

AESO/SE  
2-21-98-F-286

March 22, 2001

Mr. John McGee, Forest Supervisor  
Coronado National Forest  
Federal Building, 6A  
300 West Congress Street  
Tucson, Arizona 85701

Dear Mr. McGee:

This document transmits the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) Amendment Number One (1) to the original biological opinion (BO) (2-21-98-F-286) on the Johnson Peak Fire Management Plan and its effects on the endangered Yaqui chub (*Gila purpurea*) and the threatened Mexican spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis lucida*) (MSO) in accordance with section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (the Act) of 1973, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*). Your July 21, 2000, letter outlining project modifications and effects to listed species was received in our office July 24, 2000. The project is proposed for public lands administered by the Coronado National Forest, Douglas Ranger District, in the Chiricahua Mountains, in Cochise County, Arizona.

Critical habitat designated for the Yaqui chub is "all aquatic habitat on the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge." The proposed action does not occur adjacent to, nor would it affect critical habitat for the Yaqui chub. Because critical habitat for the MSO has not been designated for the Coronado National Forest, conferencing or consultation is not required for this species.

The Forest Service proposes five revisions to the burning prescription and project actions from the original BO. The revisions are the result of the Forest Service's analysis and evaluation from the 250 acre prescribed fire (PF) operations conducted in January 1999 and 2000. Fire behavior was within anticipated parameters, but the fuel reduction objective was not met by the burning prescription and fuel moisture ratings because of their conservative levels. The (first) conservative levels were agreed upon during intra-agency negotiations as a first-entry burning prescription range in the original BO. The Forest Service has computed the expenses and projected a future cost of pre- and post-MSO occupancy and microhabitat monitoring at \$45,000 to burn 250 acres in burn block 1 in compliance with the original BO. A total of 6,000 acres are planned for treatment.

First, instead of treating one burn block at a time, the Forest Service proposes to conduct PF operations across some of the ridge tops simultaneously in the planning area. This will allow for

portions of more than one burn block to be treated at one time and the burn will more closely follow the natural landscape topography. There will not be multiple ignitions; instead, the fire will be closely monitored as it follows the natural topography across the ridge tops. The total number of acres burned in any one PF operation will not change; only the burning path will be altered to improve cost-effectiveness and a natural pattern of burning. No additional acres (other than originally described in the original BO) are planned for treatment in the West Turkey Creek watershed.

Second, instead of conducting PF operations between December and the end of February, the Forest Service proposes to conduct PF operations between October and the end of March, annually, for the life of the plan.

Third, the Forest Service proposes to adjust the original PF fuel moisture rating ranges for all hour fuel categories downwards. The category of highest concern, the 1,000 hour dead fuel moisture rating, was originally set high enough to “retain nearly all” such fuels. Because of the current heavy fuel load in this category, the Forest Service proposes to reduce 1,000 hour fuels between 5 to 40 percent. This will still leave a dead and down wood component more closely aligned to that as described in the MSO Recovery Plan regarding optimal MSO habitat, yet aid in protection of MSO PACs from catastrophic fire events. Further details for the other fuel moisture ratings are clearly described in the revision letter from the Forest Service and are insignificant in scope.

Fourth, instead of conducting MSO pre- and post-monitoring across the entire planning area (6,000 acres), the Forest Service proposes to extrapolate current MSO occupancy data and microhabitat plot data (from the first treatment of 250 acres) to burn blocks 1, 2, and 3. This will be possible because the aspects, slopes, topography, and geology closely match the first treatment area (of 250 acres), and makes the assumption any known and unknown MSO PACs are or will be occupied at any given time.

Fifth, instead of a continuous on-site presence of a qualified Prescribed Burn Monitor at all times all fire operations are being conducted, the Forest Service proposes that such personnel be on-site for initial PF ignitions, and be allowed to leave the site if operations show normal and typical fire behaviors within prescriptions. A qualified monitor would be immediately notified if fire behavior or operations changed, and would quickly return to the site for further evaluation. For longer-term (ten days or longer) operations, a qualified monitor would visit the site of operations on a regular basis for fire behavior and evaluation.

The Forest Service anticipates no change in effects to the Yaqui chub or the MSO due to these proposed modifications to the original BO. It is the Service’s biological opinion that the proposed modifications, as described, will not jeopardize the continued existence of the Yaqui chub or the MSO. All other provisions in the original BO remain in effect.

Mr. John McGee

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The Service appreciates your efforts on behalf of listed species and the public lands they inhabit. Please call Thetis Gamberg (520) 670-4619 or Sherry Barrett (520) 670-4617 with any concerns or questions.

Sincerely,

/s/ David L. Harlow  
Field Supervisor

cc: Regional Director, Fish and Wildlife Service, Albuquerque, NM (ARD-ES)  
Field Supervisor, Fish and Wildlife Service, Albuquerque, NM

Terry Johnson, Nongame Branch, Arizona Game and Fish Department, Phoenix, AZ

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