this Executive order.

Migratory Bird Treaty Act

Executive Order 13186, Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds, was issued in furtherance of the purposes of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Acts, the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the NEPA. This order requires

including the effects of Federal actions on migratory birds as a part of the environmental analysis process. On December 8, 2008, the Forest Service signed a memorandum of understanding with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to complement the Executive order (USDA Forest Service and USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2008), and the Forest Service agreed to incorporate migratory bird habitat and population objectives and recommendations into the agency planning process, in cooperation with other governments, State and Federal agencies, and non-Federal partners, and strive to protect, restore, enhance, and manage the habitat of migratory birds, and prevent the further loss or degradation of remaining habitats on National Forest System lands. The Council for the Conservation of Migratory Birds was established in 2009 by the Secretary of the Interior to oversee Executive Order 13186. More than 20 Federal agencies, including the Forest Service, currently participate in and have representation on the Council for the Conservation of Migratory Birds.

The forest plan includes forestwide direction related to key stressors for migratory birds and their habitats, including direction to maintain or improve forest resilience, composition, and structure. Future site-specific activities or projects with the potential to impact migratory bird habitat will be analyzed with site-specific analysis under the NEPA process and will comply with forest plan direction. Therefore, I find that the revised forest plan is compliant with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and Executive Order 13186.

Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act

The Forest Service manages National Forest System lands to sustain the multiple use of its renewable resources in perpetuity while maintaining the long-term health and productivity of the land. Resources are managed through a combination of approaches and concepts for the benefit of human communities and natural resources. As demonstrated in the FEIS and as required by the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960 (16 U.S.C. 528-531), the forest plan guides sustainable and integrated management of Forest resources in the context of the broader landscape, giving due consideration to the relative values of the various resources in particular areas. Therefore, I find that the revised forest plan is compliant with the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act.

National Environmental Policy Act

The NEPA requires that Federal agencies prepare detailed statements on proposed actions that may significantly affect the quality of the human environment. The act's requirement is designed to serve two major functions:

- to provide decision makers with a detailed accounting of the likely environmental effects of proposed actions prior to adoption
- to inform the public of, and allow comment on, such efforts

The Forest Service has developed, gathered, and reviewed an extensive amount of information regarding the potential effects of each of the alternatives considered in the FEIS. This information expands and refines the data, analyses, and public input described in the NEPA documents associated with the draft plan and DEIS. My decision also considers the large amount of public input, including public meetings, comments on the forest plan revision website (https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=3375), and comments received during the 120-day comment period for the DEIS.

All substantive comments, written and oral, made in regard to the RDEIS have been summarized and responded to in appendix H of the FEIS. During the course of this effort, the public involvement has led to changes in the analysis and the alternatives. We find that the environmental analysis and public involvement process upon which the FEIS is based complies with each of the major elements of the

requirements set forth by the Council on Environmental Quality regulations for implementing the NEPA (40 CFR 1500-1508). Our conclusion is supported by the following findings:

- The FEIS considered a broad range of reasonable alternatives. The six alternatives considered in detail in the FEIS cover a broad range of possible management allocations based on revision topics identified through public involvement and scoping.
- The FEIS reflects consideration of cumulative effects of the alternatives by evaluating past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions in the plan area, including Federal, State, Tribal, and private lands. The environmental effects analysis estimates the potential effects of timber activities and timber-associated activities. The analysis of effects to wildlife was based on the assumption that these activities would take place with management constraints to ensure habitat availability at certain thresholds. Moreover, although non-Federal lands are outside the scope of this decision, effects from their management have been thoroughly considered and coordinated, to the extent practicable, in the FEIS.
- The FEIS uses scientific integrity to support the conclusions made. The decision here does not authorize timber sales or any other specific activity on the Forest. Site-specific decisions will be made on projects in compliance with the NEPA, the Endangered Species Act, and other environmental laws following applicable public involvement and administrative review procedures.

National Forest Management Act

The National Forest Management Act requires the development, maintenance, amendment, and revision of forest plans for each unit of the National Forest System. Forest plans help create a dynamic management system, so an interdisciplinary approach to achieve integrated consideration of physical, biological, economic, and other sciences will be applied to all future actions on the unit. Under the act, the Forest Service is to ensure coordination of the multiple uses and sustained yield of products and services of the National Forest System.

The National Forest Management Act requires the Secretary of Agriculture to promulgate regulations for developing and maintaining forest plans. On April 9, 2012, the Department of Agriculture issued a Final Planning Rule for National Forest System land management planning (36 CFR Part 219; refer to the *Federal Register* at 77 FR 68, pp. 21162-21276).

As discussed in detail in the requirements of the planning rule section of this document, my review of the planning process, the FEIS, and the information provided in this record of decision indicate the final forest plan, and preparation of the plan, meet requirements for revising plans under the provisions of the 2012 Planning Rule and comply with the National Forest Management Act.

