United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
Folsom Field Office
63 Natoma Street
Folsom, CA 95630
www.blm.gov/ca/folsom

EA Number: CA-180-08-65

Proposed Action: South Yuba sediment reduction project

Location: MDM, T 17 N, R 7 E, Section 36, Nevada County

1.0 Purpose of and Need for Action

1.1 Need for Action

The Folsom Field Office (BLM) is planning to do erosion-control work on a small portion of the Excelsior Ditch on BLM-administered land located near Starvation Bar in the South Yuba River canyon. Runoff from large rainstorms has caused small landslides to fill the ditch's channel and the ditch's berm to breach where streams cross the ditch. The breaches have led to landslides below the ditch which has washed considerable amounts of sediment into the South Yuba River. BLM proposes to address the issue of preserving the Excelsior Ditch and reducing sediment flows into the river by doing erosion-control work at a major breach in the ditch on BLM-administered land. BLM would hire a work crew, possibly a Cal Fire-administered inmate crew, to use shovels, wheelbarrows, and other hand tools to clean the landslide material out of the ditch's channel and use it to repair the ditch's berm.

1.2 Conformance with Applicable Land Use Plans

The proposed action is consistent with the South Yuba River Comprehensive Management Plan, approved in June 2005, which was adopted in the Sierra Resource Management Plan/Record of Decision, approved in February 2008. The proposed action is located within the South Yuba Special Recreation Management Area and a state Wild and Scenic River corridor. Management objectives for this area include preserving significant cultural resources and protecting the Wild and Scenic River's outstandingly remarkable values, which include the Excelsior Ditch (see page 54 in the South Yuba River Comprehensive Management Plan).

2.0 Proposed Action and Alternatives

2.1 Proposed Action

BLM proposes to hire a work crew, possibly a Cal Fire (CDF)-administered inmate crew, to do simple, easy-to-build erosion-control work that would help preserve the Excelsior Ditch in the long run and reduce the amount of sediment flowing into the South Yuba River. The workers would clean the landslide material out of the ditch's channel and use it to repair the ditch's berm. At the breach, the workers would create a small channel through which runoff could drain during a flood event without further damaging the ditch.

The proposed action would involve the following steps:
1. Use hand tools to limb up trees to make room for work at point A, the location of the major breach in the ditch's berm, where the drainage crosses the ditch.
2. Move existing logs out of the way at point A. The logs were put in place by members of the public to help move water through the ditch during flood events.
3. Clean out boulders and rock collapse in the ditch's channel at point B.
4. Use these materials to rebuild the ditch's berm nearby, also at point B.
5. Pull and bag Scotch broom near point D, a large landslide.
6. Use wheelbarrows to haul material from a small landslide at point C to use to do erosion-control work at the drainage at point A.
7. Widen breach in ditch's berm to 96 inches at point A.
8. Use excavated material from widening the ditch's berm and from point C to build up the berm on the west side of drainage at point A.
9. Use excavated material and material from point C to build up the berm on the east side of drainage at point A.

Points of work areas within the project area (Refer to the project area location map attached):
A. Primary project work area where the drainage crosses the ditch.

B. Boulders and other rock collapse in the ditch's channel near small breach/blowout in the ditch's berm.

C. Landslide area which would be used as a barrow area.

D. Big rock slide/blowout.

2.2 Project Design Features

A BLM archaeologist would be present during project implementation to monitor and direct the work and make sure there is not any unnecessary degradation to the ditch and any other associated cultural resources that might be discovered during the project.

2.3 No Action

Under the no action alternative, the sediment reduction project would not occur.

2.4 Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis

There were no alternatives considered but eliminated from detailed analysis.

3.0 Affected Environment

The project area is located at approximately 1400 ft in elevation in the central Sierra Nevada foothills. Specifically the project area is located in steep, rugged river canyon, with rocky slopes, covered with poison oak, toyon, live oak, and other plant species. While the primary hydrological feature near or within the project area is the South Yuba River, there are numerous side tributaries on the south side of the river canyon. One of them, an unnamed tributary, runs through the project area and is the source of the erosion.

