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Summary of Proposed Action for the Verde Ranger Station Administrative Site Sale

Coconino National Forest

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Purpose and Need

Background

This document discusses a proposal to sell approximately 213 acres of Coconino National Forest lands where the current Verde Ranger Station offices of the Prescott National Forest are located. The proposal is a result of special legislation, the Arizona National Forest Improvement Act of 2000, P.L. 106-458 passed in November 2000, which allows the Forest Service to exchange or sell several sites in various locations in Arizona and use the proceeds of those sales to acquire, construct or improve administrative facilities. This legislation responded to a long standing issue of Verde Valley Forest Service offices being inadequate and high maintenance facilities that do not best serve National Forest or public purposes and limited funding for administrative site facilities construction. Proceeds from land sales in combination with Forest Service funding will be used to build new ranger station facilities in the Verde Valley starting in 2006. Two Verde Valley administrative sites were identified in the legislation: This proposal addresses a 213 acre parcel on State Route 260 in Camp Verde where the existing Verde Ranger District (Prescott National Forest) office is located.

Purpose and Need for Action

There is a need for the Forest Service to use the Arizona National Forest Improvement Act legislation to sell the Verde Ranger Station location in order to obtain funding to build administrative facilities that better serve the public and provide quality work environments for employees. This action is needed, because the existing ranger station facility at Camp Verde is not able to provide quality public service or employee work conditions due old and outdated facilities that are inadequate and are high maintenance. Congress passed this legislation in recognition of limited funding available to construct new facilities. This legislation allows for income derived from the sales of these properties to be used in construction of new facilities that better provide for public service and to improve employee working conditions.

This action responds to and implements the goals and objectives outlined in the Coconino and Prescott Forest Plans that promote providing quality administrative facilities that serve the public and meet administrative service needs. The Coconino Forest Plan identified the area east of the Verde Ranger Station site as base for exchange indicating the area met one or more of the criteria under the Landownership Planning/Land Classification standards and guidelines (page 86) for possible conveyance to private ownership. The administrative site was not specifically identified as base for exchange but has similar characteristics to adjacent lands that were identified and meets the landownership adjustment guidelines in the Coconino National Forest Plan (page 86). This project also helps to implement the standard and guideline under General Administration that states “Maintain an aggressive and pro-active public affairs program, Forest-wide, to establish and maintain informed consent for resource management objectives.” Prescott NF Plan Desired Future Conditions for facilities are to construct, maintain and regulate use of Forest Service facilities to protect natural resources, correct safety hazards, reduce disinvestments and support management activities and that all facilities provide visitor orientation, information and interpretation. The Prescott Plan also states in standards and guidelines that it will provide for establishing facilities necessary for the administration of National Forest lands and include construct/reconstruct FA&O facilities to support management and administration activities. Moving forward with proposed construction of new administrative facilities is consistent with the Prescott National Forest Plan.

Proposed Action

The Forest Service proposes to sell a portion of the 213-acre Verde Ranger Station site and use the funds derived from these sales to build new administrative facilities at the remaining administrative site to meet the purpose and need. The result of the sale of this site would likely be some form of private development as allowed through the local Town of Camp Verde development process. The location of the existing administrative facility and area east of that facility will be used for development of new ranger station facilities. Facilities would include approximately 12,000 square feet of office space and 16,000 square feet of warehouse/shop space. Improvements of infrastructure would likely also be needed at the existing site. The area along the Verde River, including the White Bridge recreation area would be retained in federal ownership. This proposed action is different than the proposal sent out in November 2003. The initial proposal indicated sale of the entire 213 acre parcel with restrictions to protect the riparian and threatened and endangered species habitat along the Verde River. Since that time and considering public comment, the proposal is to sell approximately

Decision Framework

Given the purpose and need, the deciding official reviews the proposed action and the other alternatives in order to make the following decisions:

Should this ranger station property be sold or not?

Should the whole 213 acre administrative site parcel be sold?

Should only a portion of the site be sold?

Should new facilities for the Verde Ranger Station facility be built on this site or not?

Should of the site be sold with restrictions or limitations?

The deciding official, Coconino National Forest Supervisor, may choose the No Action Alternative, the Proposed Action as stated above, or one of two other action alternatives in this project. The action alternatives include a variety of scenarios that sell portions of the 213 acre site or the entire site.

