Monongahela National Forest

United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest Service

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Record of Decision

Final Environmental Impact Statement

To accompany the Land and Resource Management Plan

Record Of Decision
For Final Environmental Impact Statement for the 2006 Land and Resource Management Plan

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Final Environmental Impact Statement for the
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Record of Decision

Preface

This Record of Decision (ROD) describes my decision to select Alternative 2 Modified as the Monongahela National Forest 2006 Land and Resource Management Plan (2006 Forest Plan). I have reviewed the range of alternatives, considered public input, and reviewed the evaluation of the alternatives in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS). Alternative 2, as presented in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), was modified based on public comments received during the 90-day comment period and from internal review by Forest staff. The ROD also explains my reasons for making changes to the original 1986 Forest Plan.

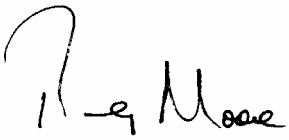
Although I am the final decision maker, I have not made this decision alone. We received nearly 13,000 comments and suggestions during the development of the 2006 Forest Plan. Hundreds of citizens talked with members of the planning team during meetings held throughout the planning process. Meaningful collaboration with local governments, state and federal agencies, and various interest groups resulted in valuable contributions to the revision effort. This decision is the result of the positive and productive relationships that evolved during the planning process and the important contributions from all who participated. We have listened, and your input has shaped this 2006 Forest Plan.

Developing a forest plan that is supported by most members of the public is not easy. The Monongahela National Forest provides many different uses to many different people, and those people often have divergent views on how to manage public lands. The Forest includes some of West Virginia's most beautiful landscapes, which are important for tourism and are a principal reason that people choose to live in this part of West Virginia. The Forest is ecologically diverse, providing a home for many native plants and animals. Hardwood forests provide important wood products to society. Valuable natural gas deposits lie under the Forest. The Monongahela National Forest is uniquely positioned to provide abundant multiple uses while conserving the ecology and culture of West Virginia.

The ecological, social, and economic conditions on the National Forest change over time, as does public opinion of what constitutes the best use of National Forest lands. For these reasons, the management direction provided in the 2006 Forest Plan is dynamic and will be re-evaluated periodically as new information becomes available. The 2006 Forest Plan is the result of a comprehensive evaluation of the 1986 plan, an examination of the best available scientific information, and an in-depth notice and comment process. The revision process has taken over 4 years and has been the focus of an interdisciplinary team of scientists. My role, as well as the role of the Forest Supervisor on the Monongahela National Forest, has been to guide the process, listen to the public, facilitate the collaboration efforts, ensure the integrity of the analysis, and make important decisions throughout the process, including this final decision to adopt a Revised Forest Plan.

My decision establishes a plan that, I believe, emphasizes those benefits that are most important to the various interests, opinions, and beliefs expressed by agencies, groups, and individuals involved in the revision process. Together, we have crafted a plan that provides a scientifically credible foundation for the contribution of the Monongahela National Forest to the ecological, social, and economic sustainability of West Virginia over the long term. Development of future project decisions consistent with the 2006 Forest Plan will result in a sustainable supply of goods and services from the Monongahela National Forest, while conserving the natural resources of the area. This decision strikes a reasonable balance that sustains the forest and addresses the complex demands expressed by a wide variety of people, groups, and organizations.

Our work is not done. Regular monitoring and evaluation as we implement the 2006 Forest Plan will ensure that it is kept current. Changes in society's needs and values, along with emerging science, may necessitate amendments to the 2006 Forest Plan. I encourage you to continue your partnership with us in keeping the 2006 Forest Plan fresh and relevant. In order for this Forest Plan to be fully successful, we will need the help of people working collaboratively to develop projects, monitor results, and adapt the plan as appropriate over the coming years. Finally, and most importantly, I thank you for your participation, patience, and support throughout this Forest Plan revision process and into the future.



Randy Moore
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Introduction

The Monongahela National Forest 2006 Land and Resource Management Plan (2006 Forest Plan) is a 10 to 15 year programmatic framework for managing national forest resources. It was developed in accordance with the National Forest Management Act (16 U.S.C.1604, et seq.) and the 1982 planning regulations (36 CFR 219)[1]. The Forest Plan outlines environmentally sound management to achieve desired conditions on the land and produce goods and services in a way that maximizes long-term net public benefits. The 2006 Forest Plan emphasizes different desired conditions and goals for various parts of the Forest. As we develop site-specific projects consistent with the 2006 Forest Plan, management practices such as improving and maintaining roads, restoring streams, harvesting timber, and improving campgrounds will occur in some areas, but not in others. We intend to achieve multiple use goals and objectives in a diverse, cost-efficient, and sustainable manner.

The original Monongahela National Forest Plan was approved in 1986. This 2006 Forest Plan replaces all previous resource management plans for the Monongahela National Forest. It provides an integrated and programmatic framework for environmentally sound management based on the best available scientific information.

The 2006 Forest Plan will be amended or revised as needed to adapt to new information and changing conditions. Any action taken to amend or revise the Plan will include public involvement.

There are six primary decisions made with the 2006 Forest Plan:

- Forest-wide multiple-use desired conditions, goals and objectives.
- Forest-wide management requirements (standards and guidelines).
- Management Prescriptions and associated direction.
- Identification of lands suited for timber production
- Monitoring and evaluation requirements.
- Recommendations to Congress, such as areas for wilderness study.

The goals and desired conditions in the 2006 Forest Plan can be achieved from a physical, ecological, economical, and legal perspective. Management practices will be implemented and outputs produced as the Forest strives to meet the desired conditions called for in the 2006 Forest Plan, although there is no assurance that the outputs will actually occur at the projected levels. See "Overview of Forest Planning", found on the Forest Service Ecosystem Management Coordination website: www.fs.fed.us/emc/nfma/includes/overview.pdf.

The standards contained in the 2006 Forest Plan set parameters within which projects must take place. Approval of future projects must be consistent with these parameters (16 U.S.C. 1604(i)). If a project cannot be implemented in accordance with the standards included in the 2006 Forest Plan, the project cannot go forward unless the 2006 Forest Plan is amended or otherwise changed. Guidelines will generally be followed, but where deviations from guidelines are needed, we will not typically amend the plan, but will discuss the rationale for deviation from the guideline as part of the project analysis.

The 2006 Forest Plan is permissive in that it allows, but does not mandate, projects and activities. Projects may occur only after they are proposed, their environmental effects considered, and a decision is made authorizing site-specific action. Site-specific environmental analysis that occurs for each

[1] The 2005 Planning Regulations, 36 CFR 219.14(e) (January 5, 2005) allow the use of the 1982 planning regulations for this Plan since it was initiated prior to the transition period defined at 36 CFR 219.12(b).

project will be tiered to the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the 2006 Forest Plan, pursuant to 40 CFR 1508.28.

This decision was influenced by the public input received during the plan revision process. I made this decision after careful review of public comments, analysis of effects in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), and consideration of a broad range of alternatives. I considered the best available scientific assessments and most current scientific knowledge. I considered all new information provided by the public, state, and other federal agencies during the revision process and was particularly concerned about using high-quality resource data. I believe this 2006 Forest Plan provides the best mix of resource uses and opportunities to provide for public needs and desires within the framework of existing laws, regulations, policies, and capabilities of the land.

Although the resource information used to develop the 2006 Forest Plan may not be as comprehensive as some would desire, we have sought out and utilized the best available scientific information for making this programmatic decision. Although it is always possible to obtain more information prior to making any decision, I am confident that the information used here is of high quality and adequate to make a fully informed decision.

In summary, the 2006 Forest Plan establishes a programmatic framework for future multiple-use management. The FEIS discloses the differences in the expected environmental consequences of the alternatives and how alternatives respond to issues and concerns. The FEIS discusses broad-scale environmental effects and establishes a useful reference that can be tiered to for compliance with environmental laws at the site-specific project level. The level of effects disclosure is commensurate with the programmatic nature of this decision. Detailed analysis of specific environmental effects is not required when the agency has not proposed a specific project that may cause the effects. Approval of this 2006 Forest Plan does not include any on-the-ground projects, nor dictate that any particular site-specific action must occur. This 2006 Forest Plan provides the framework for future decision-making.

The Forest

Established in 1920, the Monongahela National Forest now comprises over 919,000 acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands in eastern West Virginia, within a proclamation boundary that contains nearly 1.7 million acres. The Monongahela is, by far, the largest expanse of public land in the State. The Forest is located primarily in Grant, Greenbrier, Nicholas, Pendleton, Pocahontas, Randolph, Tucker, and Webster Counties, with minor portions in Barbour and Preston Counties. It is administratively divided into four Ranger Districts: Cheat-Potomac, Gauley, Greenbrier, and Marlinton-White Sulphur Springs. While this part of West Virginia is one of the least densely populated in the state, large population centers are within a day's drive. The Forest lies within 400 miles of an estimated 96,000,000 people.

Humans are known to have occupied West Virginia for at least 10,000 years through the rise and decline of various American Indian cultures, European settlement, industrial development, and forest re-growth and recovery. What is now eastern West Virginia has supported human populations who, in turn, modified their environment. From Indian sites and rock shelters, to Civil War forts and camps, narrow-gauge railroads, mountain towns and cemeteries, to the National Radio Astronomy Observatory, humankind has continually marked its presence on the landscapes of today's Forest.

The geology of the area features steep north-south mountain ridges and deep river valleys, with elevations ranging from 900 feet near Petersburg to 4,863 feet atop Spruce Knob, West Virginia's highest point. Temperatures can vary from near 100 degrees Fahrenheit in summer to well below zero

in winter. Annual precipitation ranges from about 60 inches on the west side of the Forest to less than half that amount on parts of the east side.

The headwaters of six major rivers—the Cheat, Elk, Gauley, Greenbrier, Potomac, and Tygarts Valley—are found on the Forest, as well as four impounded lakes—Lake Sherwood, Lake Buffalo, Summit Lake, and Spruce Knob Lake. The Forest has over 500 miles of perennial trout streams, providing more than 90 percent of the high-quality trout waters in the State. Many communities use water from the Forest for all or part of their water supplies.

The Forest receives some of the highest acid deposition rates in the country due to its location downwind from the Ohio River Valley. This deposition has raised management concerns related to the loss of aquatic species due to stream acidification, and to changes in soil chemistry that could impact soil productivity. The Forest also has a high percentage of steep and highly erosive soils.

Due to its geographic location, elevation range, and complex geology, the Forest has great vegetative diversity. There are over 70 species of trees, mostly hardwoods, but conifer species add to the visual variety. Many of the tree species have high value for timber and related products. The Forest offers and sells timber for harvest as a way to help achieve vegetation and habitat objectives and to support local and regional economies.

A number of rare plants and plant communities exist, with some at the northern or southern-most limit of their ranges. Currently four plant species are listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as threatened or endangered. There are 17 Botanical Areas established on the Forest, and rare plants or communities are also protected in areas designated as National Natural Landmarks, Scenic Areas, and in candidate Research Natural Areas. The Forest provides some habitats and communities that are unlikely to occur on private lands, including large blocks of mature and old forest, spruce and spruce-hardwood forest, and areas of young brushy forest.

The Forest has 10 or fewer reported wildfires each year, with the average size less than an acre. Over 90 percent of the reported or suppressed fires are human-caused. Research indicates that fire played an important role in maintaining plant communities in fire-adapted portions of the Forest. Major insect pests include the gypsy moth and hemlock wooly adelgid. The major disease concern at present is the beech bark disease complex.

The Forest provides habitat for hundreds of animal species, including reptiles, amphibians, birds, and mammals, and an estimated 87 fish species. Five of the wildlife species are currently listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as threatened or endangered. The Forest affords excellent opportunities for wildlife viewing, hunting, and fishing. About 7,000 acres are grazed by livestock under permit.

The 57,000-acre Spruce Knob-Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area is a major recreation attraction. The Forest maintains 40 campgrounds and picnic areas and over 850 miles of hiking trails, including the Allegheny National Recreation Trail and the Greenbrier Historic Trail. The Forest manages five Congressionally designated Wildernesses, totaling well over 78,000 acres. In addition, many other large backcountry areas provide semi-primitive recreation opportunities. The Dolly Sods, Gaudineer, and Falls of Hills Creek Scenic Areas offer outstanding visual attractions in natural settings.

Natural gas is extracted from 40 to 50 wells, and there is also a natural gas storage field underlying the Forest, all contributing to regional and national energy needs. Other mineral resources include commercial quantities of coal, limestone, and gravel; however, there is little activity or interest in these minerals at present. An estimated 38 percent of National Forest System land has privately

owned oil and gas rights, and about 24 percent of the remaining federally owned gas and oil is currently leased. The Forest has numerous caves that are popular for recreation, and some that provide habitat for rare animal species, including federally listed Indiana bat and Virginia big-eared bat.

The Forest transportation network has an estimated 1,752 miles of classified roads that range from paved highways to non-surfaced roads designed for high-clearance vehicles. Many of these roads are available for pleasure driving, the removal of forest products, bicycling, and scenic viewing. Others are closed for resource protection or other management reasons.

Contributions to local and regional economies from the Forest include receipts, fees, and employment opportunities from timber harvest, natural gas development, recreation, special uses, livestock grazing, and the availability of products such as firewood and medicinal plants. One of the Forest's other important economic contributions to local economies is to serve as the scenic backdrop for local businesses, tourism, and guiding services.

Together, the primary values of the Monongahela National Forest – extraordinary biological diversity, outdoor recreation, timber, grazing and natural gas production, and an appreciation for those who have shared this land before us – contribute to the quality of life and economic vitality of eastern West Virginia and the communities that lie within and around the Forest.

A Vision for the Future

Resources on the Monongahela National Forest will be managed to conserve, protect, and produce what the public desires: clean water, outstanding fish and wildlife habitat, diverse recreation opportunities, wood products, and energy. The public's desire to keep conditions natural is balanced with human uses of the Forest for today's needs. Nature continues to change the Forest at its own pace. Management adapts to these changes, protecting resources while providing the goods, services and uses that the public needs. These goods, services, and uses will contribute toward maintaining economic and social stability in the local communities within and near the Forest.

The Monongahela National Forest will provide healthy ecosystems by maintaining or restoring natural communities on the landscape. Healthy ecosystems are essential to providing habitat for native plants and animals in West Virginia. Maintaining and restoring healthy ecosystems will also help provide a sustainable flow of goods and services requested by the public.

A wide variety of recreational opportunities will be available on the Forest, including campgrounds and other developed facilities, roads for driving for pleasure, horse trails, bike trails, hiking trails, various wildlife habitats and lands for hunting or wildlife watching, and lakes and streams for fishing. Forest products will continue to be available as a result of managing for healthy ecosystems. Wood products, natural gas development, and recreation opportunities will contribute toward the economic and social sustainability in local communities.

