



Decision Memo

Caples Ecological Restoration Project

**USDA Forest Service
Eldorado National Forest
Amador Ranger District and Placerville Ranger District
El Dorado County and Alpine County, California**

Background

The Caples Creek 6th field watershed is located 30 miles east of Placerville, California and encompasses portions of Alpine, Amador and El Dorado counties. It is more than 20,000 acres in size and primarily managed by the Eldorado National Forest (ENF). The watershed elevation ranges from approximately 5,800 feet in elevation to 10,080 feet at the highest peak. Across this vast range in elevation there are significant changes in vegetation type, predominantly ranging from Sierran mixed conifer, to red fir and subalpine forests, each interlaced with meadows, lakes and barren rock. This watershed is the primary water supply for more than 110,000 people that rely upon El Dorado Irrigation District for water and provides high quality back country recreation and fisheries in an area recommended for wilderness designation. The ENF identified the Caples Creek watershed as a priority watershed targeted for restorative actions. The three main actions associated with the restoration of the watershed are the gradual reintroduction of fire, management of fire-adapted ecosystems and meadow restoration.

Fire suppression over the past century has increased fuel accumulation and decreased forest health and resilience in the Caples Creek watershed. Departure from historic fire return intervals is greatest in the Caples Creek watershed where mixed conifer is the dominant vegetation type; while the areas dominated by higher elevation conifers (subalpine) is less departed because these areas tend to have a longer time period between fires. Historic (pre-1900) fire return intervals were 11 years in mixed conifer, 40 years in red fir, and 133 years in subalpine forests with generally low to mixed severity. Due to active fire suppression, the area has not experienced any active fire since 1916, despite numerous natural ignitions by lightening that were quickly extinguished.

This lengthening of fire return intervals has led to significant increases in fuel loading, tree density, canopy cover, and snag density as well as shifts in species composition and reduced regeneration particularly of desirable deciduous and hardwood trees and reduced shrub cover. These conditions have greatly increased the risk of high intensity wildfires that could have significant effects on water quality during a post-fire recovery period.

Meadows in the watershed are dominated with healthy riparian vegetation, but several have been heavily impacted by past and present activities such as grazing, fire exclusion, and unauthorized trails. These disturbances have compromised the condition of some aspen stands, meadows and streamside corridors. Aspen is shade intolerant, needs full sunlight for successful establishment and growth, and needs fire to stimulate regeneration through sprouting. Conifer encroachment, fire suppression, and livestock/wildlife browsing have resulted in an overall decline in the health

of these deciduous stands. Multiple locations in the Caples Creek watershed have been identified where aspen are currently declining due to conifer encroachment, shading and competition. Removing competing conifers to maximize sun exposure and reducing the insulating surface fuel layer to stimulate potential for sprouting to create conditions conducive to restoring or expanding these remnant clones of aspen have proven successful on aspen restoration projects elsewhere in California.

Scope of this Decision

The environmental analysis that was conducted by the interdisciplinary team analyzed approximately 8,800 acres of prescribed burning within the Caples Creek watershed, which included approximately 4,400 acres in the lower elevations (western portion of the project area) and 4,400 acres of vegetative island burning in the higher elevations (eastern portion of the project area). Consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for the Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog and Yosemite toad has been completed for most of the project area with the exception of an approximately 2,000-acre area in the eastern portion of the vegetative island burn unit. Therefore, this decision only includes approximately 6,800 acres of the project area. (See attached map)

Consultation with the USFWS on the remaining eastern portion of the project area (approximately 2,000 acres within the vegetative island burn unit) was initiated in November, 2015. This portion of the project area will be addressed in a future NEPA decision upon completion of consultation with the USFWS.

Decision

I have decided to implement prescribed burning, aspen enhancement, and meadow restoration activities within the Caples Creek Watershed on the Amador and Placerville Ranger Districts of the Eldorado National Forest. The Caples Ecological Restoration Project would re-introduce fire back into the landscape to restore a vital ecosystem process in the watershed after nearly a century of fire exclusion. The project is intended to improve forest health and fire resiliency, meadow and aspen ecosystems, and wildlife habitat.

