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Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact

Middle Fork Zone Elk Monitoring Project

**Salmon-Challis and Payette National Forest
Custer, Idaho, Lemhi, and Valley County, Idaho**

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[DR 4300.003 USDA Equal Opportunity Public Notification Policy \(June 2, 2015\)](#)

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Middle Fork Zone Elk Monitoring Project
USDA Forest Service
Salmon-Challis and Payette National Forest
Custer, Idaho, Lemhi, and Valley Counties, Idaho

INTRODUCTION

The Environmental Assessment (EA) discloses the environmental impacts of a proposed action for permitting Idaho Department of Fish and Game's (IDFG) landings of aircraft in the Frank Church-River of No Return (FC-RONR) Wilderness to capture and collar up to 60 elk IDFG's Middle Fork Zone for the purpose of collecting data to evaluate causes of the recent decline in the elk population.

The EA has been prepared pursuant to the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA, 40 CFR 1500-1508), the National Forest Management Act and its implementing regulations, the 2003 Payette National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended (USDA 2003) (Forest Plan), the Challis National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended (USDA 1987) (Forest Plan), the Salmon National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended (USDA 1988) (Forest Plan), and the 2003 Frank Church -River Of No Return Wilderness Management Plan (also referred to as the Wilderness Plan). Formal planning for this project was initiated on August 27, 2015 with a legal notice in *The Recorder Herald*, Salmon Idaho.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of this project is to permit, where necessary, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) to conduct operations otherwise prohibited in wilderness in order to monitor elk populations with capture and collar operations. The Forest Service in proposing this project is responding to IDFG's proposal to conduct helicopter landings in the FC-RONR Wilderness.

Idaho Department of Fish and Game Project Needs

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) need is summarized in the introduction of this document. IDFG has the responsibility to manage wildlife across Idaho, including regulating hunting in wilderness areas. Accurate information is necessary for IDFG to make informed and effective wildlife management decisions and to set appropriate regulations for consumptive uses. In summary, IDFG needs to conduct elk monitoring, including the Middle Fork Zone within the FC-RONR Wilderness, to meet its management obligations.

While the IDFG has a need to collect monitoring data, the Forest Service purpose and need is centric to responding, where necessary, to IDFG's proposal to land helicopters in the Wilderness as necessary to conduct its capture and collar operations. IDFG's activities are conducted under State wildlife management authority, and are in the nature of monitoring. The Wilderness Act, regulations, and the FSM provide relevant direction:

16 U.S.C 1133(c), Section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act defines the need to meet minimum requirements of administration: *"Except as specifically provided for in this Act, and subject to existing private rights, there shall be no commercial enterprise and no permanent road within any wilderness area designated by this Act and except as necessary to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the area for the purpose of this Act (including measures required in emergencies involving the health and safety of persons within the area), there shall be no temporary road, no use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment or motorboats, no landing of aircraft, no other form of mechanical transport, and no structure or installation within any such area."*

36 CFR 261.18 provides direction on prohibited actions in a National Forest Wilderness:
"The following are prohibited in a National Forest Wilderness:

- (a) Possessing or using a motor vehicle, motorboat or motorized equipment except as authorized by Federal Law or regulation.*
- (b) Possessing or using a hang glider or bicycle.*
- (c) Landing of aircraft, or dropping or picking up of any material, supplies, or person by means of aircraft, including a helicopter.”*

36 CFR 261.1a provides direction on authorizing uses that would otherwise be prohibited:
“...*These Forest Officers may permit in the authorizing document or approved plan an act or omission that would otherwise be a violation of a subpart A or subpart C regulation or a subpart B order. In authorizing such uses, the Forest Officer may place such conditions on the authorization as that officer considers necessary for the protection or administration of the National Forest System, or for the promotion of public health, safety, or welfare.*”

FSM 2323.37 provides direction for wildlife and fish research:
“*Wildlife and fish research is an appropriate activity in wilderness. In all cases, research shall be conducted in such a way as to minimize any adverse impacts on the wilderness resource or its users....*
“1. *Research methods that temporarily infringe on the wilderness character may be used, provided the information sought is essential for wilderness management and alternative methods or locations are not available.*
“2. *Scientific sampling of wildlife and fish populations is essential to the management of natural populations in wilderness.*
“3. *Capturing and inconspicuous marking of animals, including radio telemetry, is permitted.*
“4. *Installations, such as temporary shelters for cameras and scientific apparatus, and enclosures or exclosures, essential for wildlife research and management studies may be approved on a case-by-case basis.*”

The Forest Service has identified the following objectives for this project:

1. Determine the minimum action necessary to administer the FC-RONR Wilderness for wilderness purposes.
2. Permit, where necessary, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) to conduct operations otherwise prohibited in wilderness in order to monitor elk populations with capture and collar operations.

The project’s proposed action would help accomplish all or portions of the following:

The Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness Management Plan (2003):

Fish and Wildlife Resources (USDA Forest Service 2003 p. 2-26 thru 28):

Desired Future Condition:

The FC-RONR Wilderness land, lakes, and streams provide a variety of consumptive (i.e. hunting and fishing) and non-consumptive (i.e. viewing, photography) recreation opportunities. Wilderness managers cooperate with fish and wildlife management agencies to emphasize native species and their habitats. Managers will favor fish and wildlife resources when they resolve or eliminate identified conflicts between recreational uses and fish and wildlife populations or habitats.

Objectives:

Habitat and population conditions and trends of both game and non-game fish and wildlife species inhabiting the Wilderness will be monitored.

Research (USDA Forest Service 2003 p. 2-76 thru 79).

Desired Future Condition:

Wilderness-dependent research will continue following the intent of the Wilderness Act. The wilderness resource will continue to be shaped by natural forces and processes, while providing an opportunity to further the state of our knowledge of ecosystems and social aspects of wilderness management.

Objectives:

Provide for and encourage scientific study that:

- ◆ Depends on the wilderness setting or upon natural system not readily found outside wilderness.
- ◆ Seeks to explain or understand ecosystems found in wilderness or resolve wilderness management problems to provide managers with knowledge needed to better manage wild lands.

CHANGES BETWEEN THE PROPOSED ACTION REPORT AND EA

In addition to minor edits and corrections, a number of changes were made to the EA following distribution of the Proposed Action report. These changes are reflected throughout the EA and summarized in Section 4.6 of Chapter 4. The changes reflect consideration of public comments on the proposal and its effects upon wilderness character, and ensured that the analysis included the best scientific information. I do not believe that the edits and corrections necessitate issuance of another Proposed Action report or other form of document for comment. The updated information disclosed in the EA falls within the scope of the analysis depicted in the Proposed Action report and in most cases simply provides additional explanation.

