

# **News Release**

## **USDA Forest Service**

### **USDI Bureau of Land Management**

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## **Agencies Release Aquatic Conservation Strategy Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement**

**PORTLAND**, October 31, 2003 -- The Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) have released a Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS). The Final SEIS proposes wording changes in the Record of Decision (ROD) for the Northwest Forest Plan that relate to the Aquatic Conservation Strategy (ACS). The Final SEIS responds to the 1,200 comments received on the Draft SEIS. A ROD will be issued in December.

The ACS is an integral part of the Northwest Forest Plan and was developed to restore and maintain the ecological health of watersheds and aquatic ecosystems on public lands. However, the Northwest Forest Plan ROD includes language that has resulted in interpretations that run counter to the original intent of the ACS, making it difficult to meet the restoration and timber harvest objectives called for by the plan.

The Final SEIS includes three alternatives: No Action, Proposed Action, and Alternative A. The Preferred Alternative is Alternative A. The inclusion of Alternative A in the Final SEIS responds to comments received on the Draft SEIS. Alternative A will amend language in the Northwest Forest Plan ROD to more clearly express how the ACS is to be applied in the Northwest Forest Plan area. The ACS consists of a system of riparian reserves, a system of key watersheds, requirements and procedures for conducting watershed analysis, and a program of watershed restoration. The proposed language clarifications do not change any of the components of the ACS.

The proposed wording changes would clarify that the nine ACS objectives would be attained at the fifth-field watershed scale and not at the project or site level. A fifth-field watershed ranges from approximately 30 to 150 square miles (20,000 to 100,000 acres). All site-level projects would continue to meet the protective measures in the standards and guidelines, such as riparian buffer-widths. The agencies would continue to seek attainment of ACS objectives at the watershed and landscape scales. The agencies will monitor watersheds over time to assure the Northwest Forest Plan is attaining the ACS objectives.

Northwest Forest Plan timber harvest and restoration projects have been delayed or stopped due to recent court interpretations of certain passages in the ACS. The ACS has been interpreted to mean that every project must achieve all ACS objectives at all spatial and temporal scales (site or

project, watershed, province, region). This interpretation suggests land managers must demonstrate that a project will maintain existing conditions (or lead to improved conditions) at every spatial and temporal scale. Any project that may result in site-level disturbance to aquatic or riparian habitat, no matter how localized or short-term, could be precluded under this interpretation.

By clarifying that ACS objectives are meant to be attained at the watershed scale, opportunities to integrate timber sales and restoration projects may increase. Preferred Alternative A is less likely to result in projects that are stopped or delayed due to appeals and litigation based on ACS interpretations. Some increase in timber sales toward meeting Northwest Forest Plan objectives would be expected. Without clarifying the intent of the ACS, the agencies will continue to be constrained in their ability to achieve the sustainable and predictable level of timber sales envisioned under the Northwest Forest Plan.

Additional information and a copy of the Final SEIS can be found on the ACS EIS website: <http://www.reo.gov/acs/>.