

DECISION NOTICE
AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

MIDDLE FORK SNOQUALMIE RIVER
ACCESS AND TRAVEL MANAGEMENT PLAN

Snoqualmie Ranger District
Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest
USDA Forest Service
King County, Washington

INTRODUCTION

An environmental assessment (EA) that discusses a proposed action for management of National Forest System roads and trails within the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River watershed has been completed. A 30-day public comment period was held from April 9 through May 8, 2002. The EA was distributed to those people, organizations, agencies and Tribes that commented during the scoping period or requested a copy of the document.

The EA is currently available at the Snoqualmie Ranger District office, 42404 SE North Bend Way, North Bend, Washington 98045 or on the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest Web Page at http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/mbs/projects/mf_atm/index.shtml.

DECISION

Based on the analysis and evaluation described in the environmental assessment, the findings and recommendations of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Watershed Analysis, and the public comments received in response to the EA, it is my decision to select a modified Alternative E, with all associated mitigation measures and monitoring requirements (EA, pages 2-18 to 2-23; Appendix E).

Items 1) through 3), below, are the specific modifications to Alternative E. Following this section, my entire decision is described.

Specific Modifications to Alternative E

- 1) Mountain bike use on the Middle Fork Trail will be for a three-year test period, beginning in 2004. A formal order will be prepared, which will implement the three-year mountain bike test period. Regulatory and information signs will be posted at each trailhead and posted on Forest Service and partner websites. The Forest Service will monitor mountain bike use on the trail during the test. Monitoring results will determine long-term mountain bike use on the Middle Fork trail. This trail will be monitored:
 - For physical degradation of the trail tread (change from the current condition);
 - To determine compliance levels with posted regulations; and
 - To evaluate user conflicts, visitor satisfaction, and safety.

District Recreation staff in partnership with user groups will conduct the monitoring. This monitoring plan is intended to be a minimum plan that could be funded by the Forest Service based on current budget levels.

Nothing in this plan is intended to prohibit the Forest Service from seeking collaborative partnerships with various user groups, which may be able to expand the scope of monitoring of trail conditions.

Initial monitoring will serve as the baseline to measure any changes in physical conditions. Collection of use data and user comments will continue for a minimum of three years. A second condition survey of the trail will be conducted three years after the first survey

Monitoring will include the following:

- a. The 2001 Middle Fork Trail condition survey will be updated to obtain baseline condition of the trail. This survey will be repeated in three years.
- b. Two trail counters will be purchased to measure trail use; one will be located near the Middle Fork Trailhead and the other located near the Dingford Creek tie trail. Other counters may be added, if they can be borrowed. Data from the counters will be downloaded to a Forest Service computer by Forest staff or volunteers under agreement.
- c. Registration boxes will be placed at each entry point. Volunteers or Forest Service employees will collect registrations sheets. These sheets will be compiled and counted by Forest staff or volunteers under agreement.
- d. Volunteer Mountain Bike/Hiker Patrols: these patrols will be comprised of trained members representing all user groups (mountain bikers, hikers, and stock users). The patrols will help educate users of the new trail use regulations and document satisfaction and complaints from them.

- e. Compliance, user conflicts, user satisfaction, and safety will be monitored via trail patrol reports, law enforcement reports, and public comments. Reports shall be filed at the Snoqualmie Ranger District and reviewed by the District Staff.

Data on use and user comments will be collected each year and compiled. Letters from the public related to use of the trail and Forest Service responses would also be included. District staff will review the trail condition survey.

Evaluation of this information may help form the basis for further regulatory action at the discretion of the District Ranger or Forest Supervisor.

Funding for monitoring will come from the Forest's annual budget, and from outside grants, when available.

- 2) Seasonally, beginning in 2004, Trails 1003, 1003.1, 1003.01, and 1003.2 will be open for stock/mountain bikes. The designated season for stock and mountain bike use on these trails will be between April 15 and November 1. However, the actual date of opening the trail to these user groups will be assessed annually by the Forest Service, to determine the capability of the trail to accommodate mountain bike and stock use. The duration of seasonal closure to stock and mountain bike traffic will be determined by evaluating the ability of the trail to sustain these uses without long-term damage. Evaluation criteria will include winter snow pack, seasonal precipitation, long-term weather patterns, and soil moisture content within the trail corridor. The trail will not be seasonally opened to stock and mountain bike use until conditions are suitable for their use. The trail will be posted as closed until officially opened for stock and mountain bikes.
- 3) Parking facilities at Pratt River Bar and Camp Brown Dispersed sites will not be expanded. With hardening¹ of existing parking facilities, these sites contain adequate area to accommodate needed parking for available dispersed day/camping use. Vehicle access to these dispersed sites will be permanently blocked, dispersed roads will be decommissioned and sanitation facilities will be provided as funding permits.

¹ Hardening is the placing of ballast, such as gravel, to reduce and/or eliminate mudding and puddling caused by vehicle and foot traffic. Hardening would also include armoring or blocking and revegetating stream banks that serve as vehicle access points to rivers or streams.

The Decision

My decision, Modified Alternative E, will manage National Forest System roads and trails in the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River watershed as follows. Refer to the attached map:

The Decision: Roads

- Road 56 from the west boundary of Section 31, T24N, R10E, to the Taylor River Bridge crossing in Section 21 will be maintained to Level 4 standards for passenger cars.
- Road 56 from the Taylor River Bridge to the junction with Road 5640 will remain open to passenger cars.
- Road 56 from near its junction with Road 5640 to Dingford Creek will remain open for high clearance vehicles from April 15 through November 1. From November 1 to April 15, this segment of road will be gated and closed to public motorized access. Forest Service administrative access and approved access by inholders and their constituents will be allowed. The seasonal closure will not be implemented until November 1, 2004. This time frame will provide adequate time for installing the seasonal gate, necessary closure notification signs, develop special use agreements with inholders and public notification/education.
- Road 56 from Dingford Creek will be closed to motorized public recreation access. For the same rationale described above this closure will not be implemented until November 1, 2004.
- Vehicle parking at Dingford Creek Trailhead will be expanded as needed up to 30-car capacity, if Forest Service monitoring concludes demand exceeds capacity. Sanitation facilities will be provided as funding permits.
- Roads 5600-110, -120, -210, -220, -410, -510 past the rock pit, -520, and -950 will be decommissioned and removed from the Forest transportation system. Decommissioning will be implemented as funding becomes available.
- Road 5600-510 to the rock pit will be maintained to Maintenance Level 2 standards.
- Road 5600-980, a private road will be removed from the Forest Transportation System.²
- Middle Fork/Taylor River Trailhead (Road 5600-310) will be maintained at Maintenance Level 4 standards for passenger cars.
- Dingford Creek Trailhead (Road 5600-800) will be maintained for high clearance vehicles (ML 2).
- Road 5600-050 (CCC Road) will be decommissioned from the west line of Section 25 to its junction with Road 56 and converted to a multi-user trail (hiker/stock/mountain bike). This road segment will be decommissioned and converted to trail as funding becomes available.
- Road 5640, from Road 5600 to the Snoqualmie Lake Trailhead, will be maintained to Maintenance Level 3 standards for passenger car access.

² The road will remain as a private road, on private land.

- Road 5640, from the Snoqualmie Lake Trailhead to the east boundary of Section 8 (approximately mile post 3.2), will be reduced to Maintenance Level 1 with potential conversion to trail in the future, when not used for forest management. By agreement, inholders will be allowed to keep this road segment open for their access. The agreement will include inholder assuming maintenance and repair responsibilities. Implementation will occur as funded.
- Road 5640, past approximately milepost 3.2, will be decommissioned.
- Segments of Roads 5640-108, -110, -112, -116, -120, and -140 located on National Forest System lands will be decommissioned.
- Approximately 19.6 miles of road obtained in the Huckleberry Land Exchange will be decommissioned (EA, Appendix A). Decommissioning will be implemented as funding becomes available.

The Decision: Trails

- Trails 1003, 1003.1, 1003.01, and 1003.2 will be open for hikers/stock/llama/mountain bikes. Generally, stock and mountain bike use will be allowed on this trail between April 15 and November 1. But, the date of opening the trail to these user groups will be assessed annually by the Forest Service to determine the capability of the trail. The trail will be posted closed until officially opened for stock and mountain bikes.

During the open period, mountain bikes will be restricted to using the trail on odd calendar days.

Mountain bike use of the trail will be for a three-year trial period, during which odd-day compliance and resource damage will be monitored. Monitoring results will be used to determine long-term mountain bike use on the trail.

