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Authors

Davis, Dan

Gray, Mary E.

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INNOVATIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT TO IMPROVE WILDLIFE PASSAGE

Dan Davis, Forest Wildlife Biologist, Clearwater National Forest,
12730 Hwy 12 Orofino, Idaho 83544, phone: 208-476-8353,
Fax: 208-476-8329, Email: ddavis@fs.fed.us

Mary E. Gray, Environment/Right of Way Program Manager, Federal
Highway Administration, 3050 Lakeharbor Lane Suite 126,
Boise, Idaho 83702, Phone: 208-334-9180 x123,
Fax: 208-334-1691, Email: Mary.gray@fhwa.dot.gov

Abstract

U. S. Highway 12 is a major highway located in North Central Idaho. It bisects a primitive, remote area of the Clearwater National Forest and is adjacent to the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. Habitat in this area supports a wide variety of species including fisher, bobcat, cougar, wolverine, elk, moose, deer, as well as gray wolf and lynx, which are endangered. At least five major highway improvement or enhancement projects are planned over the next two years. These projects include the construction of a year-round rest area with a National Forest Visitor Center and two miles of passing lane construction near Lolo Pass. These projects will have an impact on wildlife and habitat especially the species listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) the lynx and the gray wolf.

During the process of ESA Section 7 consultation, it was determined that there was insufficient site-specific information available to meet the objectives, standards, and guidelines described in the Lynx Conservation Strategy and Assessment or to make specific recommendations for project mitigation and conservation measures. Therefore, only a jeopardy call could be made which would have resulted in the visitor center and the passing lane projects not being built.

An interagency decision and agreement was made to proceed with project implementation using a unique adaptive management approach where site-specific on-the-ground wildlife data would be collected over a five-year period assessing project impacts and affects. As a result the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was able to reach a may effect not likely to adversely effect determination. This is the only example that we know of where a project was allowed to go ahead in this manner.

Science based mitigation measures will be recommended and implemented when appropriate. The project is a unique partnership between a variety of State and Federal Agencies. This presentation wills describes the process that developed the interagency agreement, the specific wildlife data that will be collected, and how these data will be used to develop site-specific mitigation and conservation measures.