



File Code: 1900

Date: February 1, 2001

Dear Forest User,

I would like to invite you to review a proposal to amend the 1986 *Monongahela National Forest National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan)* regarding threatened and endangered species. This letter and attached summary have information about the proposal, which deals with management direction proposed to benefit federally threatened and endangered species found on the Monongahela National Forest (MNF).

Nine federally listed threatened and endangered (T&E) species currently occur on the MNF. Those species are: Virginia Big-Eared Bat (*Corynorhinus townsendii virginianus*), Indiana Bat (*Myotis sodalis*), West Virginia Northern Flying Squirrel (*Glaucomys sabrinus fuscus*), Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), Cheat Mountain Salamander (*Plethodon nettingi nettingi*), Shale Barren Rock Cress (*Arabis serotina*), Virginia Spirea (*Spiraea virginiana*), Running Buffalo Clover (*Trifolium stoloniferum*), and the Small-Whorled Pogonia (*Isotria medeoloides*).

BACKGROUND

Recently, the Forest completed an extensive Biological Assessment (BA) regarding these federally listed species. New information and issues concerning these species has been compiled in project records on the MNF and in the literature since 1986, when the current *Forest Plan* was approved. The BA assessed this information regarding these species, to 1) evaluate the effects of ongoing management practices on national forest system lands of Monongahela National Forest, and the effects of anticipated management through implementation of the *Forest Plan*; 2) determine if existing standards and guidelines must be adjusted or additional mitigation measures are needed to protect these species; 3) ensure that management decisions will employ state-of-the-science information regarding these species; and 4) provide a basis for a Forest Plan amendment, if one was needed. The BA concluded that a Forest Plan amendment was needed to address recommended changes in Forest standards and guidelines.

Upon completion, we presented our Biological Assessment to the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for review, and requested formal consultation with the USFWS as required by the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended. To conclude this formal consultation, the Service will review the BA and in the near future, issue a Biological Opinion.

We have, and will continue to collaborate very closely with the USFWS, members of various threatened and endangered species recovery teams, members of the scientific community, and WV Division of Natural Resources during the development of the BA and Biological Opinion. Therefore, we feel we have the general understanding of the types of recommendations and requirements that are likely to be issued in the USFWS' Biological Opinion necessary to start this scoping. Any changes to the Proposed Action that may result from the Biological Opinion are expected to be easily incorporated into the NEPA process during the development of alternatives.



The final decision will address reasonable and prudent measures and associated terms and conditions contained in the final Biological Opinion. It will also provide rationale for the adoption or rejection of discretionary conservation requirements that may be included in the final Biological Opinion.

We feel it would be advantageous to begin the NEPA process for a T&E amendment in as timely a manner as possible so as to further the conservation and recovery of T&E species by means of incorporating recommended direction into the *Forest Plan*; to meet legal requirements; and to avoid unnecessarily delaying other uses of the Forest while completing this process. Consequently, we are initiating this request for comments in advance of receiving the final Biological Opinion.

Purpose of and Need for Action

The purpose and need for the proposed Forest Plan amendment is to incorporate management recommendations and requirements contained in the Biological Assessment and the forthcoming USFWS Biological Opinion. The proposed amendment would update the Forest Plan to include these required actions.

Proposed Action

The proposed amendment would be programmatic, as is the Forest Plan. That is to say, it provides a framework for future activities and emphasizes the application of certain activities on the land but it does not provide site-specific decisions.

The proposed amendment would add several standards and guidelines to the Forest Plan that would apply to the entire MNF. In addition, a few existing standards and guidelines in the Forest Plan would be changed or rescinded. These additions, along with the existing Forest Plan standards and guidelines for threatened and endangered species, will assist the MNF in improving and carrying out programs for the conservation of these species, as required by Sections 2(c)(1) and 7(a)(1) of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended. Completion of the proposed amendment will contribute to recovery of the species by providing quality habitat across the Forest for them. Because MNF gave high priority to the recovery of threatened and endangered species in the development of the original Forest Plan, it is expected that this proposed amendment would not significantly alter the multiple-use goals and objectives for long-term land and resource management on the Forest.

Request for input

Attached, you will find a summary outlining the proposed Forest Plan amendment. Please review this summary and let me know if you have any concerns or comments on the proposal.