- Trails 1004, 1004.01, 1006, 1006.01, 1010, 1012, 1013.3, 1013.32, and 1030.1 will be open to hiker/llama use.
- Trails 1005, 1005.01, 1005.1, 1030, and 1030.01 will be open to hiker/stock use.
- Trail 1002 (Snoqualmie Lake) will be open to hiker/stock/llama/mountain bike user groups to the wilderness boundary. From the wilderness boundary to its terminus it will be open to hiker/stock user groups.
- Trail 1002 (CCC/Taylor River) will be open to hiker/stock/llama/mountain bike user groups.
- While Trail 1035 was listed in the EA, my decision does **not** include a decision regarding either potential reconstruction of the first three miles of this trail or primary user objective. These decisions will be made as part of the Pratt River Trail Reconstruction analysis, currently underway.

The Decision: Dispersed Recreation Sites

The proposed Middle Fork Campground (currently under analysis) is beyond the scope of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Watershed Access and Travel Management Plan. Under Modified Alternative E, dispersed camping will continue at a limited number of suitable, designated existing sites, as described below. If at a later time the decision is made to establish a permanent campground near Taylor River, these dispersed sites will

be closed incrementally to overnight camping, unless an analysis by the Forest Service finds them to be viable for longer-term use.

River Bend:

- Vehicle access to the area will be permanently blocked.
- Walk-in users will be allowed to use the dispersed sites.
- Overnight camping will be allowed.
- Parking along Road 56 will be expanded to accommodate three cars.
- Dispersed road surfaces will be decommissioned, as needed.
- No sanitation facilities will be provided.

Pratt River Bar:

- All vehicle access to dispersed sites along the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River will be permanently blocked.
- Roads surfaces will be decommissioned, as needed.
- Campsites will only be available to walk-in users.
- Sanitation facilities will be provided as funding becomes available.

Camp Brown:

- Vehicle access to dispersed sites will be permanently blocked.
- Dispersed sites will be accessed by foot.
- Overnight camping will be allowed.
- Dispersed site access roads will be decommissioned.
- Sanitation facilities will be provided as funding becomes available.

Other Dispersed Recreation Sites:

- Approximately 59 dispersed sites located on roads that will be closed or decommissioned will also be decommissioned (EA, Appendix A). The remaining sites will be hardened, as needed.
- Vehicle access to dispersed recreation sites will be permanently blocked and dispersed access roads decommissioned.
- For day and overnight use, appropriately located sites will be hardened, as needed. All other sites will be decommissioned.
- Use of the hardened sites for foot access to the river will be possible, but parking opportunities along Road 56 will be minimal.
- Vehicle access into the riverbed will be blocked.

The Decision: Management Requirements, Constraints, and Mitigation Measures (EA, pages 2-18 to 2-21)

My decision also includes the following management requirements and constraints, and mitigation measures, as described in the EA (pages 2-18 through 2-21):

Soils, Water, and Aquatic Resources Management Requirements/Mitigation

- Best management practices to prevent the movement of soils from disturbed ground areas will be carried out in all hardening or decommissioning activities.
- All erosion control and spill prevention devices/steps must be installed and ready prior to initiation of construction, including silt fencing and straw bales, as needed. Straw bale sediment dams or suitable replacement needs to be weed free.
- All disturbed ground will be reclaimed, including seeding and retention measures to prevent sediment from reaching streams until soil is secured by established vegetation.
- No new or replacement culverts will be migration barriers to any fish species.
- Any machinery maintenance involving potential contaminants (fuel, oil, hydraulic fluid, etc) will occur at an approved site or outside the Riparian Reserve.
- Prior to starting work each day, all machinery will be checked for leaks and all necessary repairs made.
- A written spill mitigation plan will be prepared by the contractor and approved by the Forest Service prior to initiation of construction.
- Erosion control methods will be used to prevent sediment-laden water from entering a stream. These will include, but will not be limited to, straw bales, silt fencing, filter fabric, temporary sediment pond, diversion of stream flow during the process of culvert replacement, check dams of pea gravel-filled burlap bags or other material, and/or immediate mulching of exposed areas.
- If flooding or weather events result in detrimental sedimentation, operations will be stopped.

Minerals/Mining Management Requirements/Mitigation

- If miners desire to maintain vehicle access to claims on Roads 56 and 5640 beyond the closures, they will be required to enter into a special use agreement with the Forest Service, for maintenance and repair of the road.
- As approved by the Forest Service, miners will not be subject to the seasonal closure of Road 56 from Taylor River Bridge to Dingford Creek Trailhead.

Land Use Management Requirements/Mitigation

- If private landowners desire to maintain vehicle access to their lands on Roads 56 and 5640, beyond the closures, they will be required to enter into a special use agreement with the Forest Service, for maintenance and repair of the road.
- As approved by the Forest Service, private landowners will not be subject to the seasonal closure of Road 56, from near the Taylor River Bridge to Dingford Creek Trailhead.

Vegetation Management Requirements/Mitigation

- The Forest-wide Prevention Strategy and Best Management Practices for noxious weed management (1999 EA, as included as Forest Plan Amendment 14) will apply to all proposed projects. Refer to project analysis file for BMPs.
- Weed-free equipment will be used in all phases of the projects to be implemented.
- If any previously undiscovered Sensitive plant or Survey and Manage plant, bryophyte, fungi, or lichen species are found, at any point in time prior to or during implementation of this project, work will be halted until the District Botanist is consulted and necessary mitigation measures are enacted.
- Existing noxious weed infestations will be treated before road decommissioning, stormproofing, or hardening of dispersed campsites occurred. Disturbed areas (roads, trails, and dispersed campsites) will be seeded to prevent noxious weed establishment. Seed mixes used in revegetation shall be one of those recommended for the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. These mixes consist of desirable, non-persistent plant species. See EA, Appendix D for appropriate seed mix.
- Erosion control material, such as commercial control mats or straw, for this project shall be weed free. Straw should be obtained from one of two sources: a grower whose fields have been annually inspected by the county coordinator for the Washington State Noxious Weed Board or legally certified weed-free straw from Idaho, Montana, or Wyoming.

Wildlife Management Requirements/Mitigation

- Spotted owls: Seasonal restrictions for all activities that create noise above ambient forest levels within 0.25 mile of unsurveyed or occupied habitat will not occur from March 1 to July 31. This restriction applies to all or portions of the following roads within 0.25 mile of habitat: Road 56 past Road 5640; 5600-50, -110, -120, -210, -220, and -950; Road 5640 past Taylor River Bridge; and Roads 5640-108, -112, -116, -120, and -140.
- Marbled murrelets: Seasonal restrictions to all activities that create noise above ambient forest levels within 0.25 mile of unsurveyed or occupied habitat will not occur from April 1 to August 5. Activities from August 6 to September 15 may occur beginning 2 hours after sunrise to 2 hours before sunset. Seasonal marbled murrelet restrictions apply to all, or portions, of the following roads: Road 56 past the Taylor River Bridge; Road 5600-50, -110, -120, -210, -220, and -950; Road 5640 past the bridge over the Taylor River; and Roads 5640-108, -112, -116, -120, and -140.
- Deer and elk winter range: Within deer and elk winter range, road decommissioning will not occur between December 1 and April 15. This restriction will apply to roads: 5600-050, -110, -120, -210, -220, and -310, -410, -510 and the first 0.6 miles of Road 5640.

Cultural Resources Management Requirements/Mitigation

- For the entire project area: in the event that new sites are uncovered anywhere on this project, work will be suspended, and the appropriate individuals notified.

Recreation Management Requirements/Mitigation

- Provide for traffic management along roads. Warning and or closed road signs will be posted on roads during periods of construction.
- Work on roads will be prohibited on weekends, holidays, and after 3:00 PM on Fridays.
- As needed, sign Road 56 stating there will be no access, turnarounds, or parking for vehicles with trailers above the Middle Fork Trailhead.
- Once Road 56 is paved to the Middle Fork/Taylor River Trailhead, monitor and evaluate the effects of keeping Road 56 seasonally open for motorized access between approximately the Taylor River Bridge and Dingford Creek Trailhead. Monitor specifically for changes in the amount of garbage and stolen car dumping, illegal shooting and other vandalism, and off road vehicle driving in the river, streams and wetlands located adjacent to this section of road. Refer to EA, Appendix E for the monitoring plan.

