(CEQ) for implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act at 40 CFR 1503.3).

The Forest Service believes it is important to give reviewers notice at this early stage of several court rulings related to public participation in the environmental review process. First reviewers of draft environmental impact statements must structure their participation in the environmental review of the proposals so that it is meaningful and alerts an agency to the reviewers position and contentions, *Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corp.* v. *NRDC,* 435 U.S. 519, 553 (1978). Also, environmental objections that could be raised at the draft environmental impact statement stage may be waived if not raised until after completion of the final environmental impact statement, *City of Angoon* v. *Hodel,* 803 F.2d 1016, 1022 (9th Cir. 1988), and *Wisconsin Heritages, Inc.* v. *Harris,* 490 F.supp. 1334, 1338 (E.D. Wis. 1980). Because of these court rulings, it is very important that those interested in this proposed action participate by the close of the 45-day comment period so that substantive comments and objections are made available to the Forest Service at a time when it can meaningfully consider them and respond to them in the final environmental impact statement.

Comments on the draft environmental impact statement should be as specific as possible. It is also helpful if comments refer to specific pages or chapters of the draft statement. Comments may also address the adequacy of the draft environmental impact statement or the merits of the alternatives formulated and discussed in the statement (Reviewers may wish to refer to CEQ Regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act at 40 CFR 1503.3 in addressing these points). After the comment period ends on the draft environmental impact statement, the comments received will be analyzed and considered by the Forest Service in preparing the final environmental impact statement.

The final environmental impact statement is scheduled to be completed in February 1999. In the final EIS, the Forest Service is required to respond to the comments received (40 CFR 1503.4). The responsible official will consider the comments, responses, environmental consequences discussed in the environmental impact statement, and applicable laws, regulations and policies in making a decision regarding this proposal. The responsible official will document the decision and reasons for the decision in a Record of Decision. That decision will be subject to appeal under 36 CFR part 215.

The responsible official is John E. Palmer, Forest Supervisor, Allegheny National Forest, 222 Liberty Street, P.O. Box 847, Warren PA 16365.

Dated: April 16, 1998.

John E. Palmer,

Forest Supervisor.

[FR Doc. 98–10895 Filed 4–23–98; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3410–11–M

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Revised Land and Resource Management Plans, Boise National Forest and Payette National Forest, Idaho. Significant Amendment Land and Resource Management Plan, Sawtooth National Forest, Idaho

AGENCY: Forest Service.

ACTION: Notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement in conjunction with revision of the Land and Resource Management Plans for the Boise and Payette National Forests, and significant amendment to the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Sawtooth National Forest located in Ada, Adams, Blaine, Boise, Camas, Canyon, Cassia, Custer, Elmore, Gem, Gooding, Idaho, Jerome, Lincoln, Minidoka, Owyhee, Payette, Twin Falls, Valley and Washington Counties, Idaho; Box Elder County, Utah, and Malheur County, Oregon.

SUMMARY: The Forest Service will prepare an Environmental Impact Statement in conjunction with revision and significant amendment of its Land and Resource Management Plans (hereafter referred to as Forest Plans) for the Boise, Payette and Sawtooth National Forests (hereafter referred to as the Southwest Idaho Ecogroup).

This notice describes the specific portions of the current Forest Plans to be revised and amended, environmental issues considered, estimated dates for filing the Environmental Impact Statement, information concerning public participation, and the names and addresses of the agency officials who can provide additional information. The purpose of the notice is to begin the scoping phase of public involvement in the revision and amendment process.

DATES: Comments concerning the scope of analysis should be received in writing by June 24, 1998. The agency expects to file a Draft Environmental Impact Statement in the Fall of 1999 and a Final Environmental Impact Statement in the Fall of 2000.

ADDRESSES: Send written comments to: Joey Pearson, Administrative Assistant, Southwest Idaho Ecogroup Planning Team, Payette National Forest, P.O. Box 1026, McCall, ID 83638.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Faye Krueger, Planning Team Leader—Payette National Forest (208) 634–0700; Jeff Foss, Planning Team Leader—Boise National Forest (208) 373–4100; or Sharon LaBrecque, Planning Team Leader—Sawtooth National Forest (208) 737–3200.

Responsible official: Jack Blackwell, Intermountain Regional Forester at 324 25th Street, Ogden, UT 84401.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Pursuant to part 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 219.10 (f) and (g), the Regional Forester for the Intermountain Region gives notice of the agency's intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement for the revision and significant amendment efforts described above. According to 36 CFR 219.10(g), Land and Resource Management Plans shall ordinarily be revised on a 10 to 15 year cycle. The existing Forest Plan for the Boise National Forest was approved on April 27, 1990, the Payette Forest Plan was approved on May 6, 1988, and the Sawtooth Forest Plan was approved on September 16, 1987.

