



File Code: 1950-1

Date: April 20, 2006

Dear Interested Participant

The Mormon Lake Ranger District is pleased to announce the completion of the comprehensive analysis process and Environmental Assessment (EA) and Decision Notice/FONSI for the Mountaineer HFRA project. The Final EA, appendices, and maps and Decision Notice/FONSI are included in this package. This cover letter briefly describes background information for the project, the selected alternative, modifications I have made to Alternative 3 in the decision, and selection rationale.

### **Collaborative Process and Public Involvement**

This EA and Decision 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.

### **Healthy Forests Restoration Act Authority**

This project was 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.

### **Objections Process**

This project was subject to the objection process pursuant to 36 CFR Part 218 Subpart A and was not subject to notice, comment, and appeal procedures under 215 (218.3). The Mormon Lake Ranger District provided respondents with a 30-day objection period. One objection was received on the project from The Center For Biological Diversity. The objection was reviewed pursuant to procedures under 36 CFR 218.10 and on February 2, 2006, Nora Rasure, Forest Supervisor and Objection Review Officer, issued a letter to the Center of Biological Diversity describing the findings of the review and instructions she provided to the District Ranger in response to the objections. Adjustments and additional analysis have been made as a result of further review for the objections and as directed by the Forest Supervisor, and are reflected in either the Final EA and/or as part of the Decision. As the EA was being finalized the opportunity to correct a number of edit and typographical errors was also included. An edit error



affecting alternating pages, beginning with Page 20 through Page 40 of the EA, in the header section of Chapter 2 was not detected until after printing. The header on these pages incorrectly identifies the page as Chapter 3 – Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences. The correct header should read Chapter 2 – Alternatives, for these pages.

### **Selected Alternative**

It is my decision to select Alternative 3 with the modifications I have detailed in the Decision Notice as the preferred alternative for this project. This alternative includes:

- Mechanical Thinning on approximately 13,363 acres including specific treatments on 1,310 acres to address wildlife research area proposals submitted by Greater Flagstaff Forests Partnership and other entities. The treatment acreage for Alternative 3 has been modified in the Decision by dropping mechanical treatments in three stands. Two of these stands (147 acres) were proposed treatments in Mexican spotted owl (MSO) protected activity center (PAC) stands, that upon further review for the objection, were determined to exceed Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines by recommending thinning trees greater than 9.0 inches DBH, and thus the proposal was removed. Mechanical treatment in one additional stand was removed because upon further review for meeting Northern goshawk Standards and Guidelines it was determined that they could be better met without this treatment (Site 324/17, 42 acres). This acreage also differs from the Proposed Action mechanical treatment acreage (Alternative 2) by an additional 228 acres, which are deferral stands associated with the wildlife research proposal, called Meso-Reserve sites;
- Initial and maintenance prescribed burning on approximately 15,109 acres. The treatment acreage for Alternative 3 has been modified in the Decision by dropping prescribed burn in the two MSO stands. It was determined that desired conditions could not be achieved with burning only in these stands. The acreage of prescribed fire only treatment is increased in the EA for Alternative 3 due to reduction in acreage of mechanical treatment associated with the Meso-Reserve deferrals. These stands will receive a burn only treatment under the alternative. Burn only acres are also increased in the Decision by the deferral of mechanical treatment associated with Site 324/17. This site becomes a burn only treatment in the Decision. The total prescribed fire – burn only treatment is adjusted to 1746 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. The modifications to Alternative 3 are discussed in the Decision.

I have selected Alternative 3, with modifications, 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.

***Timing of Project Decision and Implementation***

A Notice of Availability of this Final Decision/FONSI has been filed with the newspaper of record, the Arizona Daily Sun. Implementation may begin immediately after publication that the decision has been made.

For more information regarding the project, contact Alvin Brown, Environmental Coordinator, at 5075 N. Hwy 89, Flagstaff, AZ, 86004; by phone at (928) 527-8234; or by email at [arbrown@fs.fed.us](mailto:arbrown@fs.fed.us). The EA, Decision Notice/FONSI, 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>.

I would like to thank everyone who participated in this planning effort. This EA and Decision 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/ GENE WALDRIP

GENE WALDRIP  
District Ranger