

SCREENING FORM FOR LOW-EFFECT HCP DETERMINATION

Schwisow HCP

I. Project Information

A. Project name:

Schwisow Habitat Conservation Plan

B. Affected species:

Northern Idaho ground squirrel (*Spermophilus brunneus brunneus*)
(NIDGS)

C. Covered Area (in acres): 2.0 hectares (5 acres)

D. Brief project description including minimization and mitigation plans:

A private landowner will agree to implement a site management plan that preserves NIDGS and minimizes disturbance to NIDGS from human activity. The Schwisow property is in Price Valley, 8.9 kilometers (5.5 miles) northwest of New Meadows, Adams County, Idaho.

Price Valley supports one of the most robust populations of NIDGS, along with Lost Valley and the OX Ranch (Evans Mack and Yensen, *in litt.* 2004). The NIDGS population estimate for the Price Valley complex, which includes the Applicants' property and adjacent State and private lands, is upwards of 150 squirrels (Evans Mack and Yensen, *in litt.* 2004; Evans Mack 2006). Small, disjunct colonies of NIDGS occur along the Price Valley Road, beginning approximately 1.6 kilometers (1 mile) from the junction of Highway 95 and Price Valley Road and extending to the north of the Price Valley Guard Station on Payette National Forest lands (Evan Mack and Yensen, *in litt.* 2004). Much of the area is also occupied by Columbian ground squirrels (*Spermophilus columbianus*), especially in areas of deeper soils, including the meadows along the Weiser River and the side hills along the Price Valley Road (FWS *in litt.* 2006a, b).

Covered activities include leveling of an area for use as parking for an RV (RV parking site), planting of trees within the RV parking site, development of utilities for use with the RV, recreational use by the family of the property and the set aside of a portion of the property for long-term protection of NIDGS occupied habitat.

The management actions include avoiding disturbance to NIDGS in the Protected Area. The management actions in the Project Area however do not include avoiding disturbance or impacts to the NIDGS. The reasons for not avoiding impacts are the low

likelihood of an adverse impact or jeopardy to the continued survival and recovery of the species and the financial impact to the Applicant.

The management actions include a mix of minimization and mitigation. Collectively these actions reduce the likelihood of an adverse effect due to human disturbance, preserve occupied habitat and restore areas of ground disturbance in suitable but currently unoccupied habitat due to the installation of utility lines, a septic system and a well. The following management actions constitute a Site Management Plan and include:

1. Avoidance of disturbance in the Protected Area.
2. The Applicant will notify the FWS prior to ground disturbance (i.e., leveling of the RV parking site) to allow the agency to determine if squirrels are present and relocate them, in cooperation with IDFG personnel.
3. Prevent domestic pets (dogs and cats) from disturbing (chasing and killing) NIDGS in the Protected Area by prohibiting their access to the Protected Area.
4. Restore ground disturbances in the Project Area due to utility lines, well and septic system with native plants, with an emphasis on plants that can provide nutritional value for NIDGS.
5. Allow access by IDFG and FWS for annual NIDGS monitoring. Agencies will notify the permittee at least 5 days in advance of conducting surveys.
6. Allow agents of FWS/IDFG to control badgers and/or Columbian ground squirrels on site if necessary. If the Applicant observes badger activity prior to NIDGS monitoring in July, they will contact FWS/IDFG for control of the badgers. Agencies will notify the permittee at least 5 days in advance of conducting control actions. The Applicant will assist in control of Columbian ground squirrels, when such efforts are deemed necessary by the FWS/IDFG, and after receiving sufficient training (as determined by FWS/IDFG) in ground squirrel identification.

An incidental take permit is needed because the human disturbance associated with the development could result in a take of, or an adverse affect on, NIDGS within the property boundary and because there will be a loss of 13.9 square meters (150 square feet) of suitable habitat in the Project Area. The management actions are intended to minimize and mitigate for the impact of these potential adverse affects to NIDGS.

II. Does the HCP fit the low-effect criteria in the HCP Handbook?

A. Are the effects of the HCP minor or negligible on federally listed, proposed, or candidate species and their habitats covered under the HCP prior to implementation of the mitigation plan?

