BALTIMORE VEGETATIVE MANAGEMENT PROJECT

DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

USDA Forest Service

Ottawa National Forest

Ontonagon & Bergland Ranger Districts

Responsible Official:

Bruce Prud'homme
District Ranger
Ontonagon Ranger District
Ottawa National Forest

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Ontonagon Ranger District
Ontonagon County, Michigan

Responsible Agency:	**USDA Forest Service**
Responsible Official:	**Bruce Prud'homme, District Ranger** **Ontonagon Ranger District** **1209 Rockland Road** **Ontonagon, Michigan 49953** **(906) 884-2085**
For Information Contact:	**John Strasser** **Interdisciplinary Team Leader**
Comments must be received:	**Within 45 days of the publication of the Notice of Availability in the Federal Register and addressed to Bruce Prud'homme, District Ranger.**

Abstract: The Ottawa National Forest is proposing to harvest timber, do watershed and wildlife habitat improvement work, improve dispersed recreation opportunities, and provide the transportation system needed to serve the proposed projects within 35,900 acres on the Ontonagon Ranger District. Public comments were considered in development of this Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to refine the scope of the decision to be made, identify major issues, shape alternatives, and direct the analysis of effects. Major issues identified for the project proposal are aspen management, balance of the softwood component, and temporary openings exceeding 40 acres in size. Additional resource concerns identified were invasive plant species, vegetative management along the North Country National Scenic Trail, and road use through private land. Four alternatives were identified and analyzed in detail, including the "No Action" alternative (Alternative 1). Alternative 2 is the proposed action scoped to the public with modifications based on additional information obtained during the analysis process. Alternative 3 emphasizes even-aged management, specifically aspen management. Alternative 4 emphasizes the softwood component and creates no temporary openings greater than 40 acres in size. Three alternatives were considered but not carried forward for detailed study; these are documented in the EIS. Alternative 3 is the preferred alternative.

Reviewers should provide the Forest Service with their comments during the review period of the draft environmental impact statement. This will enable the Forest Service to analyze and respond to the comments at one time and to use information acquired in the preparation of the final environmental impact statement, thus avoiding undue delay in the decision-making process. Reviewers have an obligation to structure their participation in the National Environmental Policy act process so that it is meaningful and alerts the agency to the reviewers' position and contentions. *Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corp. v. NRDC*, 435 U.S. 519, 553 (1978). Environmental objections that could have been raised at the draft stage may be waived if not raised until after the completion of the final environmental impact statement. *City of Angoon v. Hodel* (9th Circuit, 1986) and *Wisconsin Heritages, Inc. v. Harris*, 490 F. Supp. 1334, 1338 (E.D. Wis. 1980). Comments on the draft environmental impact statement should be specific and address the adequacy of the statement and the merits of the alternatives discussed (40 CFR 1503.3).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Forest types within the project area are primarily second growth aspen, lowland hardwoods, and northern hardwoods, with a component of mixed conifers throughout. Similar to the history of the Upper Peninsula, the project area was logged over in the late 1800s to early 1900s.

This Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) analyzes the effects of the Baltimore Vegetative Management Project (VMP) proposal to implement an array of resource management activities. Proposed activities include timber harvest, site preparation and planting, transportation management, watershed improvement projects, dispersed recreation improvements, non-native invasive species control projects, and wildlife habitat improvements. The Baltimore project area is located approximately 4 miles north of Bruce Crossing, Michigan.

The Proposed Action/Purpose and Need

The purpose of proposing activities in the Baltimore project area is derived from Forest Plan direction and any disparity between the existing and desired resource conditions, which forms the basis of a need for management action. Key elements of this purpose and need as well as a description of how the Modified Proposed Action (Alternative 2) responds to these elements are described below. Alternative 3 and 4 respond to each element to a varying degree and have been summarized in Table 1.

Promote and maintain processes that would enhance natural species diversity while providing a supply of wood products for regional and local needs to help support a stable economic base within the market area.

The Proposed Action was designed to move the area from the existing condition towards the DFC through even-aged management of aspen forest types and even- and uneven-aged management of hardwoods.

The second-growth hardwood stands proposed for treatment currently lack a balanced size class of trees and are above stocking levels recommended for healthy growth. Over-stocked stands are hindering the establishment and growth of seedlings and saplings in the understory. These stands also contain many trees of poor form and quality that are competing with trees of higher potential. There is a need to improve the quality and growth of these stands through intermediate and regeneration treatments.

Aspen type in MA 1.1 of the project area is above the Forest Plan DFC for MA 1.1, mainly because the project area contains approximately 35% of the Forest acreage devoted to MA 1.1. Because the project area contains such a large portion of MA 1.1, and approximately 44% of the aspen in MA 1.1 of the project area is over 50 years old, there is a need to regenerate and maintain aspen-dominated stands for sustained yield over time and to provide even-aged wildlife habitat.

The aspen stands proposed for treatment are mature to overmature (e.g., over 50 years), subject to disease, and have received repeated defoliation from forest tent caterpillars over the last few years. These stands are, however, largely salvageable for wood products through commercial timber harvest.

The DFC for this area is to maintain a healthy ecosystem through the use of active management. For aspen, even-aged management (clearcutting) is the optimum silvicultural method for regenerating a

new vigorous stand of aspen (Forest Plan Appendix C, page VI C-11), and for providing early successional habitat.

Maintain and enhance habitat conditions that sustain viable populations of a variety of fish and wildlife species and enhance watershed conditions.

The Proposed Action is designed to move the area from the existing condition towards the long-term DFC through various habitat enhancement activities and watershed improvements.

One of the Forestwide Management Goals as outlined in the Ottawa Forest Plan is to "Provide a variety of vegetative community types…to create a variety of habitat conditions for game and non-game species of wildlife…" (Page IV-3). In addition, the Forestwide Management Goals indicate the need to "Maintain a moderate to high amount of aspen type to provide a sustained level of habitat for white-tailed deer and ruffed grouse and to supply a sustained level of aspen timber products…" (Page IV-3).

Many wildlife species depend on structural characteristics of vegetation for their habitat needs. Achieving these goals and attaining the DFC for MA 1.1 within the project area, which contains the largest portions of contiguous aspen ecosystem on the forest, would require the use of primarily even-aged management to regenerate aspen. This type of management creates the desired conditions for species that require forest edge and early successional habitats within a mosaic of age classes and stand densities. The habitat produced is suited for species such as white-tailed deer, ruffed grouse, snowshoe hare, woodcock, and chestnut-sided warblers. Maintaining this habitat in the Baltimore area would continue to provide habitat to support favorable populations and recreational opportunities for deer and grouse hunting (Forest Plan, page IV-11).

Another Forestwide Management Goal is to "Provide an adequate amount of coniferous thermal cover for white-tailed deer and other wildlife species such as blackburnian warbler that require this important habitat component" (Page IV-3). Thus, there is a need to maintain the existing coniferous forest patches in the project area, which include stands of hemlock, cedar, red pine, balsam fir, white spruce, black spruce, and a mix of red and white pine. This would maintain a diversity of forest types and provide some limited patches of habitat in the project area for species like blackburnian and magnolia warblers, kinglets, sharp-shinned hawks, and fisher.

