DECISION NOTICE
AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

ANACONDA-PINTLER WILDERNESS MANAGEMENT DIRECTION

USDA Forest Service

Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness
Beaverhead-Deerlodge and Bitterroot National Forests
Beaverhead, Deerlodge, Granite, and Ravalli Counties
Montana

INTRODUCTION

An Environmental Assessment (EA) for the management of the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness was made available for public comment and review on May 10, 1999. Five alternatives, including no action, were considered and analyzed in the EA. Based on the analysis in the EA, supporting documentation, and an analysis of the content of public comments, we have reached a decision that we are documenting in this Decision Notice.

The EA and this Decision Notice were prepared by the Forest Service to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

The Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness (A-P) is an outstanding example of this nation's wildlands. Population growth and increasing demand for wilderness experiences are affecting the Anaconda-Pintler. Western Montana is growing at a rapid rate. More people, many from out of state, discover the Anaconda-Pintler every year. It remains a favorite among long-time users. The intention of this updated direction is to maintain the wilderness qualities of this area despite the growing pressures of recreation use and other human induced changes.

DECISION AND REASONS FOR THE DECISION

Criteria for Decision

We based our decision on the purpose and need for the project, the desired future condition of the A-P, the issues identified in the EA, and the comments received. The purpose and need, as well as the DFC, are summarized below. Full descriptions of the purpose and need and DFC are found in the EA on pages 3-9 and 12.

Purpose and Need:

a. Management reflects the character of the A-P and its history as an outstanding example of this nation's wildlands.
b. Maintain wilderness quality of the A-P despite pressures of growing recreation use and other human induced changes.
c. Provide Forest Plan direction that defines an acceptable range of desired resource and social conditions.

Desired Future Condition:

a. A-P is predominantly an unmodified natural environment where ecological processes operate without interference.
b. Wilderness characteristics are maintained.
c. There is an opportunity for a high quality "wilderness experience."

The issues identified and the comments received throughout the public involvement process, particularly those we received in response to the EA, were also important in shaping our decision. The issues are described in Chapter II of the EA, pages 18-20. The comments received regarding the EA are summarized in Appendix II of this Decision Notice.

Overall Decision

It is our decision to select and implement Alternative C, the preferred alternative, but with several changes based on public comment.

Rationale: This alternative does a good job of maintaining wilderness quality despite the growing pressures of recreation use. The actions in this alternative maintain the status quo in terms of how the A-P looks and feels. We are choosing Alternative C because it strikes a balance that provides improvement in resource conditions with a minimum number of restrictions. The actions will result in the A-P being predominately unmodified and ecological processes will continue to operate without interference. Bio-physical wilderness characteristics will be maintained as will the opportunity for a high quality wilderness experience. Public comment showed that the proposed actions in Alternative C are acceptable to the public and address public concerns. Programmatic wilderness direction authorized by this decision is found in Appendix I, the Forest Plan Amendment. Responses to public comments are shown in Appendix II.

Modifications of Alternative C include a different group limit, a modified cap on outfitter and guide day use, a modified limit on use days for institutional groups, a mandatory trailhead registration without name or street address, and a change in wording but not in substance of the direction relating to fish stocking. Details of these changes and rationale are described in the individual sections below. Table A displays a comparison of the existing management direction, the changes proposed in the EA, and our final decision for management of the A-P. Appendix III documents the effects of these changes.

By choosing Alternative C-modified, we are making the decision to amend the Bitterroot, Beaverhead, and Deerlodge National Forest Land and Resource Management Plans (Forest Plans). The Forest Plan Amendment is displayed as Appendix I. The current (1977) Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness Management Plan is an appendix of the Forest Plans, so a change in current direction requires Forest Plan amendments. This action will modify and more clearly define the goals, objectives, standards, guidelines, and monitoring plans for the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness. The decision will adjust direction for Management Area (MA) 9 in the Beaverhead Forest Plan, MA 7A in the Bitterroot Forest Plan, and MA B1 in the Deerlodge Forest Plan. The analysis identified those portions of the 1977 Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness Management Plan that needed to be changed or refined. Some parts of the 1977 Wilderness Plan remain pertinent and there is no need to update them. They will continue to provide direction for the A-P. The relationship between the 1977 Wilderness Plan and this new direction is further discussed in the Forest Plan Amendment.

This decision is complex and involves a number of items. In order to make the decision points clearer and easier to understand, we have separated the decisions and rationale under different headings. Those major decision elements with their associated changes are described below. Some portions of the decision drew more public comment than others and thus we are elaborating on the rationale for those parts more than on others.

The proposed programmatic actions as stated and analyzed in the EA are *italicized and bolded* below. The purpose and need for the proposed actions are found on pages 5-9 of the EA. Specific supporting actions, which are directly tied to issues, appear in **bold** and are described under these programmatic actions. The specific actions were also analyzed by the EA.