DECISION

I have reviewed the analysis presented in the EA for the Middle Fork Zone Elk Monitoring Project, considered the comments received on the Proposed Action report, and discussed the project's anticipated effects with both the Interdisciplinary Team, Forest Staff, and Region Staff. I have considered and incorporated the comments and input raised in staff to staff and Government to Government Consultation with Tribes, and comments from the public received on the Proposed Action report, and discussed the project's anticipated effects with the Regional Office. My decision has also been reviewed by a SORT (Standing Objection Review Team) that resulted from an objection filed by Wilderness Watch and others. The Objection Reviewing Officer found that my decision rationale was clear and that objection issues were analyzed and addressed consistently with applicable laws and regulations. I also addressed the Objection Reviewing Officer's instructions by clarifying that there are no changes expected to the number of overflights in either alternative and I further explained why an effects call of "major" to wilderness character does not preclude a FONSI. As a result I have decided to implement **Alternative B (Proposed Action)**. My decision includes the permitting of landings by IDFG in the FC-RONR Wilderness in support of elk capture and collaring operations to place approximately 60 collars on elk. **Attachment A** of this document describes the details of my decision, including incorporated Project Design Features (PDFs) and monitoring associated with my decision.

My decision was made following a review of the project's record that reflects consideration of relevant scientific information, consideration of responsible opposing views, and the acknowledgement of incomplete or unavailable information where pertinent to the decisions being made. Specifically, I am making the following decisions:

1) Should the Forest Service permit, where necessary, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) to conduct operations otherwise prohibited in wilderness in order to monitor elk populations with capture and collar operations?

My decision will permit IDFG to conduct landings in the FC-RONR Wilderness in support of elk capture and collaring operations to place approximately 60 collars on elk (EA, Section 2.4.2). Specifically my decision will permit the landings, which are otherwise prohibited in wilderness. The permitting of landings will support IDFG proposal for capture and collar operations using helicopters. Attachment A of this

document describes the details of my decision including IDFG's proposal.

2) What design features, mitigation measures, and/or monitoring should be applied to the project?

My decision includes a number of Project Design Features (PDFs) incorporated to minimize or avoid effects on a variety of resources such as wilderness/recreation, noxious weeds, and safety (EA, Section 2.4.2.1). My decision includes monitoring requirements for wilderness/recreation and wildlife. **Attachment A** of this document describes the details of my decision, including incorporated PDFs and monitoring.

RATIONALE FOR THE DECISION

I have selected **Alternative B** because it provides the greatest attainment of the project's purpose and need while still being sensitive to other resource concerns within the project area, and uses the minimum necessary for administration of the area. In making a decision on this project, I evaluated the purpose and need for the project, the effects disclosed in the EA, and comments received in staff to staff and Government to Government consultation, during scoping, and the 30-day notice and comment period (36 CFR 218). The following discussion summarizes the rationale for my decision.

1) Should the Forest Service permit, where necessary, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) to conduct operations otherwise prohibited in wilderness in order to monitor elk populations with capture and collar operations?

I have decided to permit landings in the FC-RONR Wilderness to support the IDFG proposal to capture and collar approximately 60 elk. My decision has been determined to be the minimum necessary for administration of the FC-RONR Wilderness (EA, Section 2.5, Table 2-1) and the project record contains a Minimum Requirements Decision Guide (MRDG) which details three alternatives considered in detail and several other alternatives that were eliminated from detailed analysis in the MRDG and EA. The EA Chapter 2 (Section 2.3) describes all the activities and alternatives considered in the MRDG. My decision is specific to landings in the wilderness, which is otherwise prohibited and therefore only permitted as the minimum necessary for administration. While my decision has the greatest adverse impact to undeveloped character and will adversely affect opportunities for solitude across the Middle Fork Zone during capture operations, most of these effects will be limited to 5 days of flight operations during the winter of 2015-2016. The capture methods assure study objectives will be achieved, and IDFG will have access to data adequate to support decision making where herds are declining or prone to increased variability in annual survival. **Attachment A** of this document describes the details of my decision.

My primary concern in making this decision to permit motorized uses in wilderness was determining the minimum necessary for administration of the area. My decision will impact the wilderness character in the area (EA, Section 3.2), but has been determined to be the minimum necessary for the administration of the area for wilderness purposes. Overall, direct and indirect effects to the wilderness resource will have high intensity (noticeable and substantially affecting two or more components of wilderness character) and will be unique (affecting lands protected by legislation to preserve wilderness character). Most effects will extend throughout the project area, though such effects will be limited to very small geographic areas during capture and collaring operations. Duration of the effects to untrammeled and undeveloped character and opportunities for solitude will be temporary (lasting only during the collaring operations). Beneficial impacts to natural character will be long-term to permanent. There will be unavoidable short-term adverse effects on some aspects of wilderness character during the capture and collar operations, and wilderness character could improve long-term with data that assesses whether elk declines are indicative of degrading natural conditions and data that can better inform management decisions. My decision is sufficiently limited and focused to be considered the minimum necessary based on: the lack of options outside of wilderness (MRDG, step 1); the action being necessary to preserve the natural quality of wilderness character (MRDG, step 1); a review of my decision against other thoughtful alternatives (MRDG, Step 2); analysis disclosed in the EA; a review of internal/external comments that did not reveal other means to accomplish the minimum administration; my discussions with the IDFG; and my engagement with all members of the IDT. The MRDG completed for the project is available in the project record.

IDFG would continue to monitor elk through other means and would continue to conduct aerial monitoring surveys for elk every five to ten years. The most recent survey was conducted in 2011. An aerial elk survey involves approximately 80 flight hours over an approximate three-week period, usually in January or

February. The survey involves slow, predictable-speed flights at low elevations. The aircraft (a helicopter) often needs to move groups of encountered elk in order to obtain the correct viewing angle for age classification. Landings would occur only at established public, State, or private airstrips. No federal action is required for this work.

Biological Assessments (BA) consistent with requirements of Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act were prepared and submitted to the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in October of 2015. Determinations disclosed in the wildlife biological assessments (BA) have concluded that my decision may affect but is not likely to adversely affect Canada lynx and will have no effect to northern Idaho ground squirrel or western yellow-billed cuckoo (EA, Section 3.5). The USFWS concurred with this determination on November 23, 2015. The fish biological evaluation concluded that my decision will have no effect to steelhead, bull trout, and Chinook salmon or their designated critical habitat (EA, Section 3.5).