Part of the Forestwide Vegetative Management Standards for Old Growth Management is to "Provide old growth habitat in selected areas to maintain big trees, snags, culls, den trees, dead and down logs, and other ground material" (Page IV-88). There are more than 600 acres currently classified with an unmanaged old growth objective in MA 1.1 of the project area; however, this previous classification was inadvertently omitted in the scoping package. These acres are located along the Baltimore River and several adjacent tributaries, which coincides with some of the "favored" locations for old growth identified in the Forest Plan on page IV-91.

The Forest Plan's "Forestwide Standards and Guidelines" for riparian areas specify that we should "Preserve the beneficial values of floodplains and wetlands…" and "Minimize risk of flood loss, restore and preserve floodplain values, and protect wetlands" (Page IV-35). This coincides with the need identified within the project area to improve riparian areas and aquatic habitats for riparian dependant species, to enhance aquatic system structure, function, and composition, and improve overall watershed conditions.

The Forest Plan is essentially silent on non-native invasive plants, however, there is national direction (i.e., Forest Service Manual 2080 and Executive Order #11312) to address invasive species, and the Forest Service Chief has recently included invasive species as one of the major threats to natural resources.

Maintain a road system that allows for management of National Forest System lands and provides for public access while meeting other resource needs.

The transportation system is an important feature of the National Forest landscape that allows for the multiple-use and management of forest resources. The roaded natural environment in the project area provides recreational opportunities for passenger vehicles, ATVs, snowmobiles, and other motorized recreationists. Some National Forest roads may be closed to passenger vehicle use, thereby providing motorized use only by ATVs or snowmobiles, while providing opportunities for non-motorized recreation as well.

The transportation system should provide the most cost efficient and lowest impact transportation system needed to meet the objectives for MA 1.1 and Forest Plan goals (Forest Plan, pages IV-2 through IV-5). One of the Forestwide Management Goals is to provide, in the long-term, a network of roads that will minimize the total amount of road needed through transportation planning conducted within an integrated resource management process (Forest Plan, page IV-4).

The existing total open and closed (bermed, gated, or impassable due to vegetation) National Forest road density on National Forest System lands within MA 1.1 of the project area is approximately 3.6 miles per square mile. The DFC for road density of long-term and collector roads in MA 1.1 should average 2 ½ to 3 ½ miles of road per square mile of land (refer to Table 1.3.1 or Forest Plan, page IV-111). When supplemented by limited construction of new permanent (system) and temporary roads, and maintenance, reconstruction, and decommissioning of existing roads as described in the Proposed Action, the proposed transportation system would meet the desired management and access needs for the project area while also reducing road density.

System roads within the project area are in need of maintenance or reconstruction, which would include culvert installations with appropriate erosion control measures, road re-shaping, and some clearing. To aid in future road maintenance, reconstruction, or new construction there is a need to expand the Gauthier Gravel Pit to access an existing gravel deposit.

These resource concerns can be addressed through the Proposed Action while still enhancing desired recreation opportunities.

Provide recreational opportunities to meet the public's needs.

The Proposed Action was designed to move the area from the existing condition toward the DFC by maintaining or enhancing existing recreation opportunities while protecting resources.

Existing dispersed recreation opportunities in this area are primarily associated with deer and grouse hunting, camping, hiking the North Country Trail (NCT), mountain biking, snowmobiling, ATV riding, and canoeing and kayaking portions of the Middle, East, West, and South Branches of the Ontonagon River.

The DFC for MA 1.1 is to "Manage passenger vehicle, off-road-vehicle (ORV), all-terrain-vehicle (ATV), and snowmobile use to provide for resource protection, remote wildlife habitat, nonmotorized recreation opportunities, and public health and safety, to reduce noise, and to minimize user conflict" (Forest Plan page IV-108). Some areas of dispersed recreation have been identified as experiencing impacts to the soil and water resources as a result of passenger vehicles (4X4s) and ATVs crossing wet areas via existing roads.

Provide for Public Health and Safety

The Proposed Action is tiered toward the recreation management of ORVs, ATVs, and snowmobiles for MA 1.1, and is designed to improve the existing condition by managing "…snowmobile use to provide for resource protection…and public health and safety…and to minimize user conflict" (Forest Plan, page IV-108).

Snowmobile Trail #3 bisects the project area and a portion of this trail is located in the U.S. Highway 45 (US-45) right-of-way. Within the project area this trail crosses the highway several times and also crosses the Ontonagon River via the US-45 Bridge. The present trail location creates a situation where snowmobile traffic must parallel the highway, cross the highway, and cross the Ontonagon River by traveling over and along the US-45 Bridge. Because of this, snowmobile headlights are directed at oncoming vehicular traffic and a hazardous situation is created.

Decisions To Be Made

The Responsible Official is a District Ranger on the Ottawa National Forest who will make these decisions:

- Selection and site specific location of appropriate vegetative management practices, if any. Included in the decision would be silvicultural prescriptions necessary for the sustained harvest and regeneration of timber resources, riparian improvement and protection, and associated actions common to all action alternatives.
- Selection and site specific location of appropriate transportation system management, if any. Included in this decision would be whether or not to expand the Gauthier Gravel Pit, move the gate on FR 710, and construct, reconstruct, maintain, decommission, or close roads.
- The amount, type, and location of watershed improvement projects, if any.
- The amount, type, and location of wildlife habitat improvement projects, if any.
- The amount, type, and location of dispersed recreation improvement projects, if any.
- The amount, type, and location of treatment necessary to attempt to control or eradicate invasive, exotic, noxious, and weedy plant species, if any.
- Whether or not site specific monitoring requirements would be needed to assure actions common to all action alternatives are correctly implemented and effective.

Major Issues

The following issues were identified through public scoping. These issues were used to develop alternatives to the proposed management activities.

Aspen Management - Several commenters expressed a desire for maintenance or expansion of the existing aspen type and associated habitat, and were opposed to shelterwood treatment and/or conifer planting in aspen stands. The commenters stated that shelterwood treatment would not capture the full economic value of the mature aspen in these stands and would result in a reduction of aspen type because such treatment would convert the stands to another forest type. Also discussed were jobs created by timber-related enterprises, community stability tied to a dependable harvest level, and the payment to counties generated by timber harvest.

Balance of Softwood Component - Although the softwood component for MA 1.1 Forestwide is currently within the range of the DFC for pulpwood and is at the upper end of the range for sawtimber (see Table 1.3.1), the ID team recognizes that the softwood component in the project area is quite low, particularly softwood pulpwood, which could also be increased in MA 1.1 Forestwide.

Temporary Openings Exceeding 40 Acres - Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines for Vegetative Management provide management direction to limit the size of temporary openings created by even-aged management to 40 acres or less, except as provided for under certain circumstances listed in the Forest Plan or following review and approval by the Regional Forester (Forest Plan, IV-87).