Establish Recreation Use Zones and Prescriptions

We have decided to establish recreation use zones and prescriptions for the A-P. These management zones are based on the Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) concept. LAC sets limits in different portions of the Wilderness, based on measurements of conditions. The intent of establishing zones is to maintain or regain acceptable resource and social conditions. These conditions represent the maximum limit of change from natural which will be allowed. Zones allow managers to measure conditions against indicators such as "campsite density" or "barren core area." Each zone has individual standards reflecting the level of impact that is acceptable in those areas. When conditions, resource or social, do not meet the standards that have been set, a management action will be triggered. This action may range from education to restriction and will be designed to respond to the specific problem in order to preserve wilderness qualities and values.

The zones provide a range of conditions and a range of experiences. They are based on the capability of the land to sustain use without an unacceptable increase in impacts or a degradation of the current condition. The zones are shown on Zone Map A. The acceptable conditions for each zone are detailed in the Zone Management Direction section of the Forest Plan Amendment, and are summarized in Table I of the Amendment. The distribution of zones in relation to given destinations or routes in the Anaconda-Pintler

Wilderness (A-P) is shown in Table III of the Forest Plan Amendment. A brief narrative description of Zones I through IV follows.

Zone I (Most Natural) - Exists in essentially trailless areas where use and impacts are not concentrated around destinations. This area has the lowest level of human disturbance. It is characterized by a virtually unmodified natural environment. The A-P is primarily Zone I. This area functions as a wild place. It looks and feels wild to those who visit.

Zone II - Composed primarily of some access routes and the high elevation lake areas found on the Philipsburg and NW Wise River Districts. It is close to the crest of the range and contains more destinations than any other portion of the Wilderness. The destinations include lakes, peaks, and high passes. Access in this zone is via secondary trails. Destination areas have moderate use and are relatively vulnerable to impacts from use. This zone has a high degree of wilderness integrity and a low level of human disturbance.

Zone III – Includes some popular destinations and more heavily used areas that are along popular routes used for overnight trips. The area is characterized by a predominately unmodified natural environment. However, some sites are substantially affected by human activity. Such impacts include loss of vegetation and soil along travel routes, at campsites, and at scenic attractions such as lakeshores and viewpoints. The area has both mainline and secondary system trails. Encounters with other groups and rangers on the trail or in campsites are expected. Impacts could persist from year to year but do not exceed the limits defined in the objectives, guidelines, and standards. This zone still has a high degree of wilderness integrity.

Zone IV – (Transition/Portal) Receives the most use within the Wilderness and the highest percentage of day use. This zone has the most human disturbance of any zone within the wilderness. Despite this disturbance it is still characterized by a high degree of wilderness integrity and by a predominantly unmodified natural environment, however, some sites are affected by human activity. Impacts include loss of vegetation and soil along travel routes, campsites, and scenic attractions. Ecological processes still operate naturally. Opportunities for solitude still exist but are less characteristic of this area which offers an opportunity for primitive and unconfined recreation.

Rationale: Recreational use inevitably creates some impacts. Measurable indicators, which reflect these impacts, have been identified (pages 37-42, 55 of the EA) so that conditions can be monitored. The indicators include campsite density, loss or alteration of vegetation around campsites, social trails, encounters with other users, etc. This process of defining what is acceptable in given areas and how to measure the condition of these areas allows managers to recognize trends. This measurement lets managers know if they are reaching the desired future condition or if they need to modify management actions.

It is much easier to avoid human impacts than to correct them after they have occurred. Research (Cole, 1987) shows that damage happens quickly and those areas that still have

the most pristine qualities are the most vulnerable to impacts from human use. These areas must be protected if we are to meet the intent of the Wilderness Act.

People tend to camp in already impacted areas. Zones have been defined to lean towards a concentration of use, thus preventing other areas from being impacted.

With any human use some impact will occur. We have identified different levels of acceptable human impact for each zone. Descriptions of these settings will help managers to determine the conditions we are trying to achieve and maintain. It is our responsibility to retain conditions, at a minimum, as they exist now. It is our goal, wherever feasible, to improve them. We have selected the zone allocations displayed in Preferred Alternative C because they best match this responsibility and goal.

Many of the specific actions recommended by this planning process are proactive. They are designed to help meet the conditions we want to maintain or achieve in each zone. These actions are our main tools to prevent degradation of wilderness quality. Those specific actions needed to maintain the conditions in the zones and the rationale for each action are described below.

Group Size

As part of our decision, group size will be limited to 12 head of stock and 12 people. This is a substantial decrease from the current limit of 20 head of stock and 15 people. This size will apply to all groups, at all times, including commercially outfitted groups.

Rationale: Research has shown that party size disproportionately influences vegetation loss (Cole, 1992) and encountering large groups does more to diminish feelings of solitude than do the same number of people in small parties (Stankey, 1973). Experience shows that large groups create more damage to vegetation and soil, both in campsites and along the trail, than smaller groups. Not only do large groups take up more space but they also interact differently. Large groups diminish people's feeling of solitude more than do smaller groups. Currently most use in the Anaconda-Pintler is by small groups. Additionally, the Anaconda-Pintler has few large, impacted campsites suitable for large groups. To maintain wilderness quality, it is important to minimize large, impacted sites.