Fire and Fuels Management Requirements/Mitigation

- To provide fire resource protection during road decommissioning, Forest Service contractors will follow Fire and Fuels Management contract clauses. The contract clauses are designed to ensure that equipment used as part of the contract is inspected to ensure the presence of fire tools, spark arresters, and fire extinguishers. The contractor must also abide by the Industrial Fire Precaution Level (IFPL) System between the months of April 15 through October 15 of each year. The IFPL system restricts operating times as fire danger increases. If significant activity fuels are created from this proposal, fire management officials will decide its disposal or other use.

RATIONALE FOR DECISION

In making my decision, I carefully reviewed the analysis that is documented in the EA. I also read and reviewed the substantive public and agency comments received during the 30-day EA comment period (EA, Appendix G). I considered the range of views expressed. Based on both the analysis findings and the public responses, I selected Alternative E, with modifications as described above. I believe the decision I have made is reasonable, provides the best balance of resource protection, recreational use, and best meets the purpose and need for the access and travel management plan (EA, pages 1-7, 1-8, and 1-16 through 1-18).

Meet the Goals, Objectives, Standards, and Guidelines of the Forest Plan, as Amended:

Modified Alternative E is consistent with the goals and objectives, standards and guidelines of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) (USDA 1990), as amended by the Record of Decision (ROD) for Amendments to Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Planning Documents Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl (USDA Forest Service and USDI Bureau of Land Management, 1994).

The projects and activities to be implemented, as part of my decision, will help meet the goals and objectives of the Forest Plan, as amended. Modified Alternative E will provide benefits to Riparian Reserves; Congressionally Withdrawn MA 10 – Alpine Lakes Wilderness; and Matrix allocations MA 5A – Recommended Recreation River, MA 5B – Recommended Scenic River, and MA 14 – Deer and Elk Winter Range. My decision will contribute to meeting the objectives of the Aquatic Conservation Strategy and the standards and guidelines for Tier 2 Key Watersheds. Modified Alternative E will meet and/or maintain standards and guidelines for the following land allocations included in this project: Late-Successional Reserve 122; Late-Successional Old Growth; Administratively Withdrawn allocations (MA 1B Semi-Primitive Non-motorized Dispersed Recreation, and 27 Alpine Lakes Management Area Dispersed Recreation – DR,); and matrix allocations (MA 2A Scenic Viewshed Foreground, MA 12 – Mature and Old Growth Wildlife Habitat, MA 17 – Timber Management Emphasis, and MA 27 Alpine Lakes Management Area General Forest – GF, and Scenic Forest – SF). For more detail refer to **Other Findings Required by Law or Regulation**, below.

By closing or decommissioning roads no longer needed by the Forest Service, Modified Alternative E will help meet Forest and District objectives of fewer road miles³. My decision will also reduce the Forest annual road maintenance costs by approximately \$5,667 and annual, estimated road repair costs by at least \$3,252.

Maintain or Improve Water Quality and Fish Habitat:

My decision—a Modified Alternative E, will result in the improvement of water quality and fish habitat in a Tier 2 Key Watershed through the decommissioning of all dispersed site access roads, decommissioning 59 dispersed recreation sites, hardening (as needed) 28 dispersed sites, and decommissioning either 28.3 or 36.3 miles of road (depending on whether or not inholders maintain motorized access above Dingford Creek on Road 56 and above the Taylor River on Road 5640).⁴ This includes all roads obtained in the Huckleberry Land Exchange. Of the roads that will be decommissioned, 11.3 miles are in the Upper Middle Fork and Quartz Creek drainages. Both are areas of high concern for erosion and mass wasting (EA, pages. 4-8, 4-9, and 4-17). Implementing this decision will result in improved water quality and fish habitat through reduced stream sedimentation from roads, dispersed sites and road induced mass wasting; reduced stream temperature through revegetation of dispersed sites adjacent to streams; and reduced bacterial and chemical inputs into the stream by eliminating or controlling access to

³ The Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest has an objective of reducing the transportation system on the Forest by approximately 586 miles (Forest Infrastructure Data Base (INFRA), 1994-95 Forest-wide Access and Travel Management Plan, and 2003 Forest Roads Analysis). This mileage does not include roads acquired in the Huckleberry Land Exchange. The North Bend portion of the Snoqualmie Ranger District's objective level is to decommission and remove approximately 48 miles of road from the Forest transportation system. Modified Alternative E would move the Forest and District towards these objectives by decommissioning 8.7 or 16.7 miles of road depending on whether or not inholders maintain motorized access on portions of Roads 56 and 5640.

⁴ Private landowners and miners will be provided the opportunity to maintain their current, motorized access to their inholdings on Road 56, beyond Dingford Creek, and on Road 5640, beyond the Snoqualmie Lake Trailhead, by entering into a special use authorization with the Forest Service.

dispersed campsites and installing sanitation facilities at Dingford Creek Trailhead, Camp Brown Dispersed Site, and Pratt Bar dispersed sites.

Control or Eliminate Opportunities for Garbage Dumping, Illegal Shooting, and Off Road Vehicle Driving in the River, Streams and Wetlands within the Watershed:

The spur roads, dispersed-site access roads, and motorized dispersed day-use/camp sites on National Forest System lands within the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River watershed are targeted for illegal dumping of garage, hazardous wastes, appliances, automobiles (stolen and otherwise), and household and construction products. The material illegally dumped is not only used as shooting targets, but is a source point of pollution into creeks and soils. These roads also provide access to streams and the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River. The closures and road decommissioning that will be implemented with Modified Alternative E will control, and in many cases, eliminate the opportunity for illegal shooting and dumping, and inappropriate off-road vehicle driving in the river, streams, and wetlands of the watershed.

Provide Access Opportunities for a Variety of User Groups:

Implementing Modified Alternative E will provide a broad spectrum of recreation opportunities and experiences within the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River watershed, including increased trail opportunities for hikers, stock, and mountain bikes. These access opportunities include: approximately 20 miles of drivable County and National Forest System roads, 28 motorized dispersed day-use/campsites, and 88.2 miles of trail. All 88.2 miles of trail will be available for hikers and llamas; 72.5 miles will be available for stock; and 39.6 miles will be available for mountain bikes. My decision will also provide many other recreation opportunities in the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River watershed, such as picnicking, fishing, whitewater kayaking, sightseeing, photography, climbing, rock hounding, swimming, rafting, and hunting (EA pages 3-26 to 3-30, 4-38 to 4-39, 4-54 to 4-57 and EA Appendix G – Comment #48).

Two key components of Modified Alternative E are the seasonal closure of Road 56 near the Taylor River Bridge and the permanent closure to motorized recreation use of Road 56 at Dingford Creek.

The seasonal closure will provide resource protection for the road and adjacent resources during the winter and wet season (November 1 – April 15). Closing Road 56 seasonally will provide greater opportunity to control the spread of vandalism, car and garbage dumping, illegal shooting, and inappropriate off-road driving up the Middle Fork Valley. In addition, this seasonal closure will also add an additional 6.4 miles of multi-user trail opportunity for about 5 ½ months each year, for use by hikers, stock, and mountain bikers, plus an additional trail loop opportunity for hikers (Middle Fork Trail from the Middle Fork Trailhead to Dingford Creek and then back down Road 56 to the Middle Fork Trailhead).

This seasonal closure will not limit motorized access to Dingford Creek for private landowners, their patrons, or miners. They will be allowed motorized access during the seasonal closure.

Recreation use during the most popular months—mid-April through the summer and into early fall (November 1)—will not be affected by the seasonal closures on Road 56. Day-use opportunities to the Upper Middle Fork drainage, Dingford Creek Trail, Hester Lake Trail, Rock Creek Trail and associated destinations will still be possible. However, day-use access to Dutch Miller Gap and associated destinations will be severely limited. The most capable hikers will still be able to access this area in one day. (Closing Road 56 near the Taylor River Bridge, as proposed in Alternative D, would have totally eliminated day-use opportunities in the Upper Middle Fork Snoqualmie drainage.) (See EA, page 2-15, 4-5, 4-22, 4-38 and Appendix G response to Comment #131 and #143.)