The Excelsior Ditch is the only identified cultural resources within the project area. The ditch is a

historic aqueduct that spans approximately 17 miles, crossing public and private lands within the South Yuba River canyon. The ditch was used for over a hundred years from the 1850s to the 1960s, first for placer gold mining and later for irrigation. It was critical to the economic development of the region and has been determined to be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Designed to convey huge volumes of water, the ditch was abandoned by Nevada Irrigation District in the early 1960s; its channel and earthen berms have been subject to erosion.

The South Yuba River has been designated a state wild and scenic river. (The South Yuba has also been recommended for federal wild and scenic river status.) One of the outstandingly remarkable values for which the river was designated is the Excelsior Ditch, where project work would occur. The area is within a BLM Special Recreation Management Area, but there is very little recreation in this area because public access is difficult.

The portion of the South Yuba River canyon in which the project area is located has outstanding visual resources. Development has been sparse, causing the stretch of river canyon to retain its rugged character and scenic beauty. The South Yuba River Comprehensive Management Plan and the Sierra Resource Management Plan/Record of Decision call on BLM to maintain class II visual resource management standards on BLM-administered land in this portion of the river canyon. Class II objectives are to retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be low. Management activities may be seen, but should not attract attention of the casual observer. Any changes must repeat the basic elements of form, line, color, and texture found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape.

4.0 Environmental Effects

The following critical elements have been considered for this environmental assessment, and unless specifically mention later in this chapter, have been determined to be unaffected by the proposal: air quality, areas of critical environmental concern, prime/unique farmlands, floodplains, hazardous waste, wetlands and riparian zones, wilderness, and environmental justice.

4.1 Impacts of the Proposed Action and Alternatives

The proposed action should have beneficial effects on the environment. With respect to soils and hydrology, the purpose of the proposed action is to reduce the amount of sediment that could potentially flow into the river as a result of the erosion. The project area is small. There would be very little impact to soils in this area.

A BLM botanist visited the project area and conducted an inventory of plants (see attached study). No special status plants were found in the project area. None would be affected by the proposed project. Small stands of Scotch broom were found. This species is considered to be a noxious invasive weed in Nevada County. The stands of Scotch broom have been marked with flagging tape and would be bagged and removed for disposal during the project. This would help prevent the spread of these weeds. The proposed action should have a beneficial effect on botanical resources.

The effects of the project on wildlife were analyzed by the BLM wildlife biologist. No special status wildlife would be affected. Wildlife and fisheries should benefit from the proposed action. Reducing the amount of sediment flowing into the river should help to improve the health of the river, including wildlife and fisheries habitat.

The BLM archaeologist studied the effects of the proposed action on cultural resources listed on or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (see attached study). The study included background records search and multiple field inventories. The study was done to help BLM comply with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. The BLM archaeologist found that the proposed action would beneficially affect the Excelsior Ditch, which BLM determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places around 1980. The proposed erosion-control work would help preserve the ditch in the long run by preventing flood waters from augmenting blown-out portions of the ditch. The proposed action would not adversely affect the Excelsior Ditch. The BLM archaeologist is the project lead and plans to be present during project implementation to monitor and direct the work and ensure there is no unnecessary degradation to the ditch or any other significant cultural resources that might be discovered during the project.

The proposed project would benefit the South Yuba Wild and Scenic River. The Excelsior Ditch is one of the river's outstandingly remarkable values. The proposed project would help preserve the ditch. The proposed action also benefits water quality. Recreation may be benefited in the long run. The proposed project helps to preserve the Excelsior Ditch, leaving open the possibility of a hiking trail on the ditch's berm (built in a way that preserves the ditch). Right now, there is very little recreation in the project area. Recreation would not be affected.

The outstanding visual resources of the South Yuba River canyon would not be affected by the project. Certainly, the project work would not be noticeable because it is so small. In fact, the project could help prevent a slide, which could mar the scenic integrity of the area. Class II objectives would be met. The proposed action would not change the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape would be extremely low—barely noticeable and would not attract the attention of the casual observer. We would not be adding anything that does not have the same basic elements of form, line, color, and texture found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape.