National Historic Preservation Act

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires each Federal agency to take into account the effects of its actions on historic properties, prior to approving expenditure of Federal funds on an undertaking or prior to issuing any license; while section 110 of the act outlines the Federal agency responsibility to establish and maintain a preservation program for the identification, evaluation, and nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, and protection of historic properties.

The forest plan is a programmatic-level planning effort that will not directly authorize any ground-disturbing activities or projects. The forest plan includes desired conditions, goals, objectives,

standards, guidelines, management strategies, and monitoring requirements for managing and protecting cultural resources listed or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Site-specific projects that are undertaken as a result of the direction in the forest plan will comply with laws and regulations that ensure protection of heritage resources. Significant cultural resources will be identified, protected, and monitored in compliance with the act. Any consultation that will occur for proposed activities will be coordinated with the California State Historic Preservation Office. Therefore, I find that the revised forest plan complies with this act.

Roadless Area Conservation Rule

Management direction for inventoried roadless areas is compliant with the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (36 CFR 294 Subpart B, published at 66 FR 3244-3273). The 2001 Roadless Conservation Rule includes a prohibition on road construction and road reconstruction in inventoried roadless areas and prohibitions on timber cutting, sale, or removal except in certain circumstances. The forest plan is a programmatic-level planning effort and does not directly authorize any road construction, reconstruction, or timber removal. Therefore, I find that the revised forest plan complies with the Roadless Area Conservation Rule.

Travel Management Rule

The final rule for Travel Management; Designated Routes and Areas for Motor Vehicle Use (commonly referred to as the 2005 Travel Management Rule) implements provisions of Executive Orders 11644 and 11989, to address the use of off-road motor vehicles on Federal lands. Regulations implementing this rule are found at 36 CFR Part 212. The portion of the rule pertaining to motor vehicle use is subpart B; the portion of the rule pertaining to motorized over-snow vehicle use is subpart C, which was updated in January 2015. The Executive order's "minimization criteria" specify:

In designating National Forest System trails and areas on National Forest System lands, the responsible official shall consider effects on the following with the objective of minimizing:

1. Damage to soil, watershed, vegetation, and other forest resources;
2. Harassment of wildlife and significant disruption of wildlife habitats;
3. Conflicts between motor vehicle use and existing or proposed recreation uses of National Forest System lands or neighboring Federal lands;
4. Conflicts among different classes of motor vehicle uses of National Forest System lands or neighboring Federal lands; and
5. Compatibility of motor vehicle use with existing conditions in populated areas, taking into account sound, emissions, and other factors. (36 CFR 212.55(b), Specific criteria for designation of trails and areas).

Prior to this plan revision, the Sequoia National Forest designated specific roads, areas, and trails for the use of motor vehicles (which includes off-road vehicles) that are displayed on the motorized vehicle use maps required by 36 CFR 212 subpart B. My decision for this plan revision does not authorize additional motor vehicle use, or prohibit existing motor vehicles uses, so the motorized vehicle use maps remain unchanged. Therefore, I find that the revised forest plan complies with the Travel Management Rule.

Wetlands and Floodplains

Executive orders 11988 (Floodplain Management) and 11990 (Protection of Wetlands) require Federal agencies to avoid, to the extent possible, short- and long-term effects resulting from the modification or destruction of wetlands and the occupancy and modification of floodplains. Forestwide standards and guidelines are provided for soil, water, wetlands, and riparian areas to minimize effects to wetlands and floodplains. They incorporate the best management practices of the Forest Service Soil and Water Conservation Handbook. Therefore, I find that the revised forest plan complies with these Executive orders.

Wild and Scenic Rivers Act

This act establishes a National Wild and Scenic Rivers System with three classifications of rivers: wild, scenic, and recreational. The purpose of the act is to protect the designated rivers "for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations" and to preserve the rivers' free-flowing condition, water quality, and outstandingly remarkable values.

Management area direction in the forest plan provides protection for the water quality, free-flowing conditions, and outstandingly remarkable values identified for designated wild and scenic rivers. In addition, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act requires an evaluation of eligible wild, scenic, or recreational rivers in land management planning. This was completed, and the 88 segments on 48 rivers (363.8 miles) identified through the eligible wild and scenic river study process were analyzed in the FEIS. Management direction in the forest plan provides protection of free-flowing conditions and the outstandingly remarkable values identified for the eligible segments of rivers on the Forest. Therefore, I find that the revised forest plan complies with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Wilderness Act

The Wilderness Act of 1964 established a National Wilderness Preservation System to be administered in such a manner as to leave these areas unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness. It provides the statutory definition of wilderness, how areas are assessed for addition to the wilderness preservation system, and management requirements for congressionally designated areas.