My decision is not expected to have undue impacts to any sensitive, proposed, or candidate species (EA, Section 2.5, 3.1.1, and 3.3). My decision will have no impact or cause a loss of viability to the population or species of whitebark pine candidate species (EA, Section 3.1.1.1). My decision will have no impact on any other or sensitive plant species (EA, Section 3.1.1.1). My decision will have no impact or cause a loss of viability to the population or species of westslope cutthroat trout (EA, Section 3.1.1.9). With regard to wildlife species, my decision may impact individuals but would not likely contribute to a trend toward Federal Listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species of bighorn sheep, fisher, gray wolf, wolverine, bald eagle, boreal owl, great gray owl, and northern goshawk (EA, Section 3.3). My decision will have no impact on pygmy rabbit, spotted bat, Townsend's big-eared bat, American peregrine falcon, flammulated owl, greater sage grouse, harlequin duck, mountain quail, pileated woodpecker, three-toed woodpecker, white-headed woodpecker, or Columbia spotted frog (EA, Section 3.3).

Furthermore, my decision is not expected to have any undue impacts to other important resources. My decision is consistent with the Clean Water Act and its amendments (EA, Section 3.5). My decision is consistent with the Idaho Roadless Rule (EA, Section 3.1.1.14). While my decision will contribute pollutants to the air shed, it is not expected to measurably affect air quality in any Class I or II areas or at regional monitoring sites; it will not have measurable impacts on overall visibility, nor have measurable impacts on water quality of surface water from deposition (EA, Section 3.1.1.12).

My decision will not be consistent with the primitive ROS classification due to impacts on wilderness characteristics and increased likelihood of encounters with users expecting a primitive setting and solitude (EA, Section 3.1.1.6). Following project activities, the analysis area in a primitive ROS setting will return to conditions indicative and consistent with the setting (EA, Section 3.2).

My decision achieves Wilderness Plan objectives (EA, Section 1.5) including:

1. Objective (USDA Forest Service 2003 p. 2-26 thru 28): Habitat and population conditions and trends of both game and non-game fish and wildlife species inhabiting the Wilderness will be monitored.
2. Objective (USDA Forest Service 2003 p. 2-76 thru 79): Provide for and encourage scientific study that:
 - a. Depends on the wilderness setting or upon natural system not readily found outside wilderness.
 - b. Seeks to explain or understand ecosystems found in wilderness or resolve wilderness management problems to provide managers with knowledge needed to better manage wild lands

2) What design features, mitigation measures, and/or monitoring should be applied to the project?

Attachment A of this document describes the details of my decision, including incorporated Project Design Features (PDFs). A key part of my decision is to assign and ensure that PDFs and mitigation are designated through this process and implemented during project implementation. Several of the PDFs reduce the impacts to the wilderness resource and qualities of wilderness character (EA, Section 2.4.2.1). One is designed to reduce/prevent impacts from noxious weeds (EA, Section 2.4.2.1). And, one provides for additional safety during flight operations by notifying other air operations of the project (EA, Section 2.4.2.1). Following discussions with the IDT and other parties, I believe the incorporation of

mitigations/PDFs has a greater likelihood of reducing impacts identified as part of the purpose and need, and I have added them to the EA and my decision. The inclusion of these PDFs and mitigations fulfill my responsibilities for wilderness stewardship.

My decision includes a number monitoring items for wilderness and wildlife. To ensure implementation of this project stays within the range of the environmental effects described in the EA and to provide for needed reporting on wilderness intrusions, I have included monitoring for reporting on wilderness intrusions (EA, Section 2.4.2.2). I have also included monitoring to report wildlife sightings or occupied dens/nests of sensitive or listed species (EA, Section 2.4.2.2). The coordination and sharing of data between the Forest Service and IDFG is ongoing with regard to wildlife sightings, but this monitoring could help identify populations in the project area where the Forest Service would not normally conduct surveys. I am confident that any variance in activities permitted will only be allowed where the resulting effect falls within the range disclosed in the EA. If for some unforeseen reason monitoring reports effects outside of the range disclosed in the EA, I will use those reports to determine the degree of variance and determine the necessary course of action per FSH 1909.15, Chapter 10, Section 18.

PUBLIC AND OTHER INVOLVEMENT

Public Involvement

Public involvement has been extensive throughout the planning and analysis process leading to this document. Formal planning and the comment period per 36 CFR 218 for this project were initiated on August 27, 2015 with a legal notice appearing in the *Salmon Idaho Recorder Herald*, the newspaper of record. Additional legal notices were posted on August 27, 2015 in the *Idaho Statesman*, the *Challis Messenger*, and the *Star News*.

A scoping package, including the comment period per 36 CFR 218, describing the Proposed Action was mailed to more than 500 individuals, agencies, and/or groups on August 21, 2015. In response to these scoping efforts more than 16 oral and written comments were received.

Commenters voiced a variety of concerns including, but not limited to, potential adverse impacts on wildlife and wildlife habitat and wilderness character. The planning record contains all written comments received relative to this project and Appendix B of the EA discloses how the Interdisciplinary Team addressed those concerns.

Regulatory and Government Consultation

Scoping letters addressed specifically to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA Fisheries representatives were mailed on August 21, 2015, soliciting comments on the Proposed Action. Biological Assessments (BA) consistent with requirements of Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act were prepared and submitted to the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in October of 2015. Determinations disclosed in the wildlife biological assessments (BA) have concluded that my decision may affect but is not likely to adversely affect Canada lynx and will have no effect to northern Idaho ground squirrel or western yellow-billed cuckoo (EA, Section 3.5). The USFWS concurred with this determination on November 23, 2015. The fish biological evaluation concluded that my decision will have no effect to steelhead, bull trout, and Chinook salmon or their designated critical habitat (EA, Section 3.5).

Individual scoping packages were forwarded to Custer, Lemhi, Valley, and Idaho County Commissioners on August 21, 2015.

