



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Forest  
Service

Southwestern Region 3  
Carson National Forest  
Questa Ranger District

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**File  
Code:** 1950

**Date:** May 20, 2008

Dear Interested Party:

In compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Questa Ranger District of the Carson National Forest is embarking on an analysis of a proposal to improve wildlife habitat on approximately 21,000 acres of Valle Vidal (see Map 1 and Figure 1). Enclosed is the proposed action for your review. Comments on the proposed action should be as specific as possible to assist us in the analysis.<sup>1</sup>

### Proposed Action

The Forest Service proposes to prescribe burn approximately 21,000 acres on the north-eastern side of the Valle Vidal over a 10-year period (see Figure 1). The proposed action is designed to use fire to improve wildlife habitat by increasing the diversity in trees in terms of age and size, decreasing the density of trees (the number of trees per acre) within ponderosa pine and mixed conifer stands, restoring meadows and openings within ponderosa pine, by reducing the potential for high intensity (stand replacing) fire, and by maintaining and improving the vigor and productivity of key grassland species. The proposed action also includes conducting additional burning treatments until the project objectives (restoring openings, maintaining/improving grasslands vigor and productivity, reduced stand density, and reduced fire risk) is met.

Components of the proposed action are:

- Prescribe burn approximately 21,000 acres over a period of 10 years. The size, timing, and intensity of individual burns would be determined by considering weather conditions and the burning method likely to provide the best results. Based on past experience, the burns would be phased and the average size of each burn would likely be approximately 2,000 acres. Each burn may require up to one week to complete.

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<sup>1</sup> Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action, and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered. Additionally, pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27(d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that, under the FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and where the request is denied, the agency will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address.

- Where needed, mixed conifer (9" dbh and less) that is encroaching on grassland meadow openings would be removed by hand and chainsaw. Treated areas would be burned to replicate natural disturbances and promote grassland and meadow regeneration. These areas would be treated until grassland species have improved vigor and productivity.

To reduce or eliminate resource impacts, the following mitigation would be applied:

- Infrastructure such as historic properties, developed campgrounds (Cimarron and McCrystal), day use areas, the Whitman Vega Boy Scout tent platform, and range infrastructure (such as fences and windmills) would be protected from prescribed burning by the construction of control lines around the facilities.
- Where possible, control lines would utilize Forest Roads (FR) 1950, 1913, 1914, and 1910 and natural features such as rocks and cliffs. Where needed, woody vegetation (9" dbh and less) that borders road corridors would be limbed and scattered on either side of the road edge to increase the effectiveness of using the roads as a control feature.
- In addition to applying soil and water best management practices (BMP), streamside management buffers (SMZ) would be established around 3 perennial creeks (McCrystal, North Ponil, and Middle Ponil) and the intermittent drainages of Whitman-Vega to protect riparian areas and prevent potential water quality degradation.
- No roads would be constructed. Crews would use a combination of walk in and ATV's to access treatment areas. The use of ATV's would be limited to existing roadbeds that are currently closed to motorized use but used by horse and foot traffic. Incidental cross-country access may be needed to safely (and efficiently) implement the project.
- To reduce the negative effects to special use permit holders, recreationists, and hunters during burning periods, advance notice would be provided on planned burns.

## Monitoring

Monitoring is used to assess how well individual burning treatments met the objective of improving habitat conditions. First Order Fire Effects (FOFE) monitoring would be used to determine the number of acres burned, the intensity of the burn, if the treatments created openings, if meadow encroachment was reduced, if woody species were reduced and grass and forbs increased, and whether vegetation moved towards a more natural state. Before each subsequent re-entry, an assessment for changed conditions or circumstances within the project area would be assessed.