Prescribed burning may occur within approximately 6,800 acres of the Caples Creek watershed using manual and aerial ignition methods. Multiple entries within a 15 year timeframe would be necessary to meet multiple resource objectives and would be prescribed based on monitoring results. Approximately 4,400 acres would be understory burning in the lower elevations. Burning within vegetative islands (separated by barren rock) would be done on approximately 2,400 acres in the higher elevations, red fire and subalpine vegetation types. (See attached map)

In preparation for prescribed burning, perimeter line construction would be needed where roads, trails, or natural barriers are absent. This may involve hand cutting of vegetation including trees up to 9-inches d.b.h., pruning, and scraping a bare soil line. Within the Inventoried Roadless Area (IRA) and Caples Recommended Wilderness area, line construction would be implemented with “light on the land” concepts and restoration would be done, as needed. Line construction with a D-6 or smaller dozer may be used outside the IRA and Caples Recommended Wilderness. Handline construction within the project area may be needed during pile burning, understory burning or to protect certain wildlife habitat structures and forest infrastructure such as bridges, trail markers and “at risk” historic properties.

Where fuel loading would have adverse fire effects, pockets of continuous ladder fuels and dense fuel loading would be hand cut, piled and burned prior to understory prescribed burning.



Measures (such as raking forest litter accumulations) would be taken to protect the largest and oldest trees to the extent practical.

Aspen Restoration

Aspen restoration activities would occur on approximately 25 acres within and surrounding (within 150 feet) existing aspen stands. Conifers less than 9" d.b.h would be felled, while selected conifers 9" to 30" d.b.h. may be girdled to increase sunlight and reduce competition. Conifers selected for felling or girdling would be specific to those that are blocking the sunlight and limiting the recruitment of young sprouts to re-establish multi-layered stands. The falling would be done with chainsaws and handtools. Conifers would be felled and left in place, or limbed and material 8" and below would be piled and burned or lopped and scattered. The larger material, boles primarily, would be left in place to provide woody debris. There would be no removal of timber from the Caples recommended wilderness area as part of this project. If monitoring indicates unacceptable levels of browse on new sprouts, construct temporary fencing around aspen treatment areas as needed to prevent damage to young aspen sprouts from browsing animals. Fencing would use natural colored, non-reflective materials and be located to minimize visual impacts for forest visitors.

Meadow Restoration

Meadow restoration activities would occur on approximately 25 acres (some of which overlaps with aspen stands) within and surrounding existing meadows. Conifers (the majority of which are lodgepole pine) from seedling size to pole size trees up to 9" d.b.h. would be felled, while selected conifers 9" to 30" d.b.h. may be girdled. The falling would be done with chainsaws and handtools. Conifers would be felled and left in place, or limbed and material 8" and below would be lopped and scattered or piled and burned. Pile burning would not occur within the meadow interior. The larger material, boles primarily, would be left in place to provide woody debris.

Reroute approximately a half mile of the existing hiking trail that crosses through Jake Schneider Meadow to the north side of the meadow along the tree line (see map). The old trail would be blocked and disguised to discourage use and allowed to recover naturally.

Design Criteria

Smoke emissions would be minimized by following Best Available Control Measures (BACM). A smoke permit administered by El Dorado County Air Quality Management District would accompany burn plans.

To reduce impact to natural resources during prescribed burn implementation, where possible Minimum Impact Suppression Tactics (MIST) would be followed when determining where and what containment lines are necessary. The intent of MIST is to manage fire with the least impact to natural and cultural resources. Fire fighter safety, fire conditions and good judgment would dictate actions taken. Any adverse impacts or visual impacts near trails would be mitigated after burning.

Prescribed burn prescriptions would attempt to limit high mortality burn patches (greater than 80% dominant and co-dominant conifer of existing or projected mortality resulting from burning) to less than 10 acres.