On November 14, 1997, the Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act of 1998, H.R. 2107, was passed. Language in section 333 of the law specifically prohibits the expenditure or obligation of funds for new revisions of national forest land management plans until new final or interim final rules for forest plan revision are published in the **Federal Register**. Forests that had formally published a Notice of Intent to revise prior to October 1, 1997, or have been court-ordered to revise are exempt from this section and may proceed to complete forest plan revision. The Payette is under court order (Wilderness Society, et al. v. U.S. Forest Service, Civ. No. 94–0193–S–MHW) to complete Forest Plan revision by December 31, 2000, and thereby meets the exemption criteria to proceed with revision in accordance with 36 CFR 219.10(g). The Boise and Payette Forests were the subject of the Idaho Sporting Congress suit (Civ. No. 95–0025–S–BLW). On September 25, 1996, District Court Judge B. Lynn Winmill affirmed the Forest Service in part because the two Forests had initiated the forest plan revision process. Judge Winmill's opinion was affirmed by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals on August 21, 1997. Judge Winmill's decision in the Idaho Sporting Congress suit meets the intent

of the exemption criteria of the Appropriations Act, therefore the Boise Forest may also proceed with revision in accordance with 36 CFR 219.10(g).

The Sawtooth National Forest does not meet the exemption criteria for revision. Through the analysis of the management situation, the Sawtooth Forest did identify several areas where current management direction can be improved. Therefore, analysis efforts on the Sawtooth will continue to parallel analysis efforts on the Boise and Payette, with the intent to amend the Sawtooth Forest Plan in accordance with 36 CFR 219.10(f).

With this in mind, the Regional Forester gives notice that the Boise, Payette, and Sawtooth National Forests are beginning an environmental analysis and decision-making process for the proposed action to revise the Boise and Payette Forest Plans and to amend the Sawtooth Forest Plan. Opportunities will be provided to discuss the Forest Plan revision and amendment processes with the public. The public is invited to help identify issues that will be considered in defining the range of alternatives in the Environmental Impact Statement. Scoping meetings will be scheduled for May and June 1998. Alternative development meetings will be held in the Fall of 1998.

Forest plans describe the long-term direction for managing National Forests. Agency decisions in these plans do the following:

- Establish multiple-use goals and objectives (36 CFR 219.11);
- Establish forestwide management requirements (standards and guidelines);
- Establish management areas and management area direction through the application of management prescriptions;
- Identify lands not suited for timber production (36 CFR 219.3);
- Establish monitoring and evaluation requirements; and
- Recommend areas for official designation of wilderness.

The authorization of project-level activities on the Forests occur through project, or site-specific, decision-making. Project-level decisions must comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) procedures and must include a determination that the project is consistent with the Forest Plan.

Linkage to the Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project

Southwest Idaho Ecogroup is within the area of land covered by the Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project (ICBEMP). There are two sources of information from the ICBEMP that will heavily influence the development of the planning process: (1) The integrated science assessments and (2) the Upper Columbia River Basin Final Environmental Impact Statement (URCB FEIS) and Record of Decision.

The integrated science assessments provide an information base that provides context at broad, multiple state area scale. The information on forestlands, rangelands, aquatic and hydrologic integrity, ecosystem pathways and disturbance patterns, and the current and projected conditions of fish, wildlife and plant species were used to aid in identifying need for change topics. This information will continue to be used in defining the extent of the need for change and in the development and evaluation of alternatives.

The other primary document that will influence this project is the UCRB FEIS. The Draft EIS was issued for public comment in June, 1997, and a final document is expected in late 1999. This document, which incorporates the results of the science assessments, will amend all three Forest Plans when the Record of Decision is issued. This amendment will establish new goals, desired range of future conditions, objectives and standards for management. This amendment will simplify the scope of the Ecogroup planning effort, but will not replace the need for the revision/amendment for these reasons:

- The UCRB effort is at a broad scale. The application of the information and decisions will need to be fine-tuned for the Forest-level scale.
- The UCRB provides some standards that are only to be used until such time as better local standards are developed. The planning effort will refine these standards to local conditions.
- The UCRB EIS does not provide all of the analysis or decisions required by the National Forest Management Act regulations. The planning effort will need to evaluate land allocations, timber suitability, wilderness recommendations and other factors that the UCRB did not address.

