



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Forest  
Service

Mormon Lake  
Ranger District

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File Code: 1950-1

Date: July 29, 2005

Dear Interested Participant,

The Mormon Lake Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest is seeking comments on a project proposal to protect aspen in Priest Draw south of Flagstaff. Priest Draw is located approximately 7 miles southeast of Flagstaff, Arizona, T. 20 N., R. 7 E., sections 25 and 30 (see map). It is accessed by Forest Service (FS) Roads 132 and 235 from its eastern boundary.

#### Background

This project was originally generated in cooperation with Greater Flagstaff Forests Partnership (GFFP), a nonprofit organization based in Flagstaff. A collaborative effort was initiated in 2004 to develop community-based solutions to local forest health and fuel reduction concerns in the greater Mountaineer vicinity. Two projects, the *Mountaineer HFRA Project* and the *Mountaineer Community Trails Project* are a result of this collaborative effort. The aspen stands located in Priest Draw are within the planning area of these two projects but were not included as part of these two projects.

We recognize aspen communities as a critical component within the Coconino National Forest. Lower elevation aspen clones (less than 7500 feet elevation) represent ecologically unique sites that contribute to increased biological diversity. Both higher and lower elevation sites have been in a gradual state of decline over the past 50 years due to fire suppression and extreme browsing pressure from large ungulates. However, aerial and ground detection surveys have determined a large rate of decline in aspen clones across northern Arizona over the past few years due to defoliation by a severe frost event that occurred in early June of 1999. Many small, lower elevation clones are nearing 100% mortality. Monitoring plots located in aspen stands across the Coconino National Forest exhibit a combination of symptoms including reduced canopies, branch dieback, increased mortality, and either non-existent aspen regeneration success or ungulate browsing damage approaching 100 percent. Ungulate browsing is compounding the decline of aspen clones across the region by preventing successful regeneration of aspen. Mortality of mature aspen in many lower elevation sites coupled with continued browsing damage by ungulates is expected to result in an eventual type conversion from aspen to ponderosa pine.

Current conditions of the aspen stands located within Priest Draw include reduced crown canopies, high tree mortality, encroachment of ponderosa pine, and browsing damage to aspen suckers from ungulates. Desired future conditions include a healthy aspen stand with few ponderosa pine and abundant regeneration that does not exhibit evidence of ungulate browsing. A more thorough explanation of the aspen component in the Mountaineer vicinity is located in the Mountaineer Project Need for Change Report (November 2004) in the Mountaineer Project Record available at the Peaks Ranger District. There is a need to fence approximately 10 acres



of aspen to protect seedlings from ungulate browsing. There is also a need to prevent further pine encroachment and an eventual type conversion from aspen to ponderosa pine.

### Project Description:

Based on this need to protect aspen seedlings from large ungulate browsing and to prevent further pine encroachment, we are proposing to fence approximately 10 acres of aspen and thin ponderosa pine within these aspen stands as described:

1. Ponderosa pine less than 16 inches in diameter will be thinned within the aspen stands to prevent encroachment of pine.
2. Due to topography, a road, and the location of these aspen stands, there will be the need to cut some aspen snags (standing dead trees) less than 16 inches in diameter in order to construct and maintain the fence.
3. Construction of 3 enclosure fences in aspen stands. Fences will be approximately 7 feet in height. The middle 4 feet of the fence will consist of field fence. Two smooth strands of high tensile wire will be placed above and below the field fence. Either t-posts or ponderosa pine located at the edge of the aspen stand will be utilized as fence posts. Ponderosa pine used as fence posts may require some pruning of lower branches. Where possible, the fence will be located approximately one chain (66 feet) from the main portion of the aspen stand to encourage expansion of the aspen clone. See attached map for fence location.
4. Install an informational kiosk or sign near the aspen fencing that interprets protection of aspen regeneration from ungulate browsing.

**Design Features:** The following actions will be undertaken during planning and implementation of this project in order to coordinate a variety of resource values.

- All live trees and snags thinned within the aspen stands will be left on site as determined by the biologist for wildlife habitat and to provide further protection for aspen seedlings.
- Live trees used as fence posts will have wooden stays placed between the fencing material and bole to protect trees from girdling.
- Monitoring and control plots will be established within and outside of the aspen regeneration exclosures to evaluate the effects of fencing and ungulate browsing on aspen regeneration.
- Aspen enclosure fencing will be designed to maintain access to aspen stands for small mammals, i.e., smooth strands of single wire below field fence material.
- Implement the clearance recommendations in the archaeological survey and cultural resources clearance report.

- Maintain recreational access to vehicle parking at the trailhead on FR 235.

Environmental Analysis:

Based on our preliminary review of environmental effects, this project is proposed to be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment under categories 31.2 (5) of the Forest Service Handbook 1909.15. This category states “Regeneration of an area to native tree species, including site preparation which does not involve the use of herbicides or result in vegetation type conversion.” This project is not proposing the use of herbicides and is ensuring that this stand of aspen is not going to be converted to ponderosa pine. Public comments and additional Forest Service specialist review will conclude whether or not any extraordinary circumstances exist and if a Decision Memo is appropriate for this project.

