

Record of Decision
Natural Resources Conservation Service
SKOKOMISH RIVER BASIN ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION PROJECT
FINAL SUPPLEMENTAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

Decision Summary

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Washington will develop an Operations and Management plan for its Skokomish Farms Floodplain Easement (FPE) to allow the landowners to provide access for installation, operation, and maintenance of activities described as Alternative #18 in a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) integrated Feasibility Report and Environmental Impact Statement (FR/EIS) for the Skokomish River Basin Ecosystem Restoration Project (Project.)

The environmental consequences of this action were analyzed previously in the USACE FR/EIS and a Record of Decision (ROD), dated April 18, 2016, however, NRCS was not named as a cooperating agency in the FR/EIS. Therefore, under provisions provided for in Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations at 40 CFR §1506.3, the NRCS adopted the USACE FR/EIS, notified the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) of its adoption, and published Notice of Intent (NOI) to adopt the FR/EIS in the *Kitsap Sun* on November 5, 2020. EPA published a Notice of Availability in the *Federal Register* on November 11, 2020. NRCS made the FR/EIS available for public comment through December 14, 2020. No comments were received.

In its NOI, NRCS detailed its review of the FR/EIS, concurrence with the analysis and findings therein, and found that its proposed action to develop an Operations and Management plan for its Skokomish Farms Floodplain Easement (FPE) is substantially the same as the USACE action described in the FR/EIS as the Recommended Plan, Alternative #18, identified in the USACE ROD as the National Ecosystem Restoration Plan. Accordingly, NRCS adopted the FR/EIS in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA.) This ROD documents the selection by NRCS of the same preferred alternative as that identified in the FR/EIS and USACE ROD and decision to prepare an Operations and Management plan for its FPE that will allow the landowners to provide access for installation, operation, and maintenance of the Project.

Introduction

The mouth of the Skokomish River Basin is located on the Great Bend of Hood Canal, a natural fjord-like arm of the Puget Sound and water of national significance identified by the EPA. The Skokomish River is the largest source of freshwater to Hood Canal and of critical importance to its overall health. The primary concern to be addressed by the USACE Project is ecosystem degradation in the Skokomish River Basin, which includes the Skokomish Indian Reservation. High sediment load, reduced flows, and encroachment on the floodplain by human-made structures are causing continued degradation of natural ecosystem structures, functions, and processes necessary to support critical fish and wildlife habitat throughout the basin. The impaired ecosystem has adversely affected riverine, wetland, and estuarine habitats that are critical to salmon and other important fish and wildlife species. Aggradation of sediment in the channel causes the flow to go subsurface in the summer, which blocks fish passage to upstream spawning habitat.

NRCS holds a permanent easement on a portion of Skokomish Farms, located in the Project area on the left bank of the Skokomish River near River Mile 8-9. The easement was acquired in 2010

under the authority of the Emergency Watershed Protection Program – Floodplain Easement Option (EWPP-FPE) to restore, protect, maintain and enhance the functions of the floodplain while conserving its natural values such as providing fish and wildlife habitat. Under a Warranty Easement Deed, NRCS holds rights over activities that would alter vegetation, change the reach, flow, and circulation of water, or place structures on the easement area, among other rights. USACE requires right-of-entry access on and across the FPE to construct and maintain portions of the Project that involve activities for which NRCS holds rights.

Non-federal sponsors of the Project are Mason County and the Skokomish Tribe. Mason County has operation and maintenance responsibility after initial project construction. Monitoring will be required after construction is complete, and adaptive management measures might be required to ensure long-term project success.

Proposed Action

NRCS proposes to develop an Operations and Management plan for the Skokomish Farms FPE to allow the Skokomish Farms landowners to provide access to USACE and Mason County to construct and maintain the Recommended Plan (Alternative #18) described in the FR/EIS.

Actions in the FPE area would include levee removal and a deep excavation through the levee footprint to provide fish passage when the mainstem Skokomish River flow goes subsurface in late summer. A new distributary channel would be carved through the FPE to help maintain the new connection.

Because NRCS' action does not add environmental effects to those of the Corps' action described in the 2015 FR/EIS, NRCS' action is substantially the same and therefore, NRCS has adopted the 2015 FR/EIS.