Wildlife

Understory prescribed burning within American Marten, California Spotted Owl and Northern Goshawk habitat (CWHR 4M, 5M, 4D, and 5D habitat types): prescriptions would be designed

to result in a 5% reduction or less in canopy cover, averaged over the treatment unit. Snags (15" d.b.h. and greater) would not be targeted for active lighting. Prior to ignition, current fuel conditions surrounding trees > 30" d.b.h. would be assessed to determine need for pre-treatment or exclusion from burning. Where mortality of dominant and co-dominant trees greater than 30" d.b.h. is expected to exceed 5% then the habitat would be excluded from burning or measures taken to prevent the mortality by raking around the base of trees and/or cutting and pile burning of latter fuels and/or larger material.

Down logs greater than 30" d.b.h. at the large end will not be intentionally ignited during implementation of prescribed burning. Snags will be retained during preparation for prescribed burning, except where they pose a threat to human safety or perimeter control risk for containment of the prescribed fire.

Where prescribed burning takes place within spotted owl or northern goshawk protected activity center (PAC) boundaries (which may be identified after this decision), an attempt will be made to ascertain nesting status pre-lighting, if the burning is planned for the nesting season that year. Based on nesting status, additional mitigations, such as exclusion of portions of the proposed burn unit or PAC, additional fire lines, or different lighting techniques may be implemented to reduce potential effects to nesting spotted owls or goshawks during the breeding season.

If a nest site is located, additional hand treatments, such as hand line construction, tree pruning, and cutting of small trees (less than 6" d.b.h.), would be conducted within a 1 to 2 acre area surrounding known nest trees, to the extent necessary to protect the nest tree(s) and trees in their immediate vicinity.

The project wildlife biologist would be notified prior to implementation of prescribed burning in the identified CWHR 4M, 5M, 4D, and 5D habitat types, and may be onsite to take part in, and/or monitor prescribed burning and associated effects.

Hydrology and Aquatics

Where used outside of IRA and Recommended Wilderness, ground based equipment or mechanical (dozer) line construction would be excluded within 25 m (82 ft.) of perennial and intermittent streams, meadows, or lakes / ponds within the project area. Perimeter lines will not be constructed in riparian vegetation or through meadows. No riparian vegetation would be cut during project activities.

To minimize direct impacts to Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog (SNYLF), fire crews would avoid lighting piles located within 25 m (82 ft.) of perennial and intermittent streams, meadows, or lakes and ponds (mapped suitable habitat) unless occurring within designated aspen or meadow restoration areas and reviewed by an Aquatics Biologist. Where igniting piles within mapped suitable habitat associated with the aspen and meadow restoration areas, ignite only one side, not to exceed half the circumference of the pile, on the side furthest from the nearest aquatic feature.

During understory prescribed burning, active ignition within meadows or within or immediately adjacent to riparian vegetation would not occur, except if needed to maintain control of the fire. Fire would be allowed to back into meadow and riparian vegetation. To protect existing coarse woody debris (CWD) in upland habitats and large woody debris (LWD) in aquatic habitats, down logs that lie in or across all stream channel types or within 25 m (82 feet) of perennial and intermittent streams would not be intentionally ignited.

Botany

Sensitive plant sites would be flagged for avoidance. Activities that could impact known plant sites (i.e. line construction, piling material, developing helispots, or equipment staging areas including campsites and stock holding areas) would not occur in protected areas.

The project leader or burn boss would notify the project botanist prior to line construction in order to re-flag occurrences. This would clarify occurrence boundaries and ensure that fire lines are not cut through sensitive plant sites.

Pile construction will be avoided in meadows to the extent possible. Fire crews would avoid lighting piles located within meadows in order to protect meadow vegetation.

Active ignition within aspen stands would not occur to limit direct impacts to remnant aspen colonies. The project wildlife biologist and botanist would be notified when burn units containing aspen restoration areas, or immediately adjacent to aspen restoration areas, are treated. Project wildlife biologist and botanist would be onsite to take part in, and/or monitor burning and associated effects to aspen stands if available.

All vehicles and off-road equipment vehicles would be cleaned to insure it is free of soil, seeds, vegetative matter or other debris before entering National Forest System lands to prevent the introduction or spread of invasive plants. Prior to the start of operations, the Forest Service would do a visual inspection for such debris. Equipment would be cleaned prior to moving from weed-infested areas to weed-free areas.