The mosaic of forested ecosystems that will be maintained, created, or restored across the landscape will include natural communities in early, mid, and late successional stages. This mosaic of healthy ecosystems will contribute to species viability and biological diversity. The management prescribed in the 2006 Forest Plan will continue to preserve and enhance habitat in support of the recovery of federally listed threatened and endangered species. Conservation and recovery of federally listed species remains a top priority when making resource management decisions for the Forest.

Achieving this vision for the Monongahela National Forest will require continued collaboration with the public and with our partners. We will strive to be good neighbors, work cooperatively with others, and share credit for accomplishments.

Decision and Rationale

Need for Change

The current Forest Plan was approved in 1986. The Plan has been kept up to date through six amendments over the past 20 years. We began evaluating the need for changing the Forest Plan in 2001. Our preliminary evaluation began with the assessment of new information and changed conditions. Sources of information for this effort include:

- Meetings with Forest Service employees on each Ranger District;
- Discussions with non-governmental partners and interest groups;
- Discussions with other federal and state agencies, and county officials;
- Review of project decisions that implemented the 1986 Forest Plan;
- Review of issues raised in appeals and litigation of project decisions implementing the 1986 plan;
- Results of monitoring and evaluation;
- Changes in law and policy that are relevant to planning and management;
- Changes in conditions on the land since 1986; and
- Relevant new scientific information.

The Forest used a three-step process to identify Need For Change topics:

1. Identify preliminary Need For Change topics
2. Gather public input on the preliminary topics through meetings and scoping,
3. Consider public input and refine Need for Change topics.

In May 2002, a Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an environmental impact statement for the Forest Plan revision was published, which initiated a 90-day public scoping period. The purpose of the scoping period was to gather public input on the draft preliminary issues to help identify additional, or refine existing, Need for Change topics. This NOI identified five preliminary issues:

- Watershed Health
- Ecosystem Health
- Vegetation Management
- Visitor Opportunities and Access
- Land Allocations

The comments received on the Notice of Intent led to the refinement of the five preliminary issues listed above to the four major Need For Change Topics described below.

Soil and Water: Most commenters favored more protection to soil and water resources than the 1986 Plan offered, although representatives of the timber industry felt that the current protection was sufficient. Concerns focused on potential sedimentation from harvesting timber and building roads on highly erosive soils, and potential nutrient and productivity losses from disturbing soils that are highly sensitive to acid deposition.

Vegetation Management: Comments were split between those who felt natural processes should dominate vegetation change, and those who want the Forest to actively create more age class diversity,

particularly more young forest or early successional habitat. We identified a need to increase age class diversity because most of the forest is currently mature, with only 3% in a young (0-19 years) condition. Young and mature forest habitats are important for species such as wild turkey, ruffed grouse, and black bear. Based on scientific study, we know that mast (fruits and nuts) production decreases as mast-producing trees age past maturity. Without active management, age class diversity, along with mast and timber productivity, will decline as stands become old forest over the next 50 years. We also identified a need to restore spruce and oak ecosystems.

Backcountry Recreation: Commenters were sharply divided between those who wanted to see more backcountry recreation areas, particularly more Wilderness, and those who felt the Forest already had enough backcountry areas and wanted to see more land managed for motorized recreation, timber production, and a variety of wildlife habitats. The 1986 Plan has an estimated 124,500 acres in Management Prescription 6.2 that emphasizes backcountry recreation, with over 78,000 acres in Congressionally designated Wilderness. Also part of this issue was the need to update the Roadless Area Inventory, evaluate inventoried Roadless Areas for their wilderness potential, and consider whether additional areas should be recommended to Congress for Wilderness Study.

Timber Supply: The 1986 Plan Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ) was projected to increase to an average of 60.1 MMBF per year by the third planning horizon decade (1986 LRMP, p. 46). The suitable timber base in the 1986 Plan was 331,000 acres. The most the Forest has sold in any year since 1986 has been 39.0 MMBF. Public comment suggested that timber harvest should be anywhere from 0 to 285 MMBF per year. Those who favored little or no timber harvest were concerned with potential environmental impacts, and impacts to local economies through reduced tourism and recreation. Those who favored sustained higher levels of harvest felt that it was needed to improve habitat diversity and the general health of the forest, and to provide a much-needed boost to local employment and income opportunities.

Although these four topics or issues were the primary drivers for change and alternative development, we reviewed all sections of the 1986 Forest Plan, including the appendices. We agreed with the public that many aspects of the 1986 Plan were working well and did not need to be changed or removed. These parts were carried forward into the 2006 Forest Plan, generally with refinements to improve clarity or consistency with changes in national or regional direction or trends, or to reflect new scientific information or advances.

Decision Overview

I have selected a modified version of Alternative 2 (Alternative 2 Modified) as the 2006 Forest Plan for the Monongahela National Forest. Alternative 2, identified as the preferred alternative in the DEIS was modified based on public comments and internal staff review. The analysis of Alternative 2 Modified is included in the FEIS.

I chose Alternative 2 Modified because, in my judgment, it maximizes benefits to the public by establishing a multiple-use framework for:

- Maintaining or restoring watershed conditions to help provide for water quality, soil productivity, and functioning riparian and aquatic habitats,
- Maintaining, restoring, or enhancing ecological conditions that will help conserve and recover threatened and endangered species, and that will sustain biological diversity and species viability,
- Increasing the Forest's capability to provide diverse, high-quality outdoor recreation opportunities,
- Making timber, energy minerals, and special uses available in an environmentally sensitive manner,

- Contributing to the economic and social needs of people, cultures, and local communities by offering sustainable and diverse products, services, settings, and opportunities, and
- Providing clear direction to assist managers in making project level decisions to implement the broader social, economic and ecological goals and objectives of the 2006 Forest Plan.

This decision complies with applicable federal law and is consistent with national direction and policy. Our focus is on the long-term condition and health of the Forest. Alternative 2 Modified is a collaboratively developed framework founded upon sustainable multiple use resource management. Managed, sustainable use of the Forest is compatible with the long-term maintenance of biological diversity and ecological integrity, as well as the recovery and conservation of threatened and endangered species.

I primarily used five decision criteria for evaluating the alternatives.

Criterion 1: The extent to which the alternative maintains or restores water quality and the soil productivity necessary to support ecological functions in upland, riparian, and aquatic areas.

Criterion 2: The extent to which the alternative maintains or restores plant and animal diversity and provides habitats needed to sustain viable populations of native and desired non-native species, including threatened and endangered species, and management indicator species.

Criterion 3: The extent to which the alternative maintains or restores forest vegetation to ecological conditions with reduced risk of damage from fires, insects, diseases, and invasive species.

Criterion 4: The extent to which the alternative provides settings for a variety of recreation opportunities, including backcountry use within a semi-primitive non-motorized recreation setting.

Criterion 5: The extent to which the alternative provides a variety of uses, values, products, and services for present and future generations by managing within the capability of sustainable ecosystems.

Information about how I applied these criteria is in the "Alternatives Considered in Detail" section of this Record of Decision.

My decision also considered how the 2006 Forest Plan responded to the public's comments, internal management concerns, and national direction and policy. My decision to adopt the management direction in the 2006 Forest Plan was made in consideration of the analysis of effects disclosed in the FEIS, the Biological Assessment completed for plan revision, and the Biological Opinion of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and is supported by the planning record in its entirety.

This decision applies only to National Forest System land within the boundaries of the Monongahela National Forest. It does not apply to any other federal, state, county, municipal, or private lands, although in making my decision, I considered how likely future management of other ownerships might contribute to the overall environmental effects resulting from the management of the Monongahela National Forest.

Decision Summary and Rationale

Soil and Water

Protection of watersheds is fundamental to National Forest management and measures for protecting and improving watershed health were included in all potential management strategies. The changes made for watershed-related goals, objectives, standards and guidelines were included in all action alternatives. Therefore, my decision with respect to watershed health focused less on the differences among alternatives, and more on what changes should be made to best conserve soil, water, riparian, and aquatic resources.

To varying extents, stream channels are still recovering from the extensive logging and burning that occurred 80-120 years ago across the landscape that is now the Monongahela National Forest. The removal of riparian trees, burning of slash, and subsequent flooding and channel scouring had severe impacts on the integrity of streams and aquatic ecosystems. Forest riparian areas are only now developing the large trees needed to provide sufficient shade, bank stability, and recruitment for large woody debris. This large woody debris component will be particularly valuable over time in contributing to channel stabilization, aquatic habitat, stream energy diffusion, and nutrient cycling. This decision continues the process of ecological restoration.

The Forest currently provides over 90 percent of the coldwater trout streams in the state, and these streams are a source of great enjoyment to anglers from West Virginia and beyond. However, in addition to the impacts described above, many streams have been adversely affected by acid deposition, much of which comes from coal-fired power plants in the Ohio River Valley. This acidification is also the primary pollutant for many of the State 303(d) listed impaired water bodies. The West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (WVDNR) has an active program of adding lime to Forest streams to neutralize their acidity, which allows re-introduced or stocked fish to survive as long as the effects of the liming persist. The same acidifying chemicals that fall into streams are also falling on the land. The Forest is currently working closely with researches to learn more about the potential effects of acid deposition on soil and forest productivity.

I realize that some people would like us to remove all land sensitive to the effects of acid deposition from the suitable timber base or otherwise restrict management activities on these sites, but I feel we are taking a reasonable, cautious, and practical approach to resource management in a multiple-use context. We will inventory and monitor soil conditions to assess site-specific risks and effects, which will, in turn, improve our Forest-wide soil inventory information. We will apply a wide assortment of science-based mitigation measures to specific projects as needed to reduce the risks to soil and forest productivity. Monitoring of past projects shows that these mitigation measures are effective. We will continue to work with researchers and incorporate research findings and monitoring results into our management practices to provide any additional protection that may be needed for forest soils.

I have also heard from those who think that the level of even-aged timber harvest we are proposing will increase the risk of flooding on the Forest. Although flooding may occur due to natural events at any time, I am confident that the 2006 Forest Plan has proven safeguards in place to keep management activities from contributing to the likelihood or intensity of floods. The 2006 Plan not only has restrictions on how much even-aged harvest may occur within a given area, but it also establishes stream channel buffers to provide for healthy riparian areas and large woody debris retention and recruitment, which in turn will better dissipate stream water energy.

The 2006 Forest Plan stream channel buffer areas have management direction that will result in long-term large woody debris recruitment and low levels of disturbance. The 2006 Plan includes updated

desired conditions, goals, objectives, and standards and guidelines for watershed and riparian area protection.

I based my decision on the most current scientific knowledge of the important functions of watersheds and riparian areas and over 20 years of experience implementing and monitoring the 1986 Forest Plan. This decision responds to the Forest Service's national goal of Improving Watershed Conditions listed in the USDA Forest Service Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2004 – 2008. The 2006 Plan direction will help ensure that soil productivity, water quality, riparian areas, and aquatic ecosystems are maintained or improved.

Specifically, the 2006 Forest Plan makes the following changes relative to the 1986 Plan:

- Establishes stream channel and wetland buffers to reduce disturbance and provides for recruitment of large woody debris for the restoration of aquatic ecosystems and fisheries,
- Adds specific objectives to improve aquatic habitat within the stream channel buffers,
- Retains the same level of access to streams for the WVDNR liming program as was provided in the 1986 plan,
- Creates a management strategy to address potential impacts from acid deposition that relies on site-specific soil sampling and a range of mitigation measures to identify and address various levels of risk at the project level,
- Places 64 percent of the Forest under management prescriptions or direction that would generally minimize management-related soil and water disturbance. This 64 percent represents the amount of land that is classified unsuitable for timber production.

Vegetation Management

The 2006 Forest Plan provides direction for maintaining or restoring the long-term sustainability and health of forest ecosystems and habitats for the species that depend on them. The Plan provides a programmatic framework that allows for actively managing vegetation to achieve desired conditions for vegetative and habitat diversity. Future site-specific projects consistent with the 2006 Forest Plan will generally move the Forest toward these desired conditions. The Plan also provides flexibility to local land managers to respond to unforeseeable events such as wind or ice storms, floods, or other natural disasters.

The 2006 Forest Plan provides needed guidance for selecting the appropriate vegetation management actions at the project level to achieve desired conditions on the landscape. This new direction provides flexibility in selecting the appropriate treatments so that an adaptive management approach will be implemented (see Chapters I and IV of the 2006 Forest Plan). The 2006 Forest Plan also identifies the proportion of probable methods of timber harvest [16 U.S.C. 1604(f)(2)], but does not decide exactly when, where, or how timber harvest will occur at any particular location. The final determinations of the appropriateness of silvicultural systems and harvest methods are better made at the project level of decision-making, using site-specific resource information.

Age Class and Habitat Diversity

I recognize that there are diverse opinions about which habitats the Forest should provide, and which vegetation management practices should be used. Some people believe the Monongahela National Forest should focus exclusively on providing stands of "old growth" forest, with no commercial timber harvest. Others support managing parts of the forest for various age classes and forest habitats through commercial timber harvest.

Similar to the 1986 Forest Plan, the 2006 Forest Plan has areas where vegetation will be actively managed, and areas where little or no activity will occur. The areas of active management in the 1986 Plan were within Management Prescriptions (MPs) 2.0, 3.0, 4.0 and 6.1. For the 2006 Plan, MPs 2.0 and 4.0 were eliminated, and the areas of active management are contained within MPs 3.0, 4.1, and 6.1. However, even within the areas where active management is prescribed, there are features such as stream channel buffers, developed recreation sites, listed species habitat and eligible Wild and Scenic River corridors where active management will be severely constrained. Therefore, the lands considered suitable for regularly scheduled timber production comprise only about 36 percent of the Forest. This is roughly the same amount of land considered suitable under the 1986 Plan.

Management treatments in areas identified as suitable for timber production will focus on improving age class and plant and animal community diversity. Currently most of the timber stands on the Forest are mid-aged or mature, with very little young or old forest. That means there is very little early or late successional habitat for species that need or prefer those habitat conditions. Only about 3 percent of the Forest is younger than 20 years old. As the trees continues to age, mature stands will become old growth over much of the Forest, but there will be very little young forest to replace young, mid, and mature age classes of today—unless management begins to provide for their development now. Wide varieties of species use or at least partially rely on early successional habitats. These species include ruffed grouse, eastern cottontail, golden-winged warbler, white-tailed deer, and black racer. The 2006 Forest Plan describes specific desired conditions and objectives for improving age class and habitat diversity in MP 3.0, 4.1, and 6.1 areas.