Public Involvement

The proposal to consider sale of the property has been listed in the Coconino National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions since July 2003. Information on sale of the entire 213 acre parcel was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping in November and December 2003. As part of the public involvement process, the agency sent letters to adjacent landowners and interested parties describing the possible sale of the 213-acre site as well as developed a news release asking for comment. The Forest Service also sponsored an open house in Camp Verde to allow for specific discussion on the sale of the Camp Verde site. The Forest Service has also had public involvement regarding the dedication and construction of a new administrative site for the Verde Ranger District, with one alternative along Middle Verde Road and one in Cottonwood near Zalesky Road. The public meeting in Camp Verde included information on consideration of new ranger station sites for the Verde Ranger Station, as well as information on the proposed sale of the 213 acre existing administrative site.

Using the comments from the public, other agencies, including the Town of Camp Verde, and adjacent property owners and the Yavapai Apache Nation (see *Issues* section), the interdisciplinary team developed a list of issues to address.

Issues

The Forest Service separated the issues into two groups: significant and non-significant issues. Significant issues were defined as those directly or indirectly caused by implementing the proposed action. Non-significant issues were identified as those: 1) outside the scope of the proposed action; 2) already decided by law, regulation, Forest Plan, or other higher level decision; 3) irrelevant to the decision to be made; or 4) conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence. The Council for Environmental Quality (CEQ) NEPA regulations require this delineation in Sec. 1501.7, "...identify and eliminate from detailed study the issues which are not significant or which have been covered by prior environmental review (Sec. 1506.3)..."

As for significant issues, the Forest Service identified [4] topics raised during scoping. These issues include:

[Recreation Site Access - 1]: *Sale of the Camp Verde site may result in loss of public access to the river and existing public picnic area.* The ability of the public to access the site and river would be compared in the analysis. The parcel contains one of the few public access points to the Verde River in Camp Verde and has been improved using public grant funds. The site contains picnic facilities and trail access to the river. Preservation of the public access at this site is required since SLIF (State Lake Improvement fund) funding was used to build these facilities and the grant requires that these sites remain public for 25 years after the use of the grant. Grant funding under this authority was applied to the White Bridge recreation site in the last several years. Preserving wetlands and floodplains are required under Executive Order and this will be evaluated under each alternative.

[Historical and Cultural Resources - 2]: *Sale of Verde Ranger Station site could result in loss or removal of cultural resources.* This issue would be analyzed with how well the alternatives address preservation of the cultural resources and meet the objectives of the federal cultural resource laws. Cultural resource sites on the Camp Verde site are being mitigated in expectation of sale without restrictions, through appropriate consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office and Native American interests.

[Threatened and Endangered Species Habitat - 3]: *Sale of the Camp Verde site could result in loss of habitat and potential protection for species listed under the Endangered Species Act, including: southwestern willow flycatcher, yellow-billed cuckoo, Mexican spotted owl, bald eagle, Yuma clapper rail, loach minnow, spikedace, Colorado pikeminnow, and razorback sucker.* While deed restrictions and existing floodplain development restrictions may mitigate potential impacts to habitat along the Verde River, there is concern about the effectiveness of these restrictions and who and how to enforce them if the area along the river were part of the sale. There is concern that despite having restrictions or requirements in place, once the property is transferred out of federal ownership, the ability to administer the restrictions to ensure protection of habitat may be limited and result in impacts to these species. Alternatives were developed that exclude a portion of the Camp Verde site from the sale to mitigate these issues by retaining this habitat in federal ownership and management.

[Existing Land Use of the Verde Administrative Site - 4] *The existing Verde Ranger District administrative site is in the best location to provide service to the public and the sale of the entire site would eliminate the option of building facilities at this location.* A separate analysis was considering new site locations for the Verde Ranger District administrative office (Verde Valley Admin Site Environmental Assessment). These sites were evaluated but did not include development of new facilities on a portion of the existing administrative site. The Proposed Action considers the sale of a portion of the site and development of new administrative facilities on this site. Other alternatives assume development of new ranger station facilities at a new site.

Other Public Comments

Other comments were raised during initial public involvement on this project. These comments are not considered within the scope of this analysis. Comments considered outside the scope are things where other agencies have the jurisdiction to address. In addition, specific decisions related to the sale process are also discussed. The comments are summarized below.

