

Fruit Growers Supply Company Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) Publication

Questions and Answers

June 21, 2012

Q: What are the purposes and goals of this Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP)?

A: The purpose of the Fruit Growers Supply Company (FGS) HCP is to enable the applicant to continue to operate its commercial timberlands on a long-term basis while complying with the ESA and provide conservation measures as minimization and mitigation for the incidental take of covered species. The goals of the FGS HCP are to protect and improve the habitats used by various species covered by the proposed conservation plan, and to establish guidelines that would allow the company to continue timber harvests and other forest management activities on their privately owned land.

Q: What species would be covered by the FGS HCP?

A: FGS has applied for Incidental Take Permits (ITPs) for the federally threatened northern spotted owl and Southern Oregon/Northern California Coast (SONCC) coho salmon. The company has requested that the Upper Klamath and Trinity Rivers Chinook salmon and the Klamath Mountains Province (KMP) steelhead be listed as Covered Species in the aquatic ITP in the event these species become listed in the future. Additionally, even though take will not be authorized, FGS has requested that Yreka phlox be included in the terrestrial ITP.

Q: How much land will be covered under the FGS HCP?

A: The FGS HCP applies to 152,178 acres of commercial timberland in Siskiyou County, California, and spans three management units: Klamath River (65,340 acres), Scott Valley (39,153 acres), and Grass Lake (47,685 acres).

Q: Are any FGS lands covered under the HCP within designated critical habitat for the northern spotted owl?

A: No, neither the currently designated (2008) critical habitat nor the 2012 proposed revised critical habitat for the northern spotted owl include FGS lands.

Q: What is the anticipated impact of the FGS HCP on the covered species?

A:
Northern spotted owl:
FGS has requested authorization of incidental take of up to 83 northern spotted owls under the terrestrial ITP for the 50-year permit term. However, the Service's evaluation of the likelihood of occupancy and take for its biological opinion determined that take of up to 61 northern spotted owls is more likely to occur over the 50-year permit term. Actual take is likely to be substantially lower because many historic owl sites may not be currently occupied and several sites are not likely to support owls now or in the future. This estimated level of incidental take represents a less than one percent reduction in owl sites range-wide and is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence or impede recovery of the northern spotted owl across its range.

The FGS property is in an area with checkerboard land ownership, where Federal lands constitute about 60 percent of the area and support the vast majority of owl sites with high quality habitat. In contrast, the FGS ownership contains relatively poor habitat for spotted owls due to repeated timber harvest entries into owl home ranges. This reduces the relative impact of the taking on survival and recovery of the species at the regional and provincial levels because the majority of sites where take is likely to occur exhibit poor habitat quality and low occupancy rates.

Yreka phlox:

Since take will not be authorized for the Yreka phlox, the FGS HCP conservation measures are not expected to result in negative impacts to this species.

Aquatic species:

Take of species under the aquatic ITP is likely to result from activities that harm salmonid habitat. For example, road building can result in landslides that deliver excessive amounts of sediment to streams that support salmonid spawning and rearing. When streams receive excessive sediment, they can become less functional for these purposes. Harvesting of trees near streams can also reduce the availability of large woody debris (LWD); LWD is important in the development of deeper pools in streams, and these pools provide cool water temperatures during the warm summer, as well as provide cover from predators. The FGS HCP incorporates proactive management strategies, such as a comprehensive road management plan, that is expected to result in improved stream conditions over time. NMFS has concluded that implementation of the HCP is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of SONCC coho salmon, Klamath and Trinity Rivers Chinook salmon, or KMP steelhead, nor result in the destruction or adverse modification of SONCC coho critical habitat. Critical habitat has not been designated for Klamath and Trinity Rivers Chinook salmon or KMP steelhead because these species are not currently listed under the federal ESA.

Q: What is the anticipated impact of the FGS HCP on fisher?

A: The USFWS conducted a rigorous evaluation of potential effects of the FGS HCP on fisher habitat and modeled fisher populations. The USFWS used a landscape-scale habitat suitability model for fisher to determine that the FGS HCP is expected to result in a small increase in habitat and modeled fisher populations within the HCP Plan Area and California Klamath region. However, at a finer scale, timber harvest activities at northern spotted owl take sites are anticipated to reduce habitat suitability for fishers. Please see the model summary (attachment to the FEIS) for more information.

Q: What conservation measures will be taken by FGS to protect spotted owls and other species under the HCP?

A:
Northern spotted owl:
FGS will maintain Conservation Support Areas (CSAs) on its ownership throughout the permit term to support 24 high-quality owl sites associated with Critical Habitat Units (CHUs). FGS will adhere to habitat commitments for each CSA in addition to maintaining or creating general habitat conditions and features associated with owl habitat at the landscape scale. Selected nesting/roosting and foraging habitat in these areas will be maintained, and strategic locations with the potential to grow into suitable habitat will be managed to promote use by northern spotted owls. The HCP is expected to contribute to a general trend of increased quality and quantity of northern spotted owl dispersal and foraging habitat and a decrease in clearcutting and other even-aged management practices across the FGS ownership over the term of the ITP. The FGS HCP conservation strategy is more protective than existing regulatory mechanisms because it would require retention of a greater quantity and higher quality habitat within the home ranges of mitigation sites, and would ensure that habitat would be conserved regardless of occupancy.

