Introduction

This document, the Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact (DN/FONSI), describes my decision and the rationale for amending the 2006 Hoosier National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan).  

Forest Plan Amendment #1 Final Environmental Assessment (Final EA) proposed rewording the standard on page 3-10 of the Forest Plan regarding timber harvest and prescribed burn activities near cave and karst features. The Final EA describes the project purpose and need (USFS. 2013, pp. 2-3), the alternatives considered for detailed analysis (USFS. 2013, pages 8 to 11), and the potential environmental effects for each alternative (USFS. 2013, pp. 12-32).

The assessment analyzes four alternatives including the Proposed Action (Alternative A), the No Action alternative (Alternative B), and two alternatives that addresses concerns received during public scoping (Alternatives C and D). I believe this range of alternatives adequately provides a basis for comparing environmental effects associated with issues identified from public review of the proposal while still meeting its purpose and need.

The Final EA is available for public review from the Hoosier National Forest at the Forest Supervisor’s office in Bedford, Indiana. Copies of the Final EA are available upon request and on the Hoosier National Forest website at: http://www.fs.fed.us/nepa/project_list.php?forest=110912.

Public Involvement

We considered public involvement an important part of the decision making process for this proposal. On November 18, 2009, we mailed scoping letters to 90 individuals or groups and requested comments on the proposal. We also made the scoping letter available electronically on our website. We received eight letters of response. All comment letters and our responses to them are in the project record at the Hoosier National Forest Supervisor’s Office in Bedford, Indiana.

The proposal was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) for the Hoosier National Forest beginning with the January 1 to March 31, 2010 edition and has continued to be listed in the quarterly SOPA up to the most recent edition (July 1, 2013 to September 30, 2013). The Hoosier’s SOPA, found at http://www.fs.fed.us/sopa/forest-level.php?110912.

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1 This DN/FONSI is based on the Final EA dated July 2013. The Final EA was prepared by an interdisciplinary team (IDT) of Forest Service resource specialists following the implementing regulations for the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).
On October 6, 2011, the Hoosier National Forest mailed the Proposed Action for 30-day Notice and Comment (USDA FS 2011) to 53 individuals and organizations. The public was notified by a legal notice in the Hoosier Times, Bloomington, Indiana on October 16, 2011. The Hoosier also posted the 30-day notice and comment document and maps on the Forest website. We received no responses from individuals or organizations during the 30-day comment period.

Public comments received during the initial scoping period (November 2009) resulted in three issues. The issues were used to develop Alternatives C and D to the Proposed Action.

The Forest Plan Amendment #1 Preliminary Environmental Analysis document (Preliminary EA) was made available on May 30, 2013 to those who commented during the initial scoping period. The Preliminary EA was also available on the Hoosier’s website. No one who previously commented provided input. However, we received one new comment letter. Although no new issues were identified from these comments, parts of the EA were clarified as a result of the content. A response to comments document was prepared to disclose how comments were addressed in this final phase of the analysis process. The comments and our responses to them are in the project record at the Hoosier National Forest Supervisor’s Office in Bedford, Indiana.

Decision

It is my decision to select Alternative A, as modified in this decision, as Amendment #1 to the 2006 Forest Plan. The decision will reword the existing standard to read: “Prohibit timber harvesting and prescribed burning within 200 feet of caves.”

My decision includes the following modification of Alternative A as it was displayed in the environmental analysis,

- The addition of the guideline, “Avoid new road construction within 125 feet of a cave or karst feature.”

This decision is based on the results of the analysis documented in the Final EA, the project planning record, comments received during initial scoping (November 2009), and comments received during the Preliminary EA comment period (May 29 to July 1, 2013). The Final EA fully describes Alternative A on pages 3 to 5.

Rational for the Decision

I have decided to implement Alternative A, as modified, to amend the Forest Plan because:

- It maintains strong protection of cave and karst resources while allowing for restoration activities on landscapes where needed by maintaining a buffer around caves and maintaining Plan protections to the inputs into the system,
- It will allow for better Plan implementation by increased flexibility of planning and implementation based on site-specific analysis,
- It will allow for removal of non-native pines, which have potential for adverse effects to cave and karst systems from acidic inputs, and
- It will reduce the possibility of adverse effects from new roads near cave or karst features.

