

Chapter 15

Alternatives Considered



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15 ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

15.1 Introduction

While the California Natural Community Conservation Planning Act is silent regarding the presentation of alternatives in an NCCP, the federal ESA requires MRC to identify alternatives to our HCP/NCCP and provide reasons why we did not select these alternatives. At least 2 alternatives are often included in an HCP/NCCP. One is a specific alternative considered before or after the HCP/NCCP process has begun, that reduces *take* below levels anticipated in the project proposal. The second is a “no action” alternative, where no Incidental Take Permit (ITP) will be issued; take is avoided or the project does not proceed.

Reasons for rejecting project alternatives can include economic considerations, especially if they would significantly and adversely impact the applicant financially. Applicants must provide data to support such claims, if available and non-proprietary, and show that their HCP/NCCP represents minimization and mitigation to the maximum extent possible.

In this chapter, MRC will analyze the alternatives to our HCP/NCCP in relation to the goals of this plan, outlined in section 1.4. USFWS and NMFS do not force applicants to choose one of the alternatives analyzed in their HCP/NCCP; rather they provide recommendations to the applicants about developing an acceptable HCP/NCCP that is likely to meet the criteria for ITP issuance. Whatever the alternative selected by the applicant, USFWS and NMFS must process the application and notify the public in the Federal Register in order to provide an opportunity for public comment.

MRC recognizes that the joint EIS/PTEIR will consider project alternatives. These may in substance be similar to, or they may differ substantially from, the alternatives we considered and describe below. The EIS/EIR may also contain a different number of alternatives than the HCP/NCCP.

15.2 Alternatives

In addition to the preferred alternative described in the remainder of this document, MRC considered 3 other alternatives:

1. No action.
2. Enhanced HCP/NCCP.
3. Terrestrial reserves.

15.2.1 No action

Under this alternative, MRC would continue current strategies for avoiding take of covered species and comply with all existing state and federal regulations for timber operations, as well as the MRC *Option A* and *Management Plan*. MRC would not submit an HCP/NCCP nor would the wildlife agencies issue a permit.

Under this alternative, MRC, as is currently the case, would prepare a THP in accordance with Forest Practice Rules (FPR) and develop site-specific measures to address potential environmental impacts not covered by these rules. CAL FIRE reviews the THP with a multi-disciplinary team composed of CAL FIRE, CDFG, CGS, and North Coast RWQCB. In some situations and for certain impacts, USFWS and NMFS provide technical assistance for the THP process.

Covered species would still receive “no take” protection and other benefits from existing regulations for watershed analysis, sensitive species, and cumulative impacts. MRC would also continue to gather information on the status of these species, through mandatory monitoring, such as surveys for northern spotted owls during THP fieldwork, and through voluntary monitoring, such as watershed analysis.

MRC rejected this alternative because it does not meet a goal of our plan, namely to attain “regulatory certainty” for our endangered species management. Our HCP/NCCP allows for species management for the entire plan area with specific goals and objectives to maintain and enhance covered species populations and habitats. The no-action alternative does not consider covered species as a whole, with over-arching population and habitat goals. At most, the no-action alternative looks at species populations and habitat within a watershed or smaller biological assessment area. By choosing the no-action alternative, we would still need to consult with the agencies on a project-by-project basis. Our HCP/NCCP, on the other hand, allows a programmatic approach. A Master Agreement for Timber Operations (Appendix T) is an example of such an approach. MRC may proceed with covered activities affecting stream crossings, for example, as long as we are in compliance with MATO; there will be no need for us to apply for individual stream permits.

15.2.2 Enhanced HCP/NCCP

According to this alternative, the term, plan area, and covered species would be the same as the proposed HCP/NCCP, but the protection measures would be enhanced. An enhanced HCP/NCCP would

- Authorize take of covered species through an ITP.
- Prescribe timber operations in accordance with the HCP/NCCP.
- Monitor only as necessary to ensure prescribed take levels.

An enhanced HCP/NCCP would propose stricter conservation measures, such as more extensive “no harvest” areas in Aquatic Management Zones (AMZs); larger core areas for spotted owl territories with high and moderate protection; larger buffers around potential marbled murrelet habitat; increased rates of sediment control; and increased canopy retention in high hazard TSUs. To offset the financial burden of stricter conservation measures, MRC would reduce the monitoring programs to the minimum required to ensure prescribed levels of take.

Under this alternative, MRC would develop THPs that go through the CAL FIRE review process, but the THPs would be in accordance with the HCP/NCCP. Because MRC would address issues on a landscape level, site-specific review would focus on activities or issues not covered in the HCP/NCCP and EIS/PTEIR.

Covered species in an enhanced HCP/NCCP would theoretically receive greater protection. Confirming this, however, would be difficult because of reduced monitoring. Non-listed species that thrive in mature forest would also benefit indirectly from the enhanced protection measures for covered species. However, early successional species may not fare as well.

Although this alternative could meet the goals of our HCP/NCCP, MRC would need to reduce funding for monitoring in order to cover the greater cost of the additional conservation measures. Without robust monitoring, we would not be able to implement a flexible adaptive management strategy to ensure that the conservation measures initially proposed keep pace with advancing scientific research and techniques. The intent of such monitoring is to accurately prescribe and, if necessary, adapt conservation measures for habitat and populations. This ensures that covered

species maintain their presence where they are populous, and increase their presence where, according to historic accounts, they are currently under-populated.

15.2.3 Terrestrial reserves

Under this alternative, MRC would provide reserve areas of about 55,000 ac for marbled murrelet, northern spotted owl, and Point Arena mountain beaver. This alternative would allow for

- An HCP covering terrestrial species.
- Take of only marbled murrelet, northern spotted owl, and Point Arena mountain beaver (authorized by the HCP, as well as 2080.1¹ and 2081 take permits under a revised Option A, SYP, or PTEIR from CDFG).
- Operations in the reserves only to meet ecological objectives.

This alternative may or may not preclude an NCCP since aquatic species, part of the natural communities within MRC forests, would not be covered. NMFS and USFWS are unlikely to approve an HCP for “terrestrial species only.” USFWS would need to consult with NMFS to issue an ITP to MRC since there might be potential adverse effects for listed salmonids as a result of ITP issuance. Our understanding is that USFWS and NMFS have a joint policy to avoid such situations and discourage HCPs for “terrestrial species or aquatic species only.” Moreover, under the 2081 or 2080.1 Fish and Game Code, CDFG can only give permits for incidental take of currently state-listed species and cannot give assurances about additional requirements.

Harvesting and management outside of reserves would be the same as the *No Action* alternative discussed in 15.2.1. MRC would continue to move away from even-aged management.

MRC would prepare THPs in accordance with the HCP and 2081 permit, along with the FPR. THPs would follow protections within the HCP for marbled murrelet, northern spotted owl, and Point Arena mountain beaver; protections for all other species would be dictated by the FPR and other no-take requirements. A THP would propose site-specific measures to address significant impacts on non-covered species; a multi-disciplinary team would review the THP on a site-specific basis.

Marbled murrelet, northern spotted owls, and Point Arena mountain beaver would receive great benefit from this plan. Salmonids and amphibians would receive the same level of protection as the *No Action* alternative. Non-covered species would not receive any benefit other than that derived from current “no take” standards, FPR, and voluntary monitoring from MRC.

Once again, MRC rejected this alternative because it does not meet a goal of our plan, namely to attain “regulatory certainty” for all of our covered species, not simply for marbled murrelets, northern spotted owls, and Point Arena mountain beaver.

¹ The numbers “2080.1” and “2081” refer to sections of the California Fish and Game Code related to take of state-listed species.