Alternatives Considered in Detail

Alternatives were developed to address each of the major issues while meeting the purpose and need for the project. Each of the four (4) alternatives for this project is described below. The first alternative described is the "no action" alternative. Alternative 2 is the Modified Proposed Action, the management proposal originally designed, with a few modifications, to respond to the purpose and need. Alternatives 3 and 4 were designed to fulfill the purpose and need and respond to the issues in varying degrees. Alternative 3 is the Forest Service preferred alternative since it best meets the purpose and need while addressing the issues. Site-specific Design Criteria have been developed which apply to one or all of the action alternatives, these are described in Chapter 2 of the DEIS.

Alternative 1 – No Action

This alternative was developed in response to NEPA requirements for a No Action Alternative and serves as a baseline for comparison to the action alternatives.

This alternative proposes no new ground disturbing activities. Current activities such as dispersed recreation use and annual road maintenance would continue. No new road construction, reconstruction, or decommissioning would occur as a result of this project. No timber harvest would occur on National Forest System lands as a result of this project. Natural occurrences and processes would continue to occur. Stands within the project area classified with an old growth management objective would remain at approximately 614 acres, all within MA 1.1. No recreation, wildlife, or watershed habitat improvement or enhancement projects would occur on National Forest System lands as a result of this project. No treatment of the glossy buckthorn infestation would occur as a result of this project.

Alternative 2 – Modified Proposed Action

This alternative reflects the proposal presented in the July 8, 2002 scoping letter, with the exception of the proposed fish habitat enhancement project, proposed old growth classification, and refinements to acres proposed for timber harvest. These proposals are no longer being carried forward for reasons described in Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study section of the DEIS.

Alternative 2 includes the following multi-resource activities:

- Clearcutting of approximately 1120 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types, approximately 10 acres of conifer type, and approximately 30 acres of hardwood type (these would be silvicultural clearcuts with no residual trees);
- Clearcutting with residual trees of approximately 615 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types and approximately 110 acres of conifer type;

- Clearcutting of approximately 5 acres of conifer type followed by conifer planting;
- Thinning of approximately 755 acres of northern hardwood types and approximately 45 acres of aspen type;
- Shelterwood cutting of approximately 180 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types and approximately 110 acres of northern hardwood type, all followed by conifer planting;
- Removal cutting of approximately 85 acres of northern hardwood type;
- Selection cutting (uneven-aged management) of approximately 90 acres of northern hardwood types and approximately 10 acres of conifer type; and
- Site preparation for natural regeneration of aspen would be conducted in stands harvested for the regeneration of aspen, where needed.

The proposed clearcut treatments would create fifteen (15) temporary openings greater than 40 acres in size, ranging from approximately 50 to 175 acres, with an average size of approximately 105 acres (refer to Figure 3.1.4 in Vegetation, Section 3.1.3.2). Other activities would involve:

- Reconstruction of existing upland grass/forb openings (approximately 135 acres total), and mowing certain Forest System Roads (approximately 15 miles total);
- Creating snags and future large woody debris in some of the treated aspen stands (approximately one tree per ten acres of treated area);
- Hand-cutting small patches (approximately 0.25 acre) of tag alder to improve grouse and woodcock habitat (approximately 30 acres total);
- Approximately 1.1 miles of new system road construction;
- Approximately 10.1 miles of system road reconstruction;
- Approximately 43.1 miles of system road maintenance;
- Approximately 2.4 miles (total) of temporary road construction;
- Approximately 26.9 miles of existing roads would be decommissioned. These roads are no longer needed for long-term access and management of forest resources;
- Approximately 1.5 miles of existing roads would be retained as unclassified;
- An existing gravel pit known as the Gauthier Gravel Pit would be expanded by approximately 5 acres to access an existing gravel deposit to provide material for road system needs;
- Reconstruction of one vehicle crossing on Lathrop Creek - FR 715. This would involve replacement of the existing culvert with a larger one;
- Decommissioning two crossing sites on Lathrop Creek. This would involve the removal of an existing wooden bridge at one of the crossings;
- Improvement, rehabilitation, and/or erosion control work would be done at stream crossing sites utilized in this alternative as needed. This would involve contouring, seeding, and stabilization of the approach slopes, and diverting run-off water away from the stream to minimize sediment delivery into the stream;
- Hardening, improving, or developing some dispersed recreation parking and camping sites adjacent to Forest System Roads 710, 730, and 733 to meet current and expected demand, and address soil rutting;
- Hardening and improving a parking site in conjunction with converting approximately 300 feet of an existing unclassified road to a trail near the junction of the East and West Branches of the Ontonagon River; and
- Relocating a portion of existing Snowmobile Trail #3 that is currently located in the U.S. Highway 45 right-of-way.

Alternative 3 – Even-aged Emphasis (Aspen)

In response to Issue #1, several of the aspen stands identified in the proposed action for a shelterwood treatment with conifer planting (180 acres), are being proposed for clearcut treatment to

regenerate aspen types under this alternative (120 of those acres). Another difference is the amount of aspen and aspen-fir types that are proposed for treatment and regeneration under this alternative, which is also in response to Issue #1.

Alternative 3 includes the same activities as Alternative 2, except where noted below:

- Clearcutting of approximately 2,110 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types, approximately 80 acres of conifer type, and approximately 55 acres of hardwood type (these would be silvicultural clearcuts with no residual trees);
- Clearcutting with residual trees of approximately 1,375 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types and approximately 50 acres of conifer type;
- Clearcutting of approximately 5 acres of conifer type followed by conifer planting;
- Clearcutting with residual trees of approximately 20 acres of conifer type followed by conifer planting;
- Improvement cutting of approximately 1,025 acres of northern hardwood types and approximately 55 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types;
- Improvement cutting of approximately 170 acres of northern hardwood types along with regenerating approximately 110 additional acres of mature/over mature aspen inclusions (> 1 acre each in size) interspersed within some of these northern hardwood types;
- Selection cutting (uneven-aged management) of approximately 310 acres of northern hardwood types;
- Shelterwood cutting of approximately 65 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types (next to or near U.S. Highway 45), approximately 115 acres of conifer types, and approximately 20 acres of northern hardwood type, all followed by conifer planting; and
- Non-commercial treatment through shelterwood cutting by hand felling some of the trees on approximately 15 acres of white pine type, followed by conifer planting.

The proposed clearcut treatments would create 28 temporary openings greater than 40 acres in size, ranging from approximately 41 to 324 acres, with an average size of approximately 110 acres (refer to Figure 3.1.6 in Vegetation, Section 3.1.3.3). Other activities would involve:

- Non-commercial treatment through clearcutting by hand felling or girdling trees on approximately 40 acres of aspen types to maintain and regenerate the aspen type;
- Approximately 1.4 miles of new system road construction;
- Approximately 16.0 miles of system road reconstruction;
- Approximately 67.2 miles of system road maintenance;
- Approximately 6.5 miles (total) of temporary road construction;
- Approximately 26.9 miles of existing roads would be decommissioned;
- Approximately 1.5 miles of existing roads would be retained as unclassified; and
- Treat the entire 300-plus acre infestation of the non-native shrub glossy buckthorn on National Forest System lands. Treatment to kill the woody stems would involve girdling all stems over 1.75 inches in diameter and burning smaller stems with a flame torch.