Evaluation of existing wilderness and areas recommended for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System was included in the environmental analysis for the revised forest plan. The forest plan provides direction for designated wilderness through goals, desired conditions, standards, guidelines, and suitability that preserves the wilderness character of designated wilderness. Therefore, I find that the revised forest plan complies with this act.

Implementation Date

The Sequoia National Forest Land Management Plan becomes effective 30 days after publication of the notice of the plan's approval in the *Federal Register* (36 CFR §219.17(a)(1)).

Plan Implementation

Forest plans are permissive in that they allow, but do not mandate, the occurrence of certain activities. The forest plan will be implemented through a series of project-level decisions based on site-specific environmental analyses and public involvement. The forest plan will guide management activities and

projects by establishing a clear desired condition for the Forest, rather than by establishing schedules for actions. This approach leaves more flexibility to adapt program and project selection as changes take place in budgets, resource capabilities, and management priorities.

Outputs, such as those reflected in plan objectives, are not commitments but projections of possible outcomes. They were used to approximate activities and practices to estimate the likely environmental effects of following the direction provided by the forest plan.

Throughout the life of the plan, specific projects and activities will be proposed and analyzed. These analyses will be done in accordance with the NEPA, and documented in the appropriate NEPA documents, such as an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement, or will be categorically excluded from such documentation. Projects, practices, and activities will be designed to be consistent with the applicable desired conditions, objectives and standards and guidelines in the forest plan.

Partnerships

Long-term strategic partnerships are a critical element in managing the Sequoia National Forest in the decades to come. Partnerships add essential capacity, efficiency, and innovations that the Forest Service alone could not achieve. The Forest Service is determined to work collaboratively and across boundaries at an accelerated pace to reduce the risk and extent of high-severity wildfires. Together with our wildfire management partners in California, we have committed to use all available and appropriate stewardship tools to better protect people, infrastructure, and ecosystems from the risk of large and severe wildfires. On the Sequoia, we will continue working together closely with our partners and local communities to improve defensible spaces and support the development of fire-adapted communities.

Partner contributions can also elevate our awareness of local conditions and the outcomes for how we apply science to stewardship. Working collectively through partnerships will be critical as we seek to accomplish increased levels of ecological restoration, and best meet the increasing demands for outdoor recreation-based tourism, and other services and benefits the Sequoia provides. The forest plan includes added direction related to volunteers, interpretation, partners, and stewardship that I believe will be important for ensuring that work with partners is emphasized on the Sequoia National Forest into the future.

Existing Authorizations

The National Forest Management Act requires that when forest plans are revised, resource plans and permits, contracts and other instruments for the use and occupancy of national forest lands shall be revised as soon as practicable to be consistent with the current forest plan (16 U.S.C. 1604(i)). Any revisions of these instruments are subject to valid existing rights.

There are many management actions that have decisions made before the effective date of this Record of Decision. These pre-existing actions were considered part of the baseline in developing the revised plan and the projected effects of these actions are part of the cumulative effects analyses documented in the FEIS. An additional analysis concluded that the continued implementation of these previously decided actions will not foreclose the ability to meet the desired conditions and objectives of the revised plan.

We have not identified the need to modify any pre-existing actions involving permits, contracts, or other instruments for the use and occupancy of National Forest System lands due to inconsistencies with the revised plan. These actions will be implemented according to the terms of the applicable instrument.

However, should the need arise, we have the discretion to modify these permits, contracts or other instruments for the use and occupancy of National Forest System lands.

Project Consistency

The revised forest plan direction will apply to all projects for which decisions are made on or after the effective date of this Record of Decision. Every project and activity must be consistent with the applicable plan components or include and evaluate a plan amendment. A project or activity approval document must describe how the project or activity is consistent with the applicable plan components of the revised plan. The criteria for determining forest plan consistency are detailed in 36 CFR 219.15(d).

Maintaining the Plan

The forest plan can be changed with appropriate public involvement and environmental analysis. Through the life of the plan, amendments may be needed to incorporate new information, new policy, and direction, or changing values and resource conditions. Amendments will keep the forest plan current, relevant, and responsive to agency and public concerns. Amendments are needed whenever any of the plan components should be changed due to any of the above conditions. The plan can be amended for specific projects if it is determined that the best method of meeting project goals and objectives conflicts with existing plan direction. There will be opportunities for the public to be involved in any future changes to the plan. Any amendment to the plan will need to follow the plan amendment process outlined in 36 CFR §219.13.

In some situations, an “administrative change” can be used to update the forest plan (see also 36 CFR §219.13). Administrative changes are generally limited to changes to parts of a plan that are not components, except that administrative changes also include corrections of clerical errors to any part of the plan or conformance of the plan to new statutory or regulatory requirements (36 CFR §219.7(f)).

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this decision, please contact the Sequoia National Forest Environmental Coordinator at (559) 784-1500.

Signature and Date

Teresa Benson

TERESA BENSON
Forest Supervisor
Sequoia National Forest

05/15/2023

DATE

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