

Decision Notice
& Finding of No Significant Impact
Verde Ranger Station Administrative Site Sale

**USDA Forest Service
Red Rock Ranger District, Coconino National Forest
Yavapai County, Arizona**

Decision and Reasons for the Decision

Background

The proposal is to sell a portion of the 213-acre Verde Ranger Station Administrative Site as 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 long standing issues of Verde Valley Forest Service offices 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 and improve ranger station facilities starting in 2006. The Verde Ranger Station was one site identified in the legislation: This is a 213-acre parcel on the east side of Camp Verde along State Route 260 where the existing Verde Ranger District (Prescott National Forest) office is located. This proposal also includes development of new ranger station facilities at the existing Verde Ranger Station location. The environmental assessment (EA) documents the analysis of four alternatives to meet this need.

Decision

Based upon my review of the alternatives, I have decided to implement Alternative D, which approves sale of approximately 175 acres of the Verde Ranger Station site as well as construction of new ranger station facilities on the portion that will remain in federal ownership.

When compared to the other alternatives this alternative will allow the Forest Service to sell a portion of the ranger station administrative site that is adjacent to private land and use the proceeds of that sale to improve and construct administrative facilities. This alternative also retains ownership of the White Bridge recreation site, river access, wetland/floodplain, and threatened and endangered species habitat associated with the Verde River. Selection of this alternative does not specifically address the method of sale of the property or how the property will be developed after the sale. Current Town of Camp Verde processes, ordinances and community plan direction will be followed in any future development of the property. While selection of this alternative does have the potential for residential and commercial development on the 175 acres to be sold, these uses are not inconsistent with the development and uses in the surrounding area. Development of this property will likely occur based on the existing Town of Camp Verde land use designations that include low density residential use (1 unit per 1 acre) and commercial use along the highway corridor. This alternative authorizes issuance of an easement to the Town of Camp Verde for the existing Howard Road corridor and allows issuance of right of way/easements for an access road east of the sale property near the Camp Verde Sanitary

District road to provide future access to the sale parcel. In addition, this alternative approves construction of new administrative facilities on the retained portion of the administrative site (See Figure 3, EA) that includes construction of approximately 12,000 square feet of office space and 16,000 square feet of warehouse/shop space. Improvements of infrastructure, including water lines, would be constructed to and at the existing site. No new activities or improvements (Lot 10 and 12, Figure 5, EA) are to be constructed west of McCracken and Quarterhorse Roads to protect species status wildlife species.

Alternative D meets requirements under the Arizona National Forest Improvement Act of 2000, National Historic Preservation Act, and National Environmental Policy Act and is consistent with the Coconino and Prescott National Forest Land and Resource Management Plans. The Prescott National Forest Plan states it intends 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. In addition, this parcel is consistent with the Coconino National Forest Plan standards and guidelines related to land adjustment. Selection of this alternative is subject to the following mitigation measures:

- 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 jurisdictions after sale of the properties. 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.
- Right of way access will be designated on remaining National Forest land just east of the sale property 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 in coordination with ADOT and provide access to the sale parcel north of the ADOT drainage easement and east of McCracken Road.
- Development and activities associated with the new administrative facilities will be located entirely east of McCracken Lane.
- The parcels of land (lots 10 and 12 – see Figure 5) retained between the riparian area and the two paved roads (McCracken and Quarterhorse) will be retained in federal ownership and in an undisturbed state in order to serve as buffers between the riparian zone and future development in the uplands on the east sides of McCracken and Quarterhorse.
- Excessively loud construction activities associated with the demolition of the old administrative facilities and construction of the new facilities will not occur during the breeding season for species that are known to nest in the area (bald eagle/December 1-June 30, common black hawk/April 1-June 30, and yellow-billed cuckoo/June 15-August 31). If surveys determine that nesting birds are not present, construction that results in excessively loud noises may recommence.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, Alternative D, I considered two other alternatives and the No Action alternatives. A comparison of these alternatives can be found in the EA on pages 6-9.

Alternative A - *No Action*

Under the No Action alternative, current management plans would continue to guide management of the project area. The 213-acre Verde Administrative Site would stay in National Forest ownership and in the short-term would remain a federal administrative site. A new facility would likely be built at another site in the Verde Valley and existing facilities could be removed and decommissioned. Other management activities would remain the same including existing recreation access to the Verde River at White Bridge.

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, EA). 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 land uses approved 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 land 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 189 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 than existing authorized land uses. Other future uses and development of the property to be sold would be as described in Alternative B 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 the retained property. The river frontage area would be retained as in alternative C. Additional areas to be retained include 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, EA). 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 EA, Figure 4. The facilities to be constructed at a minimum would include the administrative site for the Verde Ranger District and warehouse for both the Verde and Red Rock Ranger Districts. This includes approximately 12,000 square feet of office space and 16,000 square feet of warehouse/shop space. Improvements of infrastructure, such as water line connections, 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 B and C. In addition, for construction of the ranger station facilities as well as for other development, road access and utility improvements would occur on both the sale property and the ranger station area.

Public Involvement

The need for this action arose in the late 1990's and authority to institute this sale occurred through the Arizona National Forest Improvement Act of 2000 legislation. 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 shared 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, the interdisciplinary team developed a list of issues to address (see EA pages 10-11). Many comments are within the authority of the Town of Camp Verde once in private ownership and managed through their development process and procedures and are outside the scope of the Forest Service's decision.