This decrease in group size is different than was proposed in the preferred alternative (any combination of people and stock up to 16). Public response varied on group limit. A number of people wanted twelve "beating hearts." Some could not understand why the number of hikers, in the proposed action, was actually increased by one over the current limit. Some stock users felt the reduction in the number of stock was too severe. We feel a limit of 12 and 12 is a fairer solution in that it decreases both people (20%) and stock (40%) compared to the current situation. We recognize that stock generally cause more impact than people, but we also recognize that stock use is a traditional use in the Anaconda-Pintler and improved handling techniques have minimized impacts in recent years. We will continue our education efforts. Stock impacts are generally greatest with overnight use. A riding group, out for one or more nights, generally has pack animals and

thus the number of people will be tend to be smaller than the maximum possible for day riders. The limit of 12 and 12 will allow overnight stock groups some flexibility on size. At the same time it will encourage restraint when deciding how much gear to bring which in turn minimizes impacts.

Self-issued, Mandatory Registration

It is our decision to require a self-issued registration by all people entering the Wilderness. This registration will be available at the trailhead, will not limit the number of people, will not assign campsites, and will be free. Boxes with completed forms will be locked for security purposes. Name and street address will be optional. City, county and state will be a portion of the mandatory information we are gathering with the registration.

Rationale: Our reasons for requiring registration are several: 1) Registration forms with detachable information are an ideal way to disseminate "Leave No Trace" information and changes in regulations. 2) We want to be able to assess use trends in the Anaconda-Pintler. Better use data will help refine management and help us minimize impacts. 3) We have had a voluntary registration in place for several years and compliance has been spotty.

A self-issuing registration interferes with individual freedom less than permits issued from an office. It allows for maximum spontaneity, provides an opportunity for exchange of information, and allows us to better monitor use trends.

Campfire Restrictions

It is our decision to close the following lakes to campfires within ¼ mile of their shorelines: Oreamnos, Sawed Cabin, Upper Phyllis, Upper Carpp, Surprise, Bear, Buck, Emerald, Lost Lakes, Lower Phyllis, Park Lakes, Sauer, Continental, the unnamed lake below Queener Mountain, and the unnamed lake west of Warren Lake. **This does not mean the lakes are closed to camping.** It simply means that campfires are not allowed within ¼ mile of the lakeshore.

Rationale: We know that many people love campfires. However, research (Cole, 1989) and experience have shown that campfire closures are one of the most effective measures for stopping impacts on vegetation and soils along sensitive lakeshores. Campfires cause many impacts. Firewood gathering removes organic matter from the soil building process, changes microclimates, and creates extra trails. Campfires blacken rocks, and sterilize and compact soil. Sometimes campfires are used as garbage pits.

The lakes we have chosen for closures are those that currently show a marked lack of firewood or those that are in pristine condition and therefore are vulnerable to degradation if campfires were to become commonplace. We are consciously choosing to be pro-active and prevent damage before it occurs in these cases.

Resource Protection Facilities

It is our decision to minimize facilities throughout the Wilderness. Any facility will be the exception, not the rule. Placement of facilities could include a toilet at Johnson Lake or a hitch rack in a few key locations to reduce damage to soil and trees. In general, standard "Leave No Trace" practices for sanitation and stock use will predominate, but in a few spots because of new inexperienced visitors and the topography, we need to be able to use these tools to minimize impacts.

Rationale: Research (Cole, 1987) and experience have shown that judicious, limited use of facilities can prevent more widespread impacts. We do not propose to use facilities to respond to over-use or abuse. Constructed facilities reduce the wilderness experience of visitors and the natural appearance of the Wilderness.

Trails

This decision will not allow new system trails. Reconstruction, including relocation of short stretches for resource protection or safety, will be allowed on existing trails only after further NEPA analysis. Abandoned portions of trail will be naturalized. Social trails and other user-built trails will be discouraged and eliminated where possible.

Rationale: Access changes the wild qualities of trailless areas in many ways. Trails change use patterns and increase impacts in adjacent areas. We want those portions of the wilderness that currently do not have trails to remain wild and challenging, while offering an opportunity for solitude.

Stock Access

It is our decision to leave Hope Lake Tr. #424 closed to travel with stock. Additionally we will prohibit camping with stock within ¼ mile of Sawed Cabin, Oreamnos, and Ripple Lakes.

Rationale: Hope Lake Trail is not safe for stock and it is not possible to tether animals 200 feet from Hope Lake as already required for all lakes in the A-P. Sawed Cabin and Oreamnos Lakes are both in fragile high elevation areas. Both have experienced a marked increase in damage due to stock use in the past few years. It is possible to camp farther than ¼ mile from the lakes, thus avoiding damage to the sensitive areas adjacent to the lakes. Ripple Lake is in a small basin unsuitable for camping with stock. It is difficult to secure stock 200 feet from the lake. Stock camps too close to the lake have created severe impacts.

Outfitter and Guide Special Use Permits

We have further defined direction for outfitters and guides.

New outfitters may be considered only if: 1) the proposed use will not create unacceptable social or bio-physical impacts; 2) the use cannot be filled by current outfitters and; 3) the new use is non-traditional, not one of the currently permitted uses. NEPA analysis will be necessary for any new permit.

