



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Flathead
National
Forest

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File Code: 1950-3

Date: December 22, 2003

Dear Interested Individual,

The intent of this letter is to provide clarification regarding the Flathead Forest Plan Amendment 24 for Motorized Winter Recreation. The Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for that project was released on December 12, 2003. The cover letter stated that the Record of Decision would not be approved for at least 30 days following release of the Final EIS. I have received several questions regarding this 30-day period, and feel it is appropriate to clarify this situation.

Federal regulations require that a 30-day period occur between release of a Final EIS and approval of a Record of Decision to provide the public with an opportunity to influence the decision, with an exception for agencies that have an administrative appeal period. The Forest Service is such an agency. Typically, release of a Final EIS and approval of a Record of Decision occur simultaneously on Forest Service projects.

I had the option of issuing a Final EIS and Record of Decision at the same time for the Amendment 24 Motorized Winter Recreation project. However, I wanted to provide the public with one more opportunity to review the information in the Final EIS before I make my final decision. It is important to understand that the time between the Final EIS and approval of the Record of Decision is not a formal comment period, such as those that are required by law or regulation during scoping and release of the Draft EIS. Rather, it is simply a notification that a Final EIS has been prepared and the agency is preparing to make a final decision. For Amendment 24, the period between the Final EIS and approval of the Record of Decision will be at least 30 days, and probably longer. We are currently consulting with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the project, and anticipate that process will take longer than the 30-day notification period. I cannot make a final decision until the Fish and Wildlife Service issue a Biological Opinion on the project.

I will accept and consider any comments that I receive up to the day that I sign the Record of Decision. However, there is no formal comment period, and there will be no formal written response to comments received at this phase of the process.

I also want to clarify a misperception that appears in the Final EIS. In several instances the Final EIS stated in several places that all parties to the settlement agreement supported Alternative 6 (reference FEIS pages 2-17; and Response to Comments #46 and 55 in Appendix 4, pages 4-8 and 4-9). It has come to light that this needs further clarification. All parties to the settlement

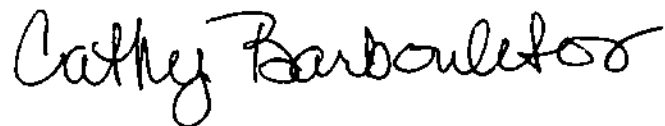
Chapter



agreement supported minor changes to boundaries that are reflected in Alternative 6, but were unable to come to agreement on spring closure dates. Please consider this to be a correction of the information presented in the referenced pages of the Final EIS.

If you have further questions or comments regarding Amendment 24, you can send them to Kim Smolt, Project Team Leader at the above address, or call Kim at (406) 758-5332.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cathy Barbouletos". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "C".

CATHY BARBOULETOS
Forest Supervisor