## Need for the Proposed Action

### **Existing Condition**

There is approximately 14,000 acres of ponderosa pine in the analysis area. Currently, the majority of trees are even aged and there is a lack of mature trees and early seral (grass and forbs) openings. Mixed conifer is encroaching within the ponderosa pine stands further reducing the number of small openings found within these stands. The lack of trees that are of various sizes and ages as well as the lack of small openings affect species such as goshawk by reducing the available habitat for goshawk prey species (mice, voles, etc). In addition, it creates stands that are too dense for the goshawk to be able to hunt in.

There is approximately 4,000 acres of mixed conifer. Most mixed conifer stands are dense and overstocked and this is inhibiting the ability of more mature and established trees to grow larger. Currently, the habitat is considered restricted habitat for the Mexican spotted owl (a federally listed species), but it lacks the large trees and even-age distribution habitat component that would be required. In both vegetation types, an excessive number of trees per acre are contributing to high fuel loadings.

There is approximately 6,000 acres of grasslands (which includes open montane meadows). Grasslands provide foraging, denning and nesting habitat for a variety of wildlife and also provide key winter range forage for elk and deer. Mixed conifer and ponderosa pine is encroaching upon the existing grasslands which is reducing available forage and habitat. Key grassland species such as Arizona fescue, Thurber's fescue and several species of gramma benefit from fire because it stimulates vigor and productivity

### **Desired Condition**

To improve wildlife habitat in both mixed conifer and ponderosa pine, the desired condition is to have a more balanced and interspersed mosaic of vegetation representing all structural (age and size) stages including grass, forbs, shrubs, seedlings and saplings, and a mix of young, mid age, mature and old forest stands (USDA Forest Service, 1990). Within ponderosa pine, there is a need to increase the number of openings and reduce tree encroachment in ponderosa pine to improve wildlife habitat diversity for several species, including goshawk, Abert's squirrel and other small mammals. There is a need for frequent surface fires to maintain openings in ponderosa pine and for reduced tree density in mixed conifer to reduce the potential for extreme fire behavior and high vegetation mortality during a fire event. In the grasslands, there is a need for maintaining or improving grasslands and meadow habitat so that it is not reduced in size, lost, or diminished in quality.

## Level of Analysis

The analysis area has been surveyed and evaluated for heritage resources and will be evaluated for threatened and endangered species. A biological assessment and evaluation will be completed before the District Ranger makes a final decision. Given the type, size, and scope of this project, it is likely to fit fall under the direction of the environmental policy and procedures handbook, FSH 1909.15, chapter 30, section 31.2, categorical exclusion #6: *Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not*

*include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction (Service level D, FSH 7709.56).*

## Opportunity to Comment on the Valle Vidal Prescribed Burn Project under 36 CFR 215

The Notice and Comment direction provided in 36 CFR 215 is met with this letter. The purpose of this comment period is to allow the public early and meaningful participation on a proposed action prior to a decision being made by the Responsible Official.

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments<sup>2</sup> on this action will be accepted for 30 calendar days following the publication of this notice in The Taos News. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period.

Please submit written comments to: District Ranger (Responsible Official) at the address or fax number included in the letterhead. The office business hours for hand-delivered comments are: 8:00-4:30 M-F, excluding holidays.

Please provide oral comments at the Responsible Official's office during business hours via telephone (505) 586-0520 or in person, or at an official agency function (i.e., public meeting) designed to elicit public comments.

Submit electronic comments in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), Word (.doc), portable document format (pdf) to comments-southwestern-carson-questa@fs.fed.us. Comments must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic comments.

## Appeal Eligibility

It is the responsibility of persons providing comments to submit them by the close of the comment period. Those wishing to comment on this proposal should not rely upon dates or timeframes provided by any other source. Only those who provide comment or otherwise express interest in the proposed action by the close of the comment period will be accepted as appellants. Comments must meet the requirements of 36 CFR 215.6. To be eligible for appeal, each individual or representative from each organization submitting comments must either sign the comments or verify identity upon request.