Use days for currently permitted outfitters will be capped at the 10-year high of actual use if demand exists and monitoring shows that impacts are acceptable. No additional use days will be permitted except for those available from a pool of **unused** days that will exist if current outfitters do not use their allotted days. Transfer of days from the pool will be allowed only between days of like kind and same season. For example, fall hunting horseback days could **not** be switched with summer backpacking days.

Incidental commercial/institutional use days will be limited to a total of 200 use days, annually, Wilderness-wide. These days are not intended for repeated use by the same group the following year. These days are not available to existing A-P outfitters. They are allotted on a one-time basis.

Rationale: Clearly defined guidelines are needed for responding to increased requests for new outfitter and guide permits from those who would like to outfit in the A-P, and for responding to requests for more use days from existing outfitters. Response to these requests needs to be consistent throughout the A-P. Public comments clearly showed the non-outfitted public wants outfitted use in the A-P to be limited. The guidelines we have chosen will limit new outfitters and will limit use days for existing outfitters. Yet existing outfitters in the A-P will be able to continue operating at the current level. Our decision does not change the economic viability of current operations. Current outfitters have been contacted throughout the planning process and their concerns have been considered.

Outfitting and guiding is an activity specifically provided for in the Wilderness Act under Special Provisions, Sec. 4(d)(6) "Commercial services may be performed…to the extent necessary for activities which are proper for realizing the recreational or other wilderness purposes…" Outfitting is a historic use in the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness. However, many operations have changed hands. Thus, a number of relatively new outfitters have only a few years of operation. This and the fact that there are actually fewer outfitters than historically, results in current outfitted use below historic use levels.

Public comment showed that many want outfitted use minimized or eliminated. The size, shape, and geography of the A-P make almost any part accessible from a trailhead, in a day, on foot. Risk, difficulty, and distances in the A-P are not such that they generate a high need or demand for outfitted services. We feel holding use at its current level is justified by the public comments we received and the observations of our managers.

The "pool" concept will allow some flexibility but will not result in any permanent increase in the use days for any given outfitter beyond their high use in the last 10 years. The use in the last 10 years has not resulted in resource damage to the A-P. The cap of 200 use days for institutional outfitters is low. It equates, for example, with two trips of ten people for ten days. Beyond these 200 use days institutional groups will not be permitted in the A-P.

Annual operating plans are required with each outfitter permit. They regulate the use of camps and routes, making certain that the resource and conditions in each zone are not compromised.

We feel the limits we are setting will help preserve the wilderness quality while still allowing an opportunity for those who wish to utilize an outfitter to experience the Wilderness. Current outfitters will be allowed to maintain their businesses, operating at current levels.

Develop Fish Stocking Direction

Between the release of the Environmental Assessment for comment and this Decision, several discussions have occurred with representatives of the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks. These discussions have focused on the statutory roles and relationships between the agencies as they relate to fisheries management and fish stocking. Additionally, we have discussed our goals and objectives for fish stocking and Wilderness management. Appendix IV contains new language relative to fisheries management in the A-P. We believe the new language retains the intent of the goals and objectives from the EA for comment, however three adjustments have been made:

1) We have clarified the text to reflect that the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks has the statutory authority to manage fisheries and stock fish in Wilderness. Certain limitations exist and are spelled out in the interagency MOU between the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies as written in August of 1986 and reaffirmed in 1995.

2) Minor word changes have been made in the goal and objective statements.

3) Forest Service fisheries guidelines have been removed from the document. This change was made to reflect that the statutory authority to stock and manage fisheries rests with the State and not the Forest Service. In its place we have agreed with the State to establish an interagency working group to develop strategies to improve our native fish stocks, manage recreational impacts, and deal with specific issues as they arise.

We believe that our agencies share common goals and that an interagency working group is a sound way to make meaningful progress towards these goals. We think this is responsive to the concerns raised by the public during scoping and comment on the EA. Anyone interested in following the progress of this group should contact us or our counterparts in Fish, Wildlife, and Parks.

Rationale: Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks has the statutory authority to manage fisheries and stock fish in the Wilderness. The role of the Forest Service is to consider how fish stocking affects the wilderness resource and its natural communities.

Research Natural Areas

It is our decision to proceed with establishment of two Research Natural Areas (RNAs), Goat Flat on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge NF and East Fork Bitterroot on the Bitterroot NF. The Regional Forester must sign the actual establishment decision. Our part of the RNA decision is to set forth management direction for these areas. That direction includes preventing any new campsite impacts, protecting native vegetation, and avoiding group camps for outfitters and administrative users.

Rationale: These RNAs were proposed in the respective Forest Plans. They have long been recognized as major ecosystem types within a nation-wide network of RNAs established to maintain biological diversity. These important plant communities have special or unique characteristics of scientific interest and importance. The purpose of RNAs is somewhat different from wilderness, with a narrower focus. In wilderness RNAs are protected by wilderness designation. Although overall direction for wilderness takes legal precedent, there is a need for further recognition and protection of these areas for scientific study. RNAs are places needing long-term protection and recognition where non-manipulative research and monitoring may occur. Goat Flat was selected to represent a unique alpine ecosystem and associated timberline forests. There are a number of sensitive plant species and rare plant communities within this RNA. A portion of it is outside the Wilderness. The East Fork Bitterroot was selected because it features a willow dominated valley bottom with beaver ponds in a sub-alpine fir forest type.

