

Marbled Murrelet Long-Term Conservation Strategy Conceptual Alternatives for Phase Two of Scoping

Introduction

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) are seeking public comment on the following no-action and three conceptual alternatives for DNR's marbled murrelet long-term conservation strategy (LTCS) to satisfy the Trust Lands Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) adopted in 1997. A Need, Purpose and Objectives (NPO) was developed by the DNR and USFWS to constructively guide the environmental review process for the marbled murrelet LTCS. The purpose of a No-Action alternative is to assess the environmental consequences of not proceeding with an alternative that meets the NPO. In contrast, the conceptual alternatives represent three distinct conservation approaches for an LTCS, each of which would be consistent with the NPO.

Features that distinguish each alternative include the range of geographic emphases, occupied site management, and non-timber activities in the forest environment. As alternatives are further developed, the agencies may also include mitigation that encompasses: innovative management approaches, murrelet use of the aquatic environment, adaptive management, and timing of forest activities.

The alternatives in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) are expected to minimize and mitigate impacts during the life of the HCP, based on threats to the marbled murrelet. These specific conceptual alternatives may be further developed for the DEIS, or other alternatives not represented here may be developed for the DEIS.

Forest stands currently managed for conservation purposes, pursuant to the HCP and Policy for Sustainable Forests, may provide habitat for marbled murrelets at present or in the future.

No Action Conceptual Alternative

Under the No-Action conceptual alternative, DNR would no longer pursue HCP coverage for the marbled murrelet. Instead, DNR would follow existing regulations that apply to marbled murrelet habitat, including current Forest Practices rules and the Endangered Species Act. Without incidental take coverage for marbled murrelets, DNR would conduct a case-by-case review of its harvests and other activities in marbled murrelet habitat. This no-action conceptual alternative assumes expiration of the marbled murrelet interim conservation strategy and lack of coverage for the marbled murrelet from the Incidental Take Permit issued by USFWS.

Conceptual Alternative #1

Conceptual Alternative #1 focuses conservation efforts on the protection of known occupied sites from forest management activities and enhances their long-term persistence. This would be accomplished by providing variable width buffers (potentially larger on average than the other alternatives that may include adjacent patches of forest and filling in habitat gaps). The goal is to reduce impacts to occupied sites from windthrow, microclimate effects, and predation risk. DNR may take additional measures to reduce corvid predation risk. Impacts needing mitigation could result from harvest of unknown occupied sites and disturbance.

Conceptual Alternative #2

Under this conceptual alternative, DNR would protect most or all occupied sites from forest management activities and provide functioning buffers to minimize windthrow, predation risk, and microclimate effects that might impact habitat quality at each protected site. DNR would also create Conservation Areas, as needed, to mitigate for impacts to marbled murrelet habitat.

Conservation Areas would be located in strategic locations in Southwest Washington, the Olympic Experimental State Forest (OESF), and the North Puget Planning Unit. Strategic locations relative to Objective #2 “Marbled Murrelet Habitat” would be identified considering distance to higher quality marine foraging areas, the size and proximity of occupied sites, the level of murrelet activity within occupied sites, and the amount of murrelet habitat.

Conservation Areas would be designed to protect and develop contiguous blocks of habitat with interior forest conditions. Contiguous blocks of interior forest can decrease habitat fragmentation at the landscape scale, potentially reducing the risk of nest predation. These Conservation Areas could contain a mix of forest stands and habitat types, including occupied sites, unoccupied habitat, and forest stands that have the potential to become habitat during the life of the HCP. These Conservation Areas would be managed to develop into high quality nesting habitat.

Conservation areas in OESF would complement extensive existing murrelet habitat located on federal lands in the Olympic Peninsula, known to be an area of high murrelet activity adjacent to the off-shore marine area with the highest density of murrelets. Habitat development within the Sitka spruce zone in the OESF was identified as a priority for murrelet conservation by the Marbled Murrelet Science Team. Since murrelet habitat is relatively scarce in the low-elevation Sitka spruce zone, there is an opportunity for DNR to contribute to conservation and development of this unique and underrepresented habitat type.

Conceptual Alternative #3

Under this conceptual alternative, DNR would protect most or all occupied sites from forest management activities and provide functioning buffers to minimize windthrow, predation risk, and microclimate effects that might impact habitat quality at each protected site. In addition, DNR would create Conservation Areas as needed to mitigate for impacts to marbled murrelet habitat.

These Conservation Areas would be located primarily in Southwest Washington to address the scarcity of federal lands available for murrelet conservation in this part of Washington State. Southwest Washington can provide habitat connectivity across subpopulations within the range of the marbled murrelet. Additional Conservation Areas could also be created in the North Puget Planning Unit. Strategic locations relative to Objective #2 “Marbled Murrelet Habitat” would be identified considering distance to higher quality marine foraging areas, the size and proximity of occupied sites, the level of murrelet activity within occupied sites, and the quantity and quality of murrelet habitat.

Conservation Areas would be designed to protect and develop contiguous blocks of habitat with interior forest conditions. Contiguous blocks of interior forest can decrease habitat fragmentation at the landscape scale, potentially reducing the risk of nest predation. These Conservation Areas could contain a mix of forest stands and habitat types, including occupied sites, unoccupied habitat, and forest stands that have the potential to become habitat during the life of the HCP. These conservation areas would be managed to develop into high quality nesting habitat.