All earth-moving equipment, gravel, fill or other materials would be weed free. Onsite sand, gravel, rock, or organic matter would be used where possible.

Straw or mulch used for erosion control will be certified weed-free. A certificate from the county of origin stating the material was inspected is required.

Any seed used for restoration or erosion control will be from a locally collected source (ENF, Seed, Mulch and Fertilizer Prescription, 2000).

Cultural Resources

Protection measures would be implemented based on the risk to values associated with each class of resources (Klemic, 2015: Cultural Resource Management Report Caples Ecological Restoration Project , R2015050360010). Protection measures are detailed in the Regional PA, Appendix E, Section 2.2, (b)(1)(A-K) and would be established based on consultation with the Fuels personnel when the expected fire behavior, burning conditions and specific locations of ground disturbing activities are determined. The locations of staging areas, including campsites and pack stock holding areas, would be reviewed by the District Archaeologist to ensure historic properties are not adversely affected. Crews constructing hand line around the perimeter of the burn may be accompanied by an archaeologist to recommend mitigations or approve of campsite locations during implementation.

Visuals

Where fuel loading would change the existing natural appearance to visual foreground of the designated trail system, pockets of continuous ladder fuels and dense fuel loading would be hand cut, piled and burned prior to understory prescribed burning to minimize negative scenery impacts. Slash shall be piled no higher than 6' by 8' in the visible foreground and burned within 3 years.

Within 75 feet of the trail system, stumps would be cut to 4 inches in height or less and covered with soil or duff material where practicable.

Environmental Analysis

This action has been categorically excluded from documentation under the Environmental Policy and Procedures Handbook, FSH 1909.15, Section 32.2, category 6, "*Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction*" (36 CFR 220.6(e)(6)). This category is applicable because the purpose of the Caples Creek Ecological Restoration Project is to re-introduce fire through prescribed burning to improve forest health and fire resiliency, aspen and meadow ecosystems, and wildlife habitat within the Caples Creek Watershed.

It has been determined that there are no identified extraordinary circumstances or conditions associated with this project that would have a significant effect on the environment (FSH 1909.15, section 30.3). The following describes the contributing information that led to this conclusion:

- a) *Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species.*

Botany

Summarized from the Biological Evaluation for Plant Species (dated 11/16/15).

There are no known federally threatened or endangered plant species or designated critical habitat within or adjacent to the project area.

There are three known occurrences of Hutchison's Lewisia (*Lewisia kelloggii ssp. Kelloggii*) that occur in open rocky areas at the top of the Caples Creek Watershed. All occurrences will be flagged and avoided during project implementation. Because past surveys cannot positively state the absence of a sensitive plant species, it is possible that the proposed project could affect undetected individuals of *Lewisia kelloggii ssp. hutchisonii* in the project area. Therefore, the proposed project may affect undiscovered individuals, but is not likely to result in a trend toward federal listing or loss of viability for *Lewisia kelloggii ssp. hutchisonii*.

Some suitable habitat for moonwort species (*Botrychium ascendens*, *Botrychium crenulatum*, *Botrychium lunaria*, *Botrychium minganense*, *Botrychium montanum*, *Botrychium paradoxum*, *Botrychium pendunculatum*) and Bolander's bruchia (*Bruchia bolanderi*) occurs in the Caples Watershed Restoration Project area, but no occurrences were not found during past or recent surveys. Because past surveys cannot positively state the absence of a sensitive plant species it is possible that the proposed project could affect undetected individuals in the project area. Therefore, the proposed project may affect undiscovered individuals but is not likely to result in a trend toward Federal listing or loss of viability for the 10 species listed above.

Terrestrial Wildlife Species

Summarized from the Biological Evaluation and Assessment for Terrestrial Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive Wildlife Species (dated 9/21/15).

There are no known federally threatened or endangered terrestrial wildlife species or designated critical habitat within or adjacent to the project area.