Alternative 4: Temporary Openings Less Than 40 Acres in Size, with Emphasis on Softwood Component

This alternative, in response to Issue #2 and Issue #3, emphasizes vegetative management to promote a better balance of the conifer component in the project area, and to not create any temporary openings greater than 40 acres in size, while still maintaining the aspen component within the Desired Future Condition.

Alternative 4 includes the same activities as Alternative 3, except where noted below:

- Clearcutting of approximately 1,070 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types, approximately 45 acres of conifer type, and approximately 55 acres of hardwood type (these would be pure silvicultural clearcuts with no residual trees);
- Clearcutting with residual trees of approximately 575 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types and approximately 10 acres of conifer type;
- Clearcutting of approximately 15 acres of aspen-fir type and approximately 5 acres of conifer type, all followed by conifer planting;
- Removal cutting of approximately 875 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types and approximately 25 acres of conifer types;
- Improvement cutting of approximately 565 acres of aspen or aspen-fir types (which includes clearcutting of approximately 10 acres within an existing aspen type to maintain an inclusion of aspen within the treated and converted stand), approximately 45 acres of conifer types, and approximately 1520 acres of hardwood types;
- Improvement cutting of approximately 60 acres of northern hardwood type along with regenerating approximately 40 acres of mature/over mature aspen inclusions (> 1 acre each in size) interspersed within some of the northern hardwood types;
- Shelterwood cutting of approximately 505 acres of aspen types, approximately 140 acres of conifer types, and approximately 20 acres of northern hardwood type, all followed by conifer planting;
- Non-commercial treatment through clearcutting by hand felling or girdling trees on approximately 10 acres of aspen types to maintain and regenerate the aspen type;
- This alternative proposes planting white pine, white spruce, or hemlock within some of the riparian influence areas. Actual acres planted in one area could range from less than one acre to as high as 40 acres. Cumulatively, approximately 170 acres may be planted. No harvesting activity is proposed for these areas;
- Treat 55 acres (the infestation centers) of the non-native shrub glossy buckthorn infestation on National Forest System lands. Treatment to kill the woody stems would involve the same type of activities as described for Alternative 3.

Comparison of Alternatives

Tables 1 and 2 below compare the alternatives in relation to how they address the purpose and need for action, and how they address the units of measure. For additional information, please see the DEIS Chapter 1 for a description of the Purpose and Need. Chapter 2 describes the Issues and Alternatives. Chapter 3 describes both the Affected Environment and the Environmental Consequences of each alternative.

Table 1. Summary Comparison of Alternatives.

Activity	Alternative 1	Alternative 2	Alternative 3	Alternative 4
Timber Management	**(Acres)**			
Clearcut	0	1,160	2,245	1,170
Clearcut w/residual trees	0	725	1,425	585
Clearcut & plant conifer	0	5	5	20
Clearcut w/residual trees & plant conifer	0	0	20	0

Activity	Alternative 1	Alternative 2	Alternative 3	Alternative 4
Commercial thin	0	800	0	0
Shelterwood cut (all followed by conifer underplanting)	0	290	215 *(15 acres is non-commercial)*	680 *(15 acres is non-commercial)*
Improvement cut	0	0	1,080	2,130
Improvement cut w/inclusions of aspen regeneration	0	0	280	100
Overstory removal	0	85	0	900
Individual tree selection	0	100	310	0
Total Treatment Acres	**0**	**3,165**	**5,580**	**5,585**
Wildlife Habitat Improvement				
Opening reconstruction (acres)	0	135	135	135
Road mowing (miles)	0	15	15	15
Snags/large woody debris (number of girdled trees)	0	158	209	72
Alder cutting (number of ¼-acre openings)	0	118	118	118
(approximate total acres treated)		30	30	30
Non-commercial aspen treatment (acres)	0	0	40	10
Transportation Management				
Road construction (miles)	0	1.1	1.4	1.4
Road reconstruction (miles)	0	10.1	16.0	16.0
Road maintenance (miles)	0	43.1	67.2	67.2
System roads not needed for project activities (miles)	114.8	61.5	31.6	31.6
Total system roads (miles)	**114.8**	**115.8**	**116.2**	**116.2**
Miles open to passenger vehicles	18.5	15.9	14.7	14.7
Miles closed to passenger vehicles	96.3	99.9	101.5	101.5
Unclassified roads (miles)	28.3	1.5	1.5	1.5
Miles open to passenger vehicles	1.8	0	0	0
Miles closed to passenger vehicles	26.5	1.5	1.5	1.5
Road density (miles/sq. mile)	3.6	2.9	2.9	2.9

Activity	Alternative 1	Alternative 2	Alternative 3	Alternative 4
Temporary road construction (approximate miles)	0	2.4	6.5	6.5
Road decommissioning (miles)	0	26.9	26.9	26.9
Relocate gate on Forest Road 710	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Number of road/stream crossings	215	173	173	173
Approximate number of culverts needed	0	10	17	17
Approximate number of berms needed	0	12	22	22
Approximate number of gates needed	0	2	2	2
Gravel pit expansion	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Watershed Improvement				
Decommission two Lathrop Cr. X-ings (located on FR 710 & Rte. No. 0514216)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Reconstruct one Lathrop Cr. X-ing (located on FR 715)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Riparian influence area planting (approximate total acres)	0	0	0	170
Recreation Management				
Dispersed parking/camping sites hardened or developed (approx. no. of sites hardened or developed)	0	23	23	23
Harden/improve Ontonagon River access parking	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Relocate portion of Snowmobile Trail # 3	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Invasive Plant Treatment				
Glossy buckthorn infestation treated (approximate acres of infestation treated)	0	0	300	55

Table 2. Summary of Issues and Measurement Indicators by Alternative.