A Summary of the Proposal to Sell the Verde Ranger Station Administrative Site and opportunity to comment on the proposal was announced through a legal notice in the Arizona Daily Sun on September 17, 2005 providing for the formal 30-day comment on the proposal. Thirty-three letters and copies of the Summary document were sent to those that had commented in November 2003, had attended the public meeting or otherwise indicated interest in this project. A news release was sent out to local Verde Valley media on September 19, 2005 announcing the 30-day comment period. Articles were printed in the Red Rock News and Cottonwood Journal. One supportive comment letter was received during the 30-day comment period. Copies of the comments are in the project record for both the November 2003 and September 2005 comment periods.

Finding of No Significant Impact

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

Context: The setting of the selected alternative and proposal is local in regards to long and short-term effects on both human and natural resources. The effects of this action are limited to a small area of Yavapai County in the Town of Camp Verde.

Intensity:

1. My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action. Both beneficial and adverse effects were considered in the environmental analysis.
2. There will be no significant effects on public health and safety, since potential development of the property to be sold and the ranger station development will be done under ordinances and laws that require compliance with health and safety standards. No specific safety or health issues were raised as significant issues.
3. There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the site. This area is surrounded by highway and private land on three sides and the site to be sold and area for administrative site construction does not contain unique features. Alternative D retains the Verde River area in federal ownership and development of the ranger station will protect wetland and floodplain features of the property. There are no other sensitive resources or unique characteristics on the site, including farmlands, rangelands or adverse impacts to minority groups, civil rights, women, consumers or relative to environmental justice (see EA pages 32).
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial because there is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the project and the ultimate development of the area to be sold and change in use of the

property will be through a subsequent Town of Camp Verde development process. There is also no controversy over the development of administrative facilities at this site.

5. There is considerable experience with the types of activities to be implemented. The effects analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk. The Forest Service has completed many land exchanges in the Sedona area. Development on the 175- acre property to be sold will likely be similar to what is seen in various other areas of the community around the property. Administrative facilities at this site have known building and infrastructure design and construction standards with regard to new facilities. Effects of development are typical and not uncertain.
6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because sale of this property and development of new administrative facilities are separate actions and decisions. No other activities or decisions are necessary as a result of this decision. Other administrative sites in Arizona may be sold in the future associated with the Arizona National Forest Improvement Act of 2000 as well as under new legislation. However, neither the Arizona Act nor new legislation requires the sales. Any future sales of administrative sites are separate decisions and not related to this decision.
7. The cumulative impacts are not significant (see EA pages 10-35).
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. Cultural resource sites found on the parcel were tested and mitigated under current law and regulation. All important information was collected from the sites or the sites were determined as ineligible based on site testing. No other items or effects would occur as a result of the sale of the property. Cultural resource surveys and reports were completed and the Arizona State Historic Preservation office has concurred with the findings in this report and clearance for the sale of the property was given on January 31, 2006. (see EA pages 27-32). The action will also not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources, because no other resources were identified on the property.
9. The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species act of 1973. Alternative D retains important threatened and endangered species habitat along the Verde River in federal ownership. A Biological Assessment and Evaluation was completed on February 14, 2006 for the sale of the property and construction of administrative facilities. This document states that the sale and likely potential development of the property and administrative facilities in the future would not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat. No consultation with Fish and Wildlife Service was required although informal coordination was completed with USFWS staff. (see EA pages 11-23). Mitigation of impacts for administrative facility construction is required including noise mitigation during breeding seasons of yellow-billed cuckoo/June 15-August 31, bald eagle/December 1-June 30 and Blackhawk/April 1-June 30 and no new activities on lands west of McCracken and

Quarterhorse Roads (Lots 10 and 12, EA Figure 5). Noise mitigation is required only when breeding birds are present and noise levels are above ambient noise along the river corridor.

10. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA. The action is consistent with the Coconino and Prescott National Forest Land and Resource Management Plans (See EA page 34-36).

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This decision to sell the 175 acres of the Verde Ranger Station Administrative Site (Proposed Action) is consistent with the intent of both the Coconino and Prescott forest plans' long term goals and objectives. The project was designed in conformance with land and resource management plan standards and incorporates appropriate land and resource management plan guidelines for providing improved visitor services and employee facilities and is consistent with land adjustment guidelines for conveyance of federal land as well as being adjacent to lands identified as base in exchange (Coconino Land and Resource Management Plan: page 86, Prescott Forest Plan, pages 50).

A Biological Assessment and Evaluation (BA&E) was completed for Sedona Administrative Site Sale dated February 14, 2006 to ensure compliance with the Endangered Species Act.

The decision to sell the property is also consistent with Public Law (P.L.) 106-458 the Arizona National Forest Improvement Act of 2000, which authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to dispose of certain Forest Service Administrative Sites, including the entire 213- acre site, within the State of Arizona.

Heritage Resources Clearance was obtained for this project on January 31, 2006 to ensure compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act (36 CFR 800).

A mineral report was prepared which documents a field examination that found that the subject parcel has low potential for locatable, salable and leasable minerals.

A Hazardous Material Examination of the project area was completed to ensure compliance with Forest Service Manual 2166. Hazardous materials in reportable quantities will be removed from the site prior to sale. Only minor amounts of hazardous materials are present on the site, such as fuels and oils and small amounts of asbestos.

A Water Resources Evaluation was completed for the project area to ensure compliance with Forest Service Manual 2527.03 and Executive Orders 11988 (floodplains) and 11990 (wetlands). No wetlands will be lost as a result of the sale of the property. There is approximately 4 acres of 100-year floodplain that may extend into the sale parcel. Existing Yavapai County floodplain ordinances will control use of these floodplains in the future.

Administrative