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This section of the FEDERAL REGISTER contains documents other than rules or proposed rules that are applicable to the public. Notices of hearings and investigations, committee meetings, agency decisions and rulings, delegations of authority, filing of petitions and applications and agency statements of organization and functions are examples of documents appearing in this section.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

[Docket No. 99-073-1]

Availability of an Environmental Assessment

AGENCY: Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice and request for comments.

SUMMARY: We are advising the public that an environmental assessment has been prepared by the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service relative to the suppression of papaya mealybugs, *Paracoccus marginatus* Williams (Homoptera, Pseudococcidae). The environmental assessment's preferred alternative is to release into the environment nonindigenous wasps for use as biological control agents to suppress the papaya mealybugs. The environmental assessment has been prepared to provide the public with documentation of APHIS' review and analysis of the environmental impact and plant pest risk associated with releasing these biological control agents into the environment.

DATES: We invite you to comment on this docket. We will consider all comments that we receive by November 18, 1999.

ADDRESSES: Please send your comment and three copies to: Docket No. 99-073-1, Regulatory Analysis and Development, PPD, APHIS, Suite 3C03, 4700 River Road, Unit 118, Riverdale, MD 20737-1238. Please state that your comment refers to Docket No. 99-073-1.

You may read any comment that we receive on this docket and review copies of the environmental assessment in our reading room. The reading room is located in room 1141 of the USDA South Building, 14th Street and

Independence Avenue, SW., Washington, DC. Normal reading room hours are 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, except holidays. To be sure someone is there to help you, please call (202) 690-2817 before coming.

APHIS documents published in the **Federal Register**, and related information, including the names of organizations and individuals who have commented on APHIS rules, are available on the Internet at <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ppd/rad/webrepor.html>.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Dr. Dale E. Meyerdirk, Supervisory Agriculturist, Pink Hibiscus Mealybug Program, PPQ, APHIS, 4700 River Road, Unit 135, Riverdale, MD 20737-1236; (301) 734-5667. For copies of the environmental assessment, write to Dr. Dale E. Meyerdirk at the same address. Please refer to the title of the environmental assessment when ordering copies.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: As a part of a biological control project to suppress papaya mealybugs, *Paracoccus marginatus* Williams (Homoptera, Pseudococcidae), the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is proposing to release nonindigenous wasps in the genera *Anagyrus*, *Apoanagyrus*, and *Acerophagus* (Hymenoptera: Encyrtidae). Papaya mealybugs can cause serious damage to numerous agricultural products, including papayas, hibiscus, citrus, cotton, and avocados, which can result in significant economic losses. The purpose of the proposed action is to suppress papaya mealybug infestations throughout the United States.

Papaya mealybugs exist in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, have recently been found in a few locations in Florida, and have been intercepted in Texas and California. From Florida, papaya mealybugs could spread rapidly through the Gulf States and eventually on to Texas and California. The limits of its spread northward cannot be accurately predicted, but certain greenhouse crops would be at risk, even in cold regions.

The wasps will be imported from Mexico into U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)-certified insect quarantine facilities at the Beneficial Insects Introduction Research Laboratory (BIIRL) in Newark, DE. At

BIIRL, species identifications would be confirmed by USDA and State taxonomists, and undesirable organisms, such as hyperparasites, would be screened out and properly eliminated. Laboratory colonies would be established by APHIS and State cooperators. The wasps would then be released by APHIS and State cooperators in areas invaded by the papaya mealybug. Such areas include the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and Florida, where the papaya mealybug is now present. The papaya mealybug may also spread to other States due to the presence of hosts and favorable habitats. These areas include Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. If the papaya mealybug does spread to these areas, APHIS and State cooperators will release the wasps in the affected areas also.

We expect that these stingless wasps would become established and reproduce naturally without further human intervention.

If APHIS does release the *Anagyrus*, *Apoanagyrus*, and *Acerophagus* wasps, these wasps will be the first exotic biological control agents approved for release against papaya mealybugs in the United States.

To document APHIS' review and analysis of the environmental impact and plant pest risk associated with releasing these biological control agents into the environment, we have prepared an environmental assessment relative to the release into the environment of *Anagyrus*, *Apoanagyrus*, and *Acerophagus* entitled "Control of Papaya Mealybug, *Paracoccus marginatus* (Homoptera: Pseudococcidae)" (October 1999). We are making this environmental assessment available to the public for review and comment.

The environmental assessment has been prepared in accordance with: (1) The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended (NEPA) (42 U.S.C. 4321 *et seq.*), (2) regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality for implementing the procedural provisions of NEPA (40 CFR parts 1500-1508), (3) USDA regulations implementing NEPA (7 CFR part 1B), and (4) APHIS' NEPA

Implementing Procedures (7 CFR part 372).

Done in Washington, DC, this 14th day of October 1999.

