

DECISION NOTICE
AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

MORMON LAKE BASIN FUEL REDUCTION PROJECT

USDA FOREST SERVICE
COCONINO NATIONAL FOREST
MORMON LAKE RANGER DISTRICT
COCONINO COUNTY, ARIZONA

INTRODUCTION

This Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact documents my decision for the Mormon Lake Basin Fuels Reduction project, located approximately 25 miles south of Flagstaff, Arizona. The Mormon Lake Basin Fuels Reduction project will apply fuel reduction and forest health prescriptions to a 2,831-acre area. The project area lies entirely on National Forest System lands, within the Mormon Lake Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest. It is adjacent to private property along the southwest side of the community of Mormon Lake.

For many years, fire personnel and resource specialists have been concerned that a severe wildfire could occur in this area and about the effects it could have on the Mormon Lake community, wildlife habitat, and the forest as a whole. The project area has ground fuel loading, fuel ladders, and dense canopy conditions that could propagate a severe crown fire. Forty-four percent of the project area is rated as extreme, very-high, or high fire hazard. Only 472 of the 2,831 acres are rated as low fire hazard.

When combined with the very high to extreme fire danger weather that occurs in May and June, these fuel conditions could result in fires within the project area that would be difficult to control by initial attack forces. Models indicate that tree torching with spot fires would be common. A crown fire could develop and spread quickly into the Mormon Lake community. Crown fires occurring upwind of the project area could continue to carry across the project area with its current dense canopy conditions.

The Mormon Lake Basin Fuel Reduction Project proposal addresses the severity with which a wildfire is expected to burn. Federal funding resulting from the National Fire Plan will result in the development of a burn plan that will change wildfire conditions in the Mormon Lake Basin area.

A project record document [PRD] is located at the Mormon Lake Ranger District and contains supporting and reference materials to this Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact.

DECISION AND RATIONALE

After consideration of information provided in the Environmental Assessment (EA) and internal Forest Service specialist input, I have selected Alternative C with one modification. Alternative C proposed to allow thinning of turkey nest and brood areas between April 15 and June 30. Since

the Coconino N.F. Land and Resource Management Plan defers thinning within the turkey nest and brood areas between April 15 and June 30, this project will observe that deferral. Alternative C differs from the Proposed Action in that some acres are deferred from thinning for wildlife issues, some light thinning occurs within eagle roost buffers, a fourth Aspen stand is thinned to improve viability of the Aspen trees, and slash islands for turkey cover are replaced with log structures.

Alternative C will thin ponderosa pine on 2388 acres. Location Site 486-2 will be thinned to result in a 55% canopy closure instead of a 40% closure, resulting in some fire hazard reduction and improved wildlife habitat cover. Location Sites 479-15, 16, 486-21, 27, and 488-9 will not be thinned, but will instead receive burn-only treatments to provide a higher degree of wildlife cover along the southern boundary of the project. The Ponderosa pine less than 15" dbh will be thinned from among Aspen trees growing within location sites 466-04, 488-04, and 479-12 to promote Aspen regeneration. Location Site 479-20 will be thinned to 40% canopy closure (approximately 20 acres) except on its north-facing slope where it will receive a burn-only treatment (approximately 13 acres) to improve viability of this aspen stand. The thinning prescription in eight stands (213 acres) near the western project boundary will be done to provide a higher degree of wildlife cover on 160A. Thinning will occur within 300 feet of eagle roosts and osprey nests. Thinning within turkey nest and brood areas is restricted to July 1 – April 14.

No broadcast burning will occur within ¼ mile of known bald eagle winter roost areas from October 15 through April 15. Broadcast burning will be allowed to occur in turkey nesting and brood sites from July 1 - April 14. Log structures will be constructed for nesting and loafing in place of ¼-acre islands of untreated slash across the turkey nest and brood sites. These structures will provide longer-term nesting and loafing habitat while reducing fire hazard created by retaining slash islands. Maintenance (prescribed) burning would be conducted on a 5 to 10 year frequency after the initial broadcast burning is completed.