We would like to know of any concerns or suggestions you may have about this proposal. If you have any questions, or if something is unclear, please contact Steven Miranda, Carson Fire/Fuels Planner at (505 758-6200) at the Carson Forest Supervisor's Office.

Sincerely,

GENEVIEVE MASTERS  
Questa District Ranger

Enclosures

## Background

The analysis area, which is located primarily on the east side of Valle Vidal, is located approximately 30 miles east of the community of Amalia, New Mexico. The area can be accessed from both the east and west on Forest Road 1950 (see Map 1 and Figure 1). Within the analysis area, elevations range from approximately 8,000 feet to 9,300 feet and the vegetation is predominantly ponderosa pine, with large grassland openings. Mixed conifer is found on the western edge of the analysis area.<sup>3</sup>

The Valle Vidal, which was acquired by the US Forest Service in 1982 from a Penzoil Company donation, is a place of numerous values. The diversity of vegetation (ponderosa pine, mixed conifer, high elevation grasslands and aspen) provides quality habitat for several species ranging from small mammals and birds to turkey, bear and big game. Elk thrive on the habitat which includes closed canopy ponderosa pine and mixed conifer (which provides thermal and hiding cover) stands that are located adjacent to open meadows and grasslands that provide quality forage. Most of the analysis area is classified as key winter habitat for elk. The Valle is classified by the New Mexico Game and Fish as a quality elk hunt with once in the lifetime hunting tags for bulls and cows. In addition, the analysis area has free flowing streams because segments of the McCrystal and North Ponil Creeks support species such as Rio Grande cutthroat trout.

All surface waters of the Valle Vidal Administrative Unit were classified as an “Outstanding National Resource Waters” (ONRW) by the New Mexico Water Quality Control Commission in September of 2005<sup>4</sup>. Surface waters designated as ONRW are recognized as waters that possess outstanding ecological or recreational values. This designation assigns the highest level of water quality protection in order to maintain the quality of these waters into the future for the benefit of both humans and wildlife.

Past management has affected the existing condition of the area. Because the area was heavily logged at the turn of the century, the trees are relatively young to mid-aged (less than 100 years old). In addition, a combination of intensive logging, aggressive fire

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<sup>3</sup> The legal description of the analysis area is Township 29.N, Range 17.E, Sections 1-20, Township 30.N, Range 17.E, Sections 20-23, 25-35, and portions of 36; and, Township 29. N, Range 16E, Sections 1-3, 11-14, and 24.

<sup>4</sup> NMAC 20.6.4.8.A. (3) (e), Antidegradation Policy and Implementation Plan. August 2007. “Preexisting land-use activities allowed by federal or state laws prior to designation as ONRW, and controlled by best management practices (BMPs), shall be allowed to continue so long as there are no new or increased discharges resulting from the activity after designation of the ONRW.

suppression, and rangeland grazing has resulted in a lack of fire at a large, landscape scale. Currently, approximately 90% of the analysis area is in Fire Regime Condition Class (FRCC) 2 and 3. A Condition Class 2 generally means that there is moderate departure from the natural (historical) regime of vegetation characteristics; fuel composition, and the frequency and severity of wildfires. Condition Class 3 generally means a high departure from the natural (historical) regime of vegetation characteristics; fuel composition; and the frequency and severity of wildfires. It is expected that a fire occurring in the analysis area could result in 50% of the analysis area burning in an uncharacteristically high to extreme manner.

Since approximately 1987, there have been numerous prescribed burns conducted throughout the Valle Vidal and one burn within the analysis area (see Figure 2.). The purpose of these burns was to improve the vegetation (ponderosa pine, mixed conifer and grasslands) structural and age diversity and ultimately improve wildlife habitat. The prescribed burning that has been conducted in the analysis area improved vegetation structure and age diversity and helped reduce stand densities and fuel loadings. However, this should be a continuous process and fire should be present on the landscape in intervals of 0 to 35 years (Allington, 1998).