Ecological Restoration

The 2006 Forest Plan has a strong emphasis on the restoration of declining or recovering forest ecosystems, an emphasis that was lacking in the 1986 Plan. In particular, the 2006 Plan focuses on restoring oak forest and spruce or spruce-hardwood forest ecosystems.

Oak forests are very important to many wildlife species because of the high amounts of hard mast the oaks produce for wildlife forage. Oak forests are currently in decline. Historically, oaks were a dominant part of the landscape, maintained through frequent fires. The more open forests that resulted did not allow shade-tolerant species like red maple to out-compete young oak seedlings. However, many oak stands have had little if any fire disturbances due to fire suppression success. Now, they typically have dense closed canopies and shade-tolerant species dominate the understory. The 2006 Forest Plan has added an oak restoration emphasis to MP 6.1, where many of the oak forests are located, and includes specific objectives for managing oak through a combination of timber harvest and prescribed fire.

Once abundant, spruce and spruce-hardwood forests were nearly eliminated during the extensive harvesting and burning that occurred in the early twentieth century. They have recovered gradually to the point where they are once again an important component of landscape diversity, supporting a number of rare species, including the West Virginia northern flying squirrel and Cheat Mountain salamander, which are found nowhere else in the world. The 4.1 Management Prescription was developed for the 2006 Forest Plan to promote and facilitate the ongoing recovery of the spruce and spruce-hardwood ecosystems. Suitable West Virginia northern flying squirrel habitat within MP 4.1 will be managed primarily to passively allow spruce and spruce-hardwood forests to grow into the older, uneven-aged stands that this species seems to prefer. Other areas within MP 4.1 can be more actively managed to promote spruce regeneration where the potential exists.

Indiana Bat Habitat

The Forest has an estimated 228,000 acres of Indiana bat primary ranges, where bats are most likely to forage, roost and swarm. Many of these acres fall within Management Prescriptions that have suited

timberlands, particularly MP 6.1, but the primary ranges are not considered suitable for timber production in the 2006 Forest Plan. However, the 2006 Plan does have a vegetation management objective to: "Treat an estimated 4,000 to 12,000 acres over the next decade on lands not suited for timber production to help restore ecosystems and enhance wildlife habitat." Much of this treatment may occur in Indiana bat primary range to enhance bat habitat. Treatments would likely be some combination of thinning and prescribed fire to help open the understory for foraging, while maintaining a full to partial canopy, but other treatments may be considered as we learn more about the preferred habitat conditions for this species.

I recognize that some groups and individuals are concerned that timber harvest and prescribed fire may harm the listed Indiana bat. However, I am confident that future project proposals consistent with the 2006 Forest Plan management direction would maintain or enhance bat habitat. The Forest completed a Biological Assessment based on the best scientific information available, which considered the status of the bat across its range. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Biological Opinion determined that the 2006 Forest Plan would not jeopardize the continued existence of this species, largely because the ecological conditions envisioned in the Plan and the Plan's standards and guidelines that provide protection for the bat and its habitat. Conservation and recovery of ESA listed species was a priority in revising the Forest Plan.

Rare Plants

The 1986 Forest Plan was relatively silent on the subject of rare plants and plant communities. In contrast, the 2006 Forest Plan recognizes that rare plants and communities are important components of plant and animal community diversity by describing desired conditions and identifying specific goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines for rare plant management. The 2006 Plan also adds management direction for federally listed plants in the Threatened, Endangered, and Proposed Species section of Chapter II.

Non-native Invasive Species

The 2006 Forest Plan recognizes the serious threat to forest health from non-native invasive species and provides a programmatic framework for addressing this emerging challenge. The 1986 Forest Plan had little direction related to non-native invasive species. The healthy ecosystems created and maintained through implementing the 2006 Plan will be more resilient and better able to withstand threats posed by invasive species. The spread of invasive species is one of the major threats facing the Forest; thus, my decision places emphasis upon reduction and control of invasive species, as well as an emphasis on using native species for revegetation activities. This is an area of developing scientific information that involves considerable technical complexity. The Forest utilized the best methodology and scientific expertise available in developing the programmatic direction in the 2006 Plan.

Insect and Disease Pathogens

There are numerous insect and disease pathogens at work on the Forest, and their effects range from ecologically essential to highly destructive. Some are endemic and some non-native. The non-native insects and diseases are of particular concern to land managers for the widespread destruction they can cause to native plant and animal life, and the resulting radical changes in ecosystem composition, structure, and function. Real examples currently include the gypsy moth, hemlock wooly adelgid, chestnut blight, and beech bark scale. To address these concerns, the 2006 Forest Plan not only has Forest-wide direction concerning non-native invasive species, but also allows discretion for possible future insect and disease treatments in Management Prescriptions that do not otherwise emphasize active management.

Prescribed Fire
The 1986 Forest Plan emphasized fire prevention and control. The 2006 Plan provides the overall programmatic management framework to allow for the future possible use of fire as a management tool for ecological restoration and fuel reduction. This framework includes anticipated activities that may be required for protecting natural resources and property from fire, and guidance for future proposals using fire to meet aspirational resource and land management goals. As such, the 2006 Forest Plan indicates that prescribed fire may be used much more extensively than in the 1986 Plan when needed to achieve management objectives related to forest restoration and reduction in fire hazard. I realize that there are concerns over air quality associated with the potential future prescribed burning proposals. My review of the FEIS programmatic analysis assures me that careful, site-specific analysis, planning, and execution will minimize smoke impacts from future projects. The 2006 Forest Plan contemplates a possible increase in prescribed burning, but does not authorize or make a site-specific decision regarding burning. The Forest Supervisor will continue to work closely with state and other federal agencies to ensure that project proposals meet applicable air quality standards.

Backcountry Recreation

The national importance of recreation resources on the Monongahela has been recognized with the Spruce Knob – Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area (NRA), five Congressionally designated Wildernesses, three Scenic Areas, a National Scenic Highway, a National Recreation Trail, and two outstanding visitor centers.

I realize that opinions vary regarding what recreation opportunities the Monongahela National Forest should provide. Some want the Forest to provide OHV trails and use. Others believe that OHV use should be excluded from the Forest in order to increase opportunities for wilderness or remote back-country experiences. Equestrian, snowmobiling, and mountain biking groups have asked for expanded opportunities for their uses. We listened carefully to all of these interests in the development of the 2006 Forest Plan.

The 2006 Forest Plan retains direction from the 1986 that allows public motorized use on roads and trails designated as open for that use. The 2006 plan does not make any route-specific decisions related to OHV use. As with the 1986 plan, motorized use of designated off roads and trails use is not allowed. Infrequent administrative use and use by contractors and cooperators is allowed to the extent needed to accomplish management objectives. Motorized use by permittees and lessees is allowed to the extent needed to accomplish the purpose of the permit or lease.

I agree that one of the unique qualities of this Forest is its opportunities for high-quality non-motorized recreation in backcountry settings. Under the 2006 Forest Plan, areas managed for backcountry recreation will increase to 26% of the Forest, from 22% in the 1986 Forest Plan. This represents an overall increase of roughly 31,000 acres. These Management Prescription areas include Designated Wilderness (MP 5.0), areas recommended for Wilderness study (MP 5.1), Backcountry Recreation areas (MP 6.2), and areas managed for Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized opportunities within the National Recreation Area (MP 8.1 SPNM). These are areas where non-motorized dispersed recreation is emphasized, and road construction, timber harvest, and public motorized use is generally prohibited.

The Forest's capacity to provide semi-primitive non-motorized recreation experiences is limited somewhat by mixed ownership patterns and a dense network of roads (about 1,750 miles on National Forest System lands). However, much of the road development that is needed for the Monongahela National Forest has already occurred. The 2006 Forest Plan envisions gradual change over time, focusing on maintenance or improvement of established roads and the decommissioning of unneeded

roads, rather than developing large new road systems. Public access for a wide variety of recreation opportunities is predicted to remain much the same as it is now.

Spruce Knob – Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area (NRA)
The Spruce Knob – Seneca Rocks NRA was the first National Recreation Area established in the United States, and it is arguably the recreational hub for the entire Forest. I believe that it is not only fitting, but well past due to give the NRA its own management prescription to highlight the importance of this unique and nationally known area. The NRA was established by Congress under one Act, with one set of goals and objectives that apply to the entire area. Therefore, the 2006 Forest Plan assigns the NRA one management prescription (8.1 special area).

Some people expressed concern over this allocation, primarily because they believe that the NRA is a large area that needs to be managed in several different ways, represented by the different management prescriptions in the 1986 Forest Plan. In particular, they feel that remote backcountry areas like Seneca Creek and North Fork Mountain will not receive the same sort of protection and emphasis if managed under a single prescription. I agree that the NRA has areas within it that require a variety of different management approaches. However, these differences can be fully accommodated through the management area description and direction in the 2006 Forest Plan, and use of the Forest Service's Recreation Opportunity Spectrum system to define recreation emphasis throughout the area. The management direction in the 2006 Forest Plan makes it clear that backcountry areas within the NRA are to be managed with similar emphasis and protections as other backcountry areas on the Forest. From a management perspective, areas like Seneca Creek will provide the same outstanding recreation settings and opportunities they did under the 1986 Plan, only more so, as these areas have been expanded somewhat under the 2006 Forest Plan.

Wild and Scenic Rivers (WSRs)
The 2006 Forest Plan continues to protect the potential eligibility of the same set of rivers and river corridors that were considered potentially eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River (WSR) System in the 1986 Forest Plan. They include segments of twelve rivers (Shavers Fork, Dry Fork, Blackwater, Glady Fork, Laurel Fork, Otter Creek, Red Creek, South Branch Potomac, North Fork South Branch Potomac, Seneca Creek, Williams, and North Fork Cherry), totaling about 270 miles. The river segments were all classified as potentially eligible for either a classification as Wild, Scenic, or Recreational in the Wild and Scenic River Study Report and EIS of 1995. The 2006 Forest Plan provides management direction for these potentially eligible segments and clarifies that they are to be "…managed to retain their free-flowing condition, their highest classification potential, and the outstandingly remarkable values identified until they are either designated as WSRs by Congress or returned to their original or assigned management prescriptions." The 2006 Forest Plan also provides information by management prescription area to aid land managers in the identification and management of the river corridors for these potentially eligible rivers.

Inventoried Roadless Areas
As part of the revision process, the Forest completed a Roadless Area Inventory that identified 18 areas, totaling an estimated 143,234 acres as meeting roadless inventory criteria. I agree with the process for roadless inventory evaluations as documented in Appendix C to the EIS that determined these 18 areas have the best wilderness potential on the Forest. All of these 18 areas have been assigned Management Prescriptions (5.1, 6.2, or 8.1 SPNM) that will maintain their roadless character and wilderness potential for future Congressional consideration.

Areas Recommended for Wilderness Study
As part of my decision, I am recommending four of the Inventoried Roadless Areas to Congress for Wilderness Study. These areas are Cheat Mountain, Cranberry Expansion, Dry Fork, and Roaring

Plains West. Although there are many fine candidates for wilderness on the Roadless Area Inventory, I feel that these four areas are the best representatives for the following reasons:

Cheat Mountain (7,955 acres) is one of the wildest areas on the Forest, with little sign of past development, and few if any non-conforming uses. It also lies along Cheat Mountain, which is considered a biodiversity hotspot with habitat for numerous rare species.

Cranberry Expansion (12,165 acres) is one of the larger roadless areas on the Forest, with few signs of past development and few if any non-conforming uses. It is also contiguous with the Cranberry Wilderness, and together they would form one of the larger wilderness areas in the East, approaching 50,000 acres.

Dry Fork (739 acres) is a small area that is contiguous to the Otter Creek Wilderness, and would expand that area to over 20,000 acres.

Roaring Plains West (6,825 acres) has few signs of past development, grand vistas, and only one trail that is currently used by expert mountain bikers. It is not only a worthy wilderness candidate by itself, but when combined with three other nearby roadless areas and a scenic area, it contributes to a complex of nearly 30,000 wild acres centered on the Dolly Sods Wilderness.

Many people wrote in, describing their favorite potential wilderness areas, and I know they will be disappointed not to find these areas on the list of areas recommended for wilderness study. Other people will be disappointed that any areas are being recommended at all. My decision as to which areas to recommend was based on a process that examined and weighed multiple factors—including capability, manageability, availability, need, current uses, potential for non-conforming uses, and values foregone, as well as public sentiment. This process is not an exact science, but it has led me to choose what I consider to be the best areas for wilderness study for the following reasons:

- I looked for areas that have strong wilderness attributes and those that would expand existing and well-known wilderness areas.

- I tended not to recommend those areas that had relatively higher levels of non-conforming uses, such as mountain biking or mechanized maintenance of wildlife-related treatment areas. These are legitimate uses of non-wilderness federal lands, representing significant value and investment for the users, and my decision will allow these uses to continue.

- I heard from many who said that there was an overwhelming need and demand for wilderness in the East. The EIS states that current wilderness use only represents about 3 percent of total Forest recreation. This current availability and use does not indicate an overwhelming need at this time from a recreational perspective. I also believe that all of the areas evaluated for wilderness potential in Appendix C to the EIS will continue to provide high-quality opportunities for backcountry recreation in relatively remote and undeveloped settings.

- I heard from many who said that wilderness designation was necessary to provide permanent protection for scenery, recreation opportunities, biological resources, and wilderness attributes. I agree that these areas have numerous values worthy of protection. Under the Selected Alternative, all of the Inventoried Roadless Areas on the Forest have been assigned Management Prescriptions that will protect these values and maintain roadless and wilderness character into the future.

Wilderness is a polarizing issue for the public. We heard from both sides of this debate during plan revision. My view in making Wilderness Study recommendations and in determining how inventoried roadless areas would be managed was to look at how management of those areas fits into a larger framework of land and resource management for the Forest. Wilderness is an important component of National Forests, but it is one of many resources or programs that the Forest Service manages. Therefore, I am sensitive to how wilderness study recommendations may affect other resources, programs, and opportunities on the Forest. For example, many people were concerned about how wilderness would affect access to public lands. Some felt that it would further restrict their access, while others wanted to see areas better protected from motorized access. We are not changing the current access status of the areas being recommended for wilderness study. They are all closed to public motorized access now, and they will remain so under the 2006 Forest Plan.

Similarly, many people argued for and against wilderness recommendation for social or economic reasons. Some felt that wildernesses would draw more tourists, retirees, and recreationists to the area, which would provide long-term benefits to local economies and communities. Others felt that these areas would provide more benefits to local economies if they were managed for timber and mineral production and motorized recreation. I feel that my decision provides a wide range of social, economic, and recreational opportunities, all of which will benefit local economies and communities.