Need for Change in the Current Forest Plans

In the Fall of 1996, the Forests in the Southwest Idaho Ecogroup completed five year monitoring reports. The results of the monitoring reports, in addition to public input and Forest Plan implementation experience, indicated that there is a need for change in some management direction in all three Forest Plans. Because of the need to consider management of ecosystems across administrative boundaries, and the fact that the three Forests share key issues, resources, customers and interested publics, it was determined that an ecogroup approach to planning would increase the overall efficiency and quality of the effort to address the need for change issues. Several sources were used in determining the needed changes in the current Forest Plans. These sources include:

- Results of the three Forest Plan monitoring reports;
- Comparison of regulatory, manual, and handbook requirements;
- New information, such as the Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Plan scientific assessment and other research; and
- Comments concerning implementation of current direction.

In November 1997, the Southwest Idaho Ecogroup published a Preliminary Analysis of the Management Situation (Pre-AMS). The Pre-AMS summarized the current management condition of the three Forests based on analysis of the findings from the sources listed above.

Major Revision/Amendment Topics

Based on the information sources listed above, the following issues/areas were identified as needs for change in management direction in all three Forest Plans. As previously explained, the Boise and Payette National Forests will address these needs for change through the revision process, while the Sawtooth will address them through a significant amendment. Since the Forest Plans were originally signed, the Boise and Payette Forests have experienced major changes in forest conditions as a result of wildfire and tree mortality. The magnitude of these changes requires that the Boise and Payette Forest Plans be revised. The Sawtooth Forest has not experienced such major changes. Until the Sawtooth is allowed to proceed with revision, it will accommodate the needed changes through a significant amendment.

In revising/amending the Forest Plans, the Forests are focusing on those areas that must be reviewed in accordance with federal regulations, and on urgent issues identified through new information, monitoring and public concerns. The regulations focus the process by stating; ''The Forest Supervisor shall determine the major public issues management concerns, and resource use and development opportunities to be addressed in the planning process'' [36 CFR 219.12(b)]. Throughout this planning process, only those portions of the Plans identified as critical issues needing change will be

addressed. Some examples of issues that were not identified as critical or did not have an identified need for change include recommended wilderness, heritage resource program management, and minerals program management. Issues not identified as critical will be addressed at a later time through non-significant amendments.

The Southwest Idaho Ecogroup is proposing to revise or amend the three Forest Plans by addressing the listed need for change topics. The following is a brief definition of the issues associated with each need for change topic and the purpose and need for change, and a description of what we propose to do to address the needed changes:

Biological Diversity

Biological diversity is the variety and abundance of life in an area including all living organisms, the genetic differences among them, and the communities and ecosystems in which they occur. It also refers to the compositions, structures and functions of species and habitats and their interactions. The goal of conserving biological diversity is to support sustainable development by protecting and using biological resources.

The current Forest Plans address many of the key indicators of biological diversity; however, these indicators are largely described and analyzed as separate functional entities. There is little information as to how these indicators interact with one another and with natural processes, particularly at the broad, Forest-level scale. The current Forest Plans need improved direction for potentially needed restoration, management and maintenance of plant communities, including vegetative structure, species composition, distribution, and patterns and how they are influenced by soil and disturbance processes in relationship to historic and current conditions. All three Forests manage significant habitat for federally listed threatened and endangered plant, wildlife and fish species. These include: Macfarlane's four-o'clock, Ute's lady tresses, gray wolf, bald eagle, peregrine falcon, sockeye salmon, chinook salmon, steelhead and redband trout. In addition, these are species that are currently proposed or candidates for listing including bull trout and Northern Idaho ground squirrel. Current Forest Plan direction for these species is to follow recovery plans developed by the appropriate regulatory agency.

The Ecogroup also manages habitat for a number of species that are designated ''sensitive'' by the Regional Forester because their populations or habitats are trending downward. Current management direction in the Forest Plans is to follow conservation assessments and plans developed at the Regional level. There is a need to improve management direction in the Forest Plans to better address the needs of listed and sensitive species.

Through this planning effort, biological diversity concepts will be used to:

- Develop improved management guidelines through better understanding of species, including threatened, endangered or sensitive (TES) species, candidate species, plant, fish, and animal species of concern, and the communities they are dependent upon.
- Develop improved guidelines for snag and coarse woody debris that better provide habitat for plant and animal species dependent on coarse woody debris, to improve soil productivity, and to better provide for natural decay processes necessary for nutrient cycling;
- Develop improved management direction to address soil processes (erosion rates, mass stability, infiltration, nutrient cycling) as they relate to management of other resources;
- Develop improved management direction for desired structure and density for each structural stage, from openings to old forest vegetation (including old growth);
- Develop additional management practices, standards and guidelines for tree density, stand structure, and species composition that address the extent and frequency of all types of disturbances.

The intent of this improved management direction is to provide for short- and long-term biological, physical, economic and social sustainability.