Where possible, existing roads will be used to access and conduct thinning. To facilitate thinning operations, 8.5 miles of roads are proposed for reconstruction (drainage and resurfacing), and approximately 2 miles of temporary road construction (grading without surfacing) are proposed. Temporary roads will be obliterated (ripped and allowed to grow over) after use. The second half of FR 90M will be converted to trail to eliminate vehicle disturbance of roosting bald eagles in that area. Two non-system roads leading from FR 90 to FR 90J will be converted to trail to reduce fire risk to the Mormon Lake community. A road segment between FR 90N and FR 219A will be converted to trail. The non-system roads between FR 9485J and FR 90L will be converted to trail to eliminate resource damage by vehicle use.

Purpose and Need

I selected Alternative C because it meets the project's purpose and need by:

- eliminating canopy ladders among the trees and increasing the height from the ground to the bottom of the canopy base, which will reduce the ability of a wildfire to transition into a crown fire within the project area and shorten the distance at which spot fires would be expected to occur;
- increasing the space between tree crowns, which will reduce the ability of a crown fire approaching from the southwest to continue across this area;

- removing much of the understory and reducing dead and down fuel loading, which will reduce flame lengths expected from a wildfire occurring within the area to less than 4 feet and make initial attack of wildfires more effective; and
- maintain the above objectives by periodic prescribed burning without additional thinning for approximately 20 years.

Alternative C responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the Coconino National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan), and helps move the project area towards desired conditions described in that plan for Management Area 3: ponderosa pine and mixed conifer on slopes less than 40% [PRD 5]. Alternative C will help bring the area into its desired fire hazard rating condition, as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. Existing, desired, and proposed fire hazard ratings for the Mormon Lake Basin Fuel Reduction Project

FIRE HAZARD	EXISTING (Acres)	DESIRED (Acres)	PROPOSED (Acres)
Extreme	74	0	0
Very High	242	0	0
High	927	0	0
Moderate	1116	0	313
Low	472	2831	2518

This action also corresponds to the Regional Forester's central priority of restoring the ecological functionality of fire-adapted systems. The project area is a Fire Regime 1 (low intensity fire recurring in less than 35 year intervals). The existing condition class of the area is 2 and is on the verge of leaving its historic range of variability. The proposed treatments will restore the area to within its historic range of variability.

Issues

In addition, I chose Alternative C because it addresses all of the issues identified during public scoping and comment.

The issue of impacting special use operations associated with the Mormon Lake Lodge (Issue #1 in the EA) has been addressed in the mitigation measures for this project; the Forest Service will coordinate thinning and burning with seasonal trail use.

There was concern that smoke from prescribed burning can affect the health and comfort of area residents (Issue #2 in the EA). As part of the mitigation measures for this project, the Forest Service will plan to burn in accordance with Arizona Department of Environmental Quality guidelines. Broadcast burning will primarily occur after Labor Day and before May 1. This will help avoid burning during the heavy summer use time in the area. Burning will only occur during periods of fair to excellent ventilation for burn. This will allow for the daytime smoke impacts to be reduced. Night time inversions holding smoke in the area will be reduced by burning earlier in the fall prior to on set of cold nighttime temperatures. Pile burning will generally occur during the winter period with snow conditions. Burning with a weather front approaching allows the smoke to rapidly exit the area due to higher winds and storm type conditions.

Residents expressed concern that failure to remain in control of prescribed burns can cause resource damage to public and private land (Issue #3 in the EA). Prior to any burning, a burn plan will be designed for the project area. This plan will address all issues related to the burn treatment, including complexity to control burn and how to assign needed resources to control the burn. Smoke management will likewise be addressed in the burn plan. The burn plan designed for this project will be completed and reviewed at the District then signed by the District Ranger.

There was the issue of livestock grazing primary turkey brood and nest areas (along the southern perimeter of the project) too soon after burning, preventing grasses and forbs to reach sufficient height and density for cover (Issue #4 in the EA). As part of the mitigation measures developed for this project, livestock grazing will be deferred until recovering grasses in this area have gone to seed. This deferment will be specified in the annual operating instructions (AOI) for the grazing allotment.

Thinning all stands along the southern boundary of the project can cause insufficient cover to be retained for turkey nesting and brooding, as well as deer fawning (Issue #5 in the EA). This issue resulted in the development of Alternative C, which will defer certain stands in this area from thinning. Location Sites 479-15, 16, 486-21, 27, and 488-9 will not be thinned, but will instead receive burn-only treatments to provide a higher degree of cover along the southern boundary of the project area.