Yes. The leveling of an RV parking site within close proximity of occupied northern Idaho ground squirrel habitat may result in periodic site abandonment from human disturbance. The risk of abandonment of the site and its significance to the northern Idaho ground squirrel population in Price Valley is considered minor because the site is currently experiencing human disturbance from a nearby

residence and a gravel roadway so the squirrels may adjust easily to any new disturbances. There will be a permanent loss of suitable, currently unoccupied, habitat due to the leveling of an RV parking site on 13.9 square meters (150 square feet), representing approximately 0.6 percent of the total covered area. There will be an additional temporary loss of less than 0.6 percent of the suitable, currently unoccupied habitat due to the development of the septic system, well and utilities. The amount of habitat that will be protected for the life of the HCP and permit, however, is approximately 60 percent of the total covered area.

The effects of the covered activities on NIDGS are minimized by: (1) maintaining the site's habitat potential through preservation of the occupied habitat to the west of the RV parking site and associated utilities, (2) rehabilitation of disturbed areas for the septic system, utilities, and well using native plants to the maximum extent practicable, and (3) should there be squirrels present, translocating them from the RV parking site prior to ground disturbance activities. Direct modifications to listed species' habitat are so limited that the impacts to the species are minor and are not likely to jeopardize the continued survival and recovery of the species. Indirect effects would be managed by implementation of the mitigation and minimization actions stated above.

Bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) and gray wolves (*Canis lupus*) occur in the area however, the project would not likely affect the feeding, breeding, or sheltering of these species because they are not known to occur within the covered area boundary.

B. Are the effects of the HCP minor or negligible on other environmental values or resources (e.g. air quality, geology and soils, water quality and quantity, socioeconomic, cultural resources, recreation, visual resources, etc.) prior to implementation of the mitigation plan?

Yes. The project involves the development of an RV parking site that is regulated by the land-use and zoning regulations of Adams County. The Applicant will implement restrictions that exceed those necessary to develop the property. State and local regulations would require that best management practices be implemented to minimize the effects of other environmental values or resources, such as water quality and any wetlands that are near the site.

Air quality of the area would not be significantly affected because of the small construction site size and limited duration of construction; emissions from construction related activities would be localized and limited to short periods of time. All construction equipment would be permitted by the State of Idaho and would be within acceptable levels of motor vehicle emissions.

Water quality and quantity of the area should not be affected because ground-disturbing activities would require the implementation of best management practices by Adams County through the grading and building permit process.

An archaeological survey was conducted on August 1, 2000, and no cultural resources were discovered in the project area (ISHS *in litt.* 2000). Therefore, no impacts to cultural resources are expected to occur.

No major changes in land-use or the socio-economic environment are expected to occur, beyond what is lawfully permitted by State and local ordinance, as a result of implementing the HCP.

Implementation of the HCP is not likely to affect any recreational activities in the area. The project area is currently privately owned so public recreational use is not anticipated.

Visual resources of the area will not be significantly affected by the RV parking site. Existing trees on the property would remain, screening the site from the roadway. The area is zoned for rural residential use and the actions in the HCP are consistent with this land use.

C. Would the impacts of this HCP, considered together with the impacts of other past, present and reasonably foreseeable similarly situated projects not result, over time, in cumulative effects to environmental values or resources which would be considered significant?

Yes. Significant cumulative effects are not expected to occur although there would be permanent loss of suitable, currently unoccupied habitat representing less than 0.6 percent of the total covered area. The permanent loss of 13.9 square meters (150 square feet) of suitable, unoccupied habitat in the Project Area will not lead to a reduction in the survival and recovery of NIDGS, due to the small size of the area in relation to the total suitable habitat that is currently occupied in the area, and due to the placement of the Protected Area. Approximately 60 percent of the total covered area would be included in the Protected Area where all ground and other human caused disturbance would be avoided. The Protected Area is adjacent to another parcel (under separate ownership) currently enrolled in a Safe Harbor Agreement (SHA) for NIDGS and currently occupied by NIDGS. The Protected Area in this HCP is also adjacent to State land currently occupied by NIDGS. The placement of the Protected Area in this HCP relative to the adjacent SHA and State land would provide a larger block of contiguous suitable habitat, allowing movements among the three parcels, and thereby compensate for the minor loss of suitable habitat due to installation of the RV parking site.