Fire and Smoke Management

The 1897 Organic Act states that forests shall be protected against destruction by fire. Early Forest Service policy interpreted protection to mean fire suppression, and for several decades fire management focused on maximum suppression efforts. The result of this interpretation is that in many areas fire regimes within the Southwest Idaho Ecogroup have changed from historical conditions; fuel loadings have increased, and areas with moderate to high fuels are larger and more contiguous. Historically, approximately 15 percent of the Ecogroup area would likely have had stand-replacing fires. Past management activities, including suppression efforts, have resulted in increasing the area that would likely have stand-replacing fires to approximately 42 percent of the Ecogroup. Population growth within the Ecogroup has also led to increases in wildland/urban interface. This growth of wildland/urban interface increases the risk of fire spreading from private to federal lands and vice versa.

The current Forest Plans need improved direction addressing the role of fire as an ecosystem process or tool for maintaining or restoring ecosystem health, particularly in vegetative communities that historically burned more frequently. The ability to accomplish fire management objectives, to set priorities for ecosystem management, and to assess properly functioning condition may be limited by missing, vague, or conflicting Forest Plan direction.

The Federal Clean Air Act mandates that human health and welfare from air pollution be protected. Particulate matter emissions are produced from Forest Service activities as prescribed fire. The current Forest Plans need improved direction that better addresses the trade-offs with air quality versus increased prescribed burning to improve rangeland and forest ecosystem health.

Through this planning effort, fire management will be incorporated into the Forest Plans through:

- Integration of fire management goals and objectives into Forest-wide desired conditions;
- Development of resource specific goals and objectives related to how and when fire will be used;
- Development of goals, objectives, standards and guidelines for the use of prescribed fire to improve ecosystem health and to reduce the risk of large uncharacteristic fires;
- Development of goals, objectives, standards, guidelines and monitoring requirements for air quality and smoke management;
- Development of management direction addressing wildland/urban interface; and
- Development of goals and objectives for determining appropriate suppression response based on factors such as social and political implications, economics, environmental considerations, public and firefighter safety and values at risk.

The intent of the new direction is to restore or maintain fire as a process where appropriate in various ecosystems, to reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire in wildland/urban interface, and to aid in determining how much area needs to be treated with prescribed fire.

Habitat Fragmentation and Disruption

Fragmentation is the separation or isolation of similar types of habitat,

either by natural events or human activities. Historically, fire, wind, insects, and disease were the disturbance processes that resulted in the fragmentation of habitats, causing disturbance to species and the habitats necessary for their survival. Current disturbance processes are far more numerous and have affected far greater areas than in the past. Agricultural and urban development have in effect created genetically isolated islands of habitat. Forest management practices such as roads, trails, utility corridors, and timber harvest have also resulted in fragmentation of habitats and disturbance to species. Disruption is the modification of species behavior as a result of the presence of humans or their activities. Some species of fish and wildlife are sensitive to human activities during breeding, nesting and wintering portions of their life cycles. Human activities, whether intentional or not, can increase stress to these species and reduce their reproductive success or increase their risk for mortality.

The current Forest Plans need improved direction concerning habitat fragmentation and disruption from roads, trails, timer harvest, fire, culverts, utility corridors, and other sources. Likewise, the Forest Plans need to better recognize the importance of maintaining Forest habitats of special concern that have been affected as a result of off-Forest activities such as conversion to agriculture and urban development. Through this planning effort, improved management direction concerning habitat fragmentation and disruption will be incorporated into the Forest Plans through:

- Integration of goals, objectives, standards and guides for the protection of species during sensitive periods of their life cycles; and
- Integration of goals, objectives, standards and guides to reduce the effects of fragmentation.

The intent of this improved direction is to develop management strategies that improve habitat connectivity, minimize life cycle disruption, and maintain species viability.

Non-Native Plants

Non-native plants are species that do not have their origin in a local geographic area. Non-native plants include exotic plants and noxious weeds. Exotic plants are species that have been introduced to an area, usually from a different continent, typically for restoration purposes such as road stabilization, range improvements and burned area emergency rehabilitation (BAER). Noxious weeds are plant species designated by law that can have detrimental effects on agriculture, commerce, or public health. These species are generally new or not common to the United States, spread aggressively, and are difficult to manage. Some exotic and noxious weed species thrive in areas so well that they tend to out-compete native species. This affects the amount and distribution of native plants and the animals that depend on them for forage and cover.

Recent monitoring reports for the Ecogroup Forests describe a growing concern with the spread and effects of noxious weeds. The expansion of noxious weeds with the Ecogroup is out-pacing containment and control efforts. New infestations both on Forest Service System lands and on adjacent lands pose significant risk for further expansion.