While thinning aspen stands and fencing has little effect on flammability, it does improve viability of the aspen stands (Issue #6 in the EA). Alternative B proposed that Ponderosa pine be thinned from among Aspen trees growing in location sites 466-04, 488-04, and 479-12 to promote Aspen regeneration. Alternative C, proposes to thin ponderosa pine from existing Aspen trees on an additional 20 acres in location site 479-20 to improve the viability of that aspen stand.

There was concern that the timing restrictions for thinning and burning across turkey brooding and nesting areas often results in delays to complete fire hazard reduction for many years (Issue #7 in the EA). Within the project area, turkey nesting habitat occurs in areas that would receive burn-only treatment. Timing restrictions should not result in any delay of project implementation.

Leaving ¼-acre islands of untreated slash across the turkey brooding and nesting areas creates a fire hazard across the nest and brood areas (Issue #8 in the EA). This issue resulted in the development of Alternative C, which will substitute log structures as cover instead of the slash islands, providing better nesting and fawning habitat while reducing fire hazard.

There was also the issue of not thinning within the 300' buffer around eagle winter roosts maintains a high fire hazard among the roost trees and within ¼-mile of private property (Issue #9 in the EA). This issue resulted in the development of Alternative C, which will thin within the 300' buffer area, reducing the possibility of losing roost trees in a wildfire and also reducing expected wildfire behavior near private property.

Design Features and Mitigation Measures

In response to public and agency comments on the proposal, mitigation measures were identified to address potential thinning and burning impacts. Some of the following items can be considered as design features of Alternative C, which includes direction from the Coconino

Forest Plan and requirements of other laws (i.e. Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act). Design features and mitigation measures are described for the activity or resource area where they are intended to reduce impacts.

Thinning Operations

Conduct thinning within ½-mile of Forest Road 90 to reduce canopy closure to approximately 40%. This reduces the ability of a wildfire from transitioning into a crown fire, reduces the ability of a crown fire from continuing across the project area, and reduces the distance at which spot fires would be expected to occur. By reducing the canopy closure to this degree (40%) FS Vegetation Simulator indicates that the canopy would not close to a dangerous level for the next 20 years. Interlocking crowns will be retained (where they currently exist) for not more than 10% of this area (approximately 72 acres). These interlocking crowns will be distributed in strips running from SE to NW and will range in width from 120 to 600 feet wide.

In the remainder of the project area, design thinning to reduce canopy closure to approximately 50% and maintain the canopy closure at approximately 60% over the next 20 years. This prescription is expected to remove Ponderosa pine from among the Aspen stands and improve the viability of the Aspen. Location Site 479-20 will be thinned to 40% canopy closure (approximately 20 acres) to improve the viability of the Aspen on that site.

Throughout the project area, use uneven tree spacing and clumping to mimic the natural variation of ponderosa pine forests. Tree spacing guidelines will not be used to maximize tree growth where retention is based on desirable tree form and vigor. Instead tree spacing guidelines for this project should result in uneven distances between trees. Groups of 6-18 trees may be joined at the base, or 4-10 feet apart. These groups of trees may be 30 – 60 feet from other groups.

Do not thin on steep slopes (greater than 35%) where thinning is not feasible or economical. Do not thin using machinery on slopes greater than 25%.

No thinning or hauling activity should occur within a ¼-mile of osprey nests or eagle winter roosts when these sites are occupied.

Perform thinning operations with an awareness of local beetle infestation.

Avoid logging damage to residual trees to decrease the risk of attack by pine engraver beetles.

Remove badly damaged trees promptly.

Thinning may be accomplished by product traditional timber sale contracts, contracts under stewardship authority, or force account thinning in combination with windrow piling.

In stands infected with dwarf mistletoe, target infected trees for thinning. If this is not possible (e.g., an infected yellow-bark pine), cut a 30-foot buffer around the tree or trees (from the drip-line) to isolate the infection source. Stand 479-14 is also infected with dwarf mistletoe but was mistakenly omitted in the draft EA as a stand proposed for treatment. A thin-to-40%-canopy-closure, with a dwarf mistletoe preference, will be implemented and a 30-foot buffer left around individual or groups of infected yellow bark.