Government to Government Tribal Consultation

A proposal of the project was presented to the Shoshone-Paiute Tribe representatives at the September 10, 2015 Wings and Roots Meeting. Individual scoping packages were also forwarded to representatives of the Shoshone-Bannock and Nez Perce Tribes on August 27, 2015. The project was presented to Shoshone-Bannock staff on October 6, 2015 and discussed with the Shoshone-Bannock Fort Hall Business Council on September 11, 2015. The project was also presented at the Nez Perce Tribe and Payette National Forest Staff to Staff meeting on September 2, 2015.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

In addition to the selected Alternative B, one alternative was developed and analyzed in detail in the EA: Alternative A (No Action). The discussion below summarizes my rationale for not selecting Alternative A (No Action).

Alternative A (No Action) - The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires consideration of a “No Action” alternative. The No Action Alternative serves as a baseline to analyze the environmental effects of the action alternatives. The No Action Alternative would not permit, where necessary, IDFG’s landings of aircraft in the FC-RONR Wilderness. As part of the Alternative A analysis, several activities would continue to occur within the project area and would not require permit from the Forest Service or alter the number of flights currently taking place on an annual basis. IDFG would continue to monitor elk through other means and would continue to conduct aerial monitoring surveys for elk every five to ten years. The most recent survey was conducted in 2011. An aerial elk survey involves approximately 80 flight hours over an approximate three-week period, usually in January or February. The survey involves slow, predictable-speed flights at low elevations. The aircraft (a helicopter) often needs to move groups of encountered elk in order to obtain the correct viewing angle for age classification. Landings would occur only at established public, State, or private airstrips. No federal action is required for this work.

Since this alternative would not require a federal action or permitting of landing in the wilderness, which is otherwise prohibited per 36 CFR 261.18 (EA, Section 1.5), I considered its relevance when considered against the purpose and need. While this alternative is particularly appealing in the wilderness setting and would not require federal action or permit for prohibited uses, it would not meet the objectives of the purpose and need (EA, Section 2.5, Table 2-1). Additionally, it would not be the minimum necessary for administration of the FC-RONR Wilderness for wilderness purposes, which I consider to be the major foundation for my decision.

In addition to alternatives considered in detail, I also considered other management approaches in the EA in response to concerns identified through preparation of the MRDG. These alternatives, which were considered but eliminated from detailed study, are described in Chapter 2 of the EA and include:

1. Techniques that Require Baiting (EA, Section 2.3.1)
2. Techniques that Require Herding (EA, Section 2.3.2).
3. Capture Other than in Winter (EA, Section 2.3.3).
4. Smaller Sample Size (EA, Section 2.3.4).
5. Limited Locations of Helicopter Landings (EA, Section 2.3.5).
6. Radio Collar Animals Only Along Major Rivers (EA, Section 2.3.6).
7. Radio Collar Animals Only Outside Wilderness (EA, Section 2.3.7).
8. Capture Elk From the Ground (EA, Section 2.3.8).

CONSISTENCY WITH THE FOREST PLAN, NFMA, AND OTHER LAWS

FOREST AND WILDERNESS PLAN

My decision is tiered to the 2003 Payette National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended (USDA 2003) (Forest Plan), the Challis National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended (USDA 1987) (Forest Plan), the Salmon National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended (USDA 1988) (Forest Plan), and the 2003 Frank Church -River Of No Return Wilderness Management Plan (also referred to as the Wilderness Plan). Information from the Forest Plans, the Forest Plan amendments, the Final Environmental Impact Statement prepared in concert with the plans, and all associated appendices, have been referenced and incorporated into this document. These documents, and specifically the Wilderness Plan, provide long term management for the project area.

The FC-RONR Wilderness Management Plan is incorporated as management direction in the three Forest Plans (EA, Section 1.7).

Middle Fork Zone Elk Monitoring Project DN & FONSI

I have evaluated my decision against the Forest Plan goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines for consistency with the Forest Plan. As documented in the EA (Chapters 1, 2, and 3), my decision will be consistent with direction in the Forest Plans and FC-RONR Wilderness Plan. My decision is based on detailed Forest/Wilderness Plan consistency documentation included in the project record.

NATIONAL FOREST MANAGEMENT ACT (NFMA)

Alternative B was found to consistent with the Forest/Wilderness Plan. My decision is based on detailed Forest/Wilderness Plan consistency documentation included in the project record. My decision does not include the harvest, cutting, or manipulation of any vegetation subject to the seven requirements in 36 CFR 219.27(b). My decision also helps achieve Wilderness Plan objectives (EA, Section 1.5) including:

1. Objective (USDA Forest Service 2003 p. 2-26 thru 28): Habitat and population conditions and trends of both game and non-game fish and wildlife species inhabiting the Wilderness will be monitored.
2. Objective (USDA Forest Service 2003 p. 2-76 thru 79): Provide for and encourage scientific study that:
 - a. Depends on the wilderness setting or upon natural system not readily found outside wilderness.
 - b. Seeks to explain or understand ecosystems found in wilderness or resolve wilderness management problems to provide managers with knowledge needed to better manage wild lands

OTHER LAWS

As summarized below, my decision is consistent with Federal, State, and local laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

Endangered Species Act

The EA discloses the effects of my decision to threatened or endangered species (EA, Section 3.5). This required disclosure involves wildlife, plant, fish, and habitat listed under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (ESA). Alternative B would have no effect to any threatened or endangered plant species. Alternative B would have no effect on Northern Idaho Ground Squirrel or western yellow-billed cuckoo and may affect, not likely to adversely affect Canada Lynx (Section 3.3). The USFWS concurred with this determination on November 23, 2015. Alternative B would have no effect to Chinook and sockeye salmon, steelhead, and bull trout and would have no effect on their designated critical habitat.

Central Idaho Wilderness Act (CIWA) and the Wilderness Act

The Wilderness Act of 1964 (Public Law 88-577; 16 U.S.C. 1131) (amended in 1978) was enacted by Congress to “secure for the American people, an enduring resource of wilderness for the enjoyment of present and future generations”. This act was passed “in order to ensure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition...”(Section 2 [a]). The Wilderness Act contains provisions for conducting operations to meet the minimum requirements for administration that include: “Except as specifically provided for in this Act, and subject to existing private rights, there shall be no commercial enterprise and no permanent road within any wilderness area designated by this Act and except as necessary to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the area for the purpose of this Act (including measures required in emergencies involving the health and safety of persons within the area), there shall be no temporary road, no use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment or motorboats, no landing of aircraft, no other form of mechanical transport, and no structure or installation within any such area.” (Section 4 [c]). Additional provisions in the Act and effects are described in the EA, Section 3.2.