Though the permanent closure of Road 56 at Dingford Creek will limit day-use opportunities into the wilderness, the closure will effectively increase solitude and naturalness along trails within the upper watershed wilderness. The closure will also provide new unroaded day-use and loop trail opportunities for multi-user groups outside of the Alpine Lakes Wilderness. At the same time, closing Road 56 at Dingford Creek will provide long-term benefits to wildlife, fish and their habitat, prevent the spread of illegal garbage dumping into the upper Middle Fork, result in improved water quality through reduced stream sedimentation from the road and dispersed sites, reduce stream temperature through revegetation of dispersed sites adjacent to streams within this segment of road, and reduced bacterial and chemical input into streams. Closing Road 56 beyond Dingford Creek will lesson the spread of noxious weeds and reduce annual road maintenance by approximately \$3,000 and annual estimated road repair costs by \$3,200. This road segment is identified as primarily responsible for areas of high risk of mass wasting. In the event of a catastrophic event, hundreds of thousands of dollars could be saved by closing this road segment (EA pages 1-1, 4-6, 4-11, 4-14, 4-16, 4-22, 4-26 to 4-30, 4-35, 4-37 to 4-38, and 4-41).

Another key component of Modified Alternative E is the three-year test period for mountain bikes on the Middle Fork Trail. This test period will allow the Forest Service time to evaluate the appropriateness of mountain bikes on the Middle Fork Trail (Decision Notice, pages 1 and 2).

Control Possible Negative Impacts Caused by Motorized Dispersed Camping

Implementation of Modified Alternative E includes decommissioning all temporary roads to motorized dispersed campsites (approximately 0.3 miles), decommissioning approximately 59 dispersed sites; and hardening 28 dispersed sites to reduce soil disturbance and access into streams and riparian areas. This work, along with providing garbage and sanitation facilities at the most popular dispersed sites will reduce garbage dumping and bacterial and chemical input into stream channels, while still maintaining considerable opportunity for motorized dispersed camping (approximately 28 hardened dispersed sites) (EA, pages 4-8, 4-9, 4-16 and 4-41).

Provide Adequate Access for the Reasonable Use of Inholders

Finally, my decision to implement Modified Alternative E will provide reasonable access to private inholders and their patrons. Private landowners, miners, and their patrons will be given motorized access past the seasonal closure of Road 56, between approximately the Taylor River Bridge and Dingford Creek Trailhead (EA, pages 2-15, 4-5, 4-22 and Appendix G response to Comment #131 and #143).

My decision will also provide inholders the opportunity to maintain motorized access to their inholdings, on Road 56 beyond the motorized recreation closure at Dingford Creek, and on Road 5640 beyond the existing closure at Snoqualmie Lake Trailhead, without obligating the Forest Service to maintain roads for non-National Forest purposes. The Forest Service is prohibited from expending public road monies solely to accommodate private uses. Inholder motorized access can be maintained if said private inholders choose to enter into a special use authorization with the Forest Service. This agreement will grant motorized access and provide the list of road maintenance and repair conditions that inholders will be required to perform to protect National Forest System lands and resources (EA, pages 2-8, 2-15, 2-16, 2-17, and Appendix G - Comments #29, #30, #34, and #76).

HOW ISSUES ARE ADDRESSED

The following major issues were identified and used to develop alternatives during environmental analysis for the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Access and Travel Management project. The issues are summarized here, followed by a discussion of how my decision addresses the issue.

Issue 1

Accelerated rates of soil erosion occur in some locations within the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River watershed. The Quartz Creek sub-watershed contains the highest concentrations of these variables.

By implementing Modified Alternative E, approximately 36.3 miles of road will be decommissioned—if inholders choose not to assume maintenance and repair responsibilities on portions of Roads 56 and 5640. , If inholders assume maintenance and repair responsibilities, a total of 28.7 miles will be decommissioned. Of these roads, 11.3 miles are in the Upper Middle Fork and Quartz Creek drainages. Both are areas of high concern for erosion and mass wasting (EA, pages. 4-8, 4-9, and 4-17). The seasonal closure of Road 56 between Taylor River and Dingford Creek will be during the winter and wet season (November 1 – April 15). Removing motorized recreation traffic from this section of road during these seasons will result in less surface erosion caused by driving on and rutting up wet roads (EA, page 4-8). The only alternative that will decommission more roads would be Alternative D (28.7 with inholder maintenance and repair or 42.7 without inholders assuming maintenance and repair of segments of Roads 56 and 5640.

Issue 2

Dispersed camping likely results in periodic bacterial contamination from human waste. Trash associated with camping, and illegal dumping, also likely results in frequent site contamination from hydrocarbons and various toxic wastes.

Implementing Modified Alternative E will result in the decommissioning of all temporary roads to motorized dispersed campsites (approximately 0.3 miles), decommissioning approximately 59 dispersed sites, and hardening of 28 dispersed sites to reduce soil disturbance and access into streams and riparian areas.

Decommissioning or controlling access to dispersed sites, and providing garbage and sanitation facilities at the most popular dispersed sites will reduce garbage dumping, and bacterial and chemical input into stream channels (EA, pages 4-8, 4-9, 4-16 and 4-41). Only Alternative D would decommission more dispersed sites (71).

Issue 3

Road and trail densities within the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River watershed are as higher than is appropriate for wildlife species sensitive to human interaction. There is a concern that security habitat will be lost if additional roads or trails are constructed.

Modified Alternative E, when implemented, includes decommissioning approximately 0.3 miles of non-system road (dispersed site access roads) and about 36.3 additional miles of road if the private inholders choose not to assume maintenance and repair responsibilities on portions of Roads 56 and 5640. If holders do assume maintenance and repair work, 28.7 additional miles of roads will be decommissioned. This will reduce the miles of roads on National Forest System Land in the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River watershed by 57 to –72 percent, depending upon inholder access (EA, pages 4-8, 4-9, and 4-17).

Modified Alternative E will reduce fifth-field watershed densities as follows:

Alternative E, with Modifications		
Fifth-Field Watershed	With Inholder Maintenance and Repair	WO Inholder Maintenance and Repair
Middle Fork	0.6 miles/ square mile	0.6 miles/ square mile
Pratt	0.0 miles/ square mile	0.0 miles/ square mile
Taylor	0.15 miles/ square mile	0.09 miles/ square mile
U. Middle Fork	0.24 miles/ square mile	0.11 miles/ square mile

Only Alternative D would provide for a greater reduction in fifth-field road densities, and only in the Upper Middle Fork watershed if inholders do not assume repair and maintenance on Road 56. Without inholder repair and maintenance, Alternative D would reduce road density in the Upper Middle Fork to 0 mile/square mile (EA, page 4-9).

Issue 4

Grizzly bear core habitat needs to be maintained at the current level within the watershed, in accordance with the “No Net Loss” policy.

By decommissioning the last 1.7 miles of Road 5640 and closing Road 56 at Dingford Creek, Modified Alternative E will result in a net increase of 3,460 acres of early core grizzly bear habitat and 2,383 acres of late core habitat. Alternatives A and B would result in no additional early and late habitat. Alternative C would result in the same increase as Modified Alternative E. Only Alternative D would result in more core habitat (an addition of 6,092 acres of early and 5,017 acres of late habitat) (EA, Appendix G, response to Comment #10 and Decision Notice, page 24).

Issue 5 There are non-federally owned lands and mining claims, within the watershed, accessed by Forest Service roads. There is a concern that access be maintained to these private lands and mining claims. There is also a concern that if roads are gated and closed to public vehicular access, that privileged motorized access will be granted to private landowners and miners.

Private landowners, miners and their patrons will be given motorized access past the seasonal closure at Taylor River Bridge to the Dingford Creek Trailhead (EA, pages 2-15, 4-5, 4-22 and Appendix G response to Comment #131 and #143).

Private landowners and miners will be provided the opportunity to maintain present motorized access to their inholdings on Road 56, beyond Dingford Creek and on Road 5640, beyond the Snoqualmie Lake Trailhead. If they choose to enter into a special use authorization with the Forest Service, the agreement will grant access and the list of road maintenance and repair conditions that will be required for protection of National Forest lands and resources (EA, pages 2-8, 2-15, 2-16, 2-17, and Appendix G - Comments #29, #30, and #76).

The Forest Service has no duty or obligation to maintain National Forest System roads for non-National forest purposes and is prohibited from expending public road monies to solely accommodate private uses (EA Appendix G, response to Comment #34).

Issue 6

There is a concern that present access travel management in the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River watershed does not address current and future user group access demands.

Modified Alternative E, when implemented, will provide a broad spectrum of recreation opportunities and experiences within the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River watershed. These include approximately 20 miles of drivable County and National Forest System roads, 28 motorized dispersed campsites, and 88.2 miles of trail. All 88.2 miles of trail will be available for hikers and llamas, 72.5 miles will be available for stock, and 39.6 miles will be available for mountain bikes.