I believe the Selected Alternative provides the best mix of opportunities in meeting widely divergent public desires regarding recreation use on the Monongahela National Forest, while maintaining a strong emphasis on backcountry recreation, which has been identified as an important part of the Forest's niche.

Timber Supply

I recognize that the public has very divided views on the issue of timber supply. Public comments suggested that timber harvest levels should be anywhere from 0 to 285 MMBF per year (the annual timber growth potential on the Forest). Those who favored little or no timber harvest were concerned with the potential environmental impacts, and impacts to local economies through reduced tourism and recreation. Those who favored sustained higher levels of harvest felt that it was needed to improve habitat diversity and the general health of the forest, and to provide a much needed boost to local employment and income opportunities.

I want to make it clear that I consider timber volume to be primarily an outcome of vegetation manipulation for various age class and habitat diversity objectives. It is not an end, but rather a means of implementing ecosystem management. Having said that, I must also add that I anticipate that the Forest will move steadily toward achieving its vegetation desired conditions in a consistent and dependable manner, which will also provide a sustainable yield of wood products. The production of these goods not only has great value for the American people, but can also contribute substantially to local and regional economies. Ensuring sustainable timber production was one of the original reasons the Forest Service was created, and this use of national forests has been validated many times over in the 100+ years since, most notably in the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960 and the National Forest Management Act of 1976. The question we are addressing in plan revision, therefore, is not whether timber harvest is allowable on the Forest, but rather where and under what conditions timber harvest may occur.

I am also aware that timber harvest and associated activities, particularly road building, can have adverse effects. To address these potential impacts, the 2006 Forest Plan has a wide array of management requirements to prevent or mitigate degradation to soil, water, plant, wildlife, aquatic, scenic, recreation, and heritage resources. The analysis documented in the FEIS shows that eastern

West Virginia is heavily forested, ecologically resilient, contributes many benefits to the area, and is capable of providing forest products in a sustainable manner without undue impact on other resources.

The 1986 Plan Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ) was projected at an average of 57.1 MMBF per year for the first planning decade, with a gradual increase to 77.3 MMBF per year by the sixth decade (1986 LRMP, p. 46). The most timber volume harvested in any year since 1986 has been 50.7 MMBF. It is not unusual to see volume fall short of the ASQ, because the ASQ is a modeled projection based on achieving the maximum amount of desired resource conditions, rather than an accurate prediction of the amount of timber that would be sold or harvested in any particular year.

The 2006 Forest Plan sets an average annual Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ) of 63 MMBF or 10.5 MMCF per year during the next 10 years. This ASQ is based on the timber harvest volume that would result from fully implementing the plan's objectives for wildlife habitat and age class diversity over the next decade. Actual harvest may be less, depending on a number of factors such as budget and personnel, agency and Forest priorities, and site-specific constraints.

To summarize, the 2006 Forest Plan:

- Has an average annual ASQ over the first decade of 63 MMBF or 10.5 MMCF,
- Has a suitable timber base of 329,400 acres,
- Has specific objectives for harvest treatments to improve age class diversity, habitat diversity, and to restore oak ecosystems on suited timberlands. It also has objectives that would allow for harvest treatments on lands classified as not suited for timber production when needed to improve listed species habitat.

Other Changes in the 2006 Revised Forest Plan

The following topics were not major factors in alternative development or issue resolution, but they do represent changes from the 1986 Forest Plan, and I am hereby incorporating them into my decision on the 2006 Revised Forest Plan.

Management Indicator Species - This decision includes changing the Management Indicator Species on the Forest from 10 species in the 1986 Plan to four species in the 2006 Plan: West Virginia northern flying squirrel, wild turkey, cerulean warbler, and eastern brook trout. The rationale for the selection of these species as MIS is described in the Appendix D to the 2006 Forest Plan. This decision was developed with consideration of 36 CFR 219.14(f) (2005).

Range Resources - Range allotments cover less than one percent of the Forest, and they are not expected to increase or decrease substantially over time. Management direction for Range Resources was reviewed and updated in the 2006 Forest Plan.

Mineral Resources – The Forest has limited potential for coal and limestone. The primary mineral resource with development potential is natural gas. There are 40 to 50 producing or capable-of-producing gas wells on the Forest. An estimated 38 percent of National Forest System lands have privately owned rights for oil and gas. Mineral rights on the remainder of the Forest are federally owned but may be leased, with some exceptions such as in Wilderness. The 2006 Forest Plan updates management direction for mineral resources. The EIS analysis showed that the availability of federally owned gas would not significantly change under the 2006 Forest Plan, compared to the 1986 Plan.

Scenery Management System - The Scenery Management System (SMS) is the new agency-mandated method for management of scenic values, replacing the previous Visual Quality Objective System. Use of this new system has been incorporated into the Forest Plan.

Heritage Resources - The 2006 Forest Plan includes new management direction to address changes in the Heritage Program since 1986, and to ensure adequate protection for sites that are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Land Acquisition - The direction for land acquisition priorities was reviewed and updated in the 2006 Forest Plan.

Species Viability Evaluations - As a part of the requirements in 36 CFR 219, the Forest provides for viable populations of native and desired non-native species. A species viability evaluation was completed, and management options for species or community conservation were developed and incorporated into the 2006 Forest Plan. In addition, direction related to specific groups of species was reviewed and updated. These groups include federally listed species, Regional Forester's Sensitive Species (RFSS), Management Indicator Species, and migratory birds.

Research Natural Areas (RNAs) - There are no established RNAs on the Forest, but there are candidate RNAs. These areas are classified as Special Areas under an 8.5 Management Prescription. A number of candidate RNAs in the 1986 Forest Plan were dropped in the 2006 Forest Plan because they either already had protective status under a different MP assignment—such as Botanical Area or National Natural Landmark—or they were considered too small to provide protection of the ecosystem features that were associated with them. The 2006 Forest Plan proposes one new candidate RNA, Pike Knob (1,950 acres).

Management Direction Language – The 1986 Plan has few resource-related desired conditions, no labeled objectives, and some standards and guidelines that were unclear about what was required. The 2006 Plan, in contrast, provides well-developed desired conditions for all resource areas, many key management objectives, and clearly written standards and guidelines that meet the intent of the definitions for those different types of direction.

Changes to the Forest Plan between the Draft and Final

We received nearly 13,000 public and internal comments on our DEIS and the Proposed Revised Forest Plan. Based on the comments received, I have made several changes from the Proposed Revised Forest Plan, and incorporated them into the 2006 Forest Plan. The 2006 Forest Plan is therefore a modification of the Alternative 2 as described in the DEIS, and the modifications are described in Chapter 2 of the FEIS.

The changes to the Selected Alternative range from minor edits and clarifications to changes in the management prescription areas, standards and guidelines, and monitoring requirements. This section summarizes the changes made between the Proposed and Final Revised Plans.

Management Prescription Changes

The Management Prescription (MP) changes to Alternative 2 in the table below were made in response to public or internal comments on the Proposed Revised Forest Plan. These changes resulted in Alternative 2 Modified. Specifically, the changes addressed the following comments or requests:

1) A request from the State of West Virginia and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to change the area (roughly 1,900 acres) around Big Run Bog from MP 6.1 (Wildlife Habitat Emphasis) to 4.1 (Spruce-Hardwood Management) due to its spruce-hardwood forest character and potential for listed species habitat.

2) A request from the State of West Virginia and TNC to change the Weiss Knob area from MP 6.1 to 4.1 due to its spruce-hardwood forest character and potential for listed species habitat. This change resulted in about 600 acres shifting from MP 6.1 to 4.1.

3) A request from the State of West Virginia and TNC to change Haystack Knob/Hoffman Ridge from MP 6.1 to 4.1 due to its spruce-hardwood forest character and potential for listed species habitat. It was later discovered that this area should have been labeled MP 5.1 in the Proposed Revised Plan and DEIS. Therefore, this area was included as part of the Roaring Plains West MP 5.1 in the FEIS and Final Revised (2006) Plan. Consequently, roughly 400 acres were changed from MP 6.1 to 5.1 on the alternative map.

4) A request from the State of West Virginia and TNC to change the Barlow Top area from MP 3.0 (Vegetation Diversity) to 4.1 due to its spruce-hardwood forest character and potential for listed species habitat. Upon closer inspection, only about half of this area has spruce-growing potential, but we did change this half, about 2,300 acres, from 3.0 to 6.1.

5) A request from the State of West Virginia and TNC to change the Pike Knob area from MP 6.1 to 8.0 (Special Areas) due to the area's many rare plant communities and the southernmost red pine stand in the country. This change resulted in approximately 2,000 acres shifting from 6.1 to 8.5 (candidate RNA).

6) A request from the State of West Virginia, TNC and the West Virginia Wilderness Coalition (WVWC) to change the Lower Laurel Fork area from MP 6.1 to 6.2 (Backcountry Recreation) due to the area's extensive wetlands and backcountry recreation potential, including an eligible Wild and Scenic River corridor that comprises about two thirds of the area. Roughly 3,100 acres were changed from MP 6.1 to 6.2.

7) A request from the WVWC to change Roaring Plains North and East from MP 4.1 and 6.1 to 6.2 due to the areas' high-quality backcountry recreation opportunities and high-elevation settings that screens these areas from surrounding signs of development. WVWC also requested that these areas be added to the roadless area inventory. These two areas, together comprising about 6,200 acres, were determined to be eligible and were added to the roadless inventory, evaluated for wilderness potential, and changed to MP 6.2.

8) A citizen's request to change the Loop Road Research Area from 4.1 to 8.0 due to its history of research use by the Fernow Experimental Forest. We integrated this area into the Fernow Experimental Forest MP and changed roughly 800 acres from MP 4.1 to 8.5 (Research Areas).

9) The Forest discovered that a small portion of the Dry Fork area needed to be changed from MP 5.1 (Recommended Wilderness Study) due to a boundary adjustment to exclude an open road. This change resulted in a minor change of 22 acres moving from MP 5.1 to MP 6.1.

These changes were incorporated into Alternative 2M and analyzed for potential effects in the FEIS, and the effects were found to be well within the ranges projected in the DEIS.

Management Direction

We made a number of changes to management direction based on public and internal comments. Most of these changes were editorial, designed to clarify the direction or make it more consistent throughout the Plan. We also added and deleted some pieces of direction, and adjusted some objectives to be more reflective of what we believe can be achieved. The requests for changes, along with the rationale for why we did or did not make the changes, are in the Responses to Comments section of Appendix A to the FEIS. Examples of changes made in response to comments are shown below.

Forest-wide Direction

- Added a standard for prescribed natural fire to the Fire Management section.
- Added an objective for treating vegetation on unsuited timberlands in the Vegetation section.
- Added three Vegetation section goals related to information gathering and use.
- Added two objectives to improve aquatic habitat features in the Wildlife and Fish section.
- Added a goal to cooperate with local entities to promote Recreation Resources.
- Deleted a Range Resources objective that was based on current rather than desired conditions.
- Added a road decommissioning objective to the Roads and Facilities section.
- Added a standard and guideline for temporary roads to the Roads and Facilities section.
- Added management direction for running buffalo clover.

Management Prescription Direction

- Added a listed species habitat connectivity guideline in MP 4.1 to address a USFWS request.
- Deleted Standard 5020 in MP 5.0 because it was already addressed by another standard.
- Deleted Guideline 5045 in MP 5.0 as it conflicts with Forest Service Manual directives.
- Added a guideline in MP 5.1 to clarify that maintenance of wildlife openings may continue.
- Deleted Standard 5127 because we do not control fish stocking, only access to the streams.
- Deleted Standard 5138 and covered prescribed natural fire in Forest-wide direction.
- Added an objective in MP 6.1 for treatment of Indiana bat habitat.
- Added a standard in MPs 6.2 and 5.1 prohibiting timber stand improvement activities.
- Added a guideline in MP 6.2 to indicate preferred fire suppression techniques.
- Added standards to MP 8.1 to clarify management of 8.1 semi-primitive non-motorized areas.
- Added Pike Knob Candidate Research Natural area management direction to MP 8.5.

Threatened and Endangered Species

Between draft and final, the Forest completed and submitted a Biological Assessment for review by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). This submission initiated formal consultation under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, and this consultation concluded with the USFWS issuing a Biological Opinion on the 2006 Revised Forest Plan, including terms and conditions for the Indiana bat and recommended conservation measures for running buffalo clover. In response to USFWS comments and Biological Opinion, the Forest made a number of minor editorial changes to the management direction for Indiana bat, and added management direction for running buffalo clover to address the recommended conservation measures. The Forest worked closely with the USFWS to develop a plan that is proactive toward listed species recovery, provides sufficient protection for the species and their habitats, and responds to their comments and the Biological Opinion.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Several changes were made to the Monitoring and Evaluation Matrix in Chapter IV of the Proposed Revised Plan based on public comments and as a result of the Forest developing a Monitoring Implementation Guide between the DEIS and FEIS. These minor adjustments were made to maintain consistency with 2006 Plan goals and objectives, and the Monitoring Implementation Guide, which is designed to provide implementation details and guidance (see Chapter IV of the 2006 Plan).

Roadless Area Inventory

As noted in the Management Prescription changes above, the public helped us identify two areas to add to the Roadless Area Inventory: Roaring Plains East (2,962 acres) and Roaring Plains North (3,119 acres). Although these areas are smaller than almost all of the other inventoried roadless areas (IRAs), they are located on a high-elevation plateau that provides a topographical buffer from the sights and sounds of nearby development, which also helps to maintain their opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation. Together these areas increase the total IRAs on the Forest from 16 to 18, and the total acreage from 137,200 to 143,234 acres.

Suitable Acres and Allowable Sale Quantity

As noted in the Management Prescription changes above, prescription areas with suitable timberlands (MPs 3.0, 4.1, 6.1) were reduced between the DEIS and FEIS. The overall reduction of actual suitable acres between Draft and Final was an estimated 900 acres. This reduction in area classified as suitable for timber production translates into a reduction in the Allowable Sale Quantity of 360,000 board feet per year, or less than 1 percent difference from the preferred alternative in the DEIS.

Glossary

A number of terms and definitions were added to the Glossary based on comments and our desire to make these documents easier to understand. The Glossary was also moved from the EIS Appendices to the 2006 Plan Appendices to make the definitions more accessible for implementing the Plan over the planning period.

Editorial Corrections

Editorial changes were made to correct misspellings, formatting, or to clarify management direction in the Forest Plan and in the Final EIS. These corrections did not change the basic intent of the direction or the analysis.