Defer timber harvesting and slash treatment activities in turkey nesting areas from April 15 through June 30.

Retain and/or develop an average of at least two turkey roost tree groups per section, in actual or potential turkey habitats.

Retain and/or develop an average of at least four turkey roost tree groups per section in identified key turkey winter range.

Slash Disposal

Pile and burn logging slash from thinning operations.

Locate slash piles to avoid damage to residual trees, snags, and logs when burning piles.

Consider pile size, prevailing wind direction, slope, and residual tree size when placing slash piles. Reseed slash pile locations greater than 400 square feet and within visual sight of trails immediately after burning. Use certified weed-free seed.

Do not place slash piles on trails or within 500 feet of private property (addresses Issue #2, EA, p. 4).

Broadcast Burning

Design prescribed burns to cover large areas (up to 150 acres/day) and be of short duration (2 to 7 days). Because the Mormon Lake community lies within a basin, it is difficult to reduce fire hazard without smoke from prescribed burns accumulating briefly in the basin. Prescribed burns will be executed in accordance with Arizona Department of Environmental Quality guidelines and under conditions of good ventilation to minimize impacts to the health and comfort of area residents (addresses Issue #2, EA, p. 4).

Conduct burning under appropriate conditions with adequate personnel on site (addresses Issue #3, EA, p. 4).

In accordance with the Coconino Forest Plan, minimize loss of snags, logs and roost trees during broadcast burning activities. Oak snags that are at least 10" diameter at root crown (drc) and 10' tall shall be lined. Snags of other species that are at least 12" dbh and 12' tall shall be lined. Dead and down material with a diameter larger than 3" shall be removed to 6' from oak trees larger than 4" diameter at root crown. If these same trees have cat faces or bole-rot, they shall be lined to prevent prescribed fire mortality.

To meet Forest Plan standards and guidelines for northern goshawk management, crews may fall a few trees (approximately 12 inches dbh) to replace logs lost during the prescribed fire. This will not exceed two trees per acre. Portions of the area would not have any trees fallen. This would not be implemented in areas easily accessible to firewood gathering or near homes or private property, and only in areas determined to be beneficial by the district biologist. Logs comprise only a fragment of the hazardous fuel profile. The thinning and prescribed burning reduce the fuel profile to a point where these felled-trees will not constitute a significant fire hazard, but will constitute valuable prey habitat (addresses Issue #8, EA, p. 5).

Minimize residual tree scorch through fire prescriptions to ensure post treatment stand approximates desired future condition and to meet visual quality objectives. Where the burn boss

determines accumulated debris threatens the viability of large oaks, remove the debris to a safe distance.

Most broadcast burning will occur in the fall. The area's dominant grasses are cool season grasses that will grow in the spring and seed out before cattle are brought in to graze (June 1). This will allow livestock grazing to be deferred one growing season after burning (addresses Issue #4, EA, p. 5).

All prescribed fire activities inside the Mexican spotted owl (MSO) protected activity center (PAC) including lining of snags and logs, line prep, layout and prescribed burning will be conducted after August 31 and prior to March 1 (MSO breeding season).

No broadcast burning will occur in eagle roosting areas from October 15 through April 15. Individual pile burning may occur within ¼ mile of bald eagle winter roosts year-round. These piles will not be allowed to creep and will likely require lining.

Defer broadcast burning within turkey nesting and brood sites from April 15 through June 30.

Vegetation

Retain all "yellow-bark" ponderosa pine trees.

Do not thin gambel oak species.

After thinning, fence aspen stands within Location 466 Site 04, Location 479 Site 12, 20, and Location 488 Site 04 as funds and volunteer work becomes available. Thinning will stimulate sprouting aspen shoots. Fencing will prevent over-browsing of new shoots (addresses Issue #6, EA, p. 5).

Soil and Watershed

Based on site-specific considerations, soil and water conservation practices will be developed for the proposed management activities to meet soil and water quality objectives and objectives of the Clean Water Act.