An Environmental Assessment will be prepared to analyze the effects of the Proposed Action and any other alternative that may be generated as a result of public response to this scoping letter. A No Action Alternative (meaning no change from current management and the continued implementation of the *Forest Plan* into the foreseeable future) also will be considered; it will present a baseline for analyzing the effects of all alternatives.

Decision To Be Made

The decision to be made is –

1. Whether to amend the *Forest Plan* as identified in the Proposed Action, incorporating recommendations and requirements of the BA and Biological Opinion by way of modifying pertinent standards, guidelines, and monitoring requirements; or
2. Whether to select an alternative to the Proposed Action that favorably addresses the recovery and conservation of the nine threatened and endangered species of the MNF and that is consistent with requirements of the Endangered Species Act of 1973; and
3. Whether the selected alternative will have significant impact on the quality of the human environment and an Environmental Impact Statement needs to be prepared (NEPA, 1501.4© and (e)); or whether no significant impacts are expected, and therefore, a “Finding of No Significant Impact,” NEPA, 1508.13) needs to be prepared.

As the Forest Supervisor of the MNF, I am the Responsible Official for this decision. My decision will be documented in a Decision Notice (FSH 1909.15, 43.2).

Additional Information

This proposal and associated information can be found on the MNF website (www.fs.fed.us/r9/mnf) or at the MNF Supervisors Office. If you have any concerns or interests in this project, please contact Daniel Arling at Monongahela National Forest National 200 Sycamore Street, Elkins, WV 26241; darling@fs.fed.us; or by phone at (304) 636-1800, ext. 202. Please be specific when formulating your concerns and submit your comments to us by March 12, 2001. If you have evidence (research with literature citations) to substantiate any changes you recommend to the proposed action, please enclose it with your comments.

We appreciate your assistance and interest in managing your National Forest.

Sincerely,

/s/ Charles L. Myers

CHARLES L. MYERS
Forest Supervisor

Enclosure

Summary Of Proposed Forest Plan Amendment For Threatened & Endangered Species

The Monongahela National Forest (MNF) requests your comments regarding the non-significant, threatened and endangered (T&E) species amendment being proposed to the *Monongahela National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan* (Forest Plan). *

LOCATION

The MNF consists of 909,409 acres of land and water in 10 eastern West Virginia counties (Barbour, Grant, Greenbrier, Nicholas, Pendleton, Pocahontas, Preston, Randolph, Tucker, and Webster). It comprises less than 6% of the State. A Vicinity Map may be found on page 5 of this summary.

PURPOSE AND NEED

Existing standards and guidelines in the *Forest Plan* currently protect special habitats and allow management of all the types of habitat needed by federally listed species; and activities that protect populations and enhance habitats for these species can be carried out under general guidance provided in the present *Forest Plan*, as amended. However, information in the BA suggests that *Forest Plan* direction relevant to the maintenance or restoration of MNF threatened and endangered species habitat could be improved to reflect pertinent scientific information that has been obtained since the Plan was approved in 1986. This is especially true in the case of the Indiana bat and the WV northern flying squirrel.

In general, a Forest Plan amendment for T&E is needed to —

- Add some standards to the Plan that will provide more specific guidance for MNF threatened and endangered management (see Proposed Action for details); and
- Modify or rescind some existing standards and guidelines to reflect the most current scientifically acceptable methods of T&E management; and

Adopt recovery requirements that are likely to be identified in the USFWS' Biological Opinion as a result of consultation on the recently completed BA, and employ them in Forest management.

These additions, along with existing Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines for threatened and endangered species, will assist the MNF in improving and carrying out programs for the conservation of these species, as required by Sections 2(c)(1) and 7(a)(1) of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended

PROPOSED ACTION

Following are proposed additions and changes to the existing standards and guidelines in the *Monongahela National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan*. These additions will update the Forest Plan to incorporate recently developed requirements for the management of the T&E species on the MNF.

