Targhee Pass Environmental Assessment

May 2020

Appendix F

No Effect Statements

Idaho Transportation Department (ITD) – District 6
Rigby, Idaho

U.S. 20, Junction S.H. 87 to the Montana State Line (Targhee Pass)
U.S. 20 Mileposts 402.1 – 406.3
ITD Project Key Numbers 14054 and 19913

No Effect Statements for North American Wolverine (*Gulo gulo luscus*) and Whitebark Pine (*Pinus albicaulis*)

September 2019

Endangered Species List – Fremont County, Idaho

ITD obtained an official species list for the project location from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on July 31, 2019. The list includes a proposed threatened species, North American Wolverine (*Gulo, gulo luscus*), and a candidate species, Whitebark Pine (*Pinus albicaulis*). These species are not included in ITD's 2003 Programmatic Biological Assessment.

North American Wolverine (*Gulo gulo luscus*)

In North America, wolverines occur within a wide variety of alpine, boreal, and arctic habitats. The southern portion of the species' range extends into the western contiguous United States where wolverine habitat is restricted to high-elevation areas centered near the tree line in conifer forests (below tree line) and rocky alpine habitat (above treeline) and in cirque basins and avalanche chutes that have food sources such as marmots, voles, and carrion. Wolverines are dependent on deep persistent snow cover for successful denning, and they concentrate their year-round activities in areas that maintain deep snow into spring and cool temperatures throughout summer (USFWS 2013).

There is known occurrence of wolverine in the vicinity; Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) records include wolverine sightings between 1985 and 2009 within twenty miles of the Targhee Pass project area (IDFG, 2018). Several sightings have been made along U.S. 20 in the vicinity of Island Park and near the intersection of U.S. 20 and S.H. 87. Wolverines do not den or rear kits in the area, but Targhee Pass bisects wolverine travel routes between Yellowstone National Park and the Wind River Range in Wyoming and high mountains of northeastern Idaho and western Montana (Heinemeyer et al., 2017; IDFG, 2014; Inman, 2013).

Past research has indicated that wolverines tend to avoid roads generally, but a recent study found that wolverines tended to move more near higher volume roads rather than avoid the roads (Scrafford et al., 2018). Wolverines are likely affected by motorized winter recreation within the Targhee Pass area, which may reduce their frequency of occurrence near U.S. 20. A study by Heinemeyer et al. (2017) identified the Henry Mountains as having high concentration of motorized winter recreation; the study found that motorized dispersed winter recreation was the second most important predictor of female wolverine habitat selection (behind topographic position), constituting a habitat loss for female wolverines.

In ITD's traffic assessment (ITD, 2015), the Targhee Pass project would not increase projected traffic volume over the No-Build environmental baseline; rather, the project would address safety related to roadway condition, drainage, shoulder width, and passing. Tree clearing within the highway right-of-way is also planned; however, the area cleared would not constitute a significant decrease in forest cover in the general area and the forest immediately surrounding the highway and surrounding nearby year-round motorized recreation use provides limited habitat value for wolverine under baseline.

Wolverines do have large home ranges and it is possible that at some point during construction a wolverine may be in the area and choose to avoid the road vicinity. However, there are no resources on either side of U.S. 20 within the potentially disturbed area that a wolverine would need to access in order to persist. Therefore, construction is unlikely to reduce their feeding, breeding, or sheltering (L. Dlugolecki, USFWS, personal communication, 1/31/19). In addition, road projects have not been identified as a threat to wolverines in the proposed listing rule, and transportation corridor and urban development are specifically cited as allowed activities in the proposed rule (4d). Based on the nature and location of the action, this project will not jeopardize the continued existence of the North American Wolverine.

Based on the foregoing observations, ITD concludes that there would be no effect to the species over environmental baseline.

Whitebark Pine (*Pinus albicaulis*)

Whitebark pine seeds are an important food source for grizzly bears in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and there has been widespread decline of this tree species due to mountain pine beetle infestation and blister rust infection (IGBC 2016). The Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy includes a monitoring protocol for whitebark pine and a distribution map (IGBC 2016, p. 80). The distribution map does not indicate any known occurrences of whitebark pine stands in the Targhee Pass project area. There are nearby known stands on the Ashton-Island Park Ranger District, shown on a distribution map in the 2018 monitoring annual report (GYWG 2019, p. 3). However, mapped stands occur at high elevation locations where whitebark pine are dominant in the overstory. There are stands where individual trees, small clumps, and understory components occupy a wider range, including areas below 7,000 feet in elevation that are not represented in currently available maps (Buermeyer et al. 2016).

With the project, there would be tree clearing within the highway easement. Whitebark pine trees (5-needle pines), if found, would be flagged to indicate that they are not to be removed. Therefore, ITD concludes that there would be no effect to this species.

Conclusions

The Idaho Transportation Department has determined there will be no effect to North American wolverine.

The Idaho Transportation Department has determined there will be no effect to whitebark pine.

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