Some comments indicated that the property should be split into several smaller properties for sale in order to obtain the best return to the government during the sale process. While the amount of return to the federal government in the sale of National Forest land is very important, this analysis is considering the sale of a larger parcel without a specific decision as to the process or method of the sale. The Forest Service will ultimately determine the method of sale including the number of parcels that would likely provide the best financial return. The type of sale, parcel size and number, as well as the type of sale process to be used, will be an administrative decision to be made after the decision on whether to sell the parcel or not. In addition, some comments indicated an interest in bidding on the property if smaller parcels were offered. Methods of sale have not yet been determined and may offer these opportunities if parties are qualified under the selected method.

There were a few other comments related to possible future development at the property to be sold, including building heights, sewer disposal, water use and traffic patterns. The future development of the administrative site areas being proposed for sale is limited by Town of Camp Verde ordinances and their public development process. Current land use designations are considered in this analysis but not in detail since the future buyer(s) will determine the in coordination with government processes and regulations. These processes will ultimately approve sewer treatment, building development, parcel size, transportation needs and water adequacy.

Alternatives

This chapter describes and compares the alternatives considered for the Verde Ranger Station Administrative Site Sale project. It includes a description and map of each alternative considered. This section also presents the alternatives in comparative form, sharply defining the differences between each alternative and providing a clear basis for choice among options by the decision maker and the public. Some of the information used to compare the alternatives is based upon the design of the alternative (i.e., land use restrictions vs. exclusion of parcels) and some of the information is based upon the environmental, social and economic effects of implementing each alternative (i.e., effectiveness of restrictions for protection of habitat vs. maintaining federal ownership).

Alternatives

Alternative A No Action

Under the No Action alternatives, current management plans would continue to guide management of the project areas. No sale of the current administrative site at Camp Verde would be implemented to accomplish project goals. The existing Ranger Station would remain in federal ownership and management.

Alternative B

The Forest Service would sell the entire 213-acre Verde Ranger Station site in Camp Verde and use the proceeds to build new administrative facilities that better serve the public (see Figure 1). This alternative includes mitigation measures that would protect and preserve threatened, endangered and sensitive species habitat along the Verde River as well as wetland and floodplain and the existing park site. Sale would include mitigation measures to preserve public access to the park site at White Bridge for a term required by the SLIF (State Lake Improvement Fund) grant. The site would likely be developed as approved through the Town of Camp Verde's development process, which could include uses under the existing approved land use as documented in the Town of Camp Verde's Community Plan. A revision to the Town of Camp Verde's Community Plan was approved by the voters in 2005. Designated and uses on this parcel include open space along the river at White Bridge and ADOT drainage easement, low density residential (1 unit per acre) north of the ADOT drainage and commercial along the SR260 highway corridor (retail/service uses). This property was also identified as a growth area in the community plan and would fall under the goals and objectives stated for growth areas. Development on the property to be sold likely includes road and utility improvements as well as the land uses approved by the town of Camp Verde.

Alternative C

This alternative would convey the larger portion of the Verde Ranger Station site but retain a small, approximately 24-acre portion on the west side of the property adjacent to the Verde River, west of McCracken/Quarterhorse Lane and south of the ADOT drainage easement (See Figure 2). This 25-acre portion would remain in federal ownership to preserve the wetland and protect threatened and endangered species habitat along the Verde River, would retain the park area in National Forest management and retain wetland associated with the Verde River. The remaining area (approximately 195 acres) of the site would be sold, leaving the isolated 25-acre inholding of federal land along the Verde River. The parcel remaining in federal ownership would maintain current management including the day use recreation site at White Bridge and management of wetland/floodplain and threatened and endangered species habitat. This alternative eliminates the need for any restrictions on

the parcel that would be sold. Other future uses and development of the property to be sold would be as described in Alternative 2 under the rules and regulations of the Town of Camp Verde.