Prevention and Removal of Noxious Weeds

It is our decision that a combination of education, detection, prevention, and eradication methods will be used to prevent weed infestations before they occur and to eliminate infestations while they are still minimal. New infestations of noxious weeds will be eradicated as soon as possible after detection and inventory. Eradication will be done by hand pulling if possible. Biological or chemical control will be used only after further NEPA analysis. Chemical treatment will always be site-specific. Biological or chemical controls will strive to minimize effects to non-target species.

Rationale: Native vegetation is an important component of wilderness. The A-P is almost entirely free from noxious weeds. Noxious weeds have the potential to drastically change the Wilderness. We do not want to see native plant communities displaced by weeds. We want to lay the groundwork for dealing with noxious weeds before they become a major problem. Many respondents to the EA were opposed to the use of chemicals in the Wilderness and some questioned the compatibility of chemical use with wilderness values. In order to preserve natural conditions in the Wilderness, it will at times be necessary to remove non-native vegetation. Since chemicals are one of the primary tools for accomplishing this, we wanted to allow this tool as an option for future managers to

consider using. Prohibiting the use of chemicals could interfere with preservation of natural conditions in the future.

Management Direction for Mystic Cabin

It is our decision that Mystic Lake Cabin be maintained and protected from deterioration in a manner that allows for its continued occasional administrative use. This includes allowing a trail crew or wilderness ranger to use the cabin when working in the area. In the event of wild or prescribed fire in the vicinity of the cabin, measures will be taken to protect the cabin from fire. Advance measures to "fire-proof" the cabin through major vegetation manipulation will not be undertaken.

Rationale: Mystic Lake Cabin has cultural significance as part of the historic component of the wilderness resource. It is eligible for listing under the National Register of Historic Places. This is the only structurally sound cabin in the entire A-P Wilderness. The cabin is used only a few times a year for administrative purposes. Cabins used this way tend to be maintained better and last longer. Preservation of the cabin involves only minimal routine maintenance of virtually no expense. It does not involve restoration since the cabin is in good shape currently.

Monitoring Direction

With this decision we have established clearer monitoring direction so that we can determine if we are meeting the desired future condition described on page 12 of the EA. Monitoring activities listed in the 1977 Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness Management Plan and individual Compartment Prescriptions will continue to be monitored. We will also monitor those conditions defined for each zone including campsite density, barren core area, social trails, encounters, administrative and permitted camps, resource protection facilities, Forest Service system trails, trail signs, and impacts to vegetation that result from recreation use. Recreation impacts include firewood utilization, forage utilization, and vegetation disturbance or elimination around campsites. A detailed monitoring plan will be part of our operating plan.

Rationale: We need to monitor to determine wilderness condition and to determine if our management actions are working. Monitoring gives us current and changing conditions, trends, and the general overall state of the wilderness. It is our tool for evaluating the effectiveness of our management.

Alternatives Not Chosen

The alternatives examined in the Environmental Assessment presented a wide range of choices, each with different strengths and weaknesses. In order to make this decision we had to weigh the current and traditional uses against the resource needs and the changing values and expectations of today's society.

Alternative A

The no action alternative would not change the current direction in the A-P. This alternative was not chosen because it did not address the issues that threaten the current quality and desired future condition of the Anaconda-Pintler. To select the no action alternative and do nothing about the existing problems or those soon headed our way would ignore our responsibility to manage the Anaconda-Pintler as an "enduring resource." We feel that we can do better in meeting the needs of the public, the needs of the environment, and the intent of the 1964 Wilderness Act.

Alternative B

This alternative was not chosen because it did not take enough actions to maintain the quality of the A-P. It relied on "hardening" by building more facilities such as hitch racks and toilets to concentrate use. Alternative B is less restrictive than our final decision, but would allow continued degradation. This would not meet the intent of the Wilderness Act.

Alternative D

This alternative was not chosen because it initiated more restrictions than we feel are necessary at this time. It would have changed the wilderness experience by implementing numerous new regulations, more signs, and more enforcement.

Alternative E

This alternative would have instituted a mandatory, agency-issued permit. The permit could incorporate use limits. We did not select this alternative because we feel such a system is not necessary at this time to meet the desired future condition. An office-issued permit would be a major inconvenience for the public, would create increased workload for the Forest Service, and would be viewed by some as an infringement on personal freedoms.

Summary

The Anaconda-Pintler was recognized for its outstanding physical and biological characteristics as early as 1937 when it was designated as a Primitive Area. It provides rugged scenic beauty, pristine conditions in many places, solitude, wildlife habitat, water resources, and back country recreation. It has an amazing array of vegetation because of complex geology, diverse topography, and precipitation differences. Headwaters of the Big Hole, Upper Clark Fork (Rock Creek), and Bitterroot Rivers, each important as cold water fisheries and irrigation sources, lie within the Anaconda-Pintler. The narrow configuration of the Wilderness makes even its high elevation central section readily accessible. The integrity of the area is intact because it is rugged and because, historically, it has not been near a population center. However, people from all over are now visiting the A-P and it is adjacent to one of the fastest growing areas of Montana. New feature articles appear in magazines every year and a new guidebook was just published. The A-P is no longer "undiscovered."