There are nine Forest Service sensitive species that occur or have suitable habitat within the project area, including California spotted owl, northern goshawk, great gray owl, willow flycatcher, American marten, pallid bat, Townsend's big-eared bat, fringed myotis, and western bumble bee. It was determined that the proposed project may affect/impact individuals but is not likely to result in a trend toward Federal listing or loss of viability for these nine sensitive species.

California spotted owl – Approximately 5,280 acres of suitable habitat (CWHR 4M, 4D, 5M, 5D, and 6) occurs within the proposed treatment area (prescribed burning). There is one spotted owl Protected Activity Center (PAC), ELD0090 which could be directly affected by the project. Existing past and foreseeable future modification of habitat are not expected to reduce the local spotted owl population. This project would, with the design criteria, retain suitable habitat, both nesting and foraging habitat. Prescribed burning is not expected to have a long term negative effect on habitat capability, based on recent data from Yosemite National Park, and may benefit habitat and prey species for spotted owl in the longer term. Project generated disturbance effects are not likely, reduced by design criteria, and should there be any, are expected to affect individuals, and not affect long term reproduction. The project would be expected to provide protection of existing suitable habitat from stand replacing wildfires, by reducing the size of high mortality patches, and providing for faster suppression of fires should they start, by reducing fire behavior and allowing safer access by fire suppression personnel.

Northern goshawk - Approximately 5,280 acres of suitable habitat (CWHR 4M, 4D, 5M, 5D, and 6) occurs within the proposed treatment area (prescribed burning). There are no known reproductive pairs of goshawks in the project area, and therefore, no PACs have been designated within the project area. Existing past and foreseeable future modification of habitat are not expected to reduce the local goshawk population. This project would, with the design criteria, retain suitable habitat, both nesting and foraging habitat. Project generated disturbance effects are not likely, reduced by design criteria, and should there be any, are expected to affect individuals, and not affect long term reproduction. The project would be expected to provide protection of existing suitable habitat from stand replacing wildfires, by reducing the size of high mortality patches, and providing for faster suppression of fires should they start, by reducing fire behavior and allowing safer access by fire suppression personnel.

Great Gray Owl - The habitat surrounding the meadows in the project area is believed to currently provide the structure necessary for great gray owl to utilize the area. Existing past and foreseeable future modification of habitat are not expected to reduce the local great gray owl population. Prescribed burning is not expected to have a long term negative effect on habitat capability for great gray owl, and the aspen and meadow restoration is expected to improve foraging habitat capability for this species. Project generated disturbance effects are not likely, reduced by design criteria associated with other species, and should there be any, are expected to affect individuals, and not affect long term reproduction. The project would be expected to provide protection of existing suitable habitat from stand replacing wildfires, by reducing the size of high mortality patches, and providing for faster suppression of fires should they start, by reducing fire behavior and allowing safer access by fire suppression personnel.

Willow Flycatcher - Little to no high quality habitat is known to exist within the project area, and where it exists it is expected to be in relatively small discreet areas, with unknown

occupancy. Burning natural fuels through prescribed burning would not be expected to impact habitat for this species, as the areas that would be burned would not overlap this habitat, and it does not readily burn, due to the saturated soils, low flammability vegetation types, and riparian location of the habitat. Meadow and aspen restoration treatments could affect the availability of both foraging habitat, and nesting habitat where it either enlarges areas of existing habitat, or creates some habitat for this species. These increases and/or improvement of habitat are expected to be minimal, and would be unlikely to change either occupancy, numbers, or trend for willow flycatcher.

American Marten – Approximately 5,280 acres of suitable habitat (CWHR 4M, 4D, 5M, 5D, and 6) occurs within the proposed treatment area (prescribed burning). There are no known den sites located within this project for marten. The proposed project would retain habitat suitability for foraging habitat by retaining canopy closure, large tree, snag and down logs, and may provide for improved foraging for marten. Project generated disturbance effects are not likely, and should there be any, are expected to affect individuals, and not reproduction for this species.