With Modified Alternative E, the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River watershed will also provide many other recreation opportunities, such as picnicking, fishing, whitewater kayaking, sightseeing, photography, climbing, rock hounding, swimming, rafting, and hunting (EA pages 3-26 to 3-30, 4-38 to 4-39, 4-54 to 4-57 and EA Appendix G – Comment #48).

Issue 7

There is a concern over increased access restrictions on National Forest System lands.

Modified Alternative E will result in increased restrictions on motorized access. Implementation will include seasonal closures to motorized recreation on 7.0 miles of road, plus permanent closures and/or decommissioning of 10.2 miles of road that are currently open for high-clearance vehicles. Approximately 2.8 of these miles are brushed-in spur roads, used mostly for illegal dumping and shooting (EA pages 4-21, 4-38, and 4-41).

Recreation use during the most popular months—mid-April through the summer and into early fall (November 1)—will not be affected by the seasonal closures on Road 56. Day-use opportunities to the Upper Middle Fork drainage, Dingford Creek Trail, Hester Lake Trail, Rock Creek Trail and associated destinations will still be possible. However, day-use access to Dutch Miller Gap and associated destinations will be severely limited. The most capable hikers will still be able to access this area in one day. Closing Road 56 near the Taylor River Bridge, as proposed in Alternative D, would have totally eliminate day-use opportunities in the Upper Middle Fork Snoqualmie drainage.

Private landowners, miners and their patrons will be given motorized access past the seasonal closure at Taylor River Bridge to the Dingford Creek Trailhead (EA, pages 2-15, 4-5, 4-22, and Appendix G response to Comment #131 and #143).

Private landowners and miners will be provided the opportunity to maintain present motorized access to their inholdings on Road 56, beyond Dingford Creek, and on Road 5640, beyond the Snoqualmie Lake Trailhead. They may choose to enter into a special use authorization with the Forest Service; the agreement will grant access and provide a list of road maintenance and repair conditions that inholders will be required to perform to protect National Forest System lands and resources (EA, pages 2-8, 2-15, 2-16, 2-17, and Appendix G - Comments #29, #30, and #76).

Though reducing motorized recreation access, implementation of Modified Alternative E will result in an increase in non-motorized access opportunities in the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Watershed: hiker trail access will be increased by 17.1 miles, stock trails by 26.4 miles, and mountain bike trail access by 30.9 miles (EA page 4-36).

Issue 8

With the decommissioning of roads within the watershed, there could be a loss of access for future resource management.

Modified Alternative E will provide roaded and/or helicopter access to approximately 3,230 out of 5,703 acres of land that are allocated to Management Areas allowing timber harvest. These are fewer acres than Alternatives A and B (5,703 acres), the same as Alternative C, but more than Alternative D (2,553 acres) (EA page 4-18).

The 2,473 acres that will no longer be accessible by road or helicopter are allocated to MA 27 - Alpine Lakes Management Area Scenic Forest and Recommended Scenic Wild and Scenic River, part of the matrix. Timber harvest is permitted in these management areas, but is not the primary objective. The programmed timber harvest on the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest is 7 million board feet. Loss of these 2,473 acres will have minimal to no effect on this harvest level.

Issue 9

There is a concern for introduction and additional spread of noxious weeds.

In the short term, ground disturbance from road and dispersed site decommissioning and hardening of dispersed campsites will provide suitable conditions for germination of noxious weed seed already existing in the soil, which could result in an increase noxious weed infestations. However, in the long-term, these activities will result in less vehicle access and further spread of noxious weeds by vehicles, allowing the native vegetation to recover (EA page 4-20).

Refer to the Management Requirements, Constraints, and Mitigation Measures for Noxious Weeds, above (see Decision Notice, page 7).

CHANGED EFFECTS BASED UPON MODIFIED ALTERNATIVE E

The estimated environmental effects of implementing Modified Alternative E are only slightly different than those identified for Alternative E in the Environmental Assessment: adding the stipulation that the seasonal opening of the Middle Fork Trail to stock and mountain bikes will be scheduled after April 15 **and** only when trail conditions are suitable for such uses will result in less ground-disturbing impacts and less potential for fine sediments from the trail reaching streams (EA, page 4-31). It could also result in fewer potential trail user conflicts, due to a shorter open season, if the trail is opened to stock and mountain bikes after April 15 (EA, page 4-40).

NON-SIGNIFICANT FOREST PLAN AMENDMENT

Included in this action is a non-significant Forest Plan amendment—Amendment # 20—which will open the Middle Fork Trail #1003 to bicycles from April 15 to November 1.

The actual opening date will be assessed annually by the Forest Service to determine the capability of the trail to accommodate mountain bike.

I have determined this is a non-significant Forest Plan amended on the basis of the criteria outlined in FSM 1922.51 *Changes to the Forest Plan That Are Not Significant, as follows:*

- 1) Seasonally opening the Middle Fork Trail #1003 to bicycles will not significantly alter the multiple-use goals and objectives for long-term Forest Plan (as amended) land and resource management.
- 2) Seasonally opening the Middle Fork Trail #1003 to bicycles will not result in adjustments of management area boundaries or management prescriptions or cause changes in multiple-use goals and objectives for long-term land and resource management.
- 3) There will be no changes to Forest Plan (as amended) standards and guidelines as a result of seasonally opening the Middle Fork Trail #1003 to bicycles.
- 4) Seasonally opening the Middle Fork Trail #1003 to bicycles will provide opportunity for a broader spectrum of recreation opportunities on National Forest System lands in the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED IN DETAIL

Alternative A (No Action)

This alternative would have continued the status quo for the roads and trails analyzed within the project area. If implemented, Alternative A would have allowed for stormproofing and/or flood repair of Road 56 and any other road and trail maintenance normally carried out on roads and trails within the projects area (EA, page 2-3 to 2-4).

Alternative B

Implementation of this alternative would have kept the entire length of Road 56 open to motorized vehicle travel, as in Alternative A. Roads 5600-050, 110, -120, -210, -220, -510 beyond the rock pit would be placed into Maintenance Level (ML) 1, storage, for future forest management. Road 5600-050 would be used as a multiple use trail (hiker/stock/mountain bike) when not utilized as a road for forest management. Roads 5600-410 and -510, past the rock pit, would be left open for high clearance access. Road 5600-950 would be decommissioned and Road 5600-980 would be removed from the Forest Transportation system. The Middle Fork/Taylor River, Snoqualmie Lake, Dingford Creek, and Hardscrabble Trailheads would be maintained as they are currently. The Quartz Creek Road 5640 would remain as current. The National Forest Spur Road off of Road 5640 would be decommissioned. All roads obtained in the Huckleberry Land Exchange would be placed in ML 1, storage, for future forest management. Use on all trails except the Middle Fork Trail (1003, 1003.01, 1003.1, and 1003.2) would remain as currently allowed. The Middle Fork Trail would be opened to mountain bike use. Dispersed campsites and access roads to them would be hardened, as needed. Roaded

access to River Bend, Pratt River Bar and Camp Brown dispersed campsites would be blocked. No amenities (toilets, garbage cans, picnic tables, etc.) would be provided at any of the dispersed sites.

Alternative C

This alternative would include all components of Modified Alternative E, with the following exceptions: there would be no seasonal closure of Road 56 at Taylor River, no mountain bikes would be allowed on the Middle Fork Trail (1003, 1003.1, 1003.01 and 1003.2), Dingford Creek Trailhead would be expanded from 10-12 cars to 30 cars, and stock use would be allowed on the Middle Fork Trail seasonally between April 15 and November 1.

Alternative D

Alternative D differs from Modified Alternative E in that implementation would permanently close Road 56 to public motorized access (except inholders, by agreement) starting at the Taylor River Bridge (compared to Dingford Creek, in Modified Alternative E). The segment of Road 56 between the Taylor River Bridge and Road 5640 would be reduced to ML 1 (unless by agreement inholders assume maintenance and repair responsibilities); parking facilities near the Middle Fork Trailhead would be expanded, as needed, by 50 cars; Road 5640 would be closed to motorized recreation access, between its junction with Road 56 and the Taylor River Bridge, with this segment reduced to ML 1. Even if the inholders, via an agreement, choose to keep the road open for their use, it would remain closed to motorized recreation access. The Snoqualmie Lake and Dingford Creek Trailheads would be closed, with only hiker/stock allowed on Trail 1003 from the Middle Fork Trailhead to the Dingford Creek Tie (1003.2). Hiker/stock/mountain bike use would be allowed on the Middle Fork Trail, from the Dingford Creek Tie to the trails end.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public involvement for this proposed project began in 1994, with the Forest-wide Access and Travel Management planning process.