We realize that this decision is not simple and has many elements. We recognize that some changes we are proposing may change the experience of some visitors. We have attempted to choose actions that will have the most "payoff" in terms of maintaining wilderness quality while infringing the least on any one group or on personal freedom.

The goal of wilderness management is to preserve wilderness values. The public comments we received showed that the Anaconda-Pintler has many treasured values. As our world becomes more crowded, frantic and industrialized, remaining wilderness will hold even more value and appeal for future generations.

The steps we have chosen reflect the character of the A-P and its history as an outstanding example of this nation's wilderness. The intention of this updated direction is to maintain the wilderness quality while still allowing for its use and enjoyment by the public. We feel the final decisions we have made best balance short-term visitor expectations with long-term wilderness protection and preservation. We have carefully weighed the effects of our decision and are aware of the costs and benefits involved.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public involvement has taken place in a number of ways. Pre-NEPA scoping took place from August of 1990 through December of 1993. During the development of the April 1993 Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness Fire Management Guidelines there was discussion with a number of individuals about A-P management. A Public Involvement/Communication Plan was developed in January of 1994. A mailing list was developed from Forest mailing lists and the A-P Fire Plan mailing list. Initial scoping, in the form of a post card, was mailed in January of 1994. Those responding to this card were sent a letter asking for concerns and comments in April of 1994. There were 23 responses to that letter. A parallel press release was sent out at the time of the letter. In June of 1996, NEPA was begun with a press release and a letter outlining some preliminary proposals. The mailing list for this letter was built from Forest lists and previous show of interest. This initial NEPA effort had 29 responses. In May of 1999 an EA was released. Six hundred and forty-two EAs were sent out for comment. We used a comprehensive mailing list of individuals, organizations, outfitters and guides, local government, and business representatives (the lists are in the project file). At this time a news release was sent to 5 newspapers. Notices about proposed actions, availability of documents, and opportunity to comment were posted on bulletin boards. During the comment period that followed the release of the EA, approximately 85 individuals contacted us with questions and comments about the proposal.

Meetings have taken place with interested groups and individuals. One meeting was held with Bitterroot Back Country Horsemen (approximately 30 people attended) and another with Missoula BCH (approximately 40 people). A meeting was also held with Wilderness Watch members in the spring of 1995, attended by approximately 25 people. A public meeting was held in Wisdom in April of 1996, with approximately 20 people attending. The project has appeared on Forest Quarterly updates for years and those expressing

interest have been added to mailing lists. The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks was contacted intermittently throughout the process. They were intimately involved in rewriting the portion of the document relating to fish stocking (see Appendix IV). This was accomplished through telephone calls, written communication, and a half-day meeting with all fish biologists associated with the A-P and the State Director. Discussions have taken place with the tribes. Written and oral comments have been received in response to meetings and mailings. Comments on wilderness registration cards, wilderness ranger reports, and questions and comments to receptionists have also been noted and considered.

Appendix II summarizes the comments we received on the EA and gives our response to each comment. A list of those who commented is attached. Those who commented are assigned a number that shows up on the comment chart so it is possible to correlate comments with their source.

DETERMINATION OF NON-SIGNIFICANCE FOR FOREST PLAN AMENDMENT

Based on our review of the following factors, we have determined that Amendment 18 for the Bitterroot Forest Plan, Amendment 7 for the Beaverhead Forest Plan, and Amendment 2 for the Deerlodge Forest Plan are not significant changes. The determination that it is not significant has been made in accordance with the requirements of 16 U.S.C. 1604 (f)(4), 36 CFR 219.10 (f), and FSM 1922.5. The following factors were used to determine whether the proposed change to the Forest Plan is or is not a significant change.

Timing of the Proposed Actions

The timing factor examines at what point, over the course of the Forest Plan period the Plan is amended. Both the age of the underlying document and the duration of the amendment are relevant considerations. The Forest Service handbook indicates that the later in the time period, the less significant the change is likely to be. All of the Forest Plans affected are slated for revision within the next few years and are reaching the end of the first planning period. The Bitterroot and Deerlodge plans were written in 1987, the Beaverhead in 1986. The original A-P plan was incorporated into these plans when they were written. It, in turn, was written in 1977 and this is the first update in 23 years.

The Forest Plan amendment will become effective following appropriate public notification and completion of procedures for administrative review of the decision in accordance with 36 CFR 219.10 (f). The management activity that will occur as a result of this amendment is planned to occur no sooner than the summer of 2000. The change is scheduled to take place before the revision of the Forest Plans.

Location and Size

The entire Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness, approximately 160,000 acres, will be affected by this decision. The Bitterroot portion represents slightly over 5% of the approximately 750,000 acres of Wilderness on the Forest. The acreage on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge is

approximately 52% of the total designated Wilderness, approximately 225,000 on the Forest. In Montana there are 15 Wildernesses totaling 3,442,048 acres. The Anaconda-Pintler is less than 5% of the total designated Wilderness acreage in the state. The area lies along the Continental Divide on the edge of the two Forests.