Alternative D

This alternative would retain a larger portion of the property and would allow for the construction of a new administrative site on this property. The river frontage area would be retained as in alternative 3 and the existing developed ranger station area south of the ADOT easement as well as an additional approximately 5 acres east of the existing site (See Figure 3). This alternative would construct a new ranger station facility at the existing site with parking areas, warehouse facilities, and administrative offices for the Forest Service, (Verde and Red Rock Ranger District staff). Preliminary conceptual drawings of potential site development are shown in Figure 4. The facilities to be constructed at this at a minimum would include the administrative site for the Verde Ranger District. This includes approximately 12,000 square feet of office space and 16,000 square feet of warehouse/shop space. Improvements of infrastructure would likely also be needed at the existing site. The developed site (including the White Bridge Park area) would remain withdrawn from mineral entry and other natural resource management activities as an administrative site. The remainder of the property, approximately 175 acres, would be sold and the proceeds used to construct new facilities per the Arizona National Forest Improvement Act of 2000 legislation. Areas to be sold under this alternative include approximately 5 acres north of the ADOT drainage area/existing ranger station office and south of existing private property, approximately 15 acres east of Quarterhorse Lane and south of SR260 and the larger 155 acre parcel on both sides of SR260 including north of Howard Road and north of SR260. Uses and development of the sale parcel would be as described in Alternative 2. In addition, for construction of the ranger station facilities as well as for other development, road access and utility improvements would occur accessing into the property.

Mitigation Measures Common to All Action Alternatives

In response to public comments on the proposal, mitigation measures were developed to ease some of the potential impacts the various alternatives may cause. The mitigation measures may be applied to any of the action alternatives.

- The actual sale process will not be determined in this decision. The sale process may require changes to obtain the best value and return to the government. Options for the sale process would likely include a competitive bidding process, negotiated sale, sale of only a portion of the properties, property sold in different parcels or a whole piece, sales at different timeframes or multiple methods of sale.
- Existing permitted uses other than grazing activities will be protected during the sale process. This would include utility and road corridors that have existing permits or easements authorizing the use of the federal lands.
- Existing land ordinances and regulations would be applied by the local government jurisdiction after sale of the property. Future uses and development will be managed under those regulations and ordinances, including floodplain ordinances that protect 100 year floodplain.
- Issuance of an easement to the Town of Camp Verde for Howard Road along the private property.

- Access will be designated just beyond the east side of the property on remaining National Forest land in the vicinity of the Camp Verde Sanitary District road. An easement will be provided by the Forest Service for public access from State Route 260 consistent with ADOT's access management plan and provide access to the sale parcel north of the ADOT drainage easement and east of McCracken Road.

Mitigation Measures Specific to Alternative B

- A restriction that would protect the habitat of threatened and endangered species and the wetlands along the Verde River portion of the Verde Ranger Station site would be placed on the property.
- A restriction that would preserve the recreation facility at White Bridge for the 30-year timeframe associated with the SLIF grant would be placed on the property.

Comparison of Alternatives

This section provides a summary of the effects of implementing each alternative. Information in the table is focused on activities and effects where different levels of effects or outputs can be distinguished quantitatively or qualitatively among alternatives.

Table 1. Comparison of effects of alternatives

	Altern. A	Altern. B	Altern. C	Altern. D
Public access to recreation site/river	Retains the entire parcel in public ownership so access opportunities do not change	Preserves access through restriction for the required term and then subject to successful buyer	Preserves public ownership of the area and therefore access will not change however area nearby would likely change	Preserves public ownership of the area and includes the administrative presence of the ranger station nearby.
Cultural and historical preservation	Cultural resources remain under current management.	Cultural resource would be mitigated and any information would be collected and documented per regulations and consultation.	Same as alternative B.	Same as Alternative B.
Impacts to threaten/endangered species	Species would remain as under current management.	Species would be protected by restrictions tied to the property and administered by another party or the Forest Service to ensure protection of aquatic and riparian resources.	Habitat for special status fish and wildlife species would be retained in public ownership using McCracken Road as the boundary. Administrative presence of the Forest Service Verde District office would no longer be at this site.	Habitat for special status fish and wildlife species would be retained in public ownership and not developed and the Verde Administrative site and presence would remain at this site.
Preservation of wetland	Wetlands would be retained in public ownership.	Wetlands would be conveyed out of federal ownership but restrictions would be in place to protect wetland resource.	Wetlands would be retained in public ownership.	Same as Alternative C.
Ability to provide public service at the existing site.	Public service would remain as currently provided at existing site or at an alternative new location.	Public service would occur at an alternative location and not at this site.	Same as Alternative B.	Public service would be provided at this site at an upgraded facility.