Public Involvement

The Forest Service implemented a thorough and active public involvement campaign throughout the planning process. A variety of public involvement tools and methods were used including public meetings, open houses, newsletters, news releases, and meetings with government agencies or interested groups when requested. The efforts of those who participated provided valuable contributions to the development of the 2006 Forest Plan.

The public involvement strategy for the Monongahela National Forest was designed to meet the requirements of the planning regulations. More importantly, the Forest strived to have a very open

planning process, with the goal of "no surprises" for our public. The following information provides an overview of how the Forest made the plan revision process available to the public and provided opportunities for the public to be actively involved.

Notice of Intent and Scoping

A Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) was published in the Federal Register on May 3, 2002, to begin a 90-day formal comment period on our Forest Plan Revision. The NOI described five preliminary issues, as well as dates, locations, and times of public meetings to discuss the issues and plan revision in general. Six public open houses here held during the comment period:

- June 15, 2002: Seneca Rocks Discovery Center, Seneca Rocks WV
- June 17, 2002: Graceland Inn and Conference Center, Elkins WV
- June 18, 2002: Richwood Public Library, Richwood WV
- June 20, 2002: McClintic Public Library, Marlinton WV
- June 24, 2002: Blackwater Falls State Park, Davis, WV
- June 25, 2002: White Sulphur Springs City Hall, White Sulphur Springs WV.

The Forest received 705 responses during this comment period. The results of our analysis of those comments were posted on our website and published in one of our newsletters. The comments received helped the Forest further define the preliminary issues published in the NOI. These issues, referred to as need for change topics, were refined and carried through the NEPA process and documented in the DEIS.

Interim Open Houses, Meetings, and Public Involvement

In February and March 2004, the Forest held a series of open houses to share the progress that had been made on the revised Forest Plan. Forest resource specialists were available to provide information on the status of the planning process, answer questions, and take input on alternative development. The Forest also introduced an updated timeline and provided information on how people could become involved in the revision process. An estimated 254 people attended the following open houses:

- February 21, 2004: Davis and Elkins College, Elkins WV
- February 23, 2004: Holiday Inn, Morgantown WV
- February 25, 2004: Public Library, Petersburg WV
- February 26, 2004: Pocahontas County High School, Pocahontas County WV
- February 27, 2004: Richwood City Hall, Richwood WV
- March 20, 2004: Gaston Caperton State Training Center, Charleston WV.

After the open houses, the Forest had hundreds of informal communications in the form of phone calls, e-mails, letters and small meetings. Forest personnel met with groups such as Trout Unlimited, West Virginia Wilderness Coalition, The Ruffed Grouse Society, West Virginia Forestry Association, The Nature Conservancy, West Virginia Division on Natural Resources, and the Randolph County Commissioners. The purpose of the meetings was to answer questions, discuss concerns over draft documents, discuss timelines, and receive input. All of these communications were aimed at allowing for an open planning process. The communications are documented in the planning record.

Public Involvement on the Draft EIS and Proposed Forest Plan

The Draft EIS and Proposed Forest Plan were officially released for public comment on August 12, 2005. A 90-day formal comment ensued, lasting until November 14, 2005. During the comment period the Forest held a series of public open houses to discuss the draft documents, provide an opportunity for the public to comment, and share information that might help people formulate their comments. These open houses were held on the following dates and at the following locations:

- September 17: Davis and Elkins College, Elkins WV
- September 19: Richwood City Hall, Richwood WV
- September 20: Pocahontas County High School, Pocahontas County WV
- September 21: Marriott Town Center, Charleston WV
- September 26: Public Library, Petersburg WV

After the open houses, the Forest again had numerous informal communications in the form of phone calls, e-mails, letters, and small meetings with various agencies, organizations, and individuals. These communications are documented in the planning record.

The Forest received close to 13,000 comments during the 90-day comment period. A Content Analysis Team reviewed all comments and created databases of public concern statements with links to specific comments and letters. The Forest Revision Team then consulted the databases of concern statements and comment letters, and responded to the public concerns and comments. These concerns, comments, and responses are in Appendix A to the FEIS.

Newsletters

Nine issues of the Monongahela National Forest Planning Newsletter were sent to a mailing list of more than 1,300 addresses. Each issue contained information about our Forest Plan and provided several ways for the public to get involved in the process. Each newsletter coincided with significant milestones in the process, such as announcing the publication of the Notice of Intent, the development of the alternatives, or the comments received on the DEIS and Proposed Revised Plan.

News Releases

At every significant milestone, news releases were prepared and distributed to area media. Each news release informed the public of the status of our revision and gave them information on how to provide comments or obtain additional information.

Interviews

At several significant points in the process, the Forest had various staff provide interviews with local newspapers or the local Public Broadcasting television station.

Website

The Forest posted information and pertinent documents about Forest Plan Revision on its web site at http://www.fs.fed.us/r9/Monongahela/. All correspondence referenced the website for additional information.

Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA)

Forest Plan Revision has been listed on the Monongahela National Forest SOPA since 2002. The SOPA is distributed quarterly and posted on the Forest's web site.

Alternatives

Alternative Development

The Plan Revision process was initiated by the May 2002 Notice of Intent. Public comments received during this initial comment period, along with management concerns identified during the need for change assessment, helped the Forest Service develop a range of alternatives that would meet the purpose and need for the plan revision as well as address the issues raised about the proposed action. The process used to formulate the alternatives is described in Chapter 2 of the FEIS.

A key task for the Forest Service was development of a reasonable range of alternatives. Based upon resource information, public comment, and experience gained under the 1986 Plan, alternatives were crafted that I believe to be a reasonable representation of alternative means to meet the purpose and need for this programmatic forest plan. We have solicited and considered alternatives submitted by the public and documented that analysis in the record. Existing resource conditions and the role of the Forest (as embodied in the purpose and need statement) were the heart of the development of the alternatives. The range of alternatives is not based on predetermined outputs but rather on themes responding to issues raised by the public. Development of a programmatic multiple use resource plan involves compromise and the consideration of many biological, physical, economic and social factors. The range of alternatives reflects the trade-offs that are inherent with multiple use management.

Alternative 1 is the no-action alternative, which reflects the 1986 Forest Plan direction and subsequent amendments. Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 provide a range of other choices for addressing the revision topics and resource issues.

Alternatives Not Considered in Detail

Although they contributed to the range of alternatives, a number of alternative themes or approaches were eliminated from detailed study because they were impractical, infeasible, not within our authority, not responsive to the purpose and need for revision, or already covered under the alternatives considered in detail. A detailed description of these alternatives and the reasons for not considering them is in Chapter 2 of the FEIS. A summary of the information from Chapter 2 of the FEIS for the alternatives considered but eliminated from detailed study follows:

No Logging/Commercial Harvest
Timber supply is one the major issues analyzed in this EIS, and the alternatives provide a reasonable range of expected commercial harvest. Timber harvesting is a tool necessary to move toward desired conditions stated in the Forest Plan, and therefore a no logging alternative would not meet the purpose and need for this proposal. Harvest is particularly important to providing plant and animal community diversity. The range of alternatives has various levels of harvest and degrees of restriction on commercial harvest, and the Selected Alternative has an estimated 64 percent of the Forest in which no scheduled commercial timber harvest will occur. To analyze an alternative with no logging or

commercial harvest would also be inconsistent with the authority provided by Congress, as Congress has clearly indicated that harvesting would be allowed on National Forests.

Long Rotations and Individual Tree Selection
A commenter suggested an alternative that would feature 200-300 year harvest rotations and limit timber harvest to individual tree selection across the Forest. The reason for this suggestion would seem to be to provide for an increase in old forest, which the DEIS states will increase under all four alternatives considered in detail. Although it has and can be used for many purposes on the Forest, individual tree selection would not achieve the intent of ecosystem restoration expressed in the purpose and need for this proposal, nor achieve the desired conditions for age class or habitat diversity expressed in the 2006 Revised Plan. Also, the 200-300 year rotations applied across the entire Forest would likely affect the Forest's ability to provide a sustainable level of timber product, another purpose of this proposal. Finally, we will be likely using individual tree selection and long rotations in some areas of the Forest (e.g., for spruce restoration, Indiana bat habitat, visually sensitive areas), but to apply the same prescription across the entire Forest would be ecologically inappropriate in many cases, and would not provide us with the management flexibility needed to address site-specific conditions and needs. For these reasons, this alternative was not developed and analyzed in detail.

Manage All of the Forest As Wilderness
An alternative that would manage the entire Forest as wilderness is beyond the scope of Plan revision, as only Congress can designate wilderness. Also, the Forest Service, by law and policy, is a multiple-use agency that is mandated to manage numerous programs, many of which would be considered non-conforming uses in wilderness. The alternatives considered in detail provide a reasonable range of backcountry areas and areas recommended for wilderness study. Finally, analysis of such an alternative is not required as it would not meet the purpose and need for the proposal, which is based in NFMA direction to develop an interdisciplinary multiple use framework for future management of multiple use resources (as listed in MUSYA, 16 U.S.C. §§ 528, 531).

Do Not Manage Any of the Forest as Wilderness
An alternative that would not manage any of the Forest as wilderness is also beyond the scope of this Plan revision. There are currently over 78,000 acres of Congressionally designated wilderness on the Forest that must be managed as such by law. The alternatives considered in detail provide a range of recommended wilderness study areas, including the No Action Alternative, which would not recommend any new areas for Congressional designation.

Maintain All Roadless Areas As Roadless
This alternative would have the Forest maintain all roadless areas as roadless. Roadless areas have been inventoried on the Forest a number of times, the most recent being for Forest Plan revision. The inventoried areas are generally not roadless, as most have some Maintenance Level 1 and 2 roads within them. However, they are managed to restrict public motorized use, commercial timber harvest, and road construction. The current Inventoried Roadless Areas have a mix of Management Prescriptions 5.1, 6.2 and 8.1 Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized in the 2006 Plan. These prescriptions would maintain all of the Inventoried Roadless Areas in their current relatively undeveloped condition. Therefore, it was not necessary to develop and analyze this alternative in detail because the issue is addressed in the Selected Alternative.

Create More Early Seral Habitat
Although we have not developed an alternative that focuses solely on creating early seral habitat, all of the alternatives considered in detail would allow for the creation of early seral habitat to some degree. Successional stage amount and distribution is one of the indicators used to display differences in age class diversity across all alternatives in the Vegetation section of Chapter 3 in the EIS.

No New Road Construction and Decommission Existing Roads
This alternative or alternatives would emphasize no new road construction and the decommissioning or elimination of all unneeded roads and/or roads harmful to the environment. The Wilderness Society, in a report it submitted to the Forest, called *Ecological and Financial Implications of Roads in the Monongahela National Forest* (Fleming et al. 2004), included a list of road management recommendations. The report also suggested scenarios in which the Forest closes: 1) all of its local roads, or 2) all of its Maintenance Level 1 and 2 roads in order to reduce the costs of road maintenance. However, the fundamental factors the Forest Service must consider when doing transportation planning include site-specific information and local public involvement, land allocation implications, and private or shared easements. To identify the objective and need for each road on the Forest requires a more in-depth analysis and focused public forum than can be provided during the Plan revision process. To design a Forest-wide transportation system based solely on the need to protect roadless areas or to reduce maintenance costs would be inappropriate. Analyzing and prioritizing transportation system needs for an area as large and complex as the Forest can more properly and effectively be done in smaller incremental stages, using local knowledge and with the consistent management direction provided by the 2006 Forest Plan.

Travel Management/Public Access
There were a large number of comments and suggestions related to travel management or public access, including comments that the Forest Plan should allow certain types of motorized access on certain roads, and plan revision should revise the Travel Management Plan. While the plan revision is the appropriate process to address broad landscape strategies for general areas where motorized use will be allowed or not allowed, it is not within the purpose and need of the plan revision to make site-specific decisions about travel management. There is a broad array of localized issues with travel management that occur at scales below a Forest Planning unit. Attempting to address specific travel management issues at the scale of this revision effort would not allow for the localized modifications needed to effectively meet resource, social, and economic issues. However, I do believe that a consistent broad-scale framework for conducting localized travel management planning has been developed in the 2006 Forest Plan.

No Management Disturbance Above 4,000 Feet
This alternative would eliminate all management-related disturbances within areas above 4,000 feet due to the sensitivity of these lands. Land managers cannot completely eliminate all management-related disturbances on any part of the Forest, even Wilderness. Some disturbance activities—such as trail maintenance, privately owned mineral development, and soil surveys—will and need to occur. However, we do have prescriptions that limit major disturbance activities, like road construction and timber harvest, and these are applied differentially across the alternatives considered in detail in the EIS. We also developed a specific prescription, 4.1, that limits some management-related disturbances in high-elevation areas on the Forest associated with spruce and spruce-hardwood ecosystems. Therefore, it was not necessary to develop and analyze this alternative in detail because the issue is addressed in other alternatives considered in detail.

No Management Within Riparian Areas
This alternative would eliminate management-related disturbance within riparian areas. Again, land managers cannot completely eliminate all management-related disturbance in riparian areas, as these areas support many other mandated uses and facilities on the Forest, such as campgrounds, gas pipelines, and essential road corridors. We have included in the 2006 Forest Plan management direction that limits specific management-related disturbances in riparian areas and promotes the removal, reduction, rehabilitation, or restoration of uses and facilities in these sensitive areas where appropriate. Therefore, it was not necessary to develop and analyze this alternative in detail.

No Management on Areas with Severe Erosion Potential
This alternative would eliminate management-related disturbance on areas with severe erosion potential, as defined by the Forest's soil erosion sensitivity map. Land managers cannot completely eliminate all management-related disturbance on any part of the Forest, including areas with severe erosion potential. We have experience with conducting management activities in areas with severe erosion potential without producing measurable adverse effects from those activities. The key to operating on sensitive soils is to limit the amount and time of soil exposure to forces of erosion so that the soil does not erode and move off site. The 2006 Plan contains effective Forest-wide management direction designed to limit soil exposure and movement, and we will apply additional mitigation measures at the project level if there is an identified need. Therefore, it was not necessary to develop and analyze this alternative in detail as the issue was address through standards and guidelines for alternatives considered in detail.

Custodial Management
This alternative would feature custodial management with a reduced level of timber production (5 million board feet), road building, mining, grazing, prescribed fire, or other management-related disturbance. This alternative would be designed to reduce disturbance to natural resources and provide more old growth, backcountry recreation opportunities, and wilderness experiences.