Goals, Objectives, and Outputs

This amendment does not change the long-term relationships between the levels of goods and services projected by the Forest Plans. Wilderness acreage does not change as a result of these actions. The whole point of the amendment is to maintain the condition of the wilderness resource we presently have.

Management Prescription

The management prescription will apply to future decisions throughout the A-P Wilderness. The change does not alter the desired future condition of the land and resources or the anticipated goods and services to be produced. The prescription applies only to the Wilderness and its entire intent is to preserve the quality of that area. The original management prescriptions, as well as the amendment, both carry out the overall intent of the Wilderness Act, and thus the amendment does not represent a major change in direction. As disclosed in the Decision Notice and the EA, the amendment better defines the Forest Plan Goals and Objectives for the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness. It does not alter the management framework for the vast majority of lands within the overall planning area on the two Forests.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on our review of the Environmental Assessment for the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness Management Direction, we have determined that our decision is not a major Federal action and will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment, individually or cumulatively with other actions in the general area. The environmental effects do not meet the definition of significance on context or intensity as defined in 40 CFR 1508.27. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement is not required. This finding is based on the following factors.

Context. This decision, by itself, does not have significance that is national or international in context. The direction is compatible with the social and economic context of the local and state areas.

The land area affected by the decision is part of the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). The NWPS is administered by the USDA Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, and the Fish and Wildlife Service. Nationwide, the NWPS includes more than 630 units totaling more than 100 million acres. In Montana there are 15 units of Wilderness totaling 3,442,048 acres. These range in size from Medicine Lake Wilderness at 11,367 acres to the Bob Marshall at 1,009,356 acres. The Anaconda-Pintler is just under 160,000. The proposed programmatic direction for the

A-P is intended to maintain the current wilderness quality of the area. This programmatic direction is not changing the A-P; rather, it is providing clearer direction for implementing the Wilderness Act on this particular Wilderness.

Intensity. The following discussion is organized around the Ten Significant Criteria described in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Regulations (40 CFR 1508.27).

1. Impacts from this project are both beneficial and adverse, and none are significant in intensity. The adverse effects are mostly short-term minor social effects. They will not impair bio-physical characteristics of the Wilderness. The number of acres of land in pristine condition will remain virtually unchanged. Conditions in some campsites will improve. In other areas conditions may degrade slightly. Overall the condition of the A-P Wilderness should remain as it is at present or slightly improve. Particular efforts will be made to prevent a proliferation of campsites. Prohibiting campfires in some areas, reducing group size, limiting camping with stock in several spots, and limiting the number of outfitters and guides as well as their use days does not prevent anyone from being in the Wilderness or from seeking less restrictive opportunities elsewhere on the Forests which share the A-P. (Pages 91-106 of EA.)

The beneficial effects are mostly long-term and they will enhance wilderness values. Prohibiting campfires will improve the aesthetic quality of campsites and help maintain natural aspects of camping areas. Reducing the maximum group size for people and stock will reduce conflicts between user groups, minimize increase in size of campsites and improve opportunities for solitude. (Pages 91-106 of EA.)

2. Public health and safety are not affected by our decision. To mitigate any safety concerns associated with the new mandatory registration, we will not require names or street addresses, and registration forms will be placed in a locked receptacle.

3. Unique characteristics of the area, such as cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecological critical areas are not adversely impacted by this proposal. No site disturbing activities are planned as part of this action.

4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. While some people have disagreed with some elements of the alternatives, no one has provided evidence that the environmental effects of the action have been wrongly predicted. (See Appendix II, Response to Comment.) Therefore, the effects are not likely to be controversial from the standpoint that a body of scientific evidence exists which refutes the findings disclosed in the EA.

5. We are satisfied that the analysis documented in the EA shows the effects of the alternatives and that they do not involve uncertain, unique, or unknown risk to the human environment. Forest Service experiences with environmental effects on similar past actions in other wilderness areas indicate that risks to the human environment are neither unique nor unknown. (EA pages 96-106.)

6. The action does not set a precedent for other projects that may have significant effects nor does it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. The Forest Service has considerable experience in managing wilderness. Nothing about this decision is unprecedented. Future site-specific actions that may be needed to restore resource and social values in the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness will be analyzed using the NEPA process in the context of the Beaverhead, Bitterroot, and Deerlodge National Forest Land and Resource Management Plans.

7. This proposal is not related to other proposals that would cause a cumulatively significant impact. The cumulative effects of this action and other actions are documented in Chapter IV of the Environmental Assessment. Those effects are not significant.

8. The action will not adversely affect or cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. No highways, structures, or National Register eligible sites will be adversely affected. Mystic Lake Cabin is a site eligible for listing under the National Register of Historic Places. SHPO concurred in the determination of eligibility in 1992. In relation to other National Register eligible properties, Mystic Lake Cabin has national and statewide importance. It will not be phased out and measures will be taken to protect and stabilize the cabin. In the event of wild or prescribed fire in the vicinity of the cabin, measures will be taken to protect the cabin from fire. Advance measures to "fire-proof" the cabin through major vegetation manipulation will be not be undertaken. (Pages 109-110 of EA.)