Description of Alternatives

In its FR/EIS, USACE analyzed six alternatives formulated around the need to restore ecosystem processes and solve the fish passage issue. Two scales of riverbed excavation and three scales of levee removal, wetland restoration, side channel connection, and engineered logjams, and a no action alternative were considered. USACE documented in its ROD the decision to implement Alternative #18 in the FR/EIS.

NRCS considered these alternatives when deciding whether and how to allow USACE and its non-federal sponsors to access the FPE area to restore riverine processes at this location and to return to the site for any required adaptive management or maintenance actions. NRCS determined that the alternatives considered in the FR/EIS were sufficient and the alternative selected by USACE was preferred. NRCS will develop an Operations and Management plan for the Skokomish Farms FPE to allow the Skokomish Farms landowners to provide access to USACE and Mason County to construct and maintain the Project described as Alternative #18 in the FR/EIS.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

USACE identified Alternative #27 in the FR/EIS as the environmentally preferable alternative as it would have the greatest net benefits to the biological and physical environment. Based on coordination with the public and sponsors, and project feasibility level designs, Alternative #27 contained three increments with insurmountable real estate issues. As such, these features were removed to formulate the Recommended Plan (Alternative #18). While smaller in scope than the

environmentally preferred alternative, the recommended plan restores the critical needs of the study area, providing year-round flow for fish passage, in channel habitat and complexity, and off-channel refugia and habitat.

NRCS has determined that Alternative #18 is environmentally preferable, as it would allow the USACE Recommended Plan to proceed while also ensuring the conservation value, acreage, and economic value of the FPE would be retained by the United States in perpetuity.

Environmental Effects, Mitigation, and Monitoring

NRCS' decision is expected to result in implementation of the USACE National Ecosystem Plan, which is expected to result in a number of environmental benefits including:

- Resolution of the problem of the river going subsurface in the summer months by providing a bypass at the confluence of the South and North Forks, such that adult salmon migrating upstream would have access to their spawning areas and would not have to endure delays to migration and the complete blockage of access to critical spawning habitat, thus potentially increasing spawning productivity;
- 200 total acres of wetland and riparian vegetation improved or created;
- A net gain of 51 acres of forested riparian zone from wetland restoration, benefitting birds and mammals;
- Improved water quality in Hood Canal, potentially benefitting shellfish;
- Restoration of LWD and renewal of the process of woody debris accumulation which will directly improve fish habitat, create and maintain channel characteristics resembling nearby less-disturbed watersheds, provide substrate for aquatic insects, structure for aquatic-oriented mammals, create pools for rearing and refuge habitat for juvenile and adult salmon, helping their survival and productivity;
- Marginal improvements in recreational opportunities and commercial as well as recreational fishing; and
- Support of local-based recreation, fishing, and tourism businesses and additional regional economic benefits from job creation and income during construction of the project.

Construction of the project would also cause some adverse environmental effects, most of which would be temporary; these are summarized as:

- Temporary, minor, and localized degradation of water quality from increases in turbidity during in-water work;
- Temporary, minor disturbance to fish and aquatic insects through increased turbidity and construction activity in the water;
- Temporary clearing of upland and riparian vegetation for access and staging areas;
- Fill of up to 5 acres of wetland where wetland embankments are constructed, which is offset by a net gain of 51 acres of wetlands by these increments, and another 1 acre of disturbance to wetlands for the Side Channel Reconnection inlet; and
- Temporary and localized disruptions to traffic caused by construction vehicle access to worksites.

Public Involvement

USACE conducted public scoping and outreach described in Appendix B if the FR/EIS, incorporated herein by reference. USACE hosted a public meeting to solicit comments on the Draft FR/EIS on March 20, 2014. Public review of the draft FR/EIS was completed on April 7, 2014. All comments submitted during the public comment period were responded to in Appendix D the Final FR/EIS. A 30-day waiting period of the Final FR/EIS was completed on October 25, 2015. Comments from state and Federal agencies did not result into any changes to the final FR/EIS.