4.2 Impacts of the No Action Alternative

Under the no action alternative, the proposed action would not occur. It is likely that another major flood event could cause a substantial portion of the Excelsior Ditch to blow out, causing sediment to flow into the South Yuba River. The area might be more susceptible to slides in the future and we could continue to lose portions of the ditch. The ditch is considered a significant cultural resource and it is not desirable to lose any more of it. Also, under the no action alternative, we would be missing an opportunity to pull Scotch broom.

4.3 Cumulative Impacts

No cumulative impacts are anticipated.

5.0 Agencies and Persons Consulted

BLM consulted with Linda Chaplin and John Olmsted of Sequoya Challenge, a nonprofit organization with long-term interests in the Excelsior Ditch.

5.1 BLM Interdisciplinary Team

_____
NEPA coordinator/Archaeologist

_____
Recreation

_____
Botany

_____
Wildlife

5.2 Availability of Document and Comment Procedures

The EA will be posted on Folsom Field Office's website (www.blm.gov/ca/folsom) under NEPA (or available upon request) and will be available for a 15-day public review period. Comments should be sent to James Barnes at the Bureau of Land Management, Folsom Field Office, 63 Natoma Street, Folsom, CA 95630 or emailed to James_Barnes@ca.blm.gov.

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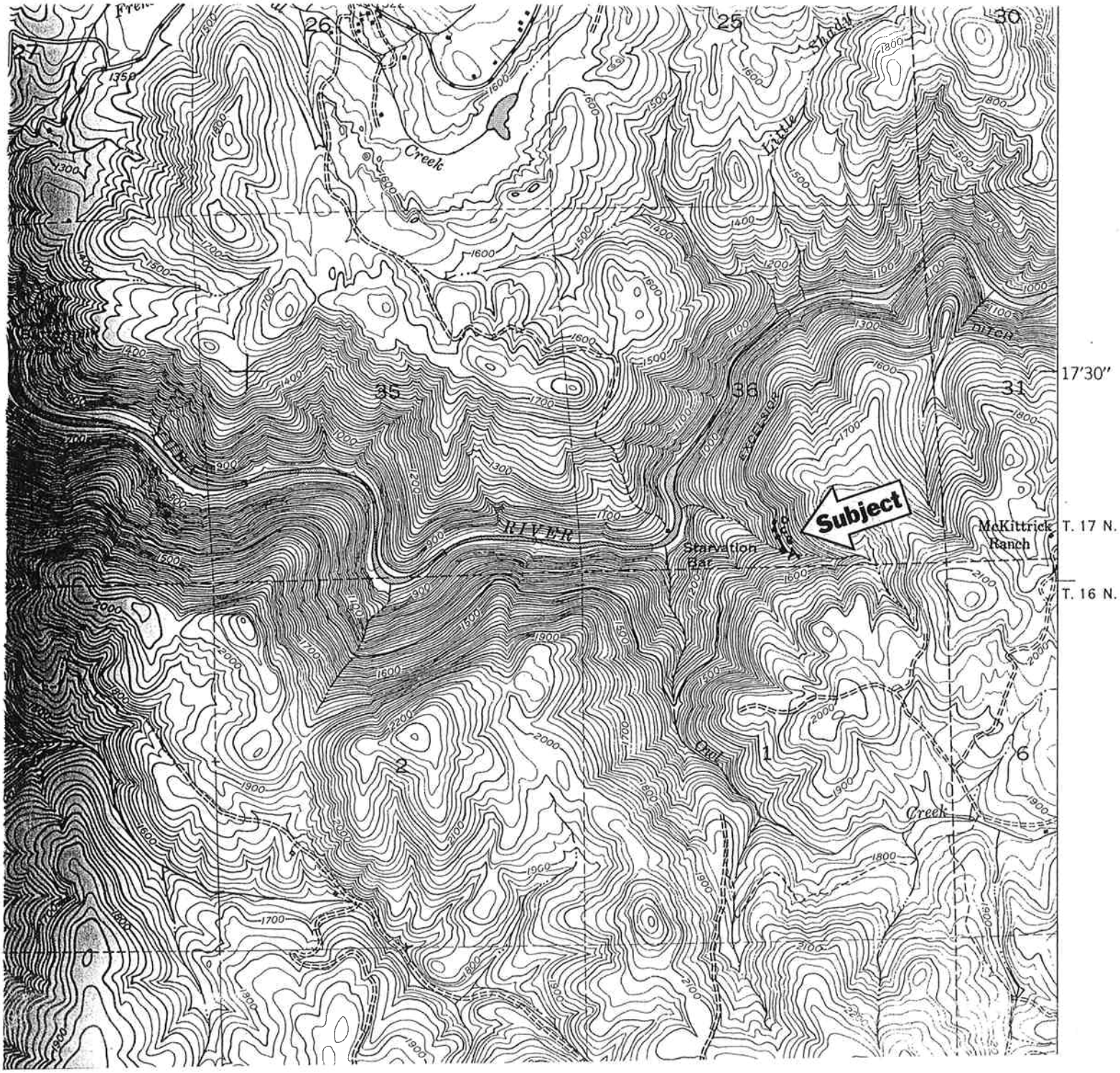