As summarized in the EA, my decision will adversely affect the wilderness setting and opportunities for solitude during a short period in the winter when helicopters are landing, at a time when visitation to this

part of the wilderness is low, and without lasting effects from the landings. Effects from the presence of collared elk in the wilderness will be longer term, but will be of low intensity since the effects only occur when a collared elk is observed by a visitor, and the observation affects the sense of being in a natural setting. Individually, the EA concludes that the effects of these activities will be moderate. For purposes of comparing alternatives, the EA shows that the effects of the proposed action will be greater than the effects of the no action alternative.

My decision and FONSI considered that the proposed action will have beneficial effects on natural character that will be of medium intensity, long-term, and extend throughout the wilderness area. At the end of the project, IDFG and the Forest Service will better understand the condition of the elk population, which is an integral part of the natural character of the wilderness. The beneficial effects to natural character will result from data necessary to accurately assess the causes of elk declines, and low to inadequate juvenile recruitment, which appear to be threatening this component of the wilderness ecosystem. If elk population declines are due to unnatural conditions, inside or outside the wilderness, this data may enable IDFG and the Forest Service to take action to reduce or reverse future declines.

As indicated, high intensity (highly noticeable) effects to wilderness character are restricted to implementation activities that will occur in the winter season when visitation is low to minimal. Helicopter use could extend over the project area as whole; however, the duration is temporary and the actual use (landings) is limited to a mere fraction of the project area. This results in the limited geographic application and effect of my decision.

A range of alternatives were analyzed in a Minimum Requirements Analysis and it was determined that helicopter landings in the FC-RONR Wilderness are the minimum necessary to administer the wilderness area. Elk monitoring is needed for the proper exercise of state wildlife management jurisdiction and responsibilities as they relate to administration of the FC-RONRW. Elk populations in the FC-RONRW have declined dramatically. Because of changed conditions resulting from increased variability in adult and calf survival, aerial surveys alone are now inadequate to detect elk population changes and causes. Without accurate demographic data, vital statistics, and mortality cause information for elk, IDFG cannot determine whether established harvest regulations and other management actions are appropriate and sustainable for this area or how to effectively address elk population declines. Monitoring elk outside the FC-RONRW, and aerial surveys alone do not provide adequate information to address unique conditions within the FC-RONRW. Data from within the wilderness are necessary to inform management decisions and to respond appropriately to elk population declines in the FC-RONRW. Data collected will provide important information on current ecology and predator-prey relationships in the FC-RONRW. Monitoring is also needed to coordinate with USFS to respond appropriately to apparent degradation to wilderness character related to the elk herds' decline. Data will also address monitoring and condition assessment required by USFS' FC-RONRW Management Plan.

Clean Water Act, The Federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1972 (PL 92-500) as amended in 1977 (PL 95-217) and 1987 (PL 100-4)

My decision is consistent with the Clean Water Act and its amendments and will have little effect or no potential to impact water resources (EA, Sections 3.1.1 and 3.5). Relative to water quality, my decision will comply with existing management direction including Forest Plan and Wilderness Plan Standards and Guidelines, as well as Terms and Conditions prescribed in the BO prepared for the Forest Plan.

Migratory Bird Treaty Act

My decision will comply with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (EA, Section 3.5). The proposed action will not result in 'take' of any migratory birds. In addition, this project complies with Executive Order 13186 because the analysis meets agency obligations as defined under the January 16, 2001 Memorandum of Understanding between the Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designed to complement Executive Order 13186. If new requirements or direction result from subsequent interagency memorandums of understanding pursuant to Executive Order 13186, this project will be reevaluated to ensure that it is consistent.

National Historic Preservation Act

My decision will have no direct, indirect, cumulative effects on cultural resources and is consistent with the National Historic Preservation Act (EA, Section 3.1.1.10).

The Clean Air Act, as amended in 1990

While my decision will contribute pollutants to the air shed, it is not expected to measurably affect air quality in any Class I or II areas or at regional monitoring sites; it will not have measurable impacts on overall visibility, nor have measurable impacts on water quality of surface water from deposition (EA, Section 3.1.1.12).

American Indian Religious Freedom Act, Executive Order 12875, Executive Order 13007, Executive Order 13175, and Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act

The American Indian Religious Freedom Act, Public Law No. 95-341, 92 Stat. 469 (Aug. 11, 1978) (commonly abbreviated to AIRFA), is a United States federal law and a joint resolution of Congress that was passed in 1978. AIRFA was enacted to protect and preserve the traditional religious rights and cultural practices of American Indians, Eskimos, Aleuts, and native Hawaiians. Executive Order 13175 established a requirement for regular and meaningful consultation between federal and tribal government officials on federal policies that have tribal implications. Executive Order 12785 was enacted in order to reduce unfunded mandates upon State, local, and tribal governments; to streamline the application process for and increase the availability of waivers to State, local, and tribal governments; and to establish regular and meaningful consultation and collaboration with State, local, and tribal governments on Federal matters that significantly or uniquely affect their communities. Executive Order 13007 was enacted in order to protect and preserve Indian religious practices. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act provides a process for museums and Federal agencies to return certain Native American cultural items, such as human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, or objects of cultural patrimony, to lineal descendants, and culturally affiliated Indian tribes and Native Hawaiian organizations.

Three federally recognized Native American tribes have expressed interest in activities proposed in this area; Nez Perce, Shoshone-Paiute, and Shoshone-Bannock Tribes. The Payette and Salmon-Challis National Forests have established both staff to staff relationships with resource management departments with these Tribes and formal Government to Government consultations to have early and often communication regarding proposed actions on the Forest and potential effects to sensitive Tribal resources or traditional cultural properties. Mailings, meetings, and consultation are summarized above in the Government to Government Tribe Consultation Section of this Decision.

Nez Perce Treaty of 1855 and 1863, Shoshone-Bannock Tribes Fort Bridger Treaty of 1868, Shoshone-Paiute Tribes Executive Order of 1877

The Nez Perce, Shoshone-Bannock, and Shoshone-Paiute interests go beyond that of spiritual, cultural, and economic to the unique legal relationship that the United States government has with American Indian tribal governments. Federally recognized tribes are sovereign nations who work with the Federal government and its agencies through the process of government-to-government consultation. The Federal trust relationship with each tribe was recognized by, and has been addressed through, the Constitution of the United States, treaties, executive orders, statutes, and court decisions. The ancestors of the modern day Nez Perce, Shoshone-Bannock, and Shoshone-Paiute were present in the area long before the establishment of the Payette and Salmon-Challis National Forests and continue to use the land to this day. Many of the treaties and executive orders signed by the United States government in the mid-1800s reserved homeland for the tribes. Additionally, the treaties with the Nez Perce and Shoshone-Bannock reserved certain rights outside of established reservations, including fishing, hunting, gathering, and grazing rights.