This alternative addresses the key issues through site-specific project design, including necessary mitigations.
Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered three other alternatives that were analyzed in detail in the Final EA. A comparison of these alternatives can be found in the Final EA (Chapter 2, Tables 1 and 2, pp. 10-11; and Chapter 3, pp. 12-32).

Consideration of Alternative B (No Action)

The No Action alternative provides a baseline for estimating the effects of the other alternatives. This alternative represents the existing (2006) Forest Plan, and is the direction currently guiding management of the Hoosier National Forest. Under the No Action alternative, no changes would be made to the Forest Plan.

I did not select Alternative B because it does not meet the purpose and need for this Forest Plan amendment (USDA. 2013, pp. 2-3). The current Forest Plan standard regarding timber harvest and prescribed burn activities near cave and karst features would remain in effect, and current management would continue. There would continue to be no restriction to road placement in regards to cave and karst features. Our ability to manage National Forest System lands within the Forest boundary would continue to be hindered based on current Forest Plan direction that is no longer warranted or needed in this landscape. Existing challenges to landscape level treatments and limited ability to move lands toward desired condition would continue.

Consideration of Alternative C

Alternative C was developed to offer a blended action in respond to issues. The addition of this alternative provided a mid-range to assess potential effects to temperature and humidity and cave obligate invertebrates.

Although this alternative provided some opportunities to increase our ability to implement the Forest Plan, I did not select Alternative C because this alternative would not be as efficient at implementing restoration goals. This alternative limits landscape restoration activities in areas around karst features, limits effective removal of pine, and does not principally change protection measures for cave and karst resources from any of the action alternatives. Additionally, the design corridors would add to implementation confusion and inefficiencies.

Consideration of Alternative D

Alternative D was developed to address issues related to hydrologic functions, specifically overland flow and its impacts to water quality. This alternative would only allow the removal of nonnative pine within the 200-foot buffer around karst features.

Although Alternative D would help move parts of the Forest toward a restored ecosystem, I did not select Alternative D because this alternative fails to address the purpose and need across the rest of the Forest. The removal of only non-native pine advances only one of the landscape restoration goals of the Plan while leaving the limitations on landscape restoration across much of the Forest. This alternative does not principally change protection measures for cave and karst resources from any of the action alternatives.

Finding of No Significant Impact

I find that this Forest Plan amendment is not a major federal action, individually or cumulatively, and will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not needed. The term "significance" refers to the National Environmental Policy Act, 42 U.S.C. 4321 et seq., requires consideration of both the context and intensity of the Federal action. I determined this based on the factors below.
Context
This amendment changes the 2006 Hoosier National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). It applies to National Forest System lands within the Hoosier National Forest proclamation boundary specific to karst areas. The effects are limited to management activities that may be implemented adjacent to these areas. The amendment is programmatic in nature and does not authorize site-specific projects. Additional analysis would be required at the site-specific level prior to project implementation.

Intensity
1. My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action. Both beneficial and adverse effects associated with my decision were considered in the environmental analysis and disclosed in the Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences section (USFS. 2013, pp. 12-32). Since this is a programmatic Forest Plan amendment, there are no irretrievable resource commitments or losses associated with this project.

2. There will be no significant effects on public health and safety, because this amendment is programmatic and does not include any site-specific project activities that have hazardous components associated with them.

3. There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area. The Final EA did not disclose any effects of concern for these resources (USFS. 2013, Chapter 3). It is also important to note that this is a programmatic amendment to the Forest Plan, and does not authorize any ground activities that could affect such unique characteristics. Site-specific analyses and decisions would be made for individual projects within these areas.

4. Comments received during initial scoping reflected a range of opinions, both of support and opposition. The Hoosier sent copies of the Preliminary EA to those who commented and no responses were received from those groups or individuals. One additional letter of comment was received on the Final EA. Based on the findings of resource specialists within the USDA Forest Service, I do not expect the effects of this amendment to be highly controversial from a scientific perspective (USFS. 2013, pp. 12-32). Any specific activities will undergo further analysis prior to implementation.

5. The effects analysis shows the effects from this amendment are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk to the human environment (USFS. 2013, pp. 12-32). This amendment rewords the existing Forest Plan standard but does not diminish karst protection. No site-specific activities are to be implemented with this amendment. Any specific activities will undergo further analysis in addition to this amendment prior to implementation.