Although advisable on most harvest units, skid trail pre-location and designation is required on those harvest units that coincide with soil map unit 584. Attention to wet weather operations is particularly important on soil map unit 584. Operations on this map unit should be limited to relatively dry conditions. Protected stream courses will be designated on the sale area map. Disturbance from mechanical equipment will be minimal within 50' on either side of the protected stream course. Existing roads no longer needed after use will be obliterated or closed (see roads section). Roads will be effectively drained, scarified, and seeded to reduce soil erosion. Where practical, slash will be deposited in the roadway to discourage travel and to stabilize soil. All temporary roads constructed will be obliterated after use.

Designating skid trail locations and operating equipment on relatively dry soils will alleviate concerns for soil compaction. Undesirable effects from the proposed activities can be mitigated through the implementation of best management practices (BMP) and guidance practices (GP) for timber sale and service contract provisions.

After initial prescribed burning of these sites, defer livestock grazing within Location 479 Sites 15, 16, 17, 18, 20 and Location 486 Sites 3, 4, 5, 6, 21, 22, 23, 24, and 27 until returning grass on those sites has gone to seed (addresses Issue #4, EA, p. 4).

Wildlife

Follow the Coconino Forest Plan as amended and the 1995 Mexican Spotted Owl Recovery Plan, for endangered, threatened, and sensitive species.

The Forest Service biologist will work with the silviculturist during the layout within the MSO PAC (thin ponderosa pine up to 9" dbh), osprey nesting area and bald eagle winter roost areas (thin ponderosa pine up to 9" dbh) to reduce fire hazard somewhat without negative impacts to these birds (addresses Issue #9, EA, p. 5).

Observe timing restrictions for the following wildlife species:

Species	Timing Restriction	Area of Restriction
Bald Eagle	October 15 to April 15	Thin and broadcast burn within ¼ mile of roost
Osprey	March 1 to August 15	Within ¼ mile of active nest
Mexican spotted owl	March 1 to August 31	Protected activity center (PAC)
Turkey nesting habitat	April 15 to June 30	Burn-only areas

As per consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service for Mexican spotted owl [PRD 126], 1) no thinning and/or burning activities will occur during the MSO breeding season (March 1 – August 31) within the Nestor PAC; 2) no thinning and/or burning activities will occur within the 100-acre nest core within the Nestor PAC; and 3) road construction, thinning, hauling, and burning within the stand adjacent to the Nestor PAC will be restricted between July 17 and February 20 to minimize disturbance to the PAC.

As per consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service for bald eagle [PRD 126], 1) thinning and broadcast burning activities within 0.25 miles of roosts will not occur when bald eagles are present; 2) no yellow pines will be harvested; and 3) snags and roost trees will be lined prior to broadcast burning.

Sensitive Plants

Avoid piling slash or creating fire control lines within sensitive and rare plant populations. Avoid sensitive plant populations when constructing temporary roads.

District biologist will locate and mark the two locations to be avoided.

Non-Native and Invasive Weeds

Clean contract and Forest Service vehicles prior to entering the project area in order to reduce the introduction of invasive weeds.

Identify areas that are “weed infested”. Clearly mark these areas “on the ground” and on project maps and avoid if possible.

Clean all off-road vehicles entering the project area at a designated cleaning site (use Timber Sale Contract Provisions FS 2400 C6.36, Equipment Cleaning).

Clean all off-road vehicles traveling between areas infested with weeds and “clean” areas within the project area.

Clean all off-road vehicles leaving the project area if the vehicles have entered an area with known weed populations.

Recreation

For public safety, prohibit camping within active thinning and burning areas. Areas will be signed. Avoid thinning activities (cutting and hauling) on the following holiday weekends: Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and Labor Day.

Schedule thinning and burning activities so the “feeder” trail connecting Mormon Lake Lodge to permitted trails can remain open between the winter dates of December 1 and March 15, and during the summer dates of May 15 and September 10. Schedule thinning and burning activities so at least half of the permitted trails remain open between the winter dates of December 1 and March 15, as well as the summer dates of May 15 and September 10. The Timber Sale Coordinator will coordinate with District recreation staff to enforce these dates and inform the Mormon Lake Lodge manager (addresses Issue #1, EA, p. 4).

Cultural Resources

Protect historic and pre-historic cultural resources during project implementation. Prohibit vehicles, burning, or other ground disturbing activities within the sites. The team archaeologist will flag sites prior to implementation and monitor the sites during burning.