Non-native plants are being introduced unintentionally (seeds from vehicle tires or animal droppings) and intentionally (BAER, restoration projects). Research has shown that seeded non-native plants have an impact on establishment and growth of native vegetation in fire rehabilitation areas. In some areas, certain species have been purposely introduced to provide forage and cover. This has resulted in monocultures or sites with few selected plant species. These conditions affect fire regimes, soil erosion and wildlife habitat.

The current Forest Plans do not address exotic and noxious weed plants from a multi-program approach (recreation, timber, special uses * * *). Current direction only addresses the treatment of noxious weed infestations, rather than taking a prevention, containment and control approach. Likewise, the current Plans address noxious weeds from a range or timber management standpoint and do not recognize that other resource programs are significant contributors to the spread of noxious weeds. There is a need to develop improved direction in the Plans for designing or implementing BAER treatment strategies to assist in evaluating the trade-offs between the short-term emergency needs of post-fire rehabilitation and the long-term compatibility with ecosystem management.

Through this planning effort, non-native plants will be addressed through:

- Development of improved goals, objectives, standards and guides to address noxious weeds from a multi-program approach;
- Development of improved goals, objectives, standards and guides for a prevention, containment and control approach to noxious weed management; and
- Development of improved goals, objectives, standards and guides for the use of non-native plants in BAER activities and non-structural range improvement projects.

The intent of this new direction is to establish a containment/control strategy that recognizes the difficulty of controlling large, firmly established populations of noxious weeds; and to ensure seeding and revegetation practices associated with erosion control, fire rehabilitation, non-structural range improvement, and watershed restoration is compatible with the desired future condition and priorities established for management activities.

Rangeland/Grazing Resources

The National Forest Management Act requires that Forest Plans determine potential capability and suitability for producing grazing animal forage while providing habitat for management indicator species. Range capability is defined as lands that have the potential to be grazed given the physical constraints of grazing (distance from water, slope, access * * *).

Current capability criteria do not make a clear distinction between sheep and cattle use. Capability determinations have been corrected or contested on a recurring basis at the project level. Some sites currently considered capable are not meeting resource objectives relating to soil productivity, erosion, and hydrologic function. This indicates that the criteria used in the past to determine capability needs to be updated. The current Forest Plans do not meet the expectations outlined in new Forest Service national direction regarding the identification of capability criteria and the rationale supporting those criteria. The capability assessments in the original Forest Plan Final Environmental Impact Statements need to be updated to include new direction and more current information.

Suitability identifies areas within the capable base where grazing is appropriate within the context of land management considerations such as economics, environmental consequences, rangeland conditions, and other uses or values. Actual average livestock use levels defined in animal unit months per year (AUM/year) are lower than originally anticipated in the Forest Plans. Some contributing factors to this downward trend include protection of threatened and endangered species habitat, increased livestock operator costs due to mitigation measures identified to protect habitat,

changing economics of grazing livestock, and voluntary and involuntary reductions for resource protection.

Guidelines in the current Forest Plans do not address site conditions such as severe drought which occurs 10 to 40 percent of the time across the Ecogroup. From a wildlife standpoint, there is inconsistent or insufficient direction concerning wildlife wintering areas that are also used by livestock, as well as the potential threat of disease transmission from domestic sheep to bighorn sheep populations. Recreation use increases above the projections made in the current Forest Plans have resulted in increased user conflicts between livestock, wildlife and recreationists. No direction or monitoring process exists in the current plans to address this concern.

Through this planning effort, capability and suitability concerns will be addressed through:

- Improved capability assessments at the programmatic level that include current Forest Service direction, research findings, and distinguish the difference between cattle and sheep;
- Development of suitability criteria to be validated on a site-specific level that reflect site conditions; and
- Development of improved goals, objectives, standards and guides that address concerns such as drought and potential wildlife/livestock and recreation/livestock conflicts.

The intent of this new direction is to insure that the Forest Plans clearly identify at the programmatic level areas where livestock grazing is appropriate and capable.

Riparian and Aquatic

Aquatic ecosystems are watersheds, waterbodies, riparian areas, and wetlands and the species (fish, wildlife, plant, amphibian, invertebrate) they contain. Riparian refers to distinctive soil and vegetation between a stream or other body of water and an adjacent upland.

All three Forests manage significant aquatic habitat for both anadromous and resident fish populations. Collectively, the Forests have over 14,400 miles of rivers and streams and 62,520 acres of lakes supporting at least 57 native and non-native fish species. The Environmental Protection Agency and the State of Idaho Department of Environmental Quality have identified a list of 130 waterbodies within the Southwest Idaho Ecogroup that are not fully meeting their designated beneficial uses.

In 1992, Snake River sockeye salmon were listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), as amended. In 1993 and 1997, Snake River chinook salmon and steelhead, respectively, were listed as threatened.