AREA OF POTENTIAL EFFECTS MAP FOR THE SOUTH YUBA RIVER SEDIMENT REDUCTION PROJECT

PORTION OF USGS 7.5 MINUTE QUADRANGLE: *FRENCH CORRAL, CALIF.* (1949)

MDM, T 17 N, R 7 E, SEC 36

LETTERED POINTS = WHERE WORK WOULD OCCUR

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South Yuba sediment reduction project (CA-180-08-65)
Finding of No Significant Impact
September 16, 2008

It is my determination that this decision will not result in significant impacts to the quality of the human environment. Anticipated impacts are within the range of impacts addressed by the Sierra Resource Management Plan/Record of Decision and the South Yuba River Comprehensive Management Plan. Thus, the project does not constitute a major federal action having a significant effect on the human environment; therefore, an environmental impact statement (EIS) is not necessary and will not be prepared. This conclusion is based on my consideration of CEQ's following criteria for significance (40 CFR §1508.27) regarding the context and intensity of the impacts described in the EA and based on my understanding of the project:

1) Impacts can be both beneficial and adverse and a significant effect may exist regardless of the perceived balance of effects. Potential impacts include minor soil disturbance. However, this impact would not be significant at the local scale or cumulatively because of the small scale of the project and project design features. Visual resources would not be impacted. In the long run, the project would help prevent portion of the Excelsior Ditch from blowing out and causing sediment from flowing into the river.

2) The degree of the impact on public health or safety. No aspects of the project have been identified as having the potential to significantly and adversely impact public health or safety.

3) Unique characteristics of the geographic area. The project area is within the South Yuba Wild and Scenic River corridor. The project will benefit the Excelsior Ditch which is one of the river's outstandingly remarkable values.

4) The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial effects. No anticipated effects have been identified that are scientifically controversial. As a factor for determining within the meaning of 40 C.F.R. § 1508.27(b)(4) whether or not to prepare a detailed environmental impact statement, "controversy" is not equated with "the existence of opposition to a use." *Northwest Environmental Defense Center v. Bonneville Power Administration*, 117 F.3d 1520, 1536 (9th Cir. 1997). "The term 'highly controversial' refers to instances in which 'a substantial dispute exists as to the size, nature, or effect of the major federal action rather than the mere existence of opposition to a use.'" *Hells Canyon Preservation Council v. Jacoby*, 9 F.Supp.2d 1216, 1242 (D. Or. 1998).

5) The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are likely to be highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks. The analysis does not show that this action would involve any unique or unknown risks.

6) The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration. Erosion-control work is not precedent setting.

7) Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. No significant site specific or cumulative impacts have been identified. The project is consistent with the Sierra Resource Management Plan and the South Yuba River Comprehensive Management Plan.

8) The degree to which the action may adversely affect National Historic Register listed or eligible to be listed sites or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historical resources. The proposed action would have not adversely affect the Excelsior Ditch, which BLM determined to be eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.

9) The degree to which the action may adversely affect ESA listed species or critical habitat. No ESA listed species (or their habitat) are known to occur in the project area.

10) Whether the action threatens a violation of environmental protection law or requirements. There is no indication that this decision will result in actions that will threaten such a violation.

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William S. Haigh
Field Manager, Folsom Field Office

Date