In early 1996, the Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust, supported by a grant from the King County Council and the Washington State Department of Natural Resources, convened a task force of local residents, landowners, resource experts, user groups, and public agency representatives to develop a concept for long-term use and management of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River watershed. This concept was documented in the *Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie River Valley Concept* (Jones & Jones, 10/96) and the *Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie River Valley Phase II River Corridor Public Use Concept*, (Jones & Jones, 10/97).

In 1997, all roads under consideration for closure or decommissioning, and analyzed in this EA, were posted with a notice to that effect.

On March 6, 1998, a "scoping letter" for the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Watershed Access Travel Management project (MF ATM) was mailed to over 448 individuals, organizations, agencies, and Tribes.

Public "scoping meetings" were held on March 26, 1998 and April 13, 1998; public comments on the proposed MF ATM project were accepted.

On September 1, 1998, approximately 560 letters were sent to interested parties, requesting assistance in developing a reasonable range of alternatives. About 90 individuals, organizations, and agencies responded to the letter, and asked to be involved in the alternative development process. An alternative development public meeting was held on February 9, 1999; 56 individuals attended the meeting. Four draft alternatives were presented at that meeting; they were corrected and modified, based on the public input from the February 9 meeting.

On May 18, 1999, a mailing was sent to all individuals who had expressed interest in assisting the Forest Service in the development process. This mailing included: a written description of the four alternatives, as modified by the February 9, 1999 meeting; maps of the proposed alternatives; and Forest Service responses to the comments received at this meeting or from follow-up letters as a result of the February meeting. On June 2, 1999, a public meeting was held, to present the final range of alternatives. Thirty-two individuals attended the meeting.

The MF ATM project has been listed in several editions of the Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions.

Approximately 560 written public comments and one petition (containing 50 signatures) were received in response to public scoping for issues, concerns and opportunities.

The 30-day public comment period on the EA ran from April 9 through June 8, 2002. Of the 1,104 responses received, about 866 (78%) supported Alternative E, the Forest Service preferred alternative. It is estimated that about 85% of those who responded would support the Modified Alternative E. Supporters included the Alpine Lakes Protection Society; the American White Water Association; Back Country Bicycle Trail Club, East Lake Washington Audubon Society; International Mountain Bicycling Association; Issaquah Alps; King County Executive Ron Sims and King County Councilman Larry Phillips; King County Rural Forest Commission; Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust; Northwest Ecosystems Alliance; Pack and Paddles Canoe Club; Puget Sound Alliance of Retired Americans; Seattle Audubon Society; Washington State Department of Natural Resources; Washington Trails Association; Washington Wilderness Coalition, MidFORC, The Mountaineers, and 850 individuals (EA Appendix G, pages G-2 to G-5).

My decision, in part, is made considering all of the public comments received.

Additional Analysis, In Response to Public Comments

As a result of public comment, the interdisciplinary team completed the following additional analysis. Also see the EA Appendix G: Public Comments to Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Watershed Access and Travel Management Environmental Assessment and Forest Service Responses.

Recreation

Affected Environment

Table 1. Qualitative Differences Between Trail Opportunities in the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Watershed (Appendix G, Comment #21)

Trail #	Mi	Proposed Use	Season of Use	Level of Difficulty	Beginning and Ending Elevation	Experience
1002 - Snoqualmie Lake	6.3	Hiker/ Stock/Mt. Bike	Spring / Summer /Fall	Easy / Follows abandoned road	1200' 1800'	Old growth, valley bottom, follows river
1002.01 - Snoqualmie Lake	4.3	Hiker Stock	Summer /Fall	Difficult	1800' 3800'	Old growth, lakes, high country
1003 - Middle Fork	5.7	Hiker/ Stock/Mt. Bike	Spring/ Summer /Fall	Easy	1000' 1200'	Valley bottom trail adjacent to river
1003.1 - MF & Taylor River Tie	0.3	Hiker/ Stock/Mt. Bike	Spring/ Summer /Fall	Easy / Trailhead tie	1000'	Bridges the Middle Fork River
1003.01 Middle Fork	7.6	Hiker/ Stock/ Mt. Bike	Spring/ Summer /Fall	Easy	1200' 2800'	Valley bottom trail adjacent to river
1003.2 Dingford Tie	0,2	Hiker/ Stock/ Mt. Bike	Spring/ Summer / Fall	Easy/ Trailhead tie	1300- 1200'	Bridges the Middle Fork River
1004 - Nordrum Lake	0.3	Hiker	Summer / Fall	Difficult/ Have to ford the river	1800' 1850'	Valley bottom trail adjacent to Taylor River.
1004.01 - Nordrum Lake	2.3	Hiker	Summer / Fall	Difficult/ brushy/ steep and rough	1850' 3700'	Valley bottom/ high country/ lake
1005 - Dingford Creek	0.8	Hiker/ Stock	Summer / Fall	Moderate/ Not recommended for stock	1300' 2000'	Steep switch- backs /second growth trees

1005.01 Dingford Creek	5.9	Hiker/ Stock	Summer / Fall	Moderate/ Not recommended for stock	2000' 3800'	Wilderness/old growth/ lakes
1005.1 - Hester Lake	2.5	Hiker/ Stock	Summer / Fall	Moderate/ Stock not recom- mended	2900' 3900'	Wilderness/high country/ lakes
1006 - Martens Lake	0.5	Hiker	Summer / Fall	Difficult/ brushy and steep	1100' 2200'	Climbs steeply thru old growth
1006.01 - Martens Lake	1.0	Hiker	Summer / Fall	Difficult/ brushy and steep	2200' 3100'	High country views
1010 - Kaleetan Lake	2.4	Hiker	Summer / Fall	Difficult/ narrow steep sideslopes	3400' 3900'	Lakes/ high country views
1012 - High Lakes	3.8	Hiker	Summer / Fall	Difficult/ can be muddy	4100' 3900'	Subalpine meadows/trees/ lakes
1013.3 - Rock Creek	3.5	Hiker	Summer / Fall	Difficult/ rocky, brushy, steep sideslopes	1600' 3000'	Old growth/ waterfall/ views
1013.32 - Rock Creek	0.9	Hiker	Summer / Fall	Difficult/ rocky, brushy, steep sideslopes	3000' 4100'	Old growth/ views
1030 - Dutch Miller Gap	0.6	Hiker/ Stock	Summer / Fall	Moderate	2800' 2950'	Valley/ various forest types/ meadows/ rockslides, waterfalls and jagged peaks
1030.01 - Dutch Miller Gap	6.8	Hiker/ Stock	Summer / Fall	Moderate	2950' 5000'	Meadows/ views of rockslides, waterfalls and jagged peaks
1030.1 - Williams Lake	1.0	Hiker	Summer / Fall	Easy	4400' 4600'	Spectacular views/ lake
1035 - Pratt River	10	Hiker or Hiker/ Stock	Spring/ Summer / Fall/ Winter	Easy/ Difficult/ much of trail is on an old railroad grade	1000' 3000'	Dense second growth/ upper portions isolated
1035.01 - Pratt River	2.0	Hiker	Summer / Fall	Difficult	3000' 3200'	Old growth/ isolated
CCC/Taylor River Trail	3.0	Hiker/ Stock/ Mt. Bike	Spring / Summer / Fall/ winter	Easy	1000' 1050'	Mostly second growth

Access

Affected Environment

Table 2. Qualitative differences between various segments of Road 56, in terms of the ease of maintenance, the amount of damage the road causes to the watershed, scenic and noise impacts of the road on nearby trails.