Price Valley supports one of the most robust populations of NIDGS, along with Lost Valley and the OX Ranch (Evans Mack and Yensen, *in litt.* 2004). The Service does not anticipate a significant impact on the species or its habitat within Price Valley from this HCP.

There are examples of NIDGS successfully reproducing in close proximity to human disturbance. While the data at the adjacent property is short-term (two years of monitoring data with development disturbance and recent human

occupation), there does not appear to be any indication that the site has experienced a significant decline in the number of squirrels observed. Adults as well as young squirrels have been documented on the site along with active burrows. NIDGS may acclimate to some levels of human disturbance, providing the human activity does not directly endanger the physical integrity of the habitat or directly disturb or take the squirrels. Nonetheless, the RV parking site and associated ongoing human activities could result in a future impact.

III. Do any of the exceptions to categorical exclusions apply to this HCP? (from 516 DM 2.3, Appendix 2)

Would implementation of the HCP:

A. Have significant adverse effects on public health or safety?

No. The area affected by the project is very small making impacts to resources such as air and water negligible, and resulting in no impacts to public health or safety.

B. Have adverse effects on such unique geographic characteristics as historic or cultural resources, park, recreation or refuge lands, wilderness areas, wild or scenic rivers, sole or principal drinking water aquifers, prime farmlands, wetlands, floodplains, or ecologically significant or critical areas, including those listed on the Department's National Register of Natural Landmarks?

No. There are no historic or cultural resources, parks, registered National Landmarks, recreation or refuge lands, wilderness areas, wild or scenic rivers, sole or principal drinking water aquifers, or prime farmlands at the site. Although wetlands and floodplains do occur adjacent to the covered area boundary on the south side of Price Valley Road, these resources would not be affected. Ground disturbance activities would follow Adams County best management practices.

C. Have highly controversial environmental effects?

No. The Service has not identified any highly controversial environmental effects through discussions with the applicant or through contact with local and State agencies.

D. Have highly uncertain and potentially significant environmental effects or involve unique or unknown environmental risks?

No. While the data at the adjacent property is short-term (two years of monitoring data with development disturbance and recent human occupation), there does not appear to be any indication that the site has experienced a significant decline in the number of squirrels observed. Adults as well as young

squirrels have been documented on the site along with active burrows. NIDGS may acclimate to some levels of human disturbance, providing the human activity does not directly endanger the physical integrity of the habitat or directly disturb or take the squirrels. Nonetheless, the RV parking site and associated ongoing human activities could result in a future impact.

The covered activities would preserve the habitat in the occupied Protected Area, reducing the risk of site abandonment.

E. Establish a precedent for future action or represent a decision in principle about future actions with potentially significant environmental effects?

No. Future actions would be reviewed on their own merits. The covered activities and the Services' biological review are based on the site-specific characteristics and the NIDGS breeding history. The project is located in a rural residential area with a residence 8 kilometers (5 miles) west of the covered area boundary. A gravel roadway, Price Valley Road, is located adjacent to the project. The NIDGS site within the project is well established and is close to one other well established NIDGS site to the west. The western NIDGS site has a short-term history of occupation and has been successfully reproducing for the past three years (FWS *in litt.* 2004, 2005, and 2006b).

The unique circumstances of the project would make it unlikely that issuance of a permit would establish a precedent for future action or represent a decision in principle about future actions with potentially significant environmental effects.

F. Be directly related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant environmental effects?

No. The HCP is not related to any other action with potentially significant cumulative environmental effects.

G. Have adverse effects on properties listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places?

No. There are no properties that are listed or eligible for listing on the National Register for Historic Places in the covered area boundary.

H. Have adverse effects on listed or proposed species, or have adverse effects on designated Critical Habitat for these species?

No. Although a small percentage of the suitable habitat on site would be permanently lost due to the RV parking site, this loss does not represent a significant impact to the continued survival and recovery of NIDGS, due to the small size of this loss of habitat (less than 1 percent), the lack of evidence of

squirrel occupancy at the RV parking site, and the benefits likely to be realized for NIDGS due to the Protected Area and other actions by the Applicants. The Protected Area is adjacent to another parcel (under separate ownership) currently enrolled in a Safe Harbor Agreement (SHA) for NIDGS and currently occupied by NIDGS. The Protected Area in this HCP also would be adjacent to State land currently occupied by NIDGS. The placement of the Protected Area in this HCP relative to the adjacent SHA and State land would provide a larger block of contiguous suitable habitat, allowing NIDGS movements among the three parcels, and thereby compensate for the minor loss of suitable habitat due to installation of the RV parking site.