Richard L. Dunkle,

Acting Administrator, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

[FR Doc. 99-27321 Filed 10-18-99; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3410-34-U

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

National Forest System Roadless Areas

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement.

SUMMARY: The Forest Service is initiating a public rulemaking process to propose the protection of remaining roadless areas within the National Forest System. This proposed rulemaking responds to strong public sentiment for protecting roadless areas and the clean water, biological diversity, wildlife habitat, forest health, dispersed recreational opportunities and other public benefits they provide.

The proposed rulemaking also responds to budgetary concerns expressed about the national forest road system. Building roads into roadless areas is expensive, and the public has questioned the logic of building new roads into roadless areas when the Forest Service receives insufficient funding to maintain its existing road system. Indeed, the Forest Service has a growing \$8.4 billion maintenance and reconstruction backlog and receives only 20 percent of the annual funding it needs to maintain its existing 380,000 mile road system to environmental and safety standards.

To assist in determining the scope and content of a proposed rule, the agency will prepare an environmental impact statement to analyze: (1) The effects of eliminating road construction activities in the remaining unroaded portions of inventoried roadless areas on the National Forest System; and (2) the effects of establishing criteria and procedures to ensure that the social and ecological values, that make both inventoried roadless areas and other uninventoried roadless lands important, are considered and protected through the forest planning process. Public comment is invited on the scope of the analysis that should be conducted, on the identification of alternatives to the proposal, and on whether the

rulemaking should apply to the Tongass National Forest.

DATES: Comments should be received in writing by December 20, 1999.

ADDRESSES: Send written comments to the USDA Forest Service-CAET, Attention: Roadless Areas NOI, P.O. Box 221090, Salt Lake City, Utah 84122 or by e-mail to roadlessareasnoi/wo_caet@www.fs.fed.us.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses when provided, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection and copying.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Project Team Leader, Scott Conroy, Attention: Roadless Areas NOI, USDA Forest Service, P.O. Box 96090, Washington, DC 20090-6090, (703) 605-5299.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

Although they make up only a small percentage of the nation's total land-base, roadless areas are critically important for the long-term ecological sustainability of the nation's forests. Roadless areas serve as reference areas for research, as a barrier against invasive plant and animal species that harm native species, and as aquatic strongholds for fish of great recreational, subsistence, and commercial value. Roadless areas often provide vital habitat and migration routes for numerous wildlife species and are particularly important for those requiring large home ranges, such as the grizzly bear and wolf. Many roadless areas also act as ecological anchors, allowing nearby federal, state, and private lands to be developed for economic purposes.

The public has rightfully questioned whether the Forest Service should build new roads into roadless areas when it lacks the resources needed to maintain its existing road system. The current national forest road system includes 380,000 miles of road, enough road to circle the globe more than 15 times. But the agency currently has a road reconstruction and maintenance backlog of approximately \$8.4 billion.

In addition to the monetary costs, the environmental costs of road construction in roadless areas remain visible and potentially damaging for decades. Road construction increases the risk of erosion, landslides, and slope failure, endangering the health of entire watersheds that provide drinking water to millions of Americans and critical habitat for fish and wildlife. Growing

scientific information demonstrates that road construction and other development in these sensitive areas can allow entry of invasive plants and animals that threaten the health of native species, increase human-caused fire, disrupt habitat connectivity, and otherwise compromise the attributes that make roadless areas socially valuable and ecologically important.

On January 28, 1998, the agency proposed revising the National Forest Transportation System regulations. Specifically, the purpose was to consider changes in how the road system is developed, used, maintained, and funded (63 FR 4350-4351). On the same day, the agency proposed a rule to suspend temporarily road construction and reconstruction in certain unroaded areas (63 FR 4352-4354). In response to the January 28, 1998, **Federal Register** notices, the agency received over 80,000 public comments. The agency published a final rule, referred to as the "interim rule", that temporarily suspended road construction and reconstruction in unroaded areas on February 12, 1999 (64 FR 7290-7305).

In commenting on the National Forest System Transportation System rule and the proposed temporary suspension rule, members of the public expressed serious concerns that are relevant to this proposal (64 FR 7290). Among those key concerns are beliefs that:

- The temporary suspension of road construction/reconstruction should be made permanent.
- Continued entry into roadless areas will decrease the amount of wildlife habitat available by increasing fragmentation.
- The temporary suspension does not go far enough to protect all roadless lands across the National Forest System.
- The temporary suspension should not have included exemptions such as the Tongass National Forest and those areas covered by the President's Forest Plan.
- Economic and social effects will result from reductions in commercial timber harvest and other commodity production.
- Temporary suspension of road construction and reconstruction essentially expands the wilderness system.
- Denying access to roadless areas violates the Alaska National Interest Land Conservation Act.

The interim rule provided a "time out" for the agency to develop a long-term road management strategy and to consider more fully public concerns about roadless areas and road management. As a consequence, the