Road #56 Segment	Miles	Ease of Maintenance	Scenic or Noise Impacts
Segment #1 - W line S 30 to Taylor River Bridge	3.7	Crushed rock surfacing, fairly easy to blade. More maintenance is needed due to higher traffic level. This segment is bladed at least two times a year (ML 3). Annual road maintenance cost is estimated at \$2,900. Estimated annual average road repair costs is \$48,654 (EA page 4-22).	This segment of road probably results in the greatest scenic, noise, and dust impacts. It is the most heavily used segment for pleasure driving, river access, day use, dispersed camping, and accesses the Middle Fork/Taylor River Trailhead. All vehicles accessing National Forest System lands within the planning area must travel or at least a portion of this segment of road.
Segment #2 - Taylor River Bridge to Road 5640	0.2	Limited crush rock surfacing. More difficult to maintain than Segment #1 (ML 3). Annual road maintenance cost is about \$993. An estimated annual average road repair cost is \$0 (EA page 4-22).	Similar to Segment #1
Segment #3 - Road 5640 to Dingford Creek	6.4	Native material surfacing, difficult to grade. Maintenance consists mostly of ditch maintenance and brushing (ML 2). Annual road maintenance cost is about \$1,914. Estimated annual average road repair costs are \$21,334 (EA page 4-22).	Limited noise and scenic impacts. This segment of road receives minor to moderate vehicular use, river access, day use, dispersed camping. There would noise potential at the Dingford Creek Trailhead and along the trail immediately adjacent to this segment of road.
Segment #4 - Dingford Creek to end	7.6	Ease of maintenance the same as segment #3. Estimated annual maintenance cost is \$3,158. Estimated annual average road repair costs are \$3,252 (EA page 4-22).	Least scenic or noise impact. Receives the least use, would disturb the fewest dispersed recreationists, including trail users. Vehicles could not be heard or seen from most trails segments.

Land Ownership

Affected Environment

Over 98% of the lands accessed from Road 56 between the Taylor River Bridge and its terminus are National Forest System lands. Approximately 481 acres are privately owned. Private lands include:

- Harrington property – 120 acres in Section 26, T24N, R10E;
- Northwest Wilderness Program properties – 200 acres in Section 1, T23N, R11E and approximately 20 acres in Section 15, T23N, R11E;
- Cascade Land Conservancy property – 60 acres in Sections 36, T24N, R11E and Section 34, T24N, R12E;
- Hardscrabble LLC property – 20 acres in Section 1, T23N, R11E;
- Bob Jackson’s Spruce Claims – 41.32 acres in T23N, R11E, Section 11; and
- Landers and partners property – 20 acres in Section 1, T23N, R11E and Section 36, T24N, R11E.

The Harrington property (120 acres) and the Cascade Land Conservancy property (60 acres) are proposed for purchase and inclusion as National Forest System lands, either in 2003 or 2004. Once these purchases are completed, there would be approximately 300 acres of privately owned land remaining in the Upper Middle Fork Snoqualmie River watershed, or about 3/10s of 1% of the project planning area (302 acres/93,350 acres = .0032%).

The Forest Service is also proposing to purchase the Green Crow property (160 acres), accessed from Road 5640, in the year 2003 or 2004.

Minerals

Affected Environment

Table 3. Mining Claims in the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Watershed within the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest Boundary

Claim Name/Number	Claimant	Legal Description	Location Date	Access Route
Duchess	Landers, Maykut, and Morita	T23N, R11E, NE Section 1 & T24N, R11E, SE Section 36	04/09/1962	Road 56, Trail #1030 and cross country hike
STOBOKOR	George	T23N, R11E, NW Section 1	11/15/2001	Road 56, cross country hike
Anna Laura	Jackson and Landers	T23N, R11E, NW SW Section 1	08/30/1951	Road 56, cross country hike
PL	Jackson	T23N, R11E, SW SE Section 2	04/18/2000	Road 56, cross country hike
The Crystal Haven	Jackson	T23N, R11E, SE Section 9	03/26/1998	Road 56, cross country hike

Copper Queen	Gilbreath, Maykut, West	T23N, R11E, NE NW Section 11	08/30/1951	Road 56, cross country hike
Spruce #27	Gilbreath, Landers, West	T23N, R11E, NE NW Section 11	07/20/1962	Road 56, cross country hike
Spruce #38	Jackson and Maykut	T23N, R11E, NW SW Section 11	07/20/1962	Road 56, cross country hike
Porter	Brown	T23N, R11E, SW Section 11	09/02/1993	Road 56, cross country hike
Cascade #9	Dillhoff	T23N, R11E, SW SE Section 11 and NW Section 14	07/20/1962	Road 56, cross country hike
Porter	West	T23N, R11E, SW Section 23	09/02/1998	Road 56, cross country hike
Rainy	Gilbreath, Jackson	T24N, R10E, NW Section 16	07/06/1948	Road 5640, cross country hike
Rainy #1	Gilbreath, Jackson	T24N, R10E, NW Section 16	06/17/1966	Road 5640, cross country hike
Rainy #2	Gilbreath, Jackson	T24N, R10E, NW Section 16	10/11/1962	Road 5640, cross country hike
Rainy #3	Gilbreath, Jackson	T24N, R10E, NW Section 16	10/11/1962	Road 5640, cross country hike
Purple Hope #2	Dillhoff	T24N, R11E, SW Section 29 and SE Section 30	07/25/1981	Road 56, helicopter or hiking cross country
Purple Hope #4	George	T24N, R11E, SE Section 30	07.25.1981	Road 56, helicopter, or hiking cross country
Nellie	Dillhoff, Gilbreath, and Maykut	T24N, R12E, NW SW Section 34	08/10/1951	Road 56, hiking cross country

Wildlife

Environmental Consequences

Grizzly Bear

Effects on core habitat have been re-evaluated for closure of Road 56 at the Taylor River Bridge (Alternative D), closure of Road 56 at Dingford Creek (Alternatives C and E), and

considering the proposed Pratt River Trail Reconstruction Project. The closures of Road 56 proposed in Alternatives C, D, and E would change use levels from high to low on Rock Creek Trails 1013.3 and 1013.32, Dutch Miller Gap Trail 1030 and 1030.1, and Williams Lake Trail 1030.1. In addition, Alternative D would change use levels on Dingford Creek Trail 1005 and 1005.01 and Hester Lake Trail 1005.1 from high to low use levels.

These effects are displayed in the following table. The net loss of acres displayed for the Pratt River Trail Reconstruction project assumes the first four miles of the Pratt River Trail would change to high use, and the remainder of the trail would be low use.

Table 4. Snoqualmie Grizzly Bear Management Unit Core Habitat Analysis – Cumulative Acres

Acres	Baseline (2001)	CCC /Taylor River Trail	CCC/ Taylor River Trail + MF ATM Alt A & B	CCC/ Taylor River Trail + MF ATM Alt C & E	CCC/ Taylor River Trail + MF ATM Alt. D	CCC/ Taylor River Trail + MF ATM Alt. C & E + Pratt Trail	CCC/ Taylor River Trail + MF ATM Alt. D + Pratt Trail
Early Core	64,678	64,598	64,598	68,058	70,770	67,022	69,734
Late Core	58,383	58,308	58,308	60,688	63,400	59,678	62,390
Change in Early Core	0	-80	-80	+3,460	+6,092	+2,424	+5,056
Change in Late Core	0	-80	-80	+2,385	+5,017	+1,375	+4,007

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

I have determined through the environmental analysis that this is not a major Federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment; therefore, an environmental impact statement is not needed. This determination was made considering the following factors.

- a) In terms of context (40 CFR 1508.27(a)): This project is site-specific and by itself, does not have international, national, region-wide or statewide importance (EA, page 1-1, *Proposed Action*).
- b) In terms of intensity (40 CFR 1508.27(b)):
 - 1) Impacts can be both beneficial and adverse; for this project, there are no known significant irreversible resource commitments or irretrievable losses of timber production, recreation opportunity, wildlife habitats, soil