Mormon Lake Community

Priority for thinning as well as burning would be given to the area adjacent to private property.

The District Fire Management Officer will coordinate implementation with the Mormon Lake Fire Protection District. Currently, the Mormon Lake Fire Department is actively working in the community encouraging thinning projects and increasing public awareness of fire prevention techniques.

Roads

Close Forest Service roads 90K, 90L, 90M, and 9485J to prohibit vehicle travel, after thinning operations are completed. If further work is needed, and funds become available, obliterate roads to address sensitive wildlife habitat.

Non-system roads will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis for obliteration (closure) where reconstruction of Forest Service system roads may increase motorized use on these adjacent user-created roads.

The horseshoe of 219A will be obliterated as thinning is completed. This management action was assessed and approved in the 2002 Arizona Trail "Mormon Lake Segment" environmental analysis.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

In making the decision to select Alternative C, I considered two other alternatives (EA, pp. 6-9).

The EA contains summary of effects tables delineating the differences between these alternatives including, but not limited to:

Alternative A was the No Action alternative, in which current management plans would continue to guide management of the project area. No thinning, burning, or road management would be implemented in the foreseeable future. Forty-four percent of the project area rated as extreme, very-high, or high fire hazard. When combined with the very high to extreme fire danger weather that occurs in May and June, these fuel conditions could result in fires within the project area that would be difficult to control by initial attack forces. Fuel modeling indicates that tree torching with spot fires would be common. A crown fire could develop and spread quickly into the Mormon Lake community. Crown fires occurring upwind of the project area could continue to carry across the project area with its current dense canopy conditions resulting in the loss of important habitat.

Alternative B was the original Proposed Action, from which Alternative C was developed. The Proposed Action is similar to Alternative C except that:

- all stands would have been thinned in the western and southern project boundary, resulting in insufficient cover for turkey nesting and brooding, as well as deer fawning (Issue #5);
- ponderosa pine would have been thinned from fewer aspen stands, thus losing an opportunity to improve the viability of existing aspen stands (Issue #6);
- there would be no thinning within turkey nest and brood sites during brood season (Issue #7);
- ¼-acre islands of untreated slash would have been left across turkey nest and brood sites, resulting in increased fire hazard across the nest and brood areas (Issue #8); and
- thinning would not have occurred within 300' of eagle roosts, thus maintaining a high fire hazard among roost trees and within ¼-mile of private property (Issue #9).

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND SCOPING

The Forest Service met with concerned members of Mormon Lake Village in the spring of 2000. The project was listed in the Coconino National Forest's Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) on April 2003 and published in all subsequent issues. The Proposed Action was mailed on June 13, 2003 for comment to persons and organizations that expressed interest in the project or who were determined to have an interest for other reasons (i.e. adjacent landowners).

In addition, as part of the public involvement process, the Dine' Medicine Man's Association, Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation, Hopi Tribe, Hualapai Tribe, Navajo Nation, Pueblo of Acoma, Pueblo of Zuni, San Carlos Apache Tribe, San Juan Southern Paiute Tribe, Tonto Apache Tribe, Yavapai-Apache Nation, Yavapai-Prescott Tribe and the White Mountain Apache Tribe were all consulted on this project [PRD 73].

The Forest Service also met with managers of the Mormon Lake Lodge and representatives of the Arizona Department of Game and Fish. In August of 2002 and 2003, the Mormon Lake District Fire Management Officer met with local residents at the annual forest recreation

residents meeting to discuss the proposed action, with 40 to 60 local residents in attendance each time.

In September 2004, the District Ranger and Fire Management Officer met with residents of Mormon Lake who provided the Forest Service with a petition signed by approximately 600 names. The petition stated that all agreed with and would like the district to move forward with this project as soon as possible.

A legal notice announcing availability of the draft environmental assessment was published in the *Arizona Daily Sun* on January 26, 2005. The EA was sent to 147 people and was also made available on the Coconino National Forest website for a 30-day public comment period. Two comments in support of the project were received during this comment period. Also, one letter from US Fish and Wildlife Service was received after the 30-day comment period and was considered in the Response to Comments (see Appendix A).