In 1995, the three Forest Plans were amended by management direction in the Interim Strategies of Managing Anadromous Fish-producing Watersheds in Eastern Oregon and Washington, Idaho, and portions of California (PACFISH) and the Inland Native Fish Strategy (INFISH). These strategies include the identification of interim riparian management objectives (RMOs), standards and guidelines, and watershed analysis requirements. These interim strategies are in effect until long-term management direction is developed through geographically specific environmental analyses such as the Upper Columbia River Basin Assessment and forest plan revision efforts. At the forest plan level, RMOs need to reflect the inherent diversity and capability of the Ecogroup aquatic ecosystems, and to support the designated beneficial uses for Water Quality Limited waterbodies.

There is a need to develop improved Forest Plan direction for riparian area management that is consistent across the Ecogroup. This direction should include all riparian areas (including intermittent streams) and landslide-prone areas. In June 1998, bull trout are proposed to be listed as a threatened species. In response to the potential for listing, the Governor's Bull Trout Plan was implemented in July 1996. This plan, which was coordinated with the Forest Service, included development of watershed specific problem assessments and conservation plans. This direction needs to be considered in the Forest Plans.

Through this planning effort, improved management direction for riparian and aquatics will be incorporated into the plans through:

- Development of consistent goals, objectives, standards and guides, and monitoring strategies for riparian and aquatic management;
- Development of appropriate RMOs and desired future conditions that reflect the inherent diversity and capability of the Ecogroup aquatic ecosystems and fully support the designated beneficial uses for waterbodies as identified by the State Water Quality Standards;
- Development of direction for the management of intermittent streams and landslide-prone areas;
- Development of improved management direction for sensitive species, including the identification of management indicator species; and

The intent of this new direction is to insure that: riparian and aquatic ecosystems are being managed consistently across the Ecogroup; the appropriate emphasis is being placed on riparian protection and restoration; that RMOs reflect the inherent capability of the aquatic ecosystems; appropriate emphasis is being placed on sensitive as well as listed species; and intermittent streams and landslide-prone areas are being appropriately managed.

Timberland Suitability

The National Forest Management Act and its implementing regulations require that lands identified as not suited for timber production be reassessed at least once every ten years to determine if they should be reclassified as suited. Suited lands include forested lands outside of withdrawn areas such as designated Wilderness, lands where reforestation can be assured, and lands where timber management activities can take place without causing irreversible resource damage to soils productivity or watershed conditions. The suitability assessment includes the identification of tentatively suited timberlands (available forest lands that are physically suited for timber management) and suited timberlands (the tentatively suited lands considered appropriate for timber management). Since the Forest Plans were released, land exchanges have resulted in both the loss and the addition of timberlands. A preliminary reassessment indicates that land exchanges have resulted in an approximate increase of 7,400 acres of tentatively suited lands (2,400 acres on the Boise and 5,000 acres on the Payette). New information about the capability of Forest lands and an increased understanding about the effects of timber management will also influence the reassessment of suited timberlands.

Through this planning effort, a complete reassessment of timberland suitability will be conducted.

Management Emphasis Areas

All three Forests include many outstanding natural areas with various combinations of biophysical resources and social interests. Included in the management emphasis areas are Wild and Scenic Rivers. Agency policy related to the Wild and Scenic Rivers (WSR) Act of 1968 in land management planning requires that rivers identified as potential WSRs be evaluated as to their eligibility, with the findings documented in the Forest Plan. An eligible river must be free flowing and

possess at least one feature that is judged to be outstandingly remarkable.

It is recommended but not required to complete WSR suitability studies during the Forest Plan revision process. To be found suitable, the benefits of designating the river should outweigh the disadvantages. Currently, the Boise has 35 river segments identified as eligible for WSR status, the Payette and Sawtooth have five segments each. Since the original studies were completed, there have been changed conditions such as the listing of species under ESA and new information from sources such as the ICBEMP Scientific Assessments. Suitability studies have not been conducted on the eligible rivers listed in the three Forest Plans.

There is a need to re-evaluate the previous eligibility studies based on the new information and changed conditions. There is also a need to address the suitability of high priority eligible segments. Through this planning process, the Forests are proposing to address WSR issues by:

- Re-evaluating previous eligibility studies; and
- Complete suitability studies for Priority 1 segments in revision as agreed in a settlement agreement between American Rivers, Inc. and the Payette National Forest (Big Creek, French Creek, Monumental Creek, and the Secesh River on the Payette National Forest, and the South Fork Salmon River on the Payette and Boise National Forests). Suitability studies on Priorities 2, 3, and 4 segments will be completed after the revision/amendment effort.