An additional percentage (also less than 1 percent) of habitat would be temporarily lost during the excavation of the septic system, utility lines, and well and would be mitigated through restoration of the habitat with native plants suitable for NIDGS. The remaining NIDGS habitat (60 percent of the total covered area) would be maintained and actions to minimize and mitigate effects would be implemented to address the potential for human disturbance. The NIDGS site is located in close proximity to another residential development and a gravel roadway. The project to construct an RV parking site would not significantly change this setting or the accompanying human disturbance level. The permittees would not occupy the residence year-round, but would likely only be occasional summer and fall residents. Due to difficulties accessing the site earlier in the year (snow covered roads), occupancy by the permittees of the site would likely begin in May, thereby avoiding any disturbance impacts during the period in which NIDGS first emerge from hibernation and breed.

Take of NIDGS may occur in the form of harassment, but the action contains minimization measures that should be sufficient to reduce the amount of this form of take to an insignificant level. In the Protected Area, the Applicants will avoid any ground disturbing activity and restrict their pets (dogs and cats) from using the area or harassing (chasing or killing) NIDGS. Harassment of NIDGS in the Protected Area resulting from activities conducted in the Project Area may result, but these duration and frequency of the events would likely be short, irregular, and occasional.

No critical habitat has been designated or proposed for this species; therefore, none would be affected.

I. Have adverse effects on wetlands, floodplains or be considered a water development project thus requiring compliance with either Executive Order 11988 (Floodplain Management), Executive Order 11990 (Protection of Wetlands), or the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act?

No. The project addressed in the HCP would not impact wetlands or floodplains and thus not require compliance with either Executive Order 11988 (Floodplain

Management), Executive Order 11990 (Protection of Wetlands), or the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act.

J. Threaten to violate a Federal, State, local or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment?

No. We are not aware of any Federal, State, local and/or tribal laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment that would potentially be violated under the HCP.

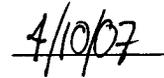
III. ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION STATEMENT

Within the spirit and intent of the Council on Environmental Quality's regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and other statutes, orders, and policies that protect fish and wildlife resources, we have established an administrative record. Based on the analysis above, the Schwisow HCP qualifies as a "Low Effect" HCP as defined in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Habitat Conservation Planning Handbook (FWS 1996). Therefore this action is a categorical exclusion as provided by 516 DM 2, Appendix 1 and 516 DM 6, Appendix 1 and no further NEPA documentation would be made.

Concurrence:



(1) Field Office Supervisor



Date

References

- Evans Mack, D. 2006. Northern Idaho Ground Squirrel. Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Boise, Idaho. E-28-4; Progress Report.
- Evans Mack, D. and E. Yensen. *in litt.* 2004. Memo from Diane Evans Mack, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, McCall, Idaho and Eric Yensen, Albertson College, Caldwell, Idaho to Ray Vizgirdas, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Boise, Idaho. Subject: Price Valley Fire Camp Concerns. Dated August 30, 2004.
- Idaho State Historical Society (ISHS). *in litt.* 2000. Historical and Cultural Resources on 14 acres (S1/2,SW1/4, section 2, T10N, R1W), 5.5 miles NW of New Meadows, Idaho. Dated August 1, 2000.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). 1996. Habitat Conservation Planning Handbook. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service. November 1996.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). *in litt.* 2004. 2004 NIDGS Field Surveys/Population Monitoring at Bob Mack's Private Property. Memo from Ray Vizgirdas, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Boise, Idaho.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). *in litt.* 2005. 2005 NIDGS Field Surveys/Population Monitoring at Bob Mack's Private Property. Memo from Ray Vizgirdas, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Boise, Idaho.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). *in litt.* 2006a. Field visit to Schwisow property. Memo from Jeri Wood, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Boise, Idaho
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). *in litt.* 2006b. 2006 NIDGS Field Surveys/Population Monitoring at Bob Mack's Private Property. Memo from Ray Vizgirdas, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Boise, Idaho.