



Motorized Use Authorization to Support Idaho Fish and Game Wolf Collaring

Scoping Notice 12-4-2005

The Idaho Fish and Game has requested that the Forest Service authorize use of a helicopter in the Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness, south of the Salmon River, to dart with tranquilizers, land and radio collar up to 16 gray wolves. This research activity would support Idaho's wolf recovery plan by providing information on wolf demographics and behavior, movement patterns, and activity sites within the wilderness. This information is required by the Idaho Fish and Game to ensure that they are meeting the requirements of the Wolf Recovery Plan approved by the Idaho Legislature in 2002, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service Recovery Plan (2004), as well as maintain minimum counts for the requirements under the Endangered Species Act.

Use of aircraft, including helicopters, in wilderness is permitted only at established airstrips, or as minimally necessary for the administration of the area as wilderness. The Forest Service and the State have mutual goals for managing the wilderness and maintaining a naturally operating ecosystem, which includes the gray wolves. The Regional Forester, Intermountain Region, is the responsible official to grant permission for the use of a helicopter for this research. He will decide whether to issue a special use permit to authorize the helicopter use.

A minimum requirements analysis has been completed that indicates that the use of the helicopter would be the minimum tool to accomplish the project objectives. Two alternatives were addressed:

- Alternative A – Use of the helicopter to tranquilizer dart and then radio collar gray wolves. The helicopter offers logistical mobility to be opportunistic in locating and sedating wolves while doing big game winter survey work within the wilderness area. The reader should note that the big game survey work is conducted regularly in the wilderness and is considered an over flight that does not need any special permission by the Forest Service, only the helicopter landings and use of helicopters to dart the wolves requires a special use permit. The Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness is estimated to have 5-8 non radio collared packs. The State of Idaho has an objective to radio collar 2 wolves per pack. Therefore, 10 to 16 wolves might be collared. Because the darting effort will be incidental to big game surveys, it is possible no wolves will be seen or darted. However, each wolf sighting that results in a collaring effort may require up to three landings in the wilderness, for potentially up to 48 landings of very short duration (15 seconds to 30 minutes each). The number of landings depends on where animals are sighted, and the preparation for darting that is needed. In the most extreme case upon visual sighting of wolves, the helicopter crew will land to remove doors, prepare dart guns and radio collars, then they will pursue and dart the wolves at low

elevations, landing upon success as close to the animal as possible. Finally they will return to the preparation area to recover any doors or material left at the first landing site. Landings will typically be done over snow in clear areas. No landings sites will be created or modified. Staging and refueling areas would be either at existing landing strips within the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, or at airstrips adjacent to the wilderness depending on which portion of the area they are working. The collaring activity would be completed during the winter months of January and February when recreation use is very low. Big game surveys will be flown within IDFG Big Game Management Units 20A, 26, and 27, which cover most of the South Fork Salmon River, Middle Fork Salmon River and Big Creek drainages within the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. Wolves spotted in these areas would be pursued, darted, captured and collared. This is the most humane way of capturing wolves.

- Alternative B – Use leg hold traps to capture gray wolves. Trappers, might travel through the wilderness by airplane to wilderness landing strips, by foot or horseback during the summer months, locating, luring and trapping wolves via leg hold traps. Trapping would occur within the same big game management areas. The same number of wolves would be attempted to be trapped and collared. This method is less successful and requires long periods of time (several months/sometimes years) in order to achieve the same results. There is more potential for damage to the captured wolves using this method. This method has been tried in the Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness with very little success over the last decade.

Alternative A is the Proposed Action.

Based on the analysis of effects in the minimum requirements analysis it is anticipated that this project would be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement as per Forest Service Handbook, 1909.15, Chapter 30. This project falls within category 31.12, #8, Approval, modification, or continuation of minor short term (one year or less) special uses of national forest system lands. We expect that effects of this activity would be very minimal because the helicopter will be landing during winter when use is very low, and snow will typically protect any underlying vegetation from damage during landings.

The Forest Service would like your thoughts and ideas on this proposal. You are welcome to send comments to Randy Welsh, Regional Wilderness Specialist, at 324 25th Street, Ogden, Utah 84401 or call with questions at 801-625-5250. You may hand deliver your comments to the above address during normal business hours from 8:00 am to 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays. Email comments may be sent to: **comments-intermtn-regional-office@fs.fed.us**.

The comment period for this scoping process ends on January 4, 2006. Comments received, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project. They will be available for public inspection and will be released if requested under the Freedom of Information Act.