Pallid Bat, Townsend's Big-Eared Bat, Fringed Myotis - All three of these species could potentially be found in the project area. All three species commonly roost in caves, buildings, mineshafts, rock crevices and bridges. Pallid bats and fringed myotis are also known to tree roost in large conifers and hardwoods. There are no known mine or cave sites within the project area that would provide suitable roosting habitat in rock crevices, and if present would not be affected by the proposed action. Large conifer trees and snags are present in the project area. Foraging habitat within the project area would be maintained and may be enhanced by opening the forest structure up. Roosting habitat would be, for the most part, maintained with implementation of these alternatives as large trees and snags. This project may result in some level of disturbance to individuals during implementation, but would not be expected to affect local population or species viability.

Western Bumble Bee - No surveys have been conducted for this species within the project area, and if present their numbers are likely low. Western bumble bees are associated with a variety of habitats; they forage on flowering plants and use rodent boroughs for nesting and overwintering. Early seral habitat with flowering plants may provide habitat for both nest/overwintering and foraging, with later seral, high canopy closure habitat expected to provide some boroughs for nesting/wintering, but little foraging opportunities. The project area is a mix of these habitat types, with the meadows and aspen stands providing some of the highest quality foraging habitat. Burning natural fuels through prescribed burning could, based on the timing, affect some foraging habitat, where flowering plants are either reduced or eliminated for a period of time from availability to the bees. The effects on the nesting/wintering boroughs is not known, and would be variable depending on the intensity of the burning, duration, and how near the boroughs. Wholesale burning within the project area would not occur at any one time, and there should be ample other habitat for foraging for this species where burning does impact habitat. Burning will result in, rejuvenation of existing shrub species, and more herbaceous species growth. The longer term effect of burning should increase the availability of flowering plants for foraging, and may increase rodent activities, in response to the herbaceous fire response, and thereby increased nesting/wintering habitat. The aspen and meadow improvement would remove conifers, and increase both aspen regeneration and reclaim meadow edges for the meadows without aspen. These treatments could affect the availability of both foraging habitat, and nesting/wintering

habitat during the year treated, but should increase both flowering plant vigor and the amount of habitat in subsequent years.

Aquatic Wildlife Species

Summarized from the Biological Assessment and Evaluation of Aquatic Species for the Caples Ecological Restoration Project (February 3, 2016). There are no Forest Service sensitive aquatic wildlife species that have the potential to be affected by this project. Two federally listed species have potential habitat within the project area, including Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog (federally endangered) and Yosemite toad (federally threatened). Proposed Critical Habitat for SNYLF also occurs within the project area.

The Eldorado National Forest, along with additional Sierra Nevada National Forests, has consulted programmatically on its vegetation management program activities and its meadow restoration program activities. This Programmatic Consultation resulted in the “Programmatic Biological Opinion on Nine Forest Programs on Nine National Forests in the Sierra Nevada of California for the Endangered Sierra Nevada Yellow-legged Frog, Endangered Northern Distinct Population Segment of the Mountain Yellow-legged Frog, and Threatened Yosemite Toad” dated December 19, 2014. Consultation for the Caples Ecological Restoration Project was initiated with the USFWS June 13, 2014 and completed February 17, 2015 (08ESMF00-2015-F-0129), appending the Caples Ecological Restoration Project to the Programmatic Biological Opinion, dated December 14, 2014.

The USFS’ Biological Assessment (BA) for Actions that Affect the Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog, Northern DPS Mountain yellow-legged frog, and Yosemite toad on National Forest Lands in the Sierra Nevada dated June 13, 2014, upon which the USFWS Programmatic Biological Opinion is based, was of necessity a very conservative approach to estimating potential effects to these newly listed species. The biological assessment generated and analyzed worst case scenarios regarding potential impacts to the three amphibians in order to achieve Endangered Species Act coverage over nine programs in nine National Forests. By appending to the Programmatic BO, this conservative approach encompassed and continues to include many projects, such as Caples Ecological Restoration Project that might not otherwise be determined as likely to adversely affect these species. Therefore, under a less conservative approach, the effects analysis would lean toward determinations other than likely to adversely affect these species. For this reason, the determination of “likely to adversely affect” should be viewed within that context and would not be considered an extraordinary circumstance for this project.