Issue	Alternative 1	Alternative 2	Alternative 3	Alternative 4
Aspen Management				
Acres of treatment proposed to maintain or convert to aspen type	0	1,885	3,710	2,010
Percentage of aspen type in MA 1.1 of the project area and Forestwide (%) after treatment	72% *(57%)*	71% *(57%)*	72% *(57%)*	65% *(55%)*
Long-term percentage of aspen type in MA 1.1 of the project area and Forestwide *(%)* due to loss of aspen type on unsuitable ground	61% *(53%)*	60% *(53%)*	61% *(54%)*	54% *(51%)*
Acres of aspen type converted to other forest types	0	230	120	1,715
Age class distribution of aspen type after treatment	(Refer to Table 3.1.1 in Vegetation, Section 3.1.3)	(Refer to Table 3.1.1 in Vegetation, Section 3.1.3)	(Refer to Table 3.1.1 in Vegetation, Section 3.1.3)	(Refer to Table 3.1.1 in Vegetation, Section 3.1.3)
Balance of Softwood Component				
Acres proposed for conversion to softwood by conifer planting	0	290	85	540
Acres proposed for conversion to a softwood pulpwood forest type *Net increase in softwood forest type*	0 *0*	0 *182*	54 *51*	806 *1,303*
Percentage of softwood type in MA 1.1 of the project area and Forestwide (%) after treatment	Saw 3% Pulp 6% *(Saw 10%)* *(Pulp 13%)*	Saw 4% Pulp 6% *(Saw 11%)* *(Pulp 12%)*	Saw 3% Pulp 6% *(Saw 11%)* *(Pulp 12%)*	Saw 5% Pulp 9% *(Saw 11%)* *(Pulp 13%)*
Temporary Openings Exceeding 40 Acres				
Number of temporary openings exceeding 40 acres Size range of openings *Average opening size*	0	15 50-175 acres *105 acres*	28 41-324 acres *110 acres*	0

1.0 Purpose and Need for Action

Chapter Preview

1.1 SUMMARY AND BACKGROUND OF PROPOSED ACTION

Within the Baltimore project area the Forest Service proposes to meet the purpose and need by using timber harvest with an emphasis on aspen forest types, planting conifers in shelterwood treatment stands, improving and maintaining early successional habitat and upland openings for a variety of game and non-game wildlife species, developing and implementing a long-term transportation plan, improving stream habitat and watershed conditions, and relocating a portion of an existing snowmobile trail (see Maps D, H, J, and K in Appendix A).

Specific activities included in the Proposed Action are described in Chapter 2 (Alternative 2). These activities could begin as early as 2004.

The Proposed Action was designed by an interdisciplinary team (ID team) comprised of Forest Service personnel, and is intended to specifically address some of the disparities between the current conditions within the project area and the desired future conditions for Management Area (MA) 1.1, as articulated in the Forest Plan (Pages IV-103 to IV-111).

1.2 OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT AREA

The Baltimore project area is located approximately 4 miles north of Bruce Crossing, MI, and lies to the east and west of U.S. Highway 45. It lies within the following legal description: T49N R38W, Sections 18, 19, 30; T49N R39W, Sections 1 - 36; T49N R40W, Sections 1 - 4, 8 - 17, 20 - 28, 33 - 36; and T50N R39W, Sections 27, 31 - 35, Ontonagon County, Michigan (see Map A in Appendix A).

The project area is bounded by the Middle Branch Ontonagon River on the east and the South Branch Ontonagon River on the west. The southern boundary follows the congressionally established Forest Boundary lying between the Middle and South Branches of the Ontonagon River, and the majority of the northern boundary follows the West Branch of the Ontonagon River and the south shore of the Victoria Reservoir. It encompasses approximately 35,900 acres of commingled state, private, and National Forest System lands that are located in the Ottawa National Forest on the Ontonagon and Bergland Ranger Districts. Approximately 28,475 of those acres are National Forest System lands.

Streams found within the project area include Johnson Creek, Schaat Creek, Erickson Creek, Plover Creek, Sandstone Creek, Hide Creek, Lathrop Creek, and part of Inkala Creek and Rockland Creek. Rivers within the project area include part of the Baltimore River and parts of the Middle, East, and main Branches of the Ontonagon River. There are also several small ponds in the project area that are mostly the result of beaver activity on intermittent or small perennial streams. The majority of these ponds lie west of U.S. Highway 45.

Another feature in the project area is a section of the North Country National Scenic Trail (NCT), with trailheads on U.S. Highway 45 and Forest Road (FR) 733.

Similar to the history of the Upper Peninsula, the project area was logged over in the late 1800s to early 1900s. Currently, forest types within the project area are primarily second growth aspen, lowland hardwoods, and northern hardwoods, with a component of

mixed conifers throughout (see Map C in Appendix A).

The dominant landforms in the project area are land type associations (LTAs) 19 and 20. LTA 19 is a nearly level, glacial lake plain, with clayey soils where water movement through the soil is very slow. LTA 19 features aspen and northern hardwood forests and is found in the majority of this area. LTA 20 is mostly found in the very steep, unstable river valley walls, valley bottoms, and floodplains associated with the branches of the Ontonagon River.

1.3 NEED FOR ACTION

The Need for Action is developed from reviewing the difference between the existing condition and the desired future condition (DFC) of resources within the project area relative to the management objectives of the Forest Plan.

1.3.1 Desired Future Condition (DFC)

The Forest Plan describes a desired future condition and sets broad goals and objectives for the management of the Ottawa National Forest (ONF). This information is translated into detailed management directions and DFCs that apply either Forestwide or to specific Management Areas (MAs) across the Forest.

1.3.1.1 Forestwide Direction.

Forestwide Management Goals and Direction for Resource Programs can be found in the Forest Plan on pages IV-10 to IV-13. Some of the goals and direction that apply directly to the Baltimore project area include:

- Manage white-tailed deer and ruffed grouse habitat at an intensity that will support favorable hunting populations, with emphasis placed in areas of greatest opportunity.
- Provide vegetative diversity that would support viable populations of existing native mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians.
- Accomplish habitat management objectives to the extent possible through commercial timber sales.
- Protect and enhance habitat for endangered and threatened, and sensitive plant and wildlife species.
- Provide a non-declining, sustained yield of timber.
- Manage the vegetation and associated resources of the Forest at a level of intensity consistent with demand and in a manner that is economically efficient.
- Maintain a system of arterial, collector, and local roads in coordination with other government agencies to provide safe and efficient access for land management and the public benefit.
- Minimize detrimental soil disturbance and erosion.
- Design management activities to minimize impacts on water quality and other riparian values.
- Encourage and promote cooperation with local governments, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, private enterprise, and user groups in the development and management of recreation facilities and opportunities.

1.3.1.2 Management Area Direction

Management Areas are subdivisions of the Forest, each with a specific desired future condition. The project area contains four Management Areas - 1.1, 8.1, 9.2, and 9.3 (see Map B in Appendix A).

Management Area 1.1

(Forest Plan, pages IV-103 to IV-111)

The desired future condition is a forest that is a mosaic of temporary openings and stands featuring aspen, paper birch, and balsam fir. Stands of even- or uneven-aged northern

hardwoods are interspersed throughout the management area. Uneven-aged management that produces a continuous forest cover with many different-sized trees may be practiced where there are northern hardwoods. See Table 1.3.1 for a more detailed breakdown of the DFC.

The desired future transportation system is to provide an average of 2 ½ to 3 ½ miles of collector and local roads per square mile for the management area. This density may vary with the mix of vegetative types present. The even-aged silvicultural system used for aspen and softwoods results in clearcuts accessed by many temporary roads.

Part of the recreation management is to permit the development, operation, maintenance, and grooming of cross-country ski trails and snowmobile trails by communities, organizations, or businesses that will support and operate them.