Concerns regarding my decision have been raised by some tribal staffs and leadership during regularly scheduled meetings and during formal consultation. While I may not fully comprehend all aspects, I

understand the importance of wildlife to tribal culture. I am also aware that the EA and project record may not specifically address all resources important to the Tribes, but I have heard and understood those comments brought to the Forests attention during consultation. The project area may also contain wildlife, plants, roots, berries (primarily *Vaccinium* sp.) and possibly other vegetative resources used by the Tribes; but, the project will have no impacts to any vegetative resources. Access to the area will remain open. No pasture or grazing needs for livestock are known to occur in the area. Where no wide spread impacts to fish, wildlife, plant or cultural resources have been identified (EA, Chapter 3), the analysis and consultation has revealed that those trust resources would be minimally or not affected by this project.

Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898)

My decision will have no disproportionately high and adverse human health impact, including social and economic impacts, on minority or low-income human populations (EA, Section 3.5).

Best Available Science

The conclusions disclosed in the EA and summarized in this document are based on a review of the project's record that reflects consideration of relevant scientific information and responsible opposing views where raised by internal or external sources, and the acknowledgement of incomplete or unavailable information, scientific uncertainty, and/or risk where pertinent to the decision being made.

Idaho Roadless Rule

My decision is consistent with the Idaho Roadless Rule (EA, Section 3.1.1.14).

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

I have reviewed the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations for significance (40 CFR 1508.27) and have determined that this decision is not a major federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment, either individually or cumulatively. Preparation of an environmental impact statement pursuant to Section 102 (2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 is not required. This determination is based on the following factors as outlined in 40 CFR 1508.27.

1. The selected alternative will be limited in geographic application [40 CFR 1508.27(a)].

Activities associated with my decision will be confined to the project area, which is restricted to that portion of the Middle Fork Zone within the FC-RONR Wilderness (EA section 1.3). While the project area is large and encompasses over 1.7 million acres, the actual scope of federal action is very restrictive. As defined in the purpose and need and the proposed action my decision is restricted to permitting landing in the FC-RONR Wilderness and the actual landings by helicopter is restricted to approximately 120 landings. The area of landing is a mere fraction of the project area and limits the geographic application of my decision.

2. My decision will not result in any significant beneficial or adverse effects [40 CFR 1508.27(b)(1)].

The analysis documented in Chapter 3 of the EA did not identify any individually or cumulatively significant impacts resulting from implementation of the selected alternative (EA Chapter 3). The project record contains additional technical reports.

USFS manages eight airstrips for active public use in the FC-RONRW. Use of these airstrips requires no special authorization from the USFS. There are an additional 18 landing strips on non-federal inholdings within the external boundaries of the FC-RONRW, four of which are owned by the State of Idaho. Use of the federal and non-federal airstrips within the FC-RONRW is considerable, particularly in summer and fall, with over 12,000 operations per year at the eight USFS public airstrips alone (FAA aircraft operation statistics, AirNav.com). Operations at airstrips at state and private in-holdings, such as high-use sites at the Thomas Creek, Loon Creek, Flying B, Pistol Creek, Sulphur Creek, and Taylor Ranches, are likely comparable in scale.

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Within the area that is now the FC-RONRW, IDFG has long used helicopters and fixed wing aircraft in the exercise of its wildlife management jurisdiction and responsibilities, conducting overflights and landing at airstrips and other locations. IDFG's aircraft use for these purposes is long-established, dating back to the 1960s (e.g., aerial surveys, radio collaring and other monitoring activities; law enforcement; and active management such as animal relocation and fish stocking).

IDFG estimates that helicopter operations will not exceed approximately five flight days for the purpose of this proposal; however, roughly 10 total days of operation could be needed due to unforeseen circumstances such as adverse weather conditions. The days of operation will occur during winter from issuance of a permit following this decision through March 31, 2016, and will not necessarily be consecutive. Flight days could occur any time between these dates. Calf collaring operations will need to be completed by January 15, 2016. The number of capture events per day will vary. Each capture event will typically include two landings: one to net an elk and offload 2-3 personnel and their equipment, and one to retrieve those personnel and their equipment. In total, 120 landings ($\pm 5\%$) will be required. The deployment of nets and/or darts from aircraft will be in addition to the 120 landings.

There is a long history of aircraft use in the FC-RONRW. High intensity (highly noticeable) effects to wilderness character are restricted to implementation activities that will occur in the winter season when visitation is low to minimal. Helicopter use could extend over the project area, but the duration is temporary and the actual use (landings) is limited to a mere fraction of the project area. This results in the limited geographic application and effect of my decision. In considering the wilderness resource as a whole, I have determined that the effects to wilderness character will not be significant.

3. The selected alternative will not result in substantive effects on public health or safety [40 CFR 1508.27(b)(2)].

My decision, including Attachment A, includes a PDF to protect public health and safety (EA, Section 2.4.2.1). Overall my decision will allow for landing in the FC-RONR Wilderness, which is extremely isolated during that time of year with negligible opportunities for the proposed action to impact public health or safety. Where landings do occur, my decision also includes PDFs that will limit effects to camps or areas otherwise occupied by people (EA, Section 2.4.2.1).

4. My decision will not result in any significant effects on any unique characteristics of the geographic area, historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas [40 CFR 1508.27(b)(3)].

The analysis documented in the EA discloses that the selected alternative will not result in any significant effects on roadless resources (EA, section 3.1.1.14), cultural or historic resources (EA section 3.1.1.10), wetlands (EA, section 3.1.1.5), or wild and scenic rivers (EA, Section 3.1.1.3). Effects to wilderness character are described elsewhere in the EA. However, while I am keenly aware of the potential impacts to wilderness character, my decision produces the minimum impact necessary to gather essential data about elk population dynamics, and although those potential effects are negative they will not result in significant effects to wilderness character (EA, Section 3.2).

While the EA indicates that the proposed action may have major effects on wilderness character, the purpose of that analysis was to compare alternatives, not reach a conclusion as to the overall magnitude of effects to wilderness character. The evaluation in the EA concludes that proposed action alternative will have greater impacts to wilderness character than the no action alternative, which has moderate effects to wilderness character. The table on page 3-7 of the EA describes the rating system that was used. This system and the rating criteria were formulated only to compare tradeoffs between alternatives, and not to reach any conclusions about the significance of potential effects.