The proposed action implements standards and guidelines and Best Management Practices (BMPs) that will minimize potential project level effects. In addition, project-specific design criteria were developed that either minimize the intensity and duration of project activities or exclude such from occurring within suitable SNYLF or YOTO habitat or within a proportion of habitat. The Caples Ecological Restoration Project has been designed to implement all of the Conservation Measures and Terms and Conditions described in the Programmatic Biological Opinion.

Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog – Approximately 1,208 acres suitable habitat and 659 acres of Proposed Critical Habitat occur within the project area. Habitat site assessments and aquatic surveys conducted in 2013 and 2014 resulted in no detections within the project area. Detections were noted in several areas and were much higher in the Caples Creek watershed unit, approximately 2 miles from the project area. Historically, SNYLFs were documented in

two locations within the project area. These detections were documented as follows; 1) the confluence of a perennial stream exiting Lake Margaret (Adult SNYLF, 7/22/1993) and 2) a .57 acre pond (SNYLF site detection, 7/4/2001) situated among 3 other ponds, with intervening distances of 32, 100 and 120 meters. These locations were revisited in the aquatic surveys of 2013 and 2014 without subsequent detections.

All applicable Conservation Measures from the Programmatic Biological Opinion for Nine Forest Service programs have been implemented in this project. Potential impacts to SNYLF are expected to be short term and small in scale, and the probability of impacting individuals is low. Beneficial effects include increasing LWD recruitment (refugia), increased sunlight for basking sites, and reducing the likelihood of high severity fire are also anticipated.

It was determined that the Caples Ecological Restoration Project may affect, and is likely to adversely affect the SNYLF, as consistent with the USFWS programmatic biological opinion (dated 12/19/14). As mentioned above, the programmatic biological opinion took a very conservative approach and includes projects that might not otherwise be determined as likely to adversely affect this species, and should be viewed within that context and would not be considered an extraordinary circumstance for this project.

In regards to Proposed Critical Habitat, it was determined that the project is not likely to destroy or adversely modify Proposed Critical Habitat of the SNYLF.

Yosemite toad - The closest known detection of Yosemite toad is approximately nine miles from the project area, and Yosemite toad occupancy within the project area is unlikely given a lack of historic detections within project area watershed. The potentially suitable YOTO habitat in the project area functions primarily for YOTO dispersal or foraging during seasonal periods of active movement (up to 1250 m. from wet meadow breeding habitat that occurs outside the Caples project area). Very limited potential breeding habitat (wet meadows) exists in the project area.

All applicable Conservation Measures from the Programmatic Biological Opinion for Nine Forest Service programs have been implemented in this project. Potential impacts to YOTO are expected to be short-term and small in scale with a low probability of impacting individuals. Beneficial effects include increasing LWD recruitment (refugia) and reducing the likelihood of high severity fire.

It was determined that the Caples Ecological Restoration Project may affect, and is likely to adversely affect the YOTO, as consistent with the USFWS programmatic biological opinion (dated 12/19/14). As mentioned above, the programmatic biological opinion took a very conservative approach and includes projects that might not otherwise be determined as likely to adversely affect this species, and should be viewed within that context and would not be considered an extraordinary circumstance for this project.

- b) *Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds.* The project occurs within the Caples Creek Watershed, which is within a municipal watershed. Design criteria for vegetative buffers should be adequate to protect water quality, to an extent that is practically possible, from sediment and nutrients in the runoff from ground disturbed by fire lines or burned ground itself. There are not impairments to Caples Creek or the larger 5th order watershed (Silver Fork American River), including sediment, turbidity or nutrient loading that might be cumulatively impacted by the proposed project. Such impacts as they might occur would be negligible and immeasurably small in either Caples Creek or on the Silver Fork American River. (Hydrology Report, June 1, 2015)