The purpose of the management prescription for MA 1.1 is as follows:

- Emphasizes early successional community types (plant and animal) within a roaded natural motorized recreational environment.
- Maintains potential conditions for moderate to high populations of game species such as deer and ruffed grouse and nongame species such as golden-winged warbler.
- Maintains moderate to high amounts of aspen type along with associated timber products and habitat conditions.
- Provides an appearance that is predominantly forested with frequent temporary openings.

Some of the early successional community types that would result from implementing this management prescription would consist of aspen, paper birch, and balsam fir. These would provide some of the conditions needed for moderate to high populations of the game species mentioned.

The transportation system would provide both motorized and non-motorized recreationists with access throughout the project area.

Management Area 8.1

(Forest Plan, pages IV-187.1 to IV-187.12)

This management area emphasizes land and resource conditions that will provide for the protection and management of designated Wild & Scenic River corridors within the Ottawa National Forest. The rivers involved were designated National Wild and Scenic Rivers in the Michigan Scenic Rivers Act of 1991.

The project area contains corridors for two segments of designated Wild and Scenic Rivers. The east side of the project area is bordered by approximately 13.5 miles of the 17.4-mile segment of the Middle Branch Ontonagon River that is classified as a Wild River. The northwestern side of the project area is bordered by approximately 4.5 miles of the 15.0-mile segment of the West Branch Ontonagon River that is classified as a Recreational River.

To obtain the desired condition of the land, the river corridors in this MA will be managed to protect, enhance, and retain the Outstandingly Remarkable Values for which they were designated. The values for which the Middle Branch of the Ontonagon River was designated include fishery, scenic, and recreational. The value for which the West Branch of the Ontonagon River was designated is scenic.

Management Area 9.2

(Forest Plan, pages IV-201 to IV-207.4)

This management area emphasizes land and resource conditions that will provide for the interim protection and management of study river corridors on National Forest Land administered by the Ottawa National Forest. The corridors involved were designated National Wild and Scenic Study Rivers in the Michigan Scenic Rivers Act of 1991.

The project area contains a corridor for one segment of a designated Wild and Scenic Study River. The west side of the project area

is bordered by approximately 11.8 miles of the 20 mile segment of the South Branch Ontonagon River.

To obtain the desired condition of the land, areas in this MA will be managed to perpetuate the existing river environment. This strategy will enable the river corridors involved to retain the characteristics that qualify them for consideration as potential additions to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The South Branch of the Ontonagon River is being studied for values that include scenic, recreational, geological, and fishery.

Management Area 9.3

(Forest Plan, pages IV-208 to IV-213)

The management prescription for this MA that applies to the portion within the project area is to:

- Protect and maintain environmental values.
- Protect the health and safety of the public.

In the project area MA 9.3 contains a portion of the lands acquired in 1992 from Upper Peninsula Power Company (UPPCO). The portion within the project boundary encompasses segments of the Ontonagon River, but it lies outside the original Forest proclamation boundary.

The DFC for MA 9.3 is that forest vegetation is natural appearing, and management activities should include only those needed for the following reasons:

- To protect life, health, and safety of incidental users.
- To prevent environmental damage caused by water, soil, pests, or fire on land of other ownership or downstream areas.
- To administer unavoidable non-Forest Service special uses.
- To meet other legal requirements.

1.3.2 Existing Condition

The table below is a comparison of the desired future condition for MA 1.1 and the current conditions. Current conditions were derived from the Ottawa National Forest stand database. Only MA 1.1 is displayed because MAs 8.1, 9.2, and 9.3 do not have specific DFC parameters spelled out in the Forest Plan.

Table 1.3.1. Current conditions within Management Area 1.1 Forestwide and within the Project Area relative to the Desired Future Condition (DFC) as described in the Forest Plan.

Management Area 1.1				
Vegetation Type	**Final Harvest Product[1]**	**DFC[2] % of Forest Land**	**Forestwide Existing Conditions[3]**	**Project Area Existing Conditions[4]**
Aspen	Sawtimber & Pulpwood	40-60 %	57 %	72 %
Softwood	Sawtimber	5-10 %	10 %	3 %
	Pulpwood	10-20 %	13 %	6 %
Hardwood	Sawtimber & Pulpwood	5-20 %	20 %	20 %
Total Forest Land:		**100 %**	**100 %**	**100 %**
Old Growth[5]		1-3 %	3.0 %	2.5 %
Permanent Upland Openings		1-5 %	1.0 %	1.6 %
Road Density[6]		2 ½ - 3 ½ mi/sq. mi	2.1 mi/sq. mi	3.6 mi/sq. mi

[1] Final Harvest Product defines the desired end product a stand is managed for, not the condition of a stand at a point in time.

[2] DFC from the Forest Plan, page IV-105.

[3] Existing conditions taken from June 2003 CDS data.

[4] Existing conditions taken from April 2003 CDS data.

[5] The percentage of forest land managed as old growth can be achieved from any of the three forest vegetation types (aspen, softwood, and hardwood) (Forest Plan, IV-105).

[6] Project area road density includes all existing roads, both open and closed, within MA 1.1 of the project area.

After looking at the data contained in the table above, the Forest Service has concluded that, relative to the objectives set forth in the Forest Plan for MA 1.1:

a) The proportion of upland openings maintained for wildlife and early successional plant species is at the low end of the desired range for both the project area and Forestwide, and could be increased;

b) The percentage of aspen is above the desired range for the project area, but is within the desired range Forestwide;

c) The percent of softwood sawtimber and pulpwood is within the desired range Forestwide, but is quite low for the project area and could be increased;

d) The percentage of hardwood sawtimber and pulpwood is within the desired range both within the project area and Forestwide;

e) Current road density is not within the desired range;

f) The percentage of old growth in the project area is within the desired range, and is at the upper end of the desired range Forestwide.

The purpose of proposing activities in the Baltimore project area is derived from Forest Plan direction and any disparity between the existing and desired resource conditions, which forms the basis of a need for management action. Following are the primary purposes and needs behind the proposed activities:

Promote and maintain processes that would enhance natural species diversity while providing a supply of wood products for regional and local needs to help support a stable economic base within the market area.

The Proposed Action was designed to move the area from the existing condition towards the DFC through even-aged management of aspen forest types and even- and uneven-aged management of hardwoods.

The second-growth hardwood stands proposed for treatment currently lack a balanced size class of trees and are above stocking levels recommended for healthy growth. Over-stocked stands are hindering the establishment and growth of seedlings and saplings in the understory. These stands also contain many trees of poor form and quality that are competing with trees of higher potential. There is a need to improve the quality and growth of these stands through intermediate and regeneration treatments.

Aspen type in MA 1.1 of the project area is above the Forest Plan DFC for MA 1.1, mainly because the project area contains approximately 35% of the Forest acreage devoted to MA 1.1. Because the project area contains such a large portion of MA 1.1, and approximately 44% of the aspen in MA 1.1 of the project area is over 50 years old, there is a need to regenerate and maintain aspen-dominated stands for sustained yield over time and to provide even-aged wildlife habitat.