In addition to these habitat commitments, the HCP's Terrestrial Conservation Strategy contains provisions to avoid direct take of northern spotted owls resulting from authorized timber harvesting operations through a combination of seasonal timing restrictions on harvest activities, pre-harvest surveys, and on-site monitoring. The HCP will also help manage known threats to the northern spotted owl by reducing the potential for catastrophic wildfire on the FGS ownership by implementing stocking control and fuel management measures within the CSAs.

Yreka phlox:

The HCP's Terrestrial Conservation Strategy contains provisions to avoid direct or indirect adverse effects to discovered populations of Yreka phlox resulting from timber harvesting operations. The HCP will also contribute to the conservation and recovery of the Yreka phlox by development and implementation of a monitoring program for populations of Yreka phlox on FGS lands that will provide information on species status, distribution, and threats to the populations in the Plan Area.

Aquatic species:

The FGS HCP will improve current management practices for the protection of salmonid habitat by implementing a comprehensive road management plan for the next 15 years that will target the remediation of potential sediment source sites (i.e., failing culverts) to prioritize the protection of nearby salmonid streams. Additionally, the HCP will require careful evaluation of potentially unstable areas by professional geologists prior to timber harvest activities that may increase the instability risk of the site. Other important conservation measures include restrictive requirements for the harvesting of trees within wide streamside "buffer zones" to protect potential LWD trees, and protect shade-producing trees that help to maintain cool temperatures within important stream zones.

Q: How does the FGS HCP contribute to the Recovery Plan for the northern spotted owl?

A: The "Revised Recovery Plan for Northern Spotted Owl" (USFWS 2011) emphasizes recovery on Federal lands with potential support from HCPs on adjacent private timberlands. Recovery Action 10 focuses on retention of high quality habitat and long-term occupancy and reproduction at spotted owl sites in order to bolster demographic rates in the larger landscape. Consistent with this Recovery Plan objective, FGS will maintain Conservation Support Areas (CSAs) on its ownership throughout the permit term to support 24 high-quality activity centers associated with Critical Habitat Units (CHUs) as mitigation for incidental take of lower quality owl sites.

Q: What will the Services do in the event of unforeseen circumstances that may jeopardize the species?

A: The Services will use their authority to manage any unforeseen circumstances that may arise to ensure that species are not jeopardized as a result of approved HCPs. In the rare event that jeopardy to the species cannot be avoided, the Services may be required to revoke the ITPs.

Q: Is there a monitoring program?

A: The FGS HCP monitoring program includes compliance monitoring of CSAs with proposed timber operations to ensure the habitat commitments are met. FGS will also conduct inventories at 10-year intervals to monitor the expected increase in spotted owl foraging and dispersal habitat. Compliance monitoring for the incidental take avoidance and minimization objective consists of documenting that pre-harvest surveys have been conducted, seasonal restrictions have been implemented as necessary, and personnel have been trained.

Monitoring the effectiveness of the northern spotted owl conservation measures is necessary to evaluate whether the biological goals and objectives of the HCP are being met, and whether the effects of HCP implementation on species and their habitats are exceeding the levels anticipated by the USFWS and if necessary make changes to the strategy in order to meet the biological goals and objectives of the HCP. Surveys will also be conducted to monitor northern spotted owl occupancy and reproductive status.

The HCP also includes an extensive aquatic monitoring program to ensure that HCP requirements are being complied with for the protection and enhancement of salmonid habitat, as well as document the effectiveness of HCP measures at achieving long-term biological goals, such as improvements in stream habitat.

Q: What happens if more owls are taken than anticipated?

A: A major amendment would be required if FGS were to request take coverage for additional owls during the permit term. Other examples that would require a major amendment include: changes that affect the scope of the HCP and conservation strategy, listing under the ESA of a new species within the Plan Area that is not an HCP covered species but may be affected by HCP covered activities, changes in the Plan Area through acquisition or sale of properties that exceed 10 percent of the initial Plan Area, or extending the term of the ITPs beyond 50 years.

Q: What happens if a species not covered by the HCP is listed during the permit term?

A: If a species that is not a covered species under the HCP is listed under the ESA during the permit term, the ITPs will be reevaluated by the Services. The HCP covered activities would be modified to ensure that the activities are not likely to jeopardize or result in the take of non-covered species. FGS would continue to implement such modifications until the company applies for and the Services approve an amendment of the ITPs to cover the non-covered species.

Q: When will incidental take permits be issued to FGS?

A: The decision on issuance of the ITPs will not be made for at least 45 days after publication of the Federal Register notice for the FEIS. The Services will accept comments during the 45-day waiting period and summarize these comments, if there are any, in the Record of Decision (ROD), but will not formally respond to comments.

Q: How can I find more information and provide comments?

A: A copy of the FEIS and accompanying documents can be viewed on the Web at <http://swr.nmfs.noaa.gov/nepa.html>, or at <http://www.fws.gov/yreka>. Correspondence related to the FEIS and associated documents, as well as requests for additional information, should be addressed to Lisa Roberts, NMFS, 1655 Heindon Rd., Arcata, Calif., 95521. Correspondence may also be sent by fax to (707) 825-4840 or by e-mail to SWR.NCO.FGSHCP@noaa.gov.

- For more information on HCPs in general, please check out our fact sheet: <http://www.fws.gov/endangered/esa-library/pdf/hcp.pdf>