When making this decision and FONSI, I considered 40 CFR 1508.27(a), above, gave further consideration to the context and the limited geographic extent of effects on the wilderness resource, and focused on the intensity, timing, and duration of effects to individual components of wilderness character. When I weighed these factors, I considered that, while helicopter landings will have high intensity effects, those effects will be temporary and of short duration, occur during winter months when visitation is low and there is low probability of disturbance to wilderness visitors, and will have no lasting effects on the natural environment. Effects from the installation of elk collars will be limited to low intensity since they are

slightly detectable when observed in the wilderness as an impact to undeveloped character to visitors. Separately and cumulatively, these effects are not significant.

In reaching my decision and FONSI, I also considered that the proposed action will have beneficial effects on natural character that will be of medium intensity, long-term, and extend throughout the wilderness area. At the end of the project, IDFG and the Forest Service will better understand the condition of the elk population, which is an integral part of the natural character of the wilderness. The beneficial effects to natural character will result from data necessary to accurately assess the causes of elk declines, and low to inadequate juvenile recruitment, which appear to be threatening this component of the wilderness ecosystem. If elk population declines are due to unnatural conditions, inside or outside the wilderness, this data may enable IDFG and the Forest Service to take action to reduce or reverse future declines.

As indicated, high intensity (highly noticeable) effects to wilderness character are restricted to implementation activities that will occur in the winter season when visitation is low to minimal. Helicopter use could extend over the project area as whole; however, the duration is temporary and the actual use (landings) is limited to a mere fraction of the project area. This results in the limited geographic application and effect of my decision. In considering the wilderness resource as a whole, I have determined that the effects to wilderness character will not be significant.

5. The selected alternative will not result in any effects that are likely to be highly controversial [40 CFR 1508.27(b)(4)].

Controversy in this context refers to situations where there is substantial dispute as to the size, nature, or effect of the federal action, rather than opposition to its implementation. The scientific basis for the analysis is contained in the project record and summarized in the EA. Standard analysis techniques and models were used. Literature supporting the use of these models and qualitative discussions, as used in this analysis, is contained in the project's planning record (EA Chapter 3).

6. The effects associated with the Selected Alternative will not result in any highly uncertain, unique, or unknown risks [40 CFR 1508.27(b)(5)].

The environmental analysis, including the EA, resource technical reports, biological assessments, and biological evaluations (contained in the planning record), determined that the selected alternative will not involve any highly uncertain or unknown risks (EA, Chapter 3). The management activities associated with my decision are typical of those successfully implemented in the past on National Forest lands outside of wilderness.

7. My decision does not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects nor does it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration [40 CFR 1508.27(b)(6)].

My decision is consistent with direction found in the Forest Plan. Implementing my decision will not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects nor does it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. Should a formal proposal for additional helicopter landings to collar elk or other wildlife management actions in the project vicinity be received at some future point, a separate environmental analysis, with comprehensive public involvement and Tribal and regulatory consultation will be conducted for that proposal, and that proposal will be analyzed on its own merit, including a minimum requirements analysis for the wilderness resource.

8. The analysis documented in the EA discloses that my decision will not result in any significant short-term, long-term, or cumulative effects [40 CFR 1508.27(b)(7)].

Section 3 of the EA discloses that the Selected Alternative will not result in any known significant temporary, short term, long term, or cumulative effects.

9. My decision will not adversely affect sites or objects listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, nor will it cause the loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources [40 CFR 1508.27(b)(8)].

My decision was made following review of previous cultural resource surveys completed in the area and found that no effects to cultural resources will occur as a result of my decision (EA section 3.8). My decision will not result in any adverse effects on cultural or historic resources (EA section 3.8).

Middle Fork Zone Elk Monitoring Project DN & FONSI

10. My decision will not adversely affect threatened or endangered species or their habitats [40 CFR 1508.27(b)(9)].

As described above under "Endangered Species Act", my decision will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat.

11. My decision is consistent with Federal, State, and local laws and requirements imposed for the protection of the environment [40 CFR 1508.27(b)(10)].

Consistency with laws or requirements imposed for protection of the environment is discussed above under "Consistency with Forest Plan and with Laws and Regulations," and Chapter 1, Section 1.6, and Chapter 3.0 of the EA. The project's planning record provides supporting information.

IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation may begin immediately following approval of necessary permit(s).

Charles A. Mark

Charles A. Mark
Forest Supervisor
Salmon-Challis National Forest

1/6/16

Date

ATTACHMENT A

DETAILS OF DECISION

Middle Fork Zone Elk Monitoring Project

Forest Service Proposed Action

The Forest Service will permit IDFG's landings in the FC-RONR Wilderness in support of IDFG's elk monitoring project involving elk capture and collar operations in placing approximately 60 collars on elk in IDFG's Middle Fork Zone in the FC-RONR Wilderness.

Idaho Department of Fish and Game Proposal

IDFG would collect data through deployment of satellite collars on elk in the Middle Fork Zone. IDFG would use data to initiate an Integrated Population Model (IPM) for elk in wilderness for harvest regulation and other state management decisions. IDFG would perform radio collaring during the winter months (December thru March). Winter is the optimal time for capture because elk are in larger groups and are more concentrated on open shrub winter range. This is also a time when recreational use and other air traffic and landings are minimal and typically associated only with developed private inholdings.

IDFG would bring equipment and personnel needed for radio collaring into the FC-RONR Wilderness using existing public and State-owned airstrips (or private airstrips with owner permission)¹. Base camps for end-of-day landing and staging areas would be at existing airstrips and non-federal landing sites on inholdings (e.g. Taylor Ranch, Whitewater Ranch, Lower Loon, and Mormon Ranch). Fueling points for helicopter activity would be at existing airstrips and non-federal in-holdings or other non-wilderness locations. Fuel would be pre-positioned prior to conducting flight operations at private/State airstrips within the FC-RONR Wilderness including Taylor Ranch, Flying B, Loon Creek, and Mormon Ranch. Fuel would be flown in fixed wing aircraft to the staging site in 50 gallon containers and staged at the airstrips in containment capable of holding the stored volume.