The aspen stands proposed for treatment are mature to overmature (e.g., over 50 years), subject to disease, and have received repeated defoliation from forest tent caterpillars over the last few years. These stands are, however, largely salvageable for wood products through commercial timber harvest.

The DFC for this area is to maintain a healthy ecosystem through the use of active management. For aspen, even-aged management (clearcutting) is the optimum silvicultural method for regenerating a new vigorous stand of aspen (Forest Plan Appendix C, page VI C-11), and for providing early successional habitat.

Maintain and enhance habitat conditions that sustain viable populations of a variety of fish and wildlife species and enhance watershed conditions.

The Proposed Action is designed to move the area from the existing condition towards the long-term DFC through various habitat enhancement activities and watershed improvements.

One of the Forestwide Management Goals as outlined in the Ottawa Forest Plan is to "Provide a variety of vegetative community types…to create a variety of habitat conditions for game and non-game species of wildlife…" (Page IV-3). In addition, the Forestwide Management Goals indicate the need to "Maintain a moderate to high amount of aspen type to provide a sustained level of habitat for white-tailed deer and ruffed grouse and to supply a sustained level of aspen timber products…" (Page IV-3).

Many wildlife species depend on structural characteristics of vegetation for their habitat needs. Achieving these goals and attaining the DFC for MA 1.1 within the project area, which contains the largest portions of contiguous aspen ecosystem on the forest, would require the use of primarily even-aged management to regenerate aspen. This type of management creates the desired conditions for species that require forest edge and early successional habitats within a mosaic of age classes and stand densities. The habitat produced is suited for species such as white-tailed deer, ruffed grouse, snowshoe hare, woodcock, and chestnut-sided warblers. Maintaining this habitat in the Baltimore area would continue to provide habitat to support favorable populations and recreational opportunities for deer and grouse hunting (Forest Plan, page IV-11).

Another Forestwide Management Goal is to "Provide an adequate amount of coniferous thermal cover for white-tailed deer and other wildlife species such as blackburnian warbler that require this important habitat component" (Page IV-3). Thus, there is a need to maintain the existing coniferous forest patches in the project area, which include stands of hemlock, cedar, red pine, balsam fir, white spruce, black spruce, and a mix of red and white pine. This would maintain a diversity of forest types and provide some limited patches of habitat in the project area for species like blackburnian and magnolia warblers, kinglets, sharp-shinned hawks, and fisher.

Part of the Forestwide Vegetative Management Standards for Old Growth Management is to "Provide old growth habitat in selected areas to maintain big trees, snags, culls, den trees, dead and down logs, and other ground material" (Page IV-88). There are more than 600 acres currently classified with an unmanaged old growth objective in MA 1.1 of the project area; however, this previous classification was inadvertently omitted in the scoping package. These acres are located along the Baltimore River and several adjacent tributaries, which coincides with some of the "favored" locations for old growth identified in the Forest Plan on page IV-91.

The Forest Plan's "Forestwide Standards and Guidelines" for riparian areas specify that we should "Preserve the beneficial values of floodplains and wetlands…" and "Minimize risk of flood loss, restore and preserve floodplain values, and protect wetlands" (Page IV-35). This coincides with the need identified within the project area to improve riparian areas and aquatic habitats for riparian dependant species, to enhance aquatic system structure, function, and composition, and improve overall watershed conditions.

There are presently three road crossings on Lathrop Creek in T49N R39W - one is located in Section 14 and the other two are in Section 23 (see Map G in Appendix A). Two of these crossings could be decommissioned and one could be repaired to stop existing erosion and minimize impacts on water quality and other riparian values. This would help improve the aquatic habitat and overall watershed conditions while still providing access to the surrounding area.

The Forest Plan is essentially silent on non-native invasive plants, however, there is national direction (i.e., Forest Service Manual 2080 and Executive Order #11312) to address invasive species, and the Forest Service Chief has recently included invasive species as one of the major threats to natural resources.

Glossy buckthorn has invaded a portion of the project area and there is a need to control this infestation from further spread. This exotic shrub can form monocultures that crowd out native plants, resulting in decreased species diversity in its vicinity.

Maintain a road system that allows for management of National Forest System lands and provides for public access while meeting other resource needs.

The transportation system is an important feature of the National Forest landscape that allows for the multiple-use and management of forest resources. The roaded natural environment in the project area provides recreational opportunities for passenger vehicles, ATVs, snowmobiles, and other motorized recreationists. Some National Forest roads may be closed to passenger vehicle use, thereby providing motorized use only by ATVs or snowmobiles, while providing opportunities for non-motorized recreation as well.

The transportation system should provide the most cost efficient and lowest impact transportation system needed to meet the objectives for MA 1.1 and Forest Plan goals (Forest Plan, pages IV-2 through IV-5). One of the Forestwide Management Goals is to provide, in the long-term, a network of roads that will minimize the total amount of road needed through transportation planning conducted within an integrated resource management process (Forest Plan, page IV-4).

The existing total open and closed (bermed, gated, or impassable due to vegetation) National Forest road density on National Forest System lands within MA 1.1 of the

project area is approximately 3.6 miles per square mile. The DFC for road density of long-term and collector roads in MA 1.1 should average 2 ½ to 3 ½ miles of road per square mile of land (refer to Table 1.3.1 or Forest Plan, page IV-111). When supplemented by limited construction of new permanent (system) and temporary roads, and maintenance, reconstruction, and decommissioning of existing roads as described in the Proposed Action, the proposed transportation system would meet the desired management and access needs for the project area while also reducing road density.

System roads within the project area are in need of maintenance or reconstruction, which would include culvert installations with appropriate erosion control measures, road re-shaping, and some clearing. To aid in future road maintenance, reconstruction, or new construction there is a need to expand the Gauthier Gravel Pit to access an existing gravel deposit.

There is a need to move the gate on Forest Road (FR) 710 back to its old location near the west line of Section 22 (approximately 300 feet east of U.S. Highway 45) because passenger vehicle use on parts of FR 710 is causing rutting and resource damage.

There is also a need to close and decommission some roads or road segments, including two of the stream crossings on Lathrop Creek, because they are no longer needed for management and access, are causing sedimentation, or vehicle use is causing or has potential to cause rutting and sedimentation.

These resource concerns can be addressed through the Proposed Action while still enhancing desired recreation opportunities.

Provide recreational opportunities to meet the public's needs.

The Proposed Action was designed to move the area from the existing condition toward the DFC by maintaining or enhancing existing recreation opportunities while protecting resources.

Existing dispersed recreation opportunities in this area are primarily associated with deer and grouse hunting, camping, hiking the North Country Trail (NCT), mountain biking, snowmobiling, ATV riding, and canoeing and kayaking portions of the Middle, East, West, and South Branches of the Ontonagon River.