- productivity, or water quality. The project will be beneficial to natural resources (EA, Chapter 4, page 4-48 to 49).
- 2) With the mitigation measures listed on EA pages 2-18 to 23, there will be no adverse effects to public safety (EA pages 2-18 to 23, Appendix E, and within this Decision notice on pages 6-8).
 - 3) There are no known significant cumulative effects between this project and other projects implemented or planned (EA, pages 4-49 through 4-58).
 - 4) The project is not located in the proximity of parklands, prime farmlands, rangeland, Inventoried Roadless Areas, or ecologically critical areas. A recommended Wild and Scenic River corridor will be positively affected. Alternative E, as modified, will reduce visual impacts caused by dispersed sites. Dispersed sites will be restored and vehicles will not be visible from the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River, except when Road 56 can be seen from the river. Implementation will also remove up to 8.2 miles of road from the Recommended Scenic River corridor (EA, page 4-15). Wetlands and the Taylor and Snoqualmie River floodplains will also be positively affected, due to removing or hardening dispersed site within riparian reserves, closing off-road vehicle access within riparian reserves, and reducing roads within Riparian Reserves (EA, pages 2-25, 4-6 to 4-10, 4-15 to 4-17, and 4-30 to 4-35).
 - 5) A decision to implement this project does not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects. Any future actions will be evaluated through the NEPA process.
 - 6) A cultural resource survey has been completed; the Washington State Historic Preservation Office has been consulted and no cultural resources listed or eligible for the National Register of Historic places will be affected (EA, page 4-12).
 - 7) A Biological Assessment has been completed, with effect determinations for threatened or endangered species. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service [now NOAA Fisheries] have been consulted and concur with a finding of no short- or long-term adverse effects on populations or habitats for: the northern spotted owl, marbled murrelet, bald eagle, grizzly bear, gray wolf, Canada lynx, Puget Sound Chinook salmon, or bull trout. Road to trail conversion and decommissioning of roads will result in long-term benefits to these species, by reducing the widths of linear openings and improving interior forest conditions. The project will result in a net gain of grizzly bear core and security habitat (EA, pages 2-26 and 4-26 to 4-31 and biological assessments, in the project analysis file).
 - 8) The effects of the project, including cumulative effects, are not likely to be highly controversial. There were over 1,100 responses during the 30-day EA comment period. Approximately 78% (866 responses) supported Alternative E as presented in the EA. With clarification that patrons to Goldmyer will be allowed access to Dingford Creek Trailhead past the seasonal closure of Road 56, near the Taylor River Bridge, and with implementation of Modified Alternative E, it is estimated that another 7%

(73 responses) of those who responded would be supportive of the plan. Most of the remaining respondents (about 15% or 165 responses) supported Alternative E with one of the two following exceptions: 1) no mountain bikes on the Middle Fork Trail and close Road 56 permanently near the Taylor River Bridge (about 9%); and 2) keep Road 56 open to the end (6%) (EA Appendix G, pages G-2 to G-5 and Decision Notice, pages 1-5).

- 9) The actions do not threaten a violation of Federal, State or local law or regulations.

OTHER FINDINGS REQUIRED BY LAW OR REGULATION

The Middle Fork Snoqualmie Access and Travel Management Plan to be implemented, with non-significant (under the National Forest Management Act) Plan amendment, is consistent with the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest (Forest Plan), as amended by the ROD for Amendments of Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Planning Documents Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl. The requirements for survey and manage species have been met (EA, pages 4-19 to 4-20 and 4-28 to 4-30).

The Middle Fork Snoqualmie River watershed is a Tier 2 Key Watershed, a source of high quality water. Watershed analysis has been completed: Middle Fork Snoqualmie Watershed Analysis (MBS, 1998) (EA, page 1-12). The Forest Plan, as amended standards and guidelines call for a reduction of existing system and non-system road mileage. Modified Alternative E will result in a reduction of approximately 0.3 miles of non-system road, plus about 36.3 miles of system roads (if inholders choose not to assume maintenance and repair responsibilities on portions of Roads 56 and 5640), or 28.7 miles (if inholders choose to assume maintenance and repair responsibilities). This would reduce the miles of roads on National Forest System lands in the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River watershed by either 57% or 72% (EA, pages 4-9, 4-17, and 4-21 to -22).

The intent of the Aquatic Conservation Strategy (ACS), a key component of the 1994 amendment to the Forest Plan (commonly called the Northwest Forest Plan), is to restore and maintain the ecological health of watersheds and aquatic ecosystems, and to protect habitat for fish and other riparian-dependent species and resources. This approach seeks to prevent further degradation and restore habitat over broad landscapes, like the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River drainage, as opposed to individual projects or small watersheds. Overall, the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Watershed Access and Travel Management Plan will contribute to the restoration and maintenance of the ecological health of watershed and aquatic ecosystems, and in meeting the objectives of the ACS (EA pages 4-42 to 4-48).

Roads Analysis, a requirement of 36 CFR 212.5, has been completed (Forest-wide Roads Analysis, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, 2003).

Modified Alternative E will decommission approximately 59 dispersed sites, 0.3 miles of dispersed site access roads, and either 28.7 or 45.4 miles of system road totaling either 172 or 275 acres (dependent on whether inholders choose to enter into a special use

agreement to maintain and repair portions of Roads 56 and 5640). At the decommissioned sites, natural vegetation will be allowed to grow back, which, at the project level and to a lesser extent at the watershed landscape level, will help restore the vegetation distribution, diversity, and complexity, and will restore and better protect affected aquatic systems (EA, pages 4-42 through 4-48).

By permanently closing Road 56 to motorized recreation at Dingford Creek and seasonally closing Road 56 near the Taylor River Bridge, opportunities for solitude in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness will increase; there will be fewer visitors and fewer encounters between parties, as a result. Over time, natural processes will be allowed to heal past recreation impacts, resulting in a more natural appearing wilderness environment and less obvious indications of human influence (EA, pages 4-13 and 4-1).

Modified Alternative E will meet Wild and Scenic River goals and standards and guidelines by enhancing the recreation, visual, wildlife, fisheries, and water quality values of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie and Taylor Rivers. Modified Alternative E will decommission approximately 59 motorized dispersed recreation sites and permanently block and decommission all access roads to dispersed sites. As a result, restoration of Riparian Reserves will occur and visual quality from recommended recreation and scenic river corridors will be improved. Vehicles will not be visible from the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River, except as occasionally seen from Road 56. My decision will also result in a reduction of about 8.2 miles of road within the recommended Scenic River corridor, dependent on whether inholders choose to enter into a special use agreement to maintain and repair portions of Roads 56 and 5640 (EA, pages 4-8, 4-9, 4-15, 4-16, and 4-17).

Implementing my decision includes decommissioning approximately 2.4 miles of spur roads located in MA 14 – Deer and Elk Winter Range. This will benefit deer and elk, by improving winter range habitat connectivity and by reducing harassment from recreational driving and shooting (EA, page 4-30).

Modified Alternative E will not result in changes to current recreation access within the following land allocations: Late-Successional Reserves; Late-Successional Old Growth; Administratively Withdrawn allocations (MA 1B – Semi-Primitive Non-motorized Dispersed Recreation and MA 27 – Alpine Lakes Management Area Dispersed Recreation – DR); and matrix allocations (MA 27 – Alpine Lakes Management Area General Forest – GF and Scenic Forest – SF, MA 2A – Scenic Viewshed Foreground, MA 12 – Mature and Old Growth Wildlife; and MA 17 – Timber Management Emphasis).

Approximately 2,473 acres of land where timber harvest is permitted will no longer be accessible for harvest. These lands are located in matrix lands, allocated to Alpine Lakes Management Area 27 - Scenic Forest, and MA 5B - Recommended Scenic River. Timber harvest is permitted in these management areas, but is not the primary objective. The programmed timber harvest on the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest is 7

million board feet. Loss of these 2,473 acres will have minimal to no effect on this harvest level.

APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to the regulations found at 36 CFR 215.7. Appeal of this Decision must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 215.14 (Content of an Appeal) and must provide sufficient evidence and rationale to show why the Responsible Official's decision should be remanded or reversed. Appeals must be in writing and must be postmarked and sent to the Appeal Deciding Officer within 45 days of publication of the legal notice of this decision in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. The Appeal Deciding Officer for this project is:

Regional Forester
ATTN: 1570 APEALS
USDA Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Region
P.O. Box 3623
Portland, OR 97208-3623

IMPLEMENTATION

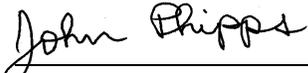
This decision may be implemented five days after the close of the appeal period, if no appeal is filed. If an appeal is filed, the decision will not be implemented until 15 days following the date of the appeal disposition.

The Forest Service intends to implement the various components of my decision, Modified Alternative E, as follows:

- Close Road 56 at Dingford Creek to motorized recreation access: November 2004.
- Seasonal Closure of Road 56 from near the Taylor River Bridge to Dingford Creek Trailhead: November 2004.
- Three-year mountain bike trail on the Middle Fork Trail: begin after April 15, 2004, as soon as the trail conditions will accommodate bike and stock use.
- Road decommissioning: as funds become available.
- Dispersed site decommissioning and hardening: immediately after appeal period, and as funds become available.
- Sanitation facilities at Dingford Creek Trailhead, and Camp Brown and Pratt Dispersed Recreation sites: as funding becomes available.

CONTACT PERSON

For further information, contact Doug Schrenk, Snoqualmie Ranger District, 42404 SE North Bend Way, North Bend, WA 98045, (425) 888-1421.



JOHN PHIPPS

Forest Supervisor

Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest

September 26, 2003

Date