I elected not to develop or analyze this alternative in detail for the following reasons: 1) We would not likely meet the purpose and need for plan revision with the mix of goods, services, and opportunities that would result, 2) We would not achieve our desired conditions or goals for vegetation management, 3) All of the alternatives considered in detail have management direction and prescriptions that would reduce disturbance to natural resources, 4) We already have an alternative that provides an abundance of backcountry recreation opportunities and potential wilderness experiences, and 5) To base an entire alternative around an arbitrary harvest production number like 5 MMBF would be unreasonable because, as explained in the EIS (see Timber and Social and Economic Environment sections), we cannot predict the exact amount of timber volume that we will produce in any given year due to many variables.

Reduce Deer and Deer Impacts
This alternative would have the Forest reduce deer populations and associated impacts from deer grazing on tree regeneration, rare plant communities, and wildlife habitat. The management of deer in West Virginia is a cooperative undertaking with the State Division of Natural Resources. The Forest works with the Division to provide or restrict access during deer hunting season, or restrict access to reduce disturbance during other times of the year. To develop an alternative focused upon one very narrow wildlife issue for management of a multiple use National Forest would not meet the purpose and need of revising the Forest Plan. The effects at the programmatic level of various alternatives upon deer populations are disclosed in the FEIS.

Recommend All Inventoried Roadless Areas as Wilderness
An alternative that would recommend all Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs) as designated wilderness was considered but eliminated from detailed study. All IRAs were evaluated for wilderness potential, and the evaluations were considered in approving a range of recommended wilderness study areas for the alternatives. Under Alternative 3, the majority of the IRAs are assigned a 5.1 (Recommended Wilderness) prescription, and the rest are assigned a 6.2 (Backcountry Recreation) prescription. Under the Selected Alternative, all of the IRAs would be assigned either a 5.1 or 6.2 prescription. Management under these prescriptions would essentially maintain wilderness attributes over the planning period, and thus preserve options for Congressional designation in the future.

Benchmark Alternatives
Several "benchmark" alternatives were developed during analysis for the Forest Plan revision. Benchmarks represent maximum production potentials for various resources and uses. Benchmarks were developed for maximum timber production, maximum present net value of market values, etc. The benchmark alternatives were eliminated from detailed consideration because they would not provide the mix of resource uses and protection. The National Forest Management Act, Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act, Endangered Species Act, and other laws and Forest Service policy require that national forests be managed for a variety of uses as well as resource protection.

Alternatives Considered in Detail

Alternative 1

Alternative 1, the no-action alternative, reflects 1986 Forest Plan direction, including six amendments made to that plan. It meets the 1982 Planning regulations (36 CFR 219.12(f) (7); 1982 Planning Rule) and NEPA requirement that a no-action alternative be considered. "No action" means that current management allocations, activities, and management direction found in the existing Forest Plan, as amended, would continue. Output levels have been recalculated for this alternative to reflect the expected results based on new information, in particular, new scientific and inventory data.

The 1986 FEIS for the Forest Plan described the emphasis of this alternative as remote habitat, semi-primitive recreation, and long rotation ages. In 1986, an estimated 48 percent of the Forest was allocated to a remote habitat management prescription (6.1), about 24 percent was allocated to semi-primitive recreation prescriptions (6.2 and 5.1), and about 23 percent was allocated to a prescription (3.0) that featured long rotations and even-aged timber management.

However, land acquisition and the 2004 Plan Amendment for Threatened and Endangered Species, have shifted prescription allocations and management emphasis somewhat since 1986. Currently, about 31 percent of the Forest is allocated to MP 6.1, about 22 percent is allocated to MPs 6.2 and 5.1, and about 15 percent is allocated to MP 3.0. Most of the area lost from the 6.1 and 3.0 prescriptions shifted to MP 6.3, Indiana bat habitat, and MP 8.0, specifically suitable habitat for West Virginia northern flying squirrel.

Decision Rationale
Although I did not select Alternative 1, the amended 1986 plan had many aspects that were working well and this No Action Alternative provided much of the basis for the Selected Alternative. Key management prescriptions, management direction, and general output levels were carried forward into the Selected Alternative. However, Alternative 1 also has many facets that could be improved. The public assisted the Forest in identifying those aspects of the existing plan that were not working well on the ground. These facets are described more thoroughly in the Decision and Rationale section of this ROD, and are summarized by Need For Change topic below.

Soil and Water – Alternative 1 has no strategy for addressing potential impacts from acid deposition. It also has no integrated and flexible strategy for managing stream and wetland buffer areas. It does not include any objectives for improving specific stream habitat conditions.

Vegetation Management – Alternative 1 has no emphasis on oak or spruce hardwood ecosystem restoration, and so represents an inferior alternative with regard to NFMA plant and animal community diversity in a multiple use management context. It has no specific objectives or desired conditions to manage for age class and habitat diversity on suited timberlands, or to manage for species habitat needs on unsuited timberlands. It has little or no direction for managing rare plants and

communities or non-native invasive species. It does not address the use of prescribed fire as a management tool for ecosystem restoration and fuel reduction.

Backcountry Recreation – Alternative 1 does not increase the opportunities for backcountry recreation on the Forest. It does not recognize and manage the NRA under one integrated prescription. It does not recommend any areas for wilderness study.

Timber Supply – The Forest has struggled over the past 20 years to attain output levels projected in the 1986 Plan. The Allowable Sale Quantity level is a cap we cannot exceed, rather than a stated production level. However, I am concerned that the overall trend has been downward and somewhat unstable. I recognize that much of that instability has been due to organization changes, budgets, adapting to new information, addressing appeals and litigation, other Forest priorities, and site-specific constraints. However, I believe that the 1986 Plan contributed somewhat to the instability through management direction that was in some cases overly restrictive in plan implementation and in other cases limited the types of vegetation treatments that are needed on the Forest.

Management Indicator Species (MIS) – Based on our experience in wildlife monitoring and new scientific information, it became clear that the MIS selected for the 1986 Plan should be changed. The FEIS describes the process used to select MIS. Alternative 1 continues the expanded MIS list of the old plan and thus would not alleviate the practical and scientific difficulties associated with some of these species.

Scenery Management System – The 1986 Plan still uses the antiquated Visual Management System.

Heritage Resources – The 1986 Plan has brief direction on cultural resource protection but no direction on interpretation and education, which are now important elements of the program.

Research Natural Areas – Many of the candidate areas identified in the 1986 Plan already had a protective status as a National Natural Landmark or Botanical Area, and most were small areas designed to protect a specific feature rather than representative ecosystem types. These features could be protected under other allocations, as noted above.

Management Direction Language – The 1986 Plan had very few desired conditions, no labeled objectives, and unclear standards or guidelines

Alternative 2

As noted above, Alternative 2 was the proposed action, based on Alternative 1 (the 1986 Plan as amended) but designed to address the identified Need For Change. Although there would still be an emphasis on semi-primitive non-motorized or backcountry recreation, the remote habitat and long rotation focus would shift somewhat to an emphasis on managing for age class and habitat diversity. More specific improvements are described by Need For Change topic below.

Decision Rationale
Alternative 2 was identified as the Proposed Revised Plan and preferred alternative in the Draft EIS/ and I still feel it is very close to what is needed for management of the Monongahela National Forest. The main reason I did not select this alternative is that, based on the comments received on the DEIS and Proposed Revised Forest Plan, we were able to modify this alternative to yield a better plan. Specifically, there was an opportunity to provide more backcountry recreation and protect special areas without unduly affecting other resources or program areas. In addition, based on the comments received, some management direction was improved through better wording or key additions or

deletions. Overall, however, Alternative 2 addresses the Need For Change in the 1986 Forest Plan through improvements in the following areas.

Soil and Water – Alternative 2 has a strategy for addressing potential impacts from acid deposition. It also has an integrated and flexible strategy for managing stream and wetland buffer areas based on new science and 20 years of experience since the 1986 Plan.

Vegetation Management – Alternative 2 provides an emphasis on oak or spruce-hardwood ecosystem restoration. It has specific objectives and desired conditions to manage for age class and habitat diversity on suited timberlands, and to manage for species habitat needs on unsuited timberlands. It creates direction for managing rare plants and communities and non-native invasive species. It uses prescribed fire as a management tool for ecosystem restoration and fuel reduction.

Backcountry Recreation – Alternative 2 increases the opportunities for backcountry recreation on the Forest compared to Alternative 1. It recognizes and manages the NRA under one integrated prescription. It updates the Roadless Area Inventory to identify those areas that currently have the best wilderness potential on the Forest. It recommends four areas for wilderness study.

Timber Supply – Alternative 2 provides clear direction for managing timber, including reasonable and integrated objectives for management on both suitable and unsuited timberlands. Suitable acres and Allowable Sale Quantity are only slightly below those of Alternative 1.

Management Indicator Species – Alternative 2 has four MIS that represent forest habitat types where management activities, or the lack thereof, are projected to produce measurable changes.

Scenery Management System – Alternative 2 adopts the new Scenery Management System.

Heritage Resources – Alternative 2 expands management direction for heritage resources to better reflect the balance between resource protection and interpretation and education.

Research Natural Areas – Alternative 2 removes the candidate RNA status from 10 areas in the 1986 Forest Plan that already have protective status as a National Natural Landmark or Botanical Area, and/ or that were small areas designed to protect a specific feature rather than representative ecosystem types.

Management Direction Language – Alternative 2 provides well-developed desired conditions for all resource areas, a number of key management objectives, and clearly written standards and guidelines that meet the intent of the definitions for those different types of direction.

To summarize, Alternative 2 is grounded in the past but seeks to improve management flexibility and effectiveness through incorporation of new information, experience, best available science, and public comment. This alternative is one of compromise and accommodation. It does not try to move the Forest in any one specific direction, but rather provides a variety of settings, opportunities, goods, and services to meet the diverse needs of the public in a sustainable manner. When the decision criteria (see page 9) are applied, Alternative 2 does not rank the highest of any alternative for any criterion, but neither does it rank the lowest. Instead, it does a relatively good job of meeting all criteria, which I believe is preferable for the agency and the public it serves.

Alternative 2 Modified – The Selected Alternative

Alternative 2 Modified was developed in response to comments received on the Draft EIS and Proposed Forest Plan. Alternative 2 Modified adjusts the preferred alternative for the DEIS as a direct outgrowth of public input and new information that became available between the draft and final documents. The emphasis and theme for Alternative 2 Modified are essentially the same as Alternative 2. Component changes that were made are described in detail previously in this Record of Decision, and include:

- Management prescription changes;
- Management direction changes;
- Habitat management requirements for T&E Species changes related to FWS consultation;
- Monitoring and Evaluation update;
- Roadless Area Inventory changes;
- Suitable Acres and ASQ changes;
- Glossary and editorial changes.

Although these changes seem extensive when listed individually, they can all be characterized as refinements of Alternative 2 that cumulatively resulted in very little difference in the outputs and effects of the two alternatives, as shown in the FEIS analysis.

Decision Rationale
My rationale for selecting Alternative 2 Modified as the 2006 Forest Plan is detailed previously in this Record of Decision. Simply put, this alternative is the same alternative I identified as "preferred" in the DEIS, except that it includes modifications as a result of public comments and new information received between the DEIS and FEIS. As such, I consider this alternative to be very similar to the preferred alternative in the DEIS, but even more responsive to the public.

Specifically, I am selecting Alternative 2 Modified for the following reasons:

Need For Change – Alternative 2 Modified addresses Need For Change the same as documented for Alternative 2, above, with the following differences:

- *Soil and Water* – It adds objectives for aquatic habitat restoration and road decommissioning.
- *Vegetation Management* – It modifies and adds objectives for harvest treatments on suited and unsuited timberlands.
- *Backcountry Recreation* – It adds Roaring Plains East and North to the Roadless Area Inventory, and adds over 9,000 acres to Management Prescription 6.2, Backcountry Recreation.
- *Timber Supply* – It slightly reduces suitable timberland and ASQ, but this change will have a negligible effect on timber supply from the Forest.
- *Research Natural Areas* – It adds a large candidate Research Natural Area that includes many rare plant species and the southernmost red pine community in the United States.

Decision Criteria – Alternative 2 Modified shows essentially the same overall strong response to the decision criteria as documented for Alternative 2, above.

Public Involvement – I have determined that Alternative 2 Modified is the most responsive to the public comments we received on the DEIS and Proposed Plan, and is responsive to the wide range of comments that we received throughout the plan revision process.

Alternative 3

Alternative 3 emphasizes backcountry recreation opportunities and reduces management-related disturbance across the Forest. The full range of recreation experiences would be available, but the emphasis would be on semi-primitive, non-motorized settings and opportunities. This alternative features the most area in Recommended Wilderness (MP 5.1) and Backcountry Recreation (MP 6.2) of all the alternatives considered in detail. Vegetation management activities anticipated are similar to those prescribed for Alternative 2, the Proposed Action; however, they would occur on a suited timber base that is over 100,000 acres smaller.

Compared to the Selected Alternative, Alternative 3 would increase acres in Management Prescriptions 5.1 and 6.2 that emphasize backcountry recreation opportunities by nearly 200,000 acres. Alternative 3 also has the most area recommended for wilderness study (99,400 acres) of all the alternatives considered in detail. Because these prescriptions have a very low potential for management-related disturbance activities (road construction, timber harvest, federal mineral leasing surface occupancy, recreation facility development), the potential for ground disturbance contributing to nutrient depletion and sedimentation concerns would be reduced.

Decision Rationale
I did not select this alternative because of the way it addresses Need For Change topics and the decision criteria. Specific problem areas are highlighted below.

Need For Change – Alternative 3 addresses Need For Change with the same standards and guidelines as the Selected Alternative, but the allocation of Management Prescriptions is significantly different.

- *Soil and Water* - Alternative 3 is the most responsive alternative in reducing potential effects to soil and water by having the most area in prescriptions that limit ground-disturbing management activities. However, these potential effects will be avoided or mitigated by application of Forest-wide direction for soil and water resources, which is the same under all action alternatives, and is designed to provide adequate protection for these resources regardless of where they are located on the Forest. Still, the lower amount of activity in Alternative 3 would pose a lower risk to soil, water and aquatic resources.
- *Vegetation Management* – Because it has the least amount of suitable timber acres of all alternatives, Alternative 3 has the least potential to provide for age class and habitat diversity, and to restore oak ecosystems using timber harvest.
- *Backcountry Recreation* – Alternative 3 is by far the most responsive alternative in terms of providing backcountry recreation opportunities, with nearly 200,000 acres more MP 5.1 and 6.2 than the Selected Alternative. However, managing these areas for backcountry recreation would decrease the Forest's capacity to do needed vegetation management and decrease the federal mineral estate available for leasing. Managing in this way would also reduce opportunities for motorized or developed recreation, which are important on the Monongahela.
- *Timber Supply* – Alternative 3 would provide the least amount of potential timber supply of all the alternatives considered, with an estimated 50 mmbf per year over the first decade.

