CHAPTER 5. ANALYSIS OF ALTERNATIVES TO THE PROPOSED PROJECT

The CEQA Guidelines (Section 15126.6) require that an EIR shall describe a range of reasonable alternatives to the project, or to the location of the project, which would feasiblely attain most of the basic objectives of the project but would avoid or substantially lessen any of the significant effects of the project, and evaluate the comparative merits of the alternatives. The lead agency is responsible for selecting a range of project alternatives for examination and must publicly disclose its reasoning for selecting those alternatives.

Although no significant effects to the environment were identified in the proposed project, the following chapter provides a range of possible alternatives to the proposed project to foster informed decision making and public participation. Three alternatives, including a more aggressive, a more conservative, and a no-project alternative also required by CEQA, are presented. Each alternative contains a description and reason for selection, advantages, disadvantages, and comparison to the objectives of the proposed project and other alternatives.

NO-PROJECT ALTERNATIVE

Description

Under the no-project alternative, the Department would not release wild turkeys to enhance populations that would result in expansion of existing turkey range. Turkey management to provide hunting opportunities would be limited to areas where they already exist.

Advantages

The no-project alternative would avoid any potential unforeseeable impacts to the environment as the result of the proposed project.

Disadvantages

The no-project alternative may slow the rate of expansion of wild turkey hunting opportunities for the public. The no-project alternative may prevent some economic benefits in local communities near the proposed project areas. The no-project alternative may also prevent some benefits for wildlife conservation programs. Because wild turkeys are so popular, there is an incentive to conserve habitats that they occupy.

The proposed project is based on the assumption that Merriam's turkeys will be successful in these areas where Rio Grande turkeys have largely not been successful. The no-project alternative would limit the ability of the Department to collect information regarding the potential of the Merriam's subspecies to occupy significant areas of higher elevation habitats dominated by conifers on public lands.

Conclusion

The no-project alternative would avoid any potential impacts to the environment as the result of the proposed project. Because turkeys have previously been released in the project areas, they may continue to exist and expand their populations whether or not the proposed project is carried out.

The no-project alternative would prevent the Department from providing additional hunting opportunities, particularly on public lands. Depending on whether

existing populations continue to expand, failure to release additional turkeys would limit recreational opportunities on public lands and may impact economic benefits of these activities to local communities near the project sites.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES

Alternative 1: Release turkeys at Sierra and Plumas sites and investigate effects to sensitive plant communities.

Description

Alternative 1 involves releasing turkeys at a selected subset of the proposed release sites further to investigate effects to sensitive plant communities. Specifically, Alternative 1 would be conducted at the Sierra and Lassen release sites, which would serve as a focus area to investigate potential effects of turkeys to sensitive resources. These sites contain recent survey data with possibly the best-known baseline conditions of all six sites in the proposed project. This alternative was selected in response to concerns that the existing information used to determine potential impacts to the environment in the proposed project is not adequate to determine potentially significant effects of the proposed project. Alternative 1 contains portions of the proposed project, including two of the six release sites, but with a rigorous investigation of potential impacts to sensitive plant communities following release. Furthermore, this alternative addresses specific comments received by the CNPS during scoping of the proposed project.

Figure 5.1 illustrates known sensitive plant populations that have been documented in recent years in the Department's CNDDB database in the Sierra and Lassen project areas. These populations would serve as focus species for investigation because turkeys are known to use them as food items. Additionally, populations of *Ivesia* spp. that were of concern to the CNPS as indicated in comments received by them on the NOP, are included in Figure 5.2.

Monitoring would be conducted similar to that described in the proposed project with the addition of a component designed to determine the effects of released turkeys to the aforementioned sensitive plant communities, based on those focal species of concern. Appropriate sampling techniques would be used to determine spatial (space) and temporal (time) changes to those sensitive communities that turkeys utilize following release in the project areas.

Advantages

Alternative 1 would be a more cautious subset of the proposed project, that contains a monitoring component for potential effects to the environment, particularly to sensitive plant populations of concern in the project areas. This alternative would also serve to gather information for future projects that may be proposed in similar habitats. The Sierra and Lassen sites contain good recent baseline information on a variety of sensitive plant populations, including those that are known turkey foods and endemic California plants that have not previously coexisted with turkeys. This alternative would allow the Department to focus its efforts in one general area and conduct an intensive post-release study that would not be as feasible at all six sites. This study would also allow the Department to collect information regarding the success of releases of Merriam's turkeys in higher elevation habitats. Although wild turkeys do exist in the proposed project areas and other limited locations in the state, their relatively low numbers would make it unlikely that the Department could capture enough resident

turkeys to conduct research at this time.

Disadvantages

Alternative 1 may exercise what may be viewed as unnecessary caution that may limit the amount of new hunting opportunities the Department could provide on public lands. Although Alternative 1 will allow the Department to test the success of Merriam's turkey releases in higher elevations, it essentially only covers one set of conditions, that may not be applicable in other areas where future releases may be proposed.

Potentially Significant Effects to the Environment

Alternative 1 is a subset of the proposed project, with a more intense monitoring element, that would help ensure that any unforeseeable impacts to the environment may be detected. Therefore, no significant impacts to the environment are identified in Alternative 1.

Alternative 2: Range expansion throughout suitable habitat statewide

Alternative 2 involves range expansion throughout suitable habitats statewide. This alternative was selected because the existing information does not support a conclusion that the release of wild turkeys poses an impact to the environment that will rise to the level of significance, and this alternative would conceivably maximize hunting opportunity for the public.

Figure 5.3 indicates 30 potential release sites statewide in addition to the six proposed release sites that have been identified as the proposed project. These sites were chosen because they have high quality habitat and are geographically distributed to optimize wild turkey hunting opportunities statewide.

Advantages

Alternative 2 would maximize the probability of establishing turkey populations in all suitable locations in the state, which would be the most aggressive approach to maximize hunting and other recreational opportunities. This alternative may contribute the most economic benefits to the state, particularly to local communities in the project areas.

Disadvantages

Alternative 2 may pose risks to the environment that may not be currently understood, especially in locations where turkeys do not currently exist. Additionally, numerous public and private lands where turkeys are not desired may be occupied by turkeys released in these areas. The Department would not be able to monitor effectively the number of release sites presented in this alternative to assess these concerns.

Potentially Significant Impacts to the Environment

Alternative 2 may pose potentially significant impacts to the environment that are not analyzed in this document. Given the extensive project area of Alternative 2, such an evaluation would not be feasible.