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that the actions described in Alternative C will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment, considering the context of the project area and intensity or severity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

Context: This project is a site-specific action that by itself does not make international, national, regional or statewide decisions. The Forest Service proposes to apply fuel reduction and forest health prescriptions to a 2,831-acre area located on the Mormon Lake Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest. The scope of this decision is specific to the Mormon Lake Basin area. Achieving a low and moderate wildfire hazard rating across the project area will increase the effectiveness of initial attack by firefighters and reduce the risk of high intensity wildfires from spreading into the adjacent Mormon Lake community.

Intensity: The following discussion is organized around the ten intensity factors described in the National Environmental Policy Act regulations (40 CFR 1508.27) as they pertain to the context of the Mormon Lake Basin Fuels Reduction project under Alternative C.

1. Neither beneficial nor adverse effects are significant related to fuel reduction.

Direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of the project activities on various resources are disclosed and discussed in Chapter 3 of the EA and associated project record. It was determined that Alternative C will not significantly or adversely affect resources in the natural or human environment.

2. There will be no significant effects on public health and safety.

Public safety concerns were identified during the scoping process. Issues included thinning and burning impacts on recreational activities, ability to control prescribed fires, leaving untreated, high fire hazard areas close to private property, and smoke from prescribed burning. Alternative C was developed to address these issues and mitigate potential impacts to public health and

safety. The design features and mitigation measures of Alternative C will result in no significant effects to public health or safety.

3. There will be no significant effects on the unique characteristics of the area, such as historic or cultural resources, designated park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas (research natural areas).

This area does not contain nor is in close proximity to any designated park lands, prime farmlands, wild and scenic rivers, wetlands, or ecologically critical areas.

Historic and cultural resources are numerous on the Coconino National Forest. An archaeologist will flag sites prior to project implementation and monitor these sites during prescribed burning. Vehicles, burning, or other ground disturbing activities will not be allowed within known historic and cultural sites to protect these resources.

A cultural resources clearance report was completed with a no effect determination that received concurrence from the State Historic Preservation Officer on 2/24/2003 [PRD 2].

4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial.

This factor pertains to any disagreement between experts in a given field over the potential effects of this proposal. There is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the project based on the public comments received.

5. The degree of possible effects on the human environment is not highly uncertain, nor are there unique or unknown risks involved.

The effects analysis in Chapter 3 of the EA discloses that the effects related to thinning and burning to reduce fuel hazards are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk on the human environment.

6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects.

Fuel reduction projects have occurred in various areas across the Coconino National Forest, as well as on private and State lands over the recent past. This decision responds to a need to reduce the fire hazard rating within a finite area which has been determined to be at risk for possible severe wildfire that could spread across a larger area or into adjacent communities. The decision to implement this project does to give authority to thin or burn outside of the project area boundary and does not supercede later, site-specific NEPA analysis for fuel reduction projects in other areas adjacent to this project or elsewhere on the Coconino National Forest.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.

The cumulative impacts to different resource areas are discussed and disclosed in Chapter 3 of the EA. None of the direct or indirect effects were determined to be cumulatively significant.

8. The action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

An archaeologist will locate and mark prehistoric and historic sites in the area prior to project implementation and monitor these sites during prescribed burning. Vehicles, burning, or other ground disturbing activities will be avoided at these sites to protect cultural resources.

9. The action is not likely to adversely affect any threatened or endangered species or their habitat that has been determined to be critical habitat under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

Informal consultation was completed with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) along with a Biological Assessment and Evaluation completed for this project [PRD 115]. The USFWS concurred with the Forest Service's determination that Alternative C is *not likely to adversely affect* Mexican spotted owl or bald eagle or their habitat [PRD 126]. There is no critical habitat within the project area.

10. The action will not violate any Federal, State, or local law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment.

Alternative C is consistent with applicable Federal, State, and local laws for protecting the environment. The section below describes compliance with these laws and regulations as they pertain to this decision.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

The planning and decision-making process for this project was conducted in accordance with all applicable laws, regulations, policies and plans. This section briefly describes my findings regarding the legal requirements most relevant to this project decision.

National Forest Management Act and 36 CFR 219 Regulations

Alternative C complies with the Coconino Forest Plan and associated amendments. This project incorporates all applicable forest-wide standards and guidelines and management area direction as they apply to the project area [PRD 5]. This project is also in compliance with Forest Plan goals and objectives. All required interagency review and coordination has been accomplished.

The EA also considered effects on 8 Forest Service (Region 3) sensitive species and 10 management indicator species (MIS) that are found or have potential habitat in the project area. A Biological Assessment and Evaluation for threatened, endangered and sensitive species as well as a Wildlife Specialist Report [PRD 115] was prepared for this project and effects are summarized in the EA (pp. 43, 44, 58, 59). It was determined that Alternative C would not likely

result in a trend toward federal listing or loss of viability for sensitive species and would not contribute to a change in the forest-wide population or habitat trend for MIS.

National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA); Archeological Resources Protection Act; American Indian Religious Freedom Act; Executive Order 11593 (Cultural Resources)

Cultural resource surveys within the project area have been conducted in accordance with inventory protocols approved by the State Historic Preservation Officer. Fourteen Native American tribes and communities were consulted during public scoping. No comments were received.

It was determined under the Programmatic Agreement for Compliance with Section 106 of the NHPA that Alternative C will have no effect on cultural properties and values. In addition, implementation of Alternative C will not affect tribal access to Federal lands within the project area.

Endangered Species Act

Section 7(a)(2) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) requires that Federal agencies consult with the USFWS, as appropriate, to ensure that our actions do not jeopardize the continued existence of species listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA, or destroy or adversely modify designated critical habitat. A Biological Assessment and Evaluation for threatened and endangered species was submitted to the USFWS. The USFWS concurred with the Forest Service's determination that project activities proposed under Alternative C *may effect but are not likely to adversely affect* Mexican spotted owl or bald eagle [PRD 126].

Clean Water Act

Alternative C complies with the Non-point Source Intergovernmental Agreement signed by the Forest Service (Region 3) and the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality. There are no perennial or intermittent streams within the project area, and wet Beaver Creek is located some distance from the area. By employing soil and water mitigation measures (BMPs and GPs) the treatments proposed in Alternative C will have little cumulative effect to perennial waters and is likely to prevent the accumulation of negative watershed effects from severe wildfires and mitigate the effects of increasing recreational use on substandard roads.

Clear Air Act

All forest burning activities are regulated and administered by Article 15, Forest and Range Management Burn Rules (10/8/1996). The Arizona Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ) models emissions/pollutants from all prescribed burning within the state. Any prescribed burn planned by the Forest Service must be approved by ADEQ on a daily basis. ADEQ will not allow more acres burned per day, per air shed, than is acceptable with current air quality forecasts.

It was determined that Alternative C is not anticipated to cause disproportionate adverse human health or environmental effects to air quality. Proposed broadcast burning can be conducted without violating air quality regulations. Emissions from the initial broadcast burning of each block in the Mormon Lake Basin project would generally meet National and State Ambient Air

Quality Standards. Subsequent maintenance burns (to mimic the 3 to 15-year natural burning cycle) on any given block will generate far less smoke volume and have virtually no smoke after sunset of ignition day. Air quality standards would not be exceeded should a wildfire occur after Alternative C is implemented, except in a few isolated stands.

Executive Order 12898 (Environmental Justice)

Implementation of Alternative C is not anticipated to cause disproportionate adverse human health or environmental effects to minority or low-income populations.

Executive Order 13186 (Migratory Birds)

Executive Order 13186 requires that an analysis be made of the effects of Forest Service actions on Species of Concern listed by Partners in Flight (PIF), the effects on Important Bird Areas (IBA) identified by Partners in Flight, and the effects to important over-wintering areas. The EA analyzed the effects of fuel reduction activities to migratory bird species (pp. 62-68) and found that Alternative C would not change the existing forest trend for species of concern.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12 because only supportive comments were received during the official EA comment period.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

Implementation may occur on, but not before, the 5th business day following the date of this decision.

CONTACT PERSON

For additional information concerning this decision, contact Walker Thornton, Fuels Specialist, at the Peaks District Office, 5075 North Highway 89, Flagstaff, AZ 86004, phone (928) 526-0866 or e-mail walkerthornton@fs.fed.us.

/s/ Terri Marceron

6/13/2005

TERRI MARCERON
Mormon Lake District Ranger
Coconino National Forest

Date

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