Decision Criteria – Alternative 3 ranks at or near the top of all alternatives for meeting Criteria 1 and 4 (see page 9). However, it ranks at or near the bottom for Criteria 3 and 5. For Criterion 3, it provides the most habitats for species that prefer old forest and low disturbance, but it also provides the least habitat for species that prefer or use young forest, openings, or early successional habitat.

Overall, I believe that Alternative 3 does not provide enough early successional habitat, does not provide for oak ecosystem restoration, and does not address the need to provide the goods and opportunities expected by people living in the local communities as well as the Selected Alternative.

Alternative 4

Alternative 4 was developed to provide more emphasis on active vegetation restoration. Management Prescriptions 3.0, 4.1, and 6.1 are applied liberally to facilitate restoration of spruce, spruce-hardwood, oak-pine, and oak-hickory ecosystems. A full range of recreation experiences is available, but semi-primitive settings are not as abundant as in the Selected Alternative. No Inventoried Roadless Areas are recommended for wilderness study. Many of the areas with a 6.2 or 5.1 Management Prescription under the Selected Alternative have a 4.1 or 6.1 prescription in Alternative 4 to allow for more vegetation restoration.

Decision Rationale
I did not select this alternative because of the way it addresses Need For Change topics and the decision criteria. Specific problem areas are highlighted below.

Need For Change – Alternative 4 addresses Need For Change with the same standards and guidelines as the Selected Alternative, but the allocation of Management Prescriptions is significantly different:

- *Soil and Water* - Alternative 4 is the least responsive alternative in reducing potential effects to soil and water by having the most area in prescriptions that would have ground-disturbing management activities. However, this disadvantage would be somewhat neutralized by Forest-wide direction for soil and water resources, which is the same under all action alternatives, and is designed to provide adequate protection for these resources regardless of where they are located on the Forest. Still, the higher amount of activity in Alternative 4 would pose a higher risk to soil, water, and aquatic resources.
- *Vegetation Management* – Because it has the most amount of suitable timber acres of all alternatives, Alternative 3 has the most potential to provide for age class and habitat diversity, and to restore oak ecosystems using timber harvest.
- *Backcountry Recreation* – Alternative 4 is by far the least responsive alternative in terms of providing backcountry recreation opportunities, with over 83,000 acres less MP 5.1 and 6.2 than the Selected Alternative. No areas would be recommended for wilderness study.
- *Timber Supply* – Alternative 3 would provide the most amount of potential timber supply of all the alternatives considered, with an estimated ASQ of 80 mmbf per year over the first decade.

Decision Criteria – Alternative 4 ranks right at or near the top of all alternatives for meeting Criteria 2 and 5 (see page 9). However, it ranks at the bottom for Criteria 1 and 4. For Criterion 3, it provides the most habitat for species that prefer young forest, openings, or early successional habitat, but it also provides the least habitat for species that prefer old forest and low disturbance.

Overall, I believe that Alternative 4 does not address the needed emphasis on backcountry recreation and the need for protection and restoration of sensitive resources as well as the Selected Alternative.

The Environmentally Preferred Alternative

NEPA regulations require agencies to specify the alternative or alternatives which are considered to be environmentally preferable, 40 CFR 1502.2(b). In addition, Forest Service NEPA policy (FSH 1909.15, Section 05) defines “environmentally preferable” as:

"An alternative that best meets the goals of Section 101 of the NEPA..." (FSH 1909.15). Section 101 of the NEPA describes national environmental policy, calling on federal, state and local governments and the public to "create and maintain conditions under which man and nature can exist in productive harmony." Section 101 further defines this policy in six broad goals, to:

1) Fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations;
2) Assure for all Americans safe, healthful, productive and esthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings;
3) Attain the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk to health or safety, or other undesirable and unintended consequences;
4) Preserve important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage, and maintain wherever possible, an environment which supports diversity and variety of individual choice;
5) Achieve a balance between population and resource use which will permit high standards of living and a wide sharing of life's amenities; and
6) Enhance the quality of renewable resources and approach the maximum attainable recycling and balanced use and provision for future generations.

Based on the description of the alternatives considered in detail in the FEIS and this Record of Decision, I believe that the Selected Alternative best meets the goals of Section 101 of the NEPA and is therefore the environmentally preferable alternative for this proposed federal action.

I am confident that the Selected Alternative will preserve the historic, cultural, and natural heritage of the Monongahela National Forest, while promoting diversity and a variety of individual opportunities. The 2006 Plan will provide for a safe, healthy, productive and esthetically pleasing environment for this and succeeding generations. More so than the other alternatives considered, I believe that the Selected Alternative offers a wide range of beneficial uses and strikes the best balance between the needs of the public and protection of the environment. The Selected Alternative maintains and improves forest health by providing a framework for future opportunities for active management to work in concert with natural ecological processes to heal the land where degradation has occurred. It balances sustainable resource use and ecological sustainability in a manner intended to satisfy competing public desires for the Forest.

Findings Related to Other National Policies, Law and Authorities

The Forest Service manages the Monongahela National Forest in compliance with many laws, regulations, executive orders, and policies. The list provided here is not a complete list of all governing statutes that apply to the Forest Plan Revision, but it highlights the primary statutes guiding the preparation of this plan revision. In all cases, the 2006 Forest Plan is consistent with national law, policy, and direction.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

The Forest has compiled an enormous amount of information relevant to the effects of each of the alternatives considered in the Final Environmental Impact Statement. I find that the environmental analysis and public involvement process complies with each of the major elements of the requirements set forth by the Council on Environmental Quality for implementing NEPA (40 CFR 1500-1508). These include:

- Considering a broad range of reasonable alternatives;

- Disclosing cumulative effects;
- Using the best scientific information available;
- Consideration of long-term and short-term effects; and
- Disclosure of unavoidable adverse effects.

The decision here does not directly authorize any new ground-disturbing activities or projects. Ground-disturbing activities and projects will be subject to additional site-specific environmental analysis that will tier to the Final Environmental Impact Statement and follow applicable environmental analysis, public involvement, and administrative appeal procedures.

It is anticipated that the FEIS provides sufficient NEPA analysis to support future consent to lease decisions. Site-specific NEPA would still occur as appropriate, for example when the operator presents a plan of operations/application to drill for a specific lease. See the "Key Considerations in Plan Implementation" section of this Record of Decision.

The 2006 Forest Plan has adopted practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm. These means include provisions for providing those ecological conditions needed to support biological diversity and standards and guidelines to mitigate adverse environmental effects that may result from implementing various management practices. The 2006 Forest Plan includes monitoring requirements and an adaptive management approach to assure needed adjustments are made over time.

National Forest Management Act (NFMA)

The NFMA and its implementing regulations specify a number of requirements for forest plan development. Congress has mandated that forest plan revision assure that the plans provide for multiple-use and sustained yield of products and services. Not every use can or should occur on every acre. Our goal is to blend multiple uses of the Forest in such a way that is sustainable and best meets the needs of the American people.

The Monongahela National Forest developed an integrated land and resource management plan using a systematic interdisciplinary approach to integrate consideration of physical, biological, economic, and other sciences. The 2006 Forest Plan maximizes net public benefit and contains strong conservation measures to protect, maintain, and improve soil and water resources, wildlife habitat, and other forest resources within a multiple-use context. The 2006 Forest Plan complies with each of the NFMA and regulatory requirements, as explained elsewhere in this Record of Decision, accompanying FEIS, and Appendices. Certain requirements are discussed in further detail below.

The 1982 NFMA regulations require fish and wildlife habitat to be managed to maintain viable populations of existing native and desired non-native vertebrate species in the planning area (36 CFR 219.19; (1982)). A key part of forest plan revision was the evaluation of over 200 species for viability concerns. Neither NFMA nor its implementing regulations create a concrete, precise standard for diversity. The original Committee of Scientists noted in the development of the early planning regulations for NFMA that "it is impossible to write specific regulations to provide for diversity" and thus "there remains a great deal of room for honest debate on the translation of policy into management programs." (44 Federal Register 26600-26608, 26608). Because absolute certainty cannot be obtained regarding plant and animal community diversity, the planning process involves projections or estimates of distribution and abundance of plants and animals based upon ecological conditions necessary to maintain viable populations.

Using an ecological or "coarse filter" approach, broad land categories of wildlife habitat were identified. A relatively small change in the abundance and quality of wildlife habitats is likely to occur in the next decade due to actions we take as we implement the 2006 Forest Plan. Some changes in the quality and quantity of wildlife habitat will occur through natural succession and disturbances. These changes are not anticipated to create any species viability concerns. The Forest also used a species, or "fine filter", analysis to assure that standards and guidelines were in place to provide for the needs of threatened, endangered and sensitive species. Forest plan direction was developed to conserve habitat and avoid any adverse effects of the future management actions. The analysis presented in the FEIS indicates that, under all alternatives there is a high likelihood of continued representation of all species and important wildlife habitats on the Forest.

Management Indicator Species (MIS) were chosen that will respond to forest management activities and assist in predicting the effects of implementing the forest plan over time. The choice of MIS for the 2006 Plan was based upon experience implementing the 1986 Forest Plan and the best available scientific information. Monitoring and management experience has shown that some species that were selected as MIS in the previous plan were not good indicators. Some of the MIS species that were not retained have populations that are substantially affected by "off-forest" activities and conditions. Other species were habitat generalists that are not very responsive to changes in management. Others occurred on only a small portion of the Monongahela National Forest so were of limited use in indicating overall effects of the way the NFS lands are managed. Lastly, some species were difficult to find so that regular monitoring was either impossible or unreliable.

Management Indicator Species are just one part of the overall monitoring effort. Species that are not designated as MIS may still be monitored. Recognizing the discretion provided by the 1982 NFMA regulations (36 CFR 219.19(a)(1)), the Forest carefully selected MIS that will meet the intent of the NFMA regulations, but not impose an unattainable or unnecessarily burdensome monitoring requirement on the Forest. In general, the Forest was guided by 36 CFR 219.14(f) (2005) in its consideration of MIS.

The NFMA also requires that forest plans identify the proportion of harvest methods that are proposed for implementation. The 2006 Forest Plan, Appendix A, includes a forecast of the harvest methods that are likely to be chosen as the plan is implemented. The 2006 Forest Plan does not mandate that any particular harvest method be applied to any specific project. The choice of when, where and how to harvest timber is deferred as a future site-specific decision.

Adaptive management is an important part of ensuring compliance with the NFMA. Adaptive management is a management philosophy that runs throughout the 2006 Forest Plan. Recognizing that perfect information and resource inventories are impossible in an imperfect world, we anticipate that new scientific information and changes in resource conditions will require "course corrections" during the 10-15 year life of this plan. The 2006 Forest Plan is dynamic and will respond to new information.

The 1982 Planning Rule requires identification of the alternative that maximizes the present net value (PNV) and how the Selected Alternative compares to this alternative. According to the economic analysis displayed in the Final EIS, Alternative 4, because of its emphasis on even-aged timber management, maximizes PNV. The Selected Alternative has the third highest PNV of the five alternatives considered, which indicates that the Net Public Benefits that were considered in my selection went well beyond economic and financial efficiency. Appendix B of the FEIS includes a detailed description of the PNV analysis.

Endangered Species Act

The Endangered Species Act creates an affirmative obligation "…that all Federal departments and agencies shall seek to conserve endangered and threatened (and proposed) species" of fish, wildlife, and plants. This obligation is further clarified in the national Interagency Memorandum of Agreement (dated August 30, 2000) which states our shared mission to "…enhance conservation of imperiled species while delivering appropriate goods and services provided by the lands and resources."

The Selected Alternative will protect threatened, endangered, and sensitive species. The 2006 Forest Plan was developed with our responsibilities concerning conservation of listed species (Section 7(a)(1)) foremost in mind. Based on consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, their concurrence with our Biological Assessment, and the non-jeopardy finding in their Biological Opinion, I have determined that the 2006 Forest Plan is in compliance with the Endangered Species Act.

Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act (RPA) and Forest Service Strategic Plan 2004 – 2008

The Forest Service Strategic Plan 2004 – 2008, in lieu of a Resource Planning Act Program, was completed in accordance with the Government Performance Results Act (GPRA) and the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act. While forest plans should be consistent with the broad guidance provided in the Strategic Plan, and should consider the information provided by the Resource Planning Act Assessment along with other available and relevant science, neither the Strategic Plan nor the Assessment contain recommended outputs to incorporate in specific forest plans. I find the 2006 Forest Plan to be in compliance with the Forest Service Strategic Plan, and to contribute toward its goals, which are:

Reduce the risk from catastrophic wildland fire

The 2006 Forest Plan contains management direction in the form of desired conditions and objectives to increase the amount of forest restored to, or maintained in, a healthy condition to reduce risk and damage from wildland fires.

Reduce the impacts from invasive species

The 2006 Forest Plan addresses the spread of terrestrial or aquatic non-native invasive species that pose a threat to native ecosystems through the establishment of forest wide direction as well as desired conditions on the ground that foster native species. All management areas in the 2006 Forest Plan allow for the treatment of non-native invasive species. The Plan emphasizes reduction and control of non-native invasive species, but it does not make any decisions on site-specific treatments.

Provide outdoor recreation opportunities

As outlined elsewhere in this Record of Decision, the 2006 Forest Plan places high emphasis on recreational use of the Monongahela National Forest. Specifically, it provides direction needed to manage uses of recreation motor vehicles; and expands the lands allocated to the Backcountry Recreation management area on the Forest.

Help meet energy resource needs

As discussed elsewhere in this Record of Decision, the 2006 Forest Plan allows for the development of energy resources on the Monongahela National Forest.

Improve watershed conditions

The 2006 Forest Plan employs a proactive approach to the management of watersheds and riparian areas. This work is being done collaboratively with other federal, state and local agencies as well as non-governmental groups and organizations to restore healthy streams to eastern West Virginia.

Mission-related work in addition to that which supports agency goals

This goal deals mostly with processes. While the 2006 Forest Plan specifically focuses on desired conditions and objectives, and not the processes to achieve them, we will improve our productivity and efficiency as we implement the 2006 Forest Plan.

Energy Policy Act of 2005

I find the 2006 Forest Plan is consistent with the Energy Policy Act of 2005. This Act makes it clear that domestic energy production from both renewable and nonrenewable sources is a national priority.

Healthy Forest Restoration Act

I find the 2006 Forest Plan is consistent with the Healthy Forest Restoration Act in that it provides for the protection of old growth when conducting covered projects, provides for public involvement in assessing and conducting hazardous fuels reduction projects, and prioritizes areas for hazardous fuels reduction based on condition class and fire regime. The 2006 Forest Plan also emphasizes protection and enhancement of riparian areas and watershed resources, as directed under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act.

Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898)

Executive Order 12898 (59 Federal Register 7629, 1994) directs federal agencies to identify and address, as appropriate, any disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects on minority populations and low-income populations. I have determined, from the analysis disclosed in the Final Environmental Impact Statement, that the 2006 Forest Plan is in compliance with Executive Order 12898. My conclusion, based upon the analysis in the FEIS, is that the risk of disproportionate effects on minority or low-income populations resulting from the programmatic 2006 Forest Plan is very low.

National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA)

The 2006 Forest Plan is a programmatic action and does not authorize any site-specific activity. Projects undertaken in response to direction in the 2006 Forest Plan will fully comply with the laws and regulations that ensure protection of cultural resources. The 2006 Forest Plan contains direction for cultural resource management, including direction to integrate cultural resource management with other resource management activities. Since the 2006 Forest Plan does not authorize ground-disturbing activities, consultation with the West Virginia State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPO) under the National Historic Preservation Act is not required. It is my determination that the 2006

Forest Plan complies with the National Historic Preservation Act and other statutes that pertain to the protection of cultural resources.

Migratory Bird Treaty Act and Executive Order 13186

The 2006 Forest Plan is a programmatic framework guiding future decision-making and is permissive in nature. As such, it does not authorize, fund, or implement any site-specific activity. The 2006 Forest Plan focuses on enhancing ecological health and plant and animal community diversity to the benefit of wildlife species, including migratory birds. The management direction in the 2006 Forest Plan is in compliance with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and was developed with full consideration of the broad objectives and intent of Executive Order 13186.

Data Quality Act

The Data Quality Act and its federal guidelines concern the quality of information used in the work of federal agencies. The 2006 Forest Plan and its accompanying EIS were developed by an interdisciplinary team of agency scientists and resource specialists using the best available scientific information. Data quality was a paramount concern, as the objectivity and quality of scientific data is key to development of a realistic resource plan. The interdisciplinary team was aware of the USDA information guidelines and devoted considerable effort toward ensuring that the information used in plan development was credible and appropriate for the context. Scientific information was solicited from other federal agencies, State resource agencies, and other recognized experts and scientists. Although the USDA Data Quality Act guidelines are not intended to be legally binding regulations, they were carefully considered during development of the 2006 Forest Plan and FEIS.

USDA Forest Service Travel Management Rule

The Travel Management Rule (70 Federal Register 68264), dated November 9, 2005 (36 CFR Parts 212, 251, 261, and 295) revised regulations regarding travel management on National Forest System lands to clarify policy related to motor vehicle use including off-highway vehicles. This rule prohibits the use of motor vehicles off the designated system or use inconsistent with those designations once designations are published. Any new trail designation will occur subsequent to this decision. Further site-specific analysis will be required, as appropriate, when changing the transportation system in designating those roads, trails and areas open to motorized uses.

State Petitions for Inventoried Roadless Area Management Rule

The Forest completed a Roadless Area Inventory for plan revision, following direction in the Forest Service Handbook 1909.12. All Inventoried Roadless Areas have been assigned Management Prescriptions that will maintain their roadless character and wilderness potential. The Governor of West Virginia has indicated in his comment letter on the Proposed Plan that he does not intend to pursue the petitioning process at this time.

Other Laws, Policy, and Regulations

I also find that the Final Environmental Impact Statement and the 2006 Forest Plan are consistent with the following body of policy and regulation: the National Energy Policy (Executive Order 13212); the Transportation Rule and Policy; the Clean Air Act; the Clean Water Act; the Energy Requirement and Conservation Potential; Executive Order 13112 on Invasive Species; Secretary of Agriculture's Memorandum #1827 on Prime Farmland, Rangeland and Forestland; Executive Order 1099 on the

Protection of Wetlands and Floodplains; Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976; and the existing body of national direction for managing National Forests.

Implementation, Monitoring, and Evaluation

Implementation Begins in 30 Days

The 2006 Forest Plan becomes effective 30 calendar days after the Notice of Availability of the Record of Decision and Final Environmental Impact Statement is published in the Federal Register (36 CFR 219.10 (c)(1), 1982 planning rule.)

Transition from the 1986 Plan to the 2006 Forest Plan

The 2006 Forest Plan direction will apply to all projects that have decisions made on or after the effective date of this Record of Decision. Because this was a revision of the 1986 Monongahela National Forest Plan, many aspects of the 1986 and 2006 Forest Plans are similar. However, there may be existing or ongoing projects that are not consistent with the 2006 Plan.

The National Forest Management Act requires that "permits, contracts and other instruments for use and occupancy" of National Forest System lands be "consistent" with the Forest Plan (16 U.S.C. 1604(i)). In the context of plan revision, the National Forest Management Act specifically conditions this requirement in three ways:

1. These documents must be revised only "when necessary;"
2. These documents must be revised as "soon as practicable;"
3. Any revisions are "subject to valid existing rights."

As the decision maker, I have the discretion, on a case-by-case basis, to modify pre-existing authorizations to bring them into compliance with the 2006 Forest Plan standards and guidelines. I find that the statutory criteria of "as soon as practicable" and excepting "valid existing rights" useful in exercising that discretion.

I have decided not to modify any existing timber sale contracts solely due to the 2006 Forest Plan. These contracts will be executed according to their terms, and the potential effects of these actions have been analyzed and disclosed appropriately under the NEPA. Existing timber contracts, in most cases, will be completed within three years.

The Forest will undertake, prior to on-the-ground implementation, analysis of existing vegetation management decisions currently not under contract to ensure that they are consistent with the 2006 Forest Plan. We will identify those actions, if any, that are inconsistent with the Revised Plan and make appropriate adjustments as per NFMA Section 1604(I).

Other uses and occupancy agreements may be substantially longer than timber contracts. These uses and occupancy agreements will be reviewed to determine whether or when the Forest Supervisor should exercise discretion to bring them into compliance with the 2006 Forest Plan. Recent project decisions that have not yet been implemented will be reviewed and adjusted by the decision maker, if necessary, to be consistent with in the 2006 Forest Plan.

Key Considerations in Plan Implementation

The 2006 Forest Plan provides broad, strategic, landscape-level direction for managing the Monongahela National Forest. Working toward the desired conditions and achieving the objectives in the 2006 Forest Plan will be accomplished through site-specific project decisions, using the appropriate analyses and processes to meet the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act and other laws and regulations. The 2006 Forest Plan itself makes no project-level decisions.

The FEIS for the 2006 Forest Plan considered and evaluated the overall management direction that likely would be necessary to implement the 2006 Forest Plan. It also dealt with those issues and concerns relevant at a programmatic or Forest-wide level.

By tiering to the FEIS (40 CFR 1502.20, 1508.28), we will make appropriate use of the programmatic FEIS to streamline and focus our environmental analysis for project-level decisions. At the site-specific level of analysis, we will not revisit landscape or Forest-wide scale issues and effects because those effects have already been considered and disclosed in the FEIS. This has applicability to a wide range of findings that are appropriately done at the Forest-wide level. Analysis and findings related to threatened or endangered species should be greatly simplified when projects are within the parameters of the 2006 Forest Plan and the FEIS.

Development of future site-specific projects and actions consistent with the 2006 Forest Plan is a dynamic process that depends on many factors. The 2006 Plan contains information concerning proposed management techniques and projected outputs. The projected outputs shown in the FEIS and 2006 Forest Plan are a forecast of what may occur over the lifetime of this Plan. However, actual project development will depend on demand for products and uses, available funding, natural events such as fire or windstorm, and other factors. There is no certainty that the projected outputs will actually occur at the estimated levels.

Oil and Gas Leasing

Subsequent to this decision, leasing may occur periodically when parcels with federally owned oil and gas rights are nominated to the BLM Eastern States Office. The BLM Eastern States Office will then forward the nominated parcel(s) to the Forest Service Regional Office for processing. Each parcel is subject to the following [36 CFR 228.102(e)]:

- Verifying that oil and gas leasing of that parcel has been adequately addressed in a NEPA document and is consistent with the Monongahela National Forest LRMP.
- Ensuring that conditions of surface occupancy identified in the Monongahela National Forest LRMP are properly included as stipulations in resulting leases.
- Determining that operations and development could be allowed somewhere on each proposed lease, except where stipulations will prohibit all surface occupancy.

The Forest will ensure that appropriate NEPA compliance exists before nominated parcels are forwarded to BLM with final Forest Service consent to leasing.

After the Forest Service has provided BLM confirmation that the above three conditions have been met for each parcel and consented to leasing the parcel(s), the BLM may include the parcel(s) in a sale notice and sell the parcel(s) in a competitive oral auction [43 CPR Subpart 3120]. Sale and issuance of a lease is a Department of the Interior action subject to DOI-Bureau of Land Management protests and appeal procedures.

Site-specific analysis in compliance with NEPA and other federal law and regulations is required prior to approving ground-disturbing activities, such as the Forest Service's approval of a permit to drill at a specific location.

Future Changes to the Plan

Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring is designed to answer questions regarding application of programmatic direction in site-specific decisions. Monitoring and evaluation will tightly focus on accomplishment of the Goals and Objectives in the Forest Plan and whether there is a need for change in the plan.

Evaluation reports will document progress toward accomplishment of goals and objectives, how effective the implementation has proved to be in accomplishing desired outcomes, and what we have learned along the way. This evaluation will allow a check and review of the validity of the assumptions upon which this decision is based.

The monitoring strategy in Chapter IV ties well with the strategic nature of Forest Plans. This monitoring strategy has four key monitoring components. The first component is the direction provided in Chapter IV of the 2006 Forest Plan. The remaining three are implementation tools to ensure a common approach in monitoring Forest Plan direction.

1) The overall strategy as described in Chapter IV of the Plan.
2) A monitoring implementation guide that is not part of the plan, but will include details about how monitoring will be accomplished.
3) An Annual Monitoring Plan that outlines annual, specific tasks for the current year.
4) Annual Monitoring and Evaluation reviews, and Comprehensive Evaluations conducted every 5 years will provide a forum to review current year and longer-term findings and identify specific modification if necessary.

Another important part of our adaptive management approach will be to establish an environmental management system (EMS) for the Forest. This is required by the 2005 planning rule (36 CFR 219.5). The EMS for the Monongahela National Forest will focus on monitoring, improving performance, and reducing environmental effects for some selected significant aspects of our management under the 2006 Plan. The EMS will complement the overall monitoring and evaluation strategy for the Forest.

Amending the Forest Plan and Adaptive Management

This revision of the Forest Plan is shaped by a central idea: how we manage the Forest should adapt to changes in how we understand the ecological, social, and economic environments. In the Forest Service, we call this adaptive management. The 2006 Forest Plan is well structured for adaptive management to occur because it does a good job of describing the desired conditions toward which we will strive as we implement the Plan. In fact, those desired conditions will be the very basis for the projects we will accomplish during the life of the Plan.

In making the decision on the 2006 Forest Plan, I am also deciding that this plan will be adaptive and subject to change as we monitor, learn, and gain new information. The revision of the Monongahela National Forest Plan has incorporated much that has been learned since the 1986 Plan and as the 2006 Forest Plan was developed. However, this Plan can still be improved as we learn more about ecosystem functions and processes. This Plan is not cast in stone to be unquestioningly adhered to for the next 15 years. We will track progress toward reaching the desired conditions identified in the

Plan, and modify management actions when needed, depending on the results of our actions or new information. If a particular management strategy, technique, or practice is applied, its results will be monitored to see if the desired effect is occurring, and if not, a modified or new strategy will be developed and implemented. That new strategy will also be subject to monitoring, evaluation, and, if needed, change.

Changes to the Plan will generally take the form of plan amendments or corrections and will follow the appropriate procedures specified in the National Forest Management Act and its implementing regulations.

The Forest Supervisor will determine whether changes to the Forest Plan require an amendment or can be made through an administrative correction. The correction of simple errors may take the form of an errata statement.

Administrative Appeal of My Decision

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to the provisions of 36 CFR 217.3. A written notice of appeal must be filed with the Chief of the Forest Service within 90 days of the date that legal notice of this decision appears in the Milwaukee Journal.

Regular Mail:
USDA Forest Service
Ecosystem Management Coordination
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Mailstop Code 1104
Washington, DC 20250-1104

Express Mail:
USDA Forest Service
Ecosystem Management Coordination
201 14th Street, SW
3rd Floor, Central Wing
Washington, DC 20024
Phone: (202) 205-0895

Electronic Mail: Appeals may also be filed via e-mail to: appeals-chief@fs.fed.us. The use of Microsoft Word (.doc), WordPerfect (.wpd) or Adobe (.pdf) is recommended.

A copy of the appeal must simultaneously be sent to the deciding officer:

Regional Forester of the Eastern Region
USDA Forest Service
Eastern Region
626 East Wisconsin Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53202

Simultaneous electronic filing to the deciding officer should be sent to: appeals-eastern-regional-office@fs.fed.us.

Any notice of appeal must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 217.9 and include at a minimum:

- A statement that the document is a Notice of Appeal filed pursuant to 36 CFR Part 217.
- The name, address, and telephone number of the appellant.
- Identification of the decision to which the objection is being made.
- Identification of the document in which the decision is contained, by title and subject.
- Date of the decision and name of and title of the Deciding Officer.

Contacts

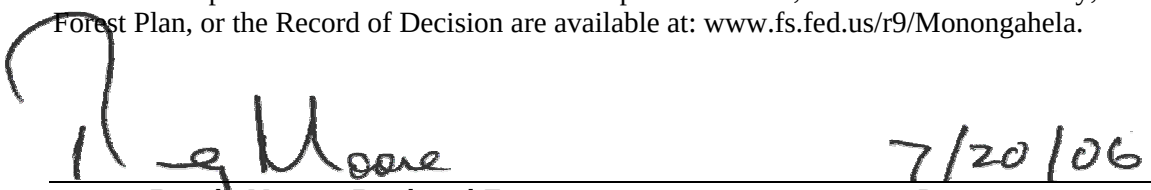
More information on this decision, the 2006 Monongahela National Forest Land and Resource Plan, and / or the Final Environmental Impact Statement can be obtained by contacting:

Clyde N. Thompson Forest Supervisor (304) 636-1800	or	Michele Jones Ecosystem Group Leader (304) 636-1800	or	David Ede Forest Planner (304) 636-1800

at

Monongahela National Forest
200 Sycamore Street
Elkins, WV 26241

Electronic copies of the Final Environmental Impact Statement, the Executive Summary, the 2006 Forest Plan, or the Record of Decision are available at: www.fs.fed.us/r9/Monongahela.



Randy Moore, Regional Forester **Date**