**Note: This proposed amendment would affect Monongahela National Forest System lands only, not private lands*

Forest wide proposed changes:

(Includes all Federally Listed Threatened and Endangered Species)

The existing list of federally listed threatened and endangered species known to occur or that may occur on the MNF will be updated to the following:

<u>Common Name</u>	<u>Scientific Name</u>
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>
Cheat Mountain Salamander	<i>Plethodon nettingi nettingi</i>
Indiana Bat	<i>Myotis sodalis</i>
Virginia Big-Eared Bat	<i>Corynorhinus townsendii virginianus</i>
West Virginia Northern Flying Squirrel	<i>Glaucomys sabrinus fuscus</i>
Running Buffalo Clover	<i>Trifolium stoloniferum</i>
Shale Barren Rock Cress	<i>Arabis serotina</i>
Small-Whorled Pogonia	<i>Isotria medeoloides</i>
Virginia Spirea	<i>Spiraea virginiana</i>

The official list of species is maintained at the local office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Any future changes to the official list will supercede the list shown here.

Language found in the Forest Plan will be edited to assure that it is clear and provides the same protection to all wildlife, fish, plants and other species that are on the USFWS official list. For example, the Standard and Guideline in the current Plan (pg. 84) will be edited to read:

Management of habitat critical to endangered and threatened ~~wildlife and fish~~ species is considered the first priority management activity. Forest personnel will work with State agencies and the US Fish and Wildlife Service, U. S. Department of Interior in identifying endangered and threatened species and critical habitat areas. The requirements of endangered species recovery plans will be fully coordinated with the Forest Land Management Plan. The Forest Service, USDA, will participate in the development of recovery plans for all threatened and endangered species.

Areas of Influence and Management Plans:

Areas of Influence will be identified for all T&E species or populations and Management Plans will be developed that reflect the intent of the Recovery Plan and/or best scientific knowledge. These Management Plans and any amendments will be generated collaboratively with USFWS, DNR, and other members of the scientific community. Areas of Influence and Management Plans are intended to be dynamic and able to incorporate the most current scientific information on a given species. Management Plans will include monitoring recommendations and requirements.

General direction concerning threats to T&E due to exotic, non-desirable, or invasive species will be set.

Species specific proposed changes:

Bald Eagle

Conservation measures needed for the bald eagle are covered under forest wide proposed changes, therefore no further species specific recommendations are being proposed.

Cheat Mountain Salamander

Forest wide:

In order to provide for the conservation and recovery of Cheat Mountain salamanders the MNF will:

- Avoid activities in known Cheat Mountain salamander populations.
- Conduct on-site surveys when ground or vegetation disturbing projects are proposed in high potential areas or near known populations.

Area of Influence:

- Area of Influence will be based upon known populations and the results of future on-site surveys.

Indiana Bat

Forest wide:

In order to maintain or increase suitable habitat for the Indiana bat the MNF will:

- Maintain suitable roosting trees.
- Protect any roost trees that are discovered.
- Retain hickory trees in all cutting units.
- Ensure that adequate snags (6 snags/acre) are retained in or near cutting units.

Area of Influence:

- The Area of Influence is considered to be a 5-mile radius around hibernacula or 2 miles around a maternity colony for the Indiana bat.
- Within the Area of Influence do not fell trees in large-scale operations (timber harvest etc) between April 1 and November 15.
- The intensity and types of management allowed within the Area of Influence will be evaluated to ensure adequate habitat is available and protective measure for the Indiana bat are sufficient

Virginia Big-Eared bat

Forest wide:

Conservation measures specifically needed for the Virginia big-eared bat are limited to the Area of Influence, therefore no forest wide measures are recommended.

Area of Influence:

- Area of Influence is considered to be a 6-mile radius around hibernacula or maternity site.
- Within the Area of Influence evaluate any buildings that exist to determine if they provide roosting habitat and apply management protections as necessary.
- Do not permit commercial cave operations in any caves occupied by Virginia big-eared bats.

West Virginia Northern Flying Squirrel

Forest wide:

Appendix X of the Forest Plan– Interim Standards for (West) Virginia northern flying squirrel will be rescinded or modified to in order to comply with the Biological Opinion and Recovery Plan as amended.

Area of Influence:

- The Area of Influence for the West Virginia northern flying squirrel will be determined based upon suitable habitat characteristics as described in the Biological Assessment and incorporating any changes suggested by USFWS in the forthcoming Biological Opinion.

Running Buffalo Clover, Shale Barren Rock Cress, Small-Whorled Pogonia, Virginia Spirea

In order to provide for the conservation and recovery of T&E plant species the MNF will:

- Avoid activities in known populations.
- Conduct on-site surveys when ground or vegetation disturbing projects are proposed in high potential areas or near known populations.