- c) *Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas.* There are no congressionally designated areas within the project area.
- d) *Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas.* The project occurs within the Caples Creek Inventoried Roadless Area (IRA) and Caples Creek Recommended Wilderness Area. The purpose of this project is to re-introduce fire, as a natural process, back into the landscape to improve forest health and fire resiliency, and meadow and aspen ecosystems. The proposed action and design criteria incorporate actions, such as line construction using “light on the land” concepts and restoration and minimum impact suppression tactics (MIST) to minimize the effects to roadless area and wilderness characteristics. Implementation of the Caples Creek Ecological Restoration Project would maintain roadless area characteristics and wilderness character (naturalness, undeveloped, opportunity for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation) and would not preclude the future designation of the area as wilderness.
- e) *Research natural areas.* The project will not occur within research natural areas (RNA).
- f) *American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites* – There are no American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites within the project area.
- g) *Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas* – Protection measures would be implemented based on the risk to values associated with each class of resources (Cultural Resource Management Report Caples Ecological Restoration Project, R2015050360010). Protection measures are detailed in the Regional PA, Appendix E, Section 2.2, (b)(1)(A-K) and would be established based on consultation with the Fuels personnel when the expected fire behavior, burning conditions and specific locations of ground disturbing activities are determined. The locations of staging areas, including campsites and pack stock holding areas, would be reviewed by the District Archaeologist to ensure historic properties are not adversely affected. Crews constructing hand line around the perimeter of the burn may be accompanied by an archaeologist to recommend mitigations or approve of campsite locations during implementation.

This project complies with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended in accordance with provisions of the *Programmatic Agreement among the U.S.D.A. Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Region (Region 5), the California State Historic Preservation Officer, the Nevada State Historic Preservation Officer, and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation Regarding Processes for Compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act for Management of Historic Properties by the National Forest of the Pacific Southwest Region (Regional PA 2013)*.

In addition, the project has limited context and intensity (40 CFR 1508.27), and this action will produce little or no individual or cumulative environmental effects, to either biological or physical components of the human environment (40 CFR 1508.14).

Public Involvement

This action was originally listed as a proposal on the Eldorado National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) in April, 2015 and updated periodically during the analysis. The SOPA is mailed to individuals, organizations, and agencies that have asked to be notified of proposed actions on the Eldorado National Forest. The SOPA is also posted on the Eldorado National Forest website. On April 6, 2015, a letter initiating scoping and requesting comments on the proposed action was mailed to special use permittees, local municipalities, local governments,



environmental organizations, wilderness organizations, and private landowners. The Forest Service received seven written letters on the proposed action, including four letters that expressed general support of the project. Several scoping comments raised questions or concerns that resulted in minor clarification of the proposed action. The summary of scoping comments and how they were considered is in the project file.

Tribal consultation for this project was initiated during the scoping process and included mailing notices to Jackson Rancheria, Shingle Springs Rancheria, Ione Band of Miwok Indians, United Auburn Indian Community, Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California and the Buena Vista Tribe of Mi-wuk Indians. Meetings were requested by the Shingle Springs Rancheria and the Washoe Tribe of CA and Nevada. A field visit to the project area with the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California was also conducted.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This action is found to be consistent with all applicable laws and the Eldorado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (1989), as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (2004).

Administrative Review (Objection) Opportunities

This decision is not subject to legal notice and comment procedures of 36 CFR 218.22, and is not subject to the pre-decisional administrative review process pursuant to 36 CFR 218.

Implementation Date

This decision may be implemented immediately.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Jennifer Ebert, Environmental Coordinator, Eldorado National Forest, 100 Forni Road, Placerville, CA 95667; Phone 530-642-5187.

Duane A. Nelson

2/8/16

DUANE NELSON
District Ranger, Placerville Ranger District

Date

Richard G. Hopson

2/9/16

RICHARD G. HOPSON
District Ranger, Amador Ranger District

Date



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Caples Ecological Restoration Project

Amador and Placerville Ranger Districts

Eldorado National Forest



- Roads
- Motorized Trail
- - - Non-Motorized Trail
- Trail 17E51 ReRoute
- Ranger District Boundary
- Caples Creek Watershed
- Caples Creek Recommended Wilderness
- Prescribed Burn Area
- Vegetation Island Ignition
- Understory Burn
- USDA Forest Service
- NON-Forest Service

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