Public Involvement

Written, facsimile, hand delivered, oral, and electronic comments are welcome. Please submit written comments by **August 19, 2005** to: Terri Marceron, Mormon Lake District Ranger, 4373 S. Lake Mary Road, Flagstaff, AZ 86001; FAX (928) 214-2460, or by e-mail to: <mailto:mpringle@fs.fed.us>. To provide oral comments or ask questions about the project, contact Patty Ringle at (928) 527-8285.

We anticipate a decision to be completed by late summer. Thank you for your participation in this important forest health project.

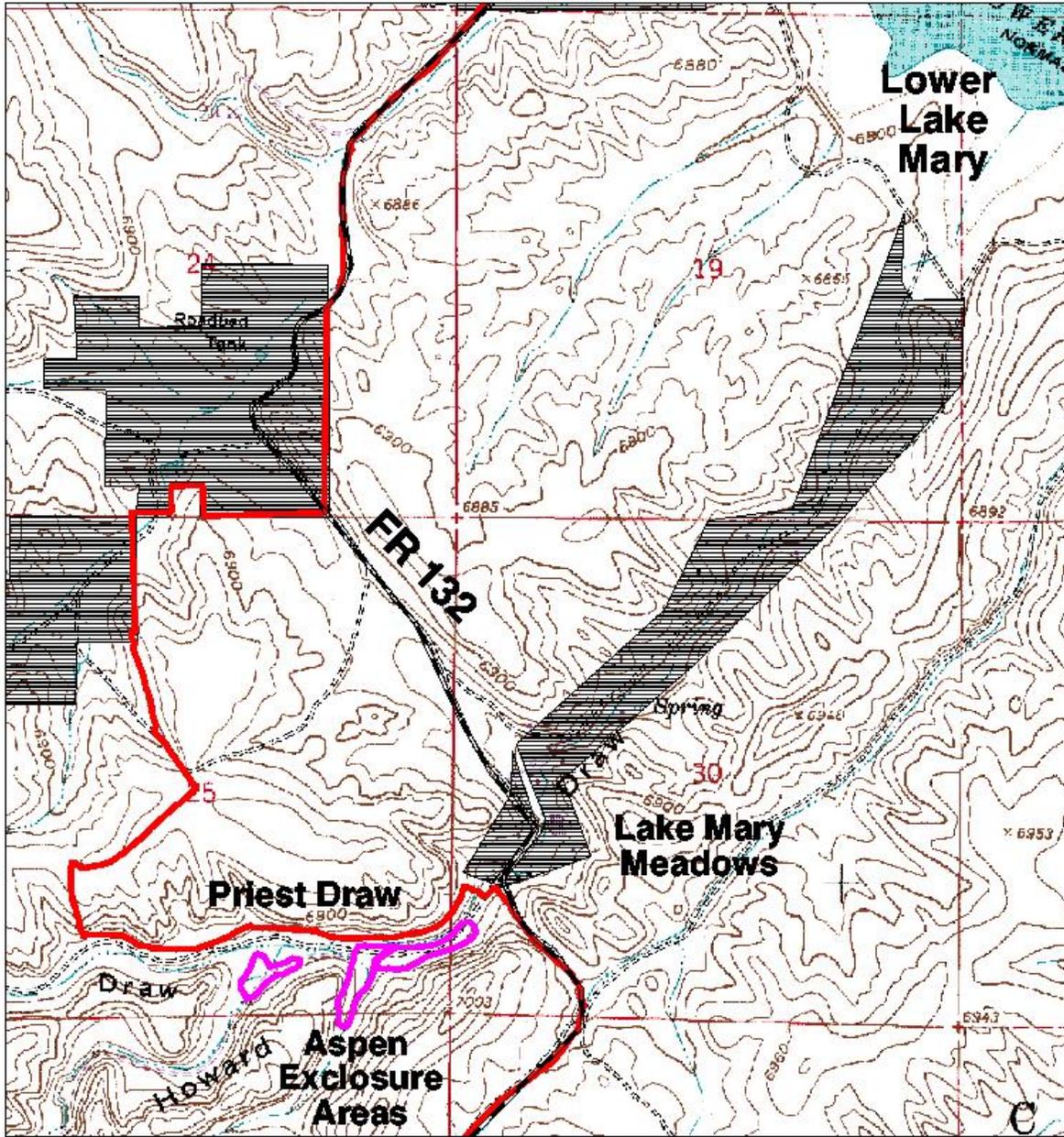
Sincerely,

/S/ TERRI MARCERON

TERRI MARCERON  
District Ranger

Cc: Project Map

# Priest Draw Aspen Protection Project July 2005



	Highways
	132 Road
	Mountainaire Project Area
<b>Ownership</b>	
	CITY
	COUNTY
	PRIVATE
	Aspen Fencing