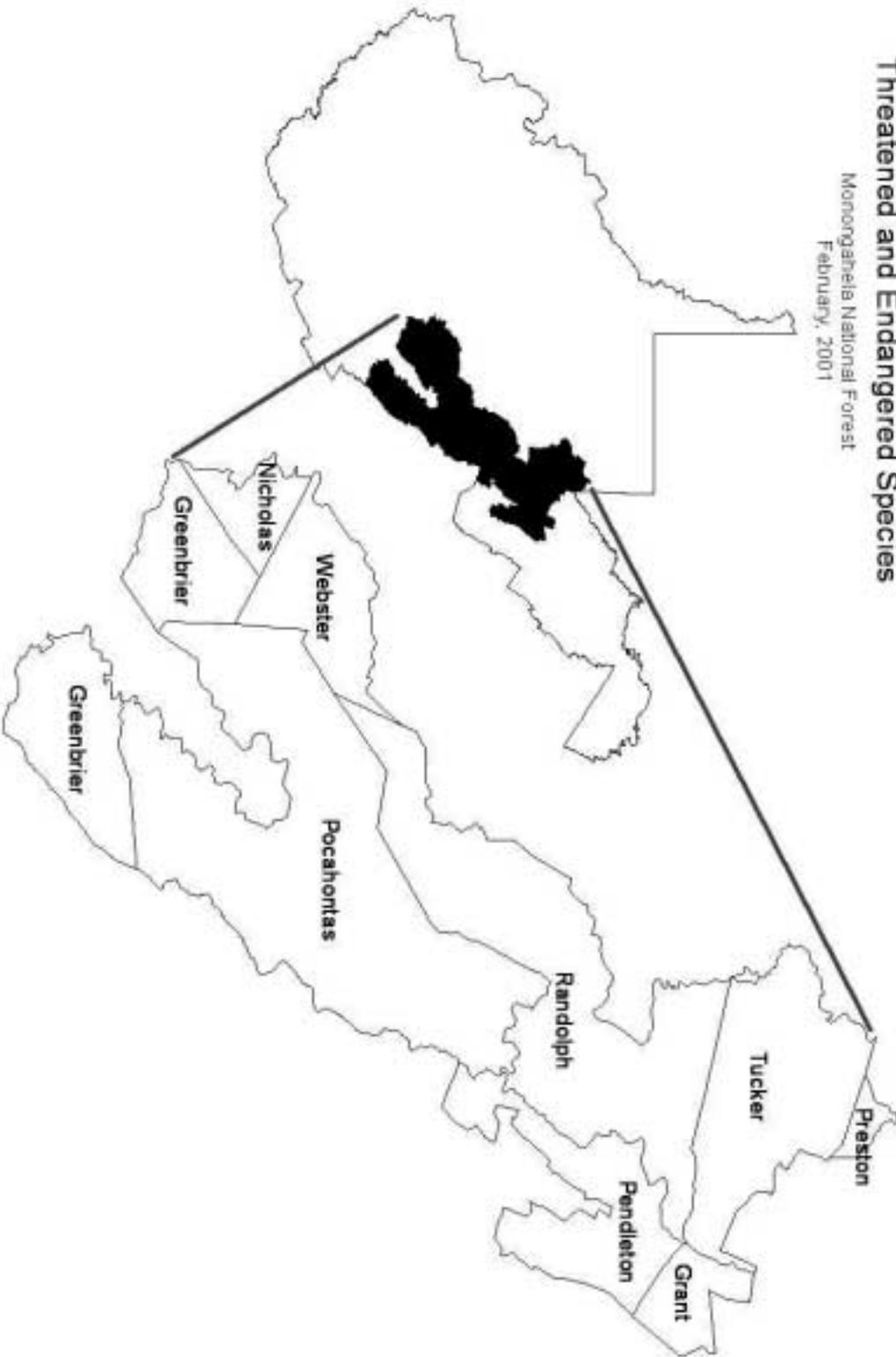
Area of Influence:

- Area of Influence will be based upon known populations and the results of future on-site surveys.

Vicinity Map

Proposed Forest Plan Amendment Threatened and Endangered Species

Monongahela National Forest
February, 2001



*NOTE: This proposed amendment would affect Monongahela National Forest System lands only, not private lands.