For its decision, NRCS coordinated with USACE, Skokomish Tribe, Mason County, the Mason Conservation District, and the Skokomish Farms landowners. NRCS published a Notice of Intent to adopt the FR/EIS in the *Kitsap Sun* on November 5, 2020. EPA published a Notice of Availability (NOA) of a Final SEIS in the *Federal Register* on November 11, 2020. Both documents were posted on the Washington NRCS web site for public review and comment. No comments were received. The NOA was available for 30 days prior to the Washington State Conservationist decision, documented in this ROD.

An NOA will be published in the *Kitsap Sun* of the NRCS decision and the availability of this ROD. The NOA and ROD will be posted on the NRCS web site

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/wa/newsroom/pnotice/>

Decision Factors

The NRCS' decisions to adopt the USACE FR/EIS and to develop an Operations and Management plan to allow the landowners to provide access to USACE and Mason County for Project construction and maintenance, are based on several factors.

- 1) NRCS reviewed the FR/EIS to determine whether it adequately analyzed impacts to the environment per NEPA and NRCS requirements, if there was sufficient public involvement that was appropriately incorporated, and whether there had been significant new circumstances or information relevant to the environmental concerns and bearing on the proposed actions or its impacts since the preparation of the FR/EIS that would warrant the preparation of a supplement. NRCS determined that the USACE FR/EIS meets NRCS criteria for NEPA compliance and that no supplement to the FR/EIS was needed because NRCS' action would simply allow the USACE decision to move forward without creating additional impacts. No other new circumstances or information relevant to the environmental concerns and bearing on the proposed actions or its impacts since the preparation of the FR/EIS were identified.
- 2) NRCS completed an internal checklist, *NEPA Supplementation Review and Documentation Checklist*, as required by its National Environmental Compliance Handbook (7 CFR 610.134) to document its decision to adopt the FR/EIS and that no supplementation was needed.
- 3) NRCS' action is consistent with its existing authorities.
- 4) NRCS provides technical and financial assistance through its EWPP-FPE to restore, protect, maintain and enhance the functions of the floodplain while conserving its natural values such as providing fish and wildlife habitat. The USACE Project will further restore floodplain functions and values on the Skokomish Farms FPE and is complementary to NRCS' efforts.
- 5) NRCS has worked with the Skokomish Tribe and Mason Conservation District on other projects in the vicinity to restore wetlands and riparian areas and improve habitat for fish and shellfish. The USACE Project will further these efforts as well.

NRCS Decision

The NRCS decision is to develop an Operations and Management plan that will allow the Skokomish Farms landowners to provide access to construct and maintain the USACE Project, described as Alternative #18, the preferred alternative in the FR/EIS. This decision is based on conformance with NRCS’ existing authorities, as well as a thorough review of the alternatives set forth in the FR/EIS, the ability of each alternative to meet the purpose and need, and the environmental consequences of implementation.

Conclusions

NRCS has reviewed the information and analyses contained in the USACE FR/EIS regarding the potential environmental effects of the Project. All applicable laws, Executive Orders, regulations, and local government plans were considered in the evaluation of the alternatives. Based on that review, I conclude there have been no significant new circumstances or information identified since completion of the FR/EIS that are relevant to environmental concerns and bearing on the proposed action or its impacts. Alternative #18 of the FR/EIS was determined to be the environmentally preferable and preferred alternative. The USACE Project that will be made possible by NRCS’ decision incorporates all practicable means of avoiding or minimizing adverse environmental effects and adequately compensates for unavoidable impacts to significant resources. Based on my consideration of this information, I agree with the conclusions presented in the FR/EIS and find that this project is environmentally acceptable. NRCS adopts the findings and conclusions of the Final Integrated Feasibility Report and Environmental Impact Statement (FR/EIS) dated April 2015, for the Skokomish River Basin Ecosystem Restoration Project and will develop an Operations and Management plan that will allow the Skokomish Farms landowners to provide access to construct and maintain the USACE Project, as described and analyzed in the FR/EIS.

This Record of Decision was prepared in accordance with (1) NEPA, (2) CEQ Regulations for Implementing the Procedural Provisions of NEPA (40 CFR 1500-1508) and (3) NRCS Regulations Implementing NEPA (7 CFR 650).

12/16/2020

ROYLENE COMES AT NIGHT
Washington State Conservationist
Natural Resources Conservation Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Date