Social and Economic Issues

While the majority of the revision topics appear to be biological and physical in nature, we recognize that the topics are all linked to social and economic issues. As we develop alternatives for the need for change topics, we need to consider how these alternatives will affect the economics of the current and traditional resource users; what influences the alternatives may have on the demographics of local communities; how the alternatives address local community priorities; and what influences the alternatives may have on local and regional cultures.

We recognize that livestock grazing, timber production and recreation activities are key sources of income to communities dependent on forest resources for the generation of revenue. As we develop and analyze the effects of alternatives we need to consider things such as local community stability, community development patterns, goods and services, employment, current and traditional resource users, and forest revenue.

We also recognize that founding of many of the communities within the Ecogroup was and continues to be tied directly to the use and production of forest products. For these communities, we need to consider land use patterns, including urban interface, local employment, community development patterns, local communities of place and interest and the implications to these factors.

As we develop alternatives and analyze their effects, we will also need to consider local and regional culture (attitudes, beliefs, values and life-styles). Some of the questions we will be considering include:

- How will Tribal life-styles and cultural traditions be affected by management activities and decisions?
- What are the potential social conflicts, risks, and implications regarding rangeland grazing and timber harvest?
- How will these alternatives affect opportunities for recreation and recreation experiences?
- How will the traditional life-styles associated with livestock grazing be affected?
- How will the alternatives tie to local community priorities?

Decision To Be Made

Based on the analysis made in the FEIS, the Regional Forester must decide what changes will be made to goals, objectives, standards and guides, and monitoring and evaluation criteria in the Forest Plans to best address the need for change topics. The Regional Forester must also decide what changes in management boundaries and prescriptions are necessary to meet the changed goals and objectives.

Framework for Alternatives To Be Considered

A range of alternatives, including an alternative addressing community stability, will be considered when revising and amending the Forest Plans. The alternatives will address different options to resolve the issues identified in the revision/amendment topics listed above. Alternatives must meet the purpose and need for revision/amendment to be considered valid. One of the alternatives to be examined is the ''no-action alternative''. This is a required alternative that represents continuation of management under the current plans as amended. Alternatives are developed in response to public issues, management concerns, and resource opportunities identified during the scoping progress. In describing alternatives, desired vegetation and resource conditions will be defined. Preliminary information, including a map of the proposed programmatic action, is available for review at all Ecogroup District and Supervisor Offices.

Involving the Public

The Forest Service is seeking information, comments and assistance from individuals, organizations and federal, state, and local agencies who may be interested in or affected by the proposed action (36 CFR 219.6). The Forest Service is also looking for collaborative approaches with members of the public who are interested in forest management. Federal and state agencies and some private organizations have been cooperating in the development of assessments of current biological, physical, and economic conditions. This information will be used to prepare the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). The range of alternatives to be considered in the DEIS will be based on public issues, management concerns, resource management opportunities, and specific decisions to be made.

Public participation will be solicited by notifying in person and/or by mail known interested and affected publics. News releases will be used to give the public general notice, and public scoping opportunities will be offered in numerous locations. Public participation activities will include written comments, open houses, focus groups and collaborative forums.

Public participation will be sought throughout the revision/amendment process and will be especially important at several points along the way. The first formal opportunity to comment is during the scoping process (40 CFR 1501.7). Scoping meetings are currently scheduled from May 26 to June 19, 1998 in the following Idaho locations: Boise, Idaho City, Mountain Home, Garden Valley, Cascade, McCall, Riggins, Weiser, Council, Twin Falls, Burley, Ketchum, Stanley.

Release and Review of the EIS

The DEIS is expected to be filed with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and to be available for public comment in the Fall of 1999. At that time, the EPA will publish a notice of availability in the **Federal Register**. The comment period on the DEIS will be 60 days from the date the EPA publishes the notice of availability in the **Federal Register**.

The Forest Service believes, at this early stage, it is important to give reviewers notice of several court rulings related to public participation in the

environmental review process. First, reviewers of the DEIS must structure their participation in the environmental review of the proposal so that it is meaningful and alerts an agency to the reviewer's position and contentions; *Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corp.* v. *NRDC.* 435 U.S. 519, 553 (1978). Also, environmental objections that could be raised at the DEIS stage but are not raised until after completion of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) may be waived or dismissed by the courts; *City of Angoon* v. *Hodel,* 803 F. 2d 1016, 1022 (9th Cir. 1986) and *Wisconsin Heritages, Inc.* v. *Harris,* 490 F. Supp. 1334, 1338 (E.D. Wis. 1980). Because of these court rulings, it is very important that those interested in this proposed action participate by the close of the two-month comment period so that substantive comments and objectives are made available to the Forest Service at a time when it can meaningfully consider them and respond to them in the FEIS.