6. This amendment is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because this amendment is for a programmatic Forest Plan and does not authorize any site-specific projects or reduce a responsibility to fully analyze expected outcomes.

7. The Final EA (Chapter 3, pp. 12-32) discusses the cumulative effects of this amendment with other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions. Based on the
disclosure of effects in the Final EA and the Forest Plan FEIS, I conclude that there are no significant cumulative impacts associated with this amendment.

8. Since the amendment proposes no on-the-ground activities, it will not adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources (USFS. 2013, p.12).

9. This amendment will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species act of 1973 because this amendment is a for a programmatic Forest Plan and does not authorize any site-specific projects. Threatened, endangered, and sensitive species and habitats were considered for potential future, site-specific proposals (USFS. 2013, pp. 24-29).

10. This amendment will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

National Forest Management Act
Land and resource management plans are mandated under the authority of the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 (as amended). The Regional Forester approved the Forest Plan in January of 2006 to meet the requirements of implementing NFMA. This amendment meets the requirements of this Act.

My decision tiers to the Record of Decision for the Forest Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) dated January 2006. All of the expected impacts from this amendment are consistent with, and within the range of, the impacts disclosed in the Forest Plan FEIS. My decision is also based on the best available science, including a review of the record that shows a thorough review of relevant scientific information, a consideration of responsible opposing views, and the acknowledgment of incomplete or unavailable information, scientific uncertainty, and risk.

Non-significant Amendment Determination
I have determined that this amendment to the 2006 Forest Plan is non-significant, and thus is within my authority. The determination that this is a non-significant amendment is made in accordance with the NFMA (16 USC 1604(f)(4)) and Forest Service Manual (FSM) 1926.5 (1900 - Planning, Chapter 20 Land Management Planning, Amendment No. 1900-2006-2 effective January 31, 2006). This Forest Plan amendment meets the criteria for a non-significant amendment because these changes will not “significantly alter the long-term relationship between levels of multiple-use goals and objectives originally projected...[or] have an important effect on the entire forest plan or affect resources throughout a large portion of the planning area during the planning period.”

Appeal Rights
My decision to approve this amendment and incorporate it into the Forest Plan is subject to administrative review (appeal) pursuant to the provisions of the Optional Appeal Procedures Available during the Planning Rule Transition Period (Optional Appeal Procedures, formerly 36 CFR 217). Because this decision is a non-significant amendment to the Plan, a written notice of
appeal must be filed with the Eastern Regional Forester within 45 days of the date that legal notice of this decision is published in *The Hoosier Times*.

Appeals must be sent by one of the following means:

**Mail**
USDA FOREST SERVICE  
SUITE 700, PAL/LSC STAFF  
626 East Wisconsin Avenue  
Milwaukee, WI  53202

**Facsimile**
(414) 944-3963

**E-mail**
appeals-eastern-regional-office@fs.fed.us

The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered appeals are: 7:30 am to 4:00 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic appeals must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), Word (.doc or .docx), or portable document format (.pdf).

Any notice of appeal must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 217.9 and include at a minimum:
1. A statement that the document is a Notice of Appeal filed pursuant to 36 CFR 219.17 (b)(3).
2. The name, address, and telephone number of the appellant.
3. Identification of the decision to which the objection is being made.
4. Identification of the document in which the decision is contained, by title and subject.
5. Date of the decision and name and title of the Deciding Officer.
6. Identification of the specific portion of the decision to which the objection is made.
7. The reason for the appeal including issues of fact, law, regulation, or policy.
8. Identification of the specific change(s) in the decision that the appellant seeks.

**Project Implementation**
Pursuant to 36 CFR 217.10(a) implementation of this amendment may begin 7 calendar days after publication of the legal notice in the newspaper of record.
Contact
Questions regarding the environmental assessment for this decision should be directed to:
Kevin Amick, Hoosier National Forest, 811 Constitution Ave., Bedford, IN 47421 (812) 275-5987.

/s/ Melany Glossa
7/26/2013

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MELANY GLOSSA      Date
Forest Supervisor

References:


USFS. 2013. *Final Environmental Assessment Forest Plan Amendment #1: Amendment to the Hoosier National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan for Cave and Karst Resources*, Bedford, IN.

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