The DFC for MA 1.1 is to "Manage passenger vehicle, off-road-vehicle (ORV), all-terrain-vehicle (ATV), and snowmobile use to provide for resource protection, remote wildlife habitat, nonmotorized recreation opportunities, and public health and safety, to reduce noise, and to minimize user conflict" (Forest Plan page IV-108). Some areas of dispersed recreation have been identified as experiencing impacts to the soil and water resources as a result of passenger vehicles (4X4s) and ATVs crossing wet areas via existing roads.

There is a need to harden and improve some dispersed parking and camping sites adjacent to Forest Roads 710, 730, and 733 that currently receive use, but have some rutting. Opportunities exist to develop some additional dispersed parking and camping sites along Forest Roads 730 and 733 to meet current and future demand.

There is also a need to harden and improve a dispersed parking site for canoeing, kayaking, and fishing access near the junction of the East and West Branches of the Ontonagon River. This site currently receives use, but it is experiencing impacts to the soil and water resources through rutting and erosion.

Provide for Public Health and Safety

The Proposed Action is tiered toward the recreation management of ORVs, ATVs, and snowmobiles for MA 1.1, and is designed to improve the existing condition by managing "…snowmobile use to provide for resource protection…and public health and safety…and to minimize user conflict" (Forest Plan, page IV-108).

Snowmobile Trail #3 bisects the project area and a portion of this trail is located in the U.S. Highway 45 (US-45) right-of-way. Within the project area this trail crosses the highway several times and also crosses the Ontonagon River via the US-45 Bridge. The present trail location creates a situation where snowmobile traffic must parallel the highway, cross the highway, and cross the Ontonagon River by traveling over and along the US-45 Bridge. Because of this, snowmobile headlights are directed at oncoming vehicular traffic and a hazardous situation is created.

There is a need to improve public safety by implementing measures that reduce the distance the snowmobile trail parallels US-45 within the right-of-way, minimize the number of times the snowmobile trail crosses US-45, and provide for a separate snowmobile crossing of the Ontonagon River. Within the Baltimore project, the Forest Service proposes to re-route a portion of the existing trail to reduce the length of trail within the US-45 right-of-way. Proposing a new and separate snowmobile crossing of the Ontonagon River is beyond the scope of this project because it is not subject to unilateral actions or decisions of the Forest Service. This action would involve other agencies such as the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the Michigan Department of Transportation in terms of land ownership, funding, and maintenance liabilities. This could be analyzed as a separate and future project, not associated with the Baltimore VMP.

1.4 DECISIONS TO BE MADE

An interdisciplinary team of resource specialists conducted this analysis and documented the results for the Baltimore VMP Draft EIS.

The Purpose and Need as well as all the action alternatives are based on the Forest Plan goals, objectives, standards and guidelines, and management area direction with consideration of both public and internal (ONF) concerns.

The ID team considered the affected area, formulated alternatives, analyzed environmental effects, and evaluated and compared the effects of implementation of each alternative.

The decisions to be made based on this analysis are as follows:

- Selection and site specific location of appropriate vegetative management practices, if any. Included in the decision would be silvicultural prescriptions necessary for the sustained harvest and regeneration of timber resources, riparian improvement and protection, and associated actions common to all action alternatives.
- Selection and site specific location of appropriate transportation system management, if any. Included in this decision would be whether or not to expand the Gauthier Gravel Pit, move the gate on FR 710, and construct, reconstruct, maintain, decommission, or close roads.
- The amount, type, and location of watershed improvement projects, if any.
- The amount, type, and location of wildlife habitat improvement projects, if any.
- The amount, type, and location of dispersed recreation improvement projects, if any.
- The amount, type, and location of treatment necessary to attempt to control or eradicate invasive, exotic, noxious, and weedy plant species, if any.
- Whether or not site specific monitoring requirements would be needed to assure actions common to all action alternatives are correctly implemented and effective.

This EIS is a reference document, written to help the deciding official, an Ottawa National Forest District Ranger, select which alternative to implement. The District Ranger can decide to:

1) Select all or parts of the Proposed Action.

2) Choose an alternative, or parts of an alternative, to the Proposed Action within the range of effects analyzed.

3) Reject all action alternatives and select the No Action Alternative.

4) Defer all activities until another time.

1.5 CONSISTENCY WITH THE FOREST PLAN AND OTHER RELEVANT LAWS

The development of this EIS is based on direction contained in the Forest Plan, the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) and its implementing regulations [36 CFR 219], as well as the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and its regulations [40 CFR 1500-1508]. This EIS is tiered to the Forest Plan (as amended), its Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and Record of Decision (ROD), all approved in 1986. This EIS is tiered to these documents as permitted by NEPA [40 CFR 1502.20].

The Ottawa NF is currently in the process of Forest Plan Revision. The following statement was released from the Consolidated Appropriations Resolution in 2003 in regards to Section 320, for the revision of Forest Plans. It states:

"Prior to October 1, 2003, the Secretary of Agriculture shall not be considered to be in violation of subparagraph 6(f)(5)(A) of the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 (16 U.S.C. 1604(f)(5)(A) solely because more than 15 years have passed without revision of the plan for a unit of the National Forest System. Nothing in this section exempts the Secretary from any other requirement of the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act (16 U.S.C. 1600 et seq.) or any other law: Provided, that if the Secretary is not acting expeditiously and in good faith, within the funding available, to revise a plan for a unit of the National Forest System, this section shall be void with respect to such a plan and a court of proper jurisdiction may order completion of the plan on an accelerated basis."

As stated, the Ottawa NF is in the process of formally initiating the Revision of its Forest Plan and the Notice of Intent is scheduled for September 2003. The anticipated completion of the Plan's revision will be in fiscal year 2006.

The Forest Plan is currently in its 17th year of implementation. Management practices were projected for two decades (20 years) in the Forest Plan, and the current plan is expected to be implemented for the full two decades or until the Plan is revised (2001 M&E Report, Abstract, page i). The information referenced from the 2001 M&E Report to complete this EIS includes two decade projections of management practices and our interpretation of 15 years of monitoring results based on these projections to determine appropriate project decisions over the remainder of the plan period (2001 M&E Report, Abstract, page i).

The Forest Plan has a wide variety of goals and objectives to achieve a balanced use of the Ottawa NF. The Proposed Action was developed to meet the direction of the Forest Plan. It includes design features to reduce or eliminate negative environmental effects and resolve concerns.

Forest management must be consistent with the Forest Plan as directed by NEPA [36 CFR 219.10(e)]. However, since the Forest Plan can be amended, as permitted by NEPA [36 CFR 219.109(f)], alternatives may be considered which are not consistent with Forest Plan direction. If the Deciding Official chooses an alternative that is not consistent with current Plan direction, a Plan amendment must be completed before the alternative is implemented. The action alternatives discussed in this EIS are consistent with the Forest Plan.

Material in the Forest Plan is incorporated into this document by reference. Management direction for Management Areas (MAs) 1.1,

8.1, 9.2, 9.3 and for the Ottawa NF as a whole has previously been decided in the Ottawa Forest Plan. Broad-scale issues of management direction are outside the scope of this analysis, and will not be addressed in this EIS.