To assist the Forest Service in identifying and considering issues and concerns on the proposed actions, comments on the DEIS should be as specific as possible. It is also helpful if comments refer to specific pages or chapters of the draft statement. Comments may also address the adequacy of the DEIS or the merits of the alternatives formulated and discussed in the statements. Reviewers may wish to refer to the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act at 40 CFR 1503.3 in addressing these points.

After the comment period ends on the DEIS, comments will be analyzed, considered, and responded to by the Forest Service in preparing the FEIS. The FEIS is scheduled to be completed in the Fall of 2000. The responsible official will consider the comments, responses, and environmental consequences discussed in the FEIS, and applicable laws, regulations, and policies in making decisions regarding making the revisions and amendment. The responsible official will document the decisions and reasons for the decisions in a Record of Decision for the revised and amended plans. The decisions will be subject to appeal in accordance with 36 CFR part 217.

Dated: April 16, 1998.

Jack A. Blackwell,

Regional Forester.

[FR Doc. 98–10782 Filed 4–23–98; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3410–11–M

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Modoc National Forest Noxious Weed Control Project

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement.

SUMMARY: The Forest Service will prepare an environmental impact statement to eradicate between 100 and 300 acres of noxious weeds annually, beginning 1999 for a period of 10 to 20 years, within site specific areas of the Modoc, Lassen, and Siskiyou Counties in northeastern California. The proposed 26 target weeds are Plumeless thistle, Musk thistle, Canada thistle, Yellowspine thistle, Scotch thistle, Russian knapweed, Rush skeletonweed, Diffuse knapweed, Spotted knapweed, Yellow starthistle, Hoary cress or whitetop, Squarrose knapweed, Marlahan mustard, Leafy spurge, Halogeton, St. Johnswort, Dalmation toadflax, Purple loosestrife, Mediterranean sage, Puncture vine, Perennial pepperweed, Medusahead, Jointed goatgrass, Barbed goatgrass, Common crupina, and Wavyleaf thistle. The proposed treatment methods are mechanical, biological, cultural, preventive, chemical, and through land management practices such as livestock grazing. The herbicides which will be used are chloraulfuron, dicamba, clopyralid, 2,4-D, picloram, hexazinone, glyphosate, triclopyr, sulfometuron methyl, and simazine. The proposed herbicides are distributed under a number of trade names and strengths. The agency invites written comments and suggestions on the proposed project.

In preparing the environmental impact statement, the Forest Service will identify and consider a range of alternatives. Possible alternatives to this proposal are no action, utilize all treatments except aerial, and all treatments except chemical.

DATES: Comments concerning the proposal should be received in writing by May 25, 1998, to receive timely consideration in the preparation of the draft EIS. The draft EIS will be filed with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and to be available for public review in August 1998. The final EIS and Record of Decision are expected to be issued in November 1998.

ADDRESSES: Submit written comments and suggestions concerning the scope of the analysis to Steven F. Bishop, Acting Forest Supervisor, Modoc National Forest, 800 West 12th Street, Alturas, CA 96101.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Direct questions about the proposed action and environmental impact statement to Jim Irvin, or Allison Sanger, Project Leader, Modoc National Forest, 800 West 12th Street, Alturas, CA 96101, 530–233–5811.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: There are 26 noxious weed species which receiving intensive control in or near the Modoc National Forest. Thirteen of the 26 species are listed as ''A'' rated weed pests which means they have limited distribution in California and are subject to eradication, quarantine, or other holding actions at the State and County levels. All 26 of these are exotic pests, not native to California and thus replace the native species then they invade different plant communities.

In 1997, approximately 90 acres of noxious weeds were treated on the Modoc National Forest in Modoc, Lassen, and Siskiyou Counties. Infestations are scattered primarily over Lassen and Modoc Counties, the largest being the common crupina infestation above Round Valley which covers a total of 740 acres of private and Forest Service lands. Most infestations are less than one acre in size.

An Integrated Weed Pest Management approach will be use to control and eradicate these weeds species. This approach uses a combination of control methods which include; mechanical control such as hand pulling, clipping, mowing, and burning of weeds; cultural control such as fertilization, seeding, and cultivation; biological control through the use of parasites and pathogens; preventive through the use of education and guidelines to increase awareness and prevent new infestations onto Forest lands; chemical control through the use of herbicides; and control by land management practices such as livestock grazing.

Chemical methods include the use of backpack sprayers, truck mounted power sprayers, or aerial application of a specific area only. The chemicals (herbicides) would be in either liquid or granular form. Helicopters are used for aerial application to minimize resource damage in areas with limited access, and large infestations. To obtain the greatest reduction of weeds from chemical control, selection of the proper herbicide with application at the proper time and method are of the utmost importance.

Aerial application is being proposed for only one area on the Forest, a 160 acre (740 acre total) infestation of common crupina found on private and