IDFG estimates that helicopter operations would not exceed approximately 5 flight days for the purpose of this proposal; however, roughly 10 total days of operation could be needed due to unforeseen circumstances such as adverse weather conditions. The days of operation would occur during winter from December 1, 2015, through March 31, 2016, and would not necessarily be consecutive. Flight days could occur any time between these dates. Calf collaring operations would need to be completed by January 15, 2016. The number of capture events per day would vary. Each capture event would typically include two landings: one to net an elk and offload 2-3 personnel and their equipment, and one to retrieve those personnel and their equipment.² In total, 120 landings ($\pm 5\%$) would be required. The deployment of nets and/or darts from aircraft would be in addition to the 120 landings.

Capture methods would follow published protocols using a helicopter and either a net gun or immobilizing darts depending on terrain and habitat. Net gunning is most efficient in open terrain where biologists have the ability to stop and restrain the animal at a selected location, which is safer for both the animal and helicopter crew and minimizes helicopter time. Darting would be used in forested terrain that precludes net gun use. Darting requires maintaining visual contact with the animal after darting, generally 5 minutes, before the animal is fully anesthetized. Handling and care of the darted animals is managed under standard operating procedures developed by the University of Idaho Animal Care and Use Committee. At the time of radio collaring, IDFG would collect information from adult females as to nutritional condition through various techniques (e.g. ultrasound, body scoring, and blood samples).

¹ Any reference to use of private airstrips assumes obtaining prior permission.

² By regulation, a landing occurs anytime equipment (such as a net) or people are offloaded from a helicopter, or anytime one or more helicopter skids touch ground (36 CFR 261.18). Five to nine landings could occur per elk if the helicopter hovers and does not touch down a skid: the net; 2-3 people and their equipment offloading the aircraft; and 2-3 people and their equipment reloading the aircraft. For the purposes of this analysis and to be consistent with the way IDFG considers landings, we have abbreviated these 5 to 9 landings as two landings. However, IDFG would be required to report the actual number of landings per FS regulations, including the number of nets, equipment, and people entering and exiting an aircraft.

Middle Fork Zone Elk Monitoring Project DN & FONSI

All captured animals would be radio collared with GPS satellite collars. These collars would automatically send information to IDFG's computer systems, thus limiting the need for future overflights to locate collared animals. Collars would be retrieved by personnel on foot or pack stock after landing at the nearest public, State, or private airstrip.

IDFG would use a stratified random sampling design to capture elk in proportion to their distribution on winter ranges. Each GMU is stratified into subunits based on low, medium or high winter elk densities. Figure 2 illustrates stratification across the Middle Fork Zone. IDFG would seek to sample all high-density subunits, and to sample medium- and low-density subunits at a rate of approximately 50% (targeting medium-density subunits). IDFG would calculate the number of elk required in each of the density strata and randomly capture cows and calves up to the target number (30 calves and 30 adult females). Calves should be collared by January 15 to accurately track mortalities.

For collaring, a processing team of 2-3 personnel would exit the helicopter while the pilot maintains either a hover or a "toe-in" (the front of the skids touch the ground). The full hover is the more common exit and is safer--the skid cannot get caught under vegetation under the snow and the blades are farthest from the ground. Following exit of the personnel, the helicopter would normally take off and orbit until ground operations are complete. Personnel would re-enter the helicopter in the same fashion after the animal is processed. Elk would be anesthetized with Carfentanil and reversed with Naltrexone, if net gunning is not feasible.

Multiple captures would occur during each of the 5 flight days. Elk congregate in groups while on their winter range. The helicopter would move from group to group, attempting to capture 1-3 animals from each group. Only one capture operation would be imposed on each group during the collaring operations, limiting disturbance to one occurrence per group. Helicopters disturb elk and cause them to retreat from open winter range areas into nearby timber if available. Elk typically stop their retreat within 200 meters after pursuit ends and resume normal behavior in a few hours. Once a group has retreated, the helicopter would move on to another group and then another group, etc. In that way, multiple elk from multiple groups could be captured and collared on a single day.

Design Features

In addition to Forest and Wilderness Plan standards and guidelines designed to mitigate impacts, the following measures will be applicable to Alternative B. These design features have been incorporated to reduce or prevent undesirable effects resulting from proposed management activities.

Wilderness/Recreation

Pursuits will ideally occur in terrain where elk may be safely captured.

The number of people needed to safely and efficiently handle each elk will be minimized. Handlers will be experienced wildlife handlers with previous elk capture experience, maximizing efficiency.

Minimize wilderness impacts by using the seven³ designated airstrips in the project area and state or private property for landings and staging as much as possible.

Use existing unimproved openings for landings; no cutting of vegetation to create landing zones.

Four airstrips in the Big Creek drainage- Dewey Moore, Mile Hi, Simonds, and Vines- are available for emergency use only. Use of these airstrips will be considered a wilderness intrusion.

No equipment or materials will be cached on lands administered by the Forest Service.

To the extent possible, no landings will occur within ½ mile of camps or areas occupied by people.

To the extent possible, flight paths will minimize the distance flown over designated wilderness.

Collar retrieval crews will use minimum impact techniques, such as Leave No Trace principles, and shall comply with all regulations specific to the FC-RONR Wilderness. Similarly, collar retrieval crews shall comply with all regulations specific to the Middle Fork Salmon and Main Salmon rivers should they need

³ Bernard, Cabin Creek, Chamberlain, Cold Meadows, Indian Creek, Mahoney, Soldier Bar

to work within these wild and scenic river corridors.

Noxious Weeds

All equipment (including the helicopter and nets) and clothing will be inspected for weeds and seeds prior to project activities. All soil and plant parts will be removed.

Safety

Utilize flight-following with local dispatch centers when capture and collar activities are in progress. SCNF would issue a Notice to Airmen (NOTAM) to alert pilots in the area of the pending activity after IDFG files a flight plan. Airstrip landowner files the NOTAM.

Monitoring

Wilderness/Recreation

Report the number landings and capture success following daily operations or as soon as possible thereafter. To meet Forest Service regulations for landings, the data needed are: the number of nets and darts deployed from an aircraft; the number of bodies and equipment bundles exiting a hovering aircraft (skid not touching down); the number of bodies and equipment bundles entering a hovering aircraft (skid not touching down); the number of times a helicopter touches down (one or more skids) outside of designated airstrips.

Wildlife

Report any occupied sensitive species nests or dens encountered during implementation that may be associated with listed or sensitive species. Sightings of listed or sensitive wildlife species will be reported to the Forest Service.