9. The decision will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species, or its habitat. Biological Assessments were completed for this decision and concluded that this action will have "No Effect" on Westslope Cutthroat Trout, Bull Trout, Grey Wolf, Peregrine Falcon, Lynx, or Bald Eagle. (See project file.) A determination of "No Effect" was also made for Federally Proposed or listed threatened or endangered plant species and habitat. (See project file.) There is also "No Effect" on species listed as sensitive on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge and Bitterroot National Forests.

10. The action is in compliance with all Federal, State, and local laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. No site-specific ground disturbing actions are taking place. Consistency with applicable laws is covered below.

CONSISTENCY WITH THE FOREST PLAN, APPLICABLE LAWS, AND REGULATIONS

Forest Plan

Our decision amends the Forest Plans. This action is not a significant amendment to the Forest Plans as it will not significantly alter the multiple-use goals and objectives for long-term land and resource management.

Wilderness Act of 1964

The decision is in full compliance with direction in this Act. The actions included in this decision do not include or necessitate the need for any temporary roads, use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment, landing of aircraft, mechanical transport, structures, or installations except as necessary to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the area [Sec.4(c)]. Furthermore, this decision supports the administration of this area to preserve its wilderness character and for the purposes of recreational, scenic, scientific, educational, conservation, and historical use. [Sec. 4(b)].

Endangered Species Act

The proposed action was determined to have no effect on threatened or endangered species or their critical habitat. Further, this action will not result in a trend toward listing of any sensitive species. These findings have been documented in the Biological Evaluations and Biological Assessments (see project file).

National Historic Preservation Act

This decision will not adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures or objects listed in, or eligible for listing in, the National Register of Historic Places, nor will it cause loss or destruction of significant cultural or historic resources. Mystic Lake Cabin was recorded and evaluated by Heritage Research Associates in 1991. It was determined eligible for listing in the National Register based on criteria A and C. It represents early Forest Service management and conservation history (Criterion A) and is a representative of an early standard C-1 style administrative building plan. SHPO concurred in the determination of eligibility in 1992. In relation to other National Register eligible properties Mystic Lake Cabin has national and statewide importance.

Clean Air Act

This decision is in compliance with direction in this Act. No actions involving air quality are associated with this decision.

Clean Water Act

This decision is in compliance with direction in this Act. No actions relating to water quality are associated with this decision.

National Forest Management Act

Requirements for Forest planning under 36 CFR 219, National Forest System Land and Resource Management Planning, have been met. This action provides direction in

accordance with 36 CFR 293.3, which allows the Forest Service to require registration and limit certain uses such as campfires and camping.

Organic Administration Act

This action is in compliance with this Act, which provides authority to regulate the use and occupancy of National Forest System Lands (16 USC 551).

National Environmental Policy Act

The requirements of NEPA, as specified in 40 CFR Part 1500, have been fully applied through this project planning effort. The Environmental Assessment, Decision Notice, and comprehensive analyses, as well as the public involvement steps that they incorporate, comply with the letter and intent of NEPA. The EA analyzes a reasonable range of alternatives, including no-action, and discloses the expected environmental impacts of each alternative within the context of identified issues. This Decision Notice describes the selected actions we have made and our rationale for making these decisions.

Environmental Justice Executive Order

The effects of the preferred and alternative actions on the quality of the human environment were considered. We determined that minority and low-income populations will not be disproportionately affected by these actions. The actions will affect wilderness visitors in like manner regardless of minority status or income.

APPEAL RIGHTS

This decision is subject to appeal in accordance with 36 CFR 215. A written Notice of Appeal must be postmarked within 45 days after the date this notice is published in the Ravalli Republic and Montana Standard newspapers. The content of the appeal must meet the requirements of 36 CFR 215.14. The Notice of Appeal should be sent to USDA Forest Service, Northern Region, ATTN: Appeal Deciding Officer, Federal Building, P.O. Box 7669, Missoula, MT 59807.

IMPLEMENTATION

If no appeal is received, implementation may occur on, but not before, five business days from the close of the appeal filing period. If an appeal is received, implementation may not occur for 15 days following the appeal disposition.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For additional information please contact Judith Fraser at the West Fork Ranger District Office of the Bitterroot National Forest, phone # (406) 821-3269; or Deb Gale at the Wisdom Ranger District Office of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, phone # (406) 689-3243.

We know that the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness is an important and special area to you, the local communities, the State of Montana, and the nation. We believe this decision will address environmental concerns, provide for balanced wilderness management, and protect the wilderness for enjoyment by current and future generations. This decision was not easy, simple, or without effects to you and other visitors. We believe that this decision is a reasonable and sensible way to ensure that the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness continues to provide its many benefits.

RODD RICHARDSON	Date	JANETTE KAISER	Date
Forest Supervisor		Forest Supervisor	
Bitterroot National Forest		Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest	