



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Mormon Lake
Ranger District

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Dear Interested Participant,

The Mormon Lake Ranger District is pleased to announce the completion of the comprehensive analysis process and Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Mountaineer HFRA project. The EA, appendices, and maps are included in this package. This cover letter briefly describes background information for the project, the preferred alternative and selection rationale, and procedures for filing objections to the project.

Collaborative Process and Public Involvement

This EA and preferred alternative are the result of months of collaboration with Greater Flagstaff Forests Partnership, a diverse, community-based group dedicated to reducing the risk of wildfire to communities and restoring ecosystem health of the ponderosa pine forests surrounding Flagstaff. This collaborative effort is aimed at involving the greater Flagstaff community to develop community-based solutions to local forest health and fire hazard concerns.

The public also took advantage of public involvement opportunities to influence the EA and planning process. The proposed action was released for a 30-day public review on March 24, 2005. This scoping package was more comprehensive than what is typically sent out for projects on the Coconino National Forest, but it was important to give the public enough context and information to provide meaningful comments.

The District also held an open house on April 13, 2005 at Highlands Fire Station in Kachina Village to present project information, answer questions, and solicit feedback on the proposal. In total, 16 written comments were received that aided the planning team in presenting information, and developing mitigation and new alternatives included in the EA.

Healthy Forests Restoration Act Authority

This project is being planned and analyzed under authorization of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (HFRA), which was designed to expedite the preparation and implementation of hazardous fuels reduction projects on federal lands. Use of this authority helps streamline the planning process and allows the district to implement the newly developed Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) for the greater Flagstaff area that was developed by numerous local and state organizations and agencies. Appendix C of the EA is an HFRA compliance document that provides additional detail about HFRA authorities and requirements.

Planning processes under HFRA are different than projects planned under traditional NEPA procedures. This EA includes analysis of a no-action alternative (Alternative 1), the original Proposed Action (Alternative 2), and two additional action alternatives that respond directly to public comments from the scoping period. While HFRA requirements in areas with an approved CWPP only require one additional action alternative to be analyzed, two additional alternatives were developed to respond to incongruent public issues—a proposal for a large tree diameter limit and a wildlife research proposal that requires large tree removal.



Preferred Alternative

It is my decision to select Alternative 3 as the preferred alternative for this project. This alternative includes:

- Mechanical Thinning on approximately 13,780 acres including specific treatments on 1,310 acres to address wildlife research area proposals submitted by Greater Flagstaff Forests Partnership and other entities;
- Initial and maintenance prescribed burning on approximately 15,256 acres;
- Designating an open road system of 47.7 miles;
- Decommissioning 55.7 miles of user-created social and system roads;
- Constructing and decommissioning (after use) 1.3 miles of temporary road (3 segments) to provide access for thinning operations;
- Designating dispersed camping areas;
- Implementing mitigation and monitoring measures that minimize effects of project activities on soil and water, wildlife, vegetation, recreation, rare plant and cultural resource quality;
- Implementing Best Management Practices designed to prevent or reduce the amount of pollution generated by non-point sources to levels compatible with water quality goals.

A complete description of Alternative 3 activities and mitigation and monitoring measures is located in Chapter 2 of the EA.

I have selected Alternative 3 as the preferred alternative based on the following rationale.

Implementing the Memorandum of Understanding between GFFP and the Coconino National Forest

Through this alternative, we would implement the goals and objectives for forest management approaches that improve and restore ecosystem health of ponderosa pine forest ecosystems in the greater Flagstaff area, while concurrently reducing fire hazard and fuels.

The partnership actively participated in all aspects in the planning process and development of this Environmental Assessment. Public outreach strategies and efforts by partners have created greater community awareness and understanding of the restoration and fire risk issues of interest to the region.

The wildlife research proposal is a good example of adaptive management approaches to treatment design that GFFP, Arizona Game and Fish Department, and the Mormon Lake Ranger District developed over months of meetings, research, and field trips.

Addressing the Purpose and Need for Action

Alternative 3 best addresses the purpose and need for action from a fuels, vegetation, and transportation system management perspective while providing for unique wildlife habitat improvement approaches and research opportunities. Alternative 3 would reduce flame lengths, fuel loads, and crown fire potential, and allow low to moderate surface fires to take place. Alternative 3 would reduce canopy cover and stand densities while restoring a diverse, uneven-age forest structure that is essential for understory diversity and wildlife habitat. It also designates an open road system that consists of the minimum network of roads necessary to satisfy agency and public access needs, yet reduces impacts to wildlife habitat and soil and water resources.

Addressing Public Issues

Significant issues raised for the Mountainaire HFRA project were identified through public scoping. Significant issues were addressed through project design, mitigation measures, integration of specific Best Management Practices, effects analyses, and the development of new alternatives.

One significant issue brought up by two respondents is a large tree diameter limit for thinning activities. Two variations on this diameter limit were introduced. Alternative 4 was developed to address this issue, however certain aspects of the large tree management recommendations were integrated into the large tree management rationale and criteria for Alternative 3.

Alternative 3 focuses on the removal of smaller diameter trees to accomplish project objectives. It does allow for thinning of some large trees (16 inches to 23.9 inches in diameter) for the following purposes: creating openings and natural regeneration areas, creating uneven-age forest structure, meeting canopy cover target values, protecting “yellow” pine and large oaks, reducing dwarf mistletoe infection, and restoring grassland and savannah areas. These purposes stem directly from the purpose and need for action that was collaboratively developed with, and fully supported by GFFP and its Board of Directors. District staff has developed rationale and criteria that retain a majority of large trees while still meeting minimum threshold conditions to support the purpose and need and desired future conditions.

The number of large trees removed for these objectives are a small portion of the total number of trees removed. Forest age, size class, and structural diversity will be greatly increased—further meeting the purpose and need for action—with the removal of some large trees. Where possible, the District has included criteria for the removal of large trees to better define large tree harvest activities. Appendix C of the EA is an HFRA compliance document that provides detailed background information, rationale, and criteria for large tree management that complies with HFRA and the Community Wildlife Protection Plan. The Vegetation section in Chapter 3 of the EA fully describes the effects on the large tree component of this alternative.

Objections Process

This project is subject to the objection process pursuant to 36 CFR Part 218 Subpart A and is not subject to notice, comment, and appeal procedures under 215 (218.3). The Mormon Lake Ranger District is providing respondents with a 30-day objections period. Objections will be accepted only from those who have previously submitted written comments specific to the proposed authorized hazardous fuel reduction project either during scoping or other public involvement opportunities on the EA (218.6). Individual members of organizations must have submitted their own comments to meet the requirements of eligibility as an individual, objections received on behalf of an organization are considered as those of the organization only. If an objection is submitted on behalf of a number of individuals or organizations, each individual or organization listed must meet the eligibility requirement of having previously submitted comments on the project (218.6)

Objection Requirements

The objection must contain at a minimum, a sufficient narrative description of those aspects of the proposed project objected to, specific issues related to the project, and suggested remedies which would resolve the objection. Incorporation of documents by reference shall not be allowed, rather complete copies of references should be included.

Individuals and organizations filing an objection must also provide the following information: (218.7)

- Objector’s name and address; with telephone number if available.

- Signature or other verification of identity upon request. (A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic objections.)
- For objections with multiple names or multiple organizations, identification of the lead Objector is required. Verification of the identity of the lead Objector shall be provided on request.
- The name of the proposed project, the name and title of the Responsible Official, and the name(s) of the National Forest(s) and/or Ranger District(s) on which the proposed project will be implemented.

Written objections, including any attachments, must be filed (regular mail, fax, email, hand-delivery, or express delivery) with Nora Rasure, Reviewing Officer, at 1824 S. Thompson St., Flagstaff, AZ 86001; by fax at (928) 527-3420; or by email at nrasure@fs.fed.us within 30 days following the publication date of the legal notice in the Arizona Daily Sun. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered objections are 8:00 to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays. Electronic objections must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), and Word (.doc). It is the responsibility of objectors to ensure their objection is received in a timely manner (218.9).

The publication date in the Arizona Daily Sun, newspaper of record, is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an objection. Those wishing to object to this proposed project should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. Time extensions of the objection time period are not permitted (218.9).

Timing of Project Decision and Implementation

When the objection-filing period has ended and responses have been made to any objections by the Reviewing Officer, the Responsible Official may make a final decision on the project. The Reviewing Officer shall issue a written response to any Objectors within 30 days following the end of this objection-filing period (218.9). If no timely objections are filed, a decision can be made on the 5th business day following the close of the filing period (218.11). Implementation may begin immediately after the decision is made.

For more information on how this objection process works or additional information regarding the project, contact Roger Poirier, Team Leader, at 5075 N. Hwy 89, Flagstaff, AZ, 86004; by phone at (928)527-8254; or by email at rpoirier@fs.fed.us. The EA and additional information regarding this project can be found on the Coconino National Forest website at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/coconino/nepa/index.shtml>. Objections process information under 36 CFR 218 Subpart A can be found electronically on the national Forest Service website at <http://www.fs.fed.us/emc/applit/36cfr218a.htm>.

I would like to thank everyone who participated in this planning effort. This EA is the culmination of over a year of meetings, field trips, and passionate discussions over forest management in the area. It has been a tremendous value to the process to work with partners who've worked together to find innovative and common solutions to forest health and fire risk concerns. I'm confident this alternative will best meet the needs of the public and the forests surrounding the greater Flagstaff community.

Sincerely,

/S/ TERRI MARCERON

NOVEMBER 18, 2005

TERRI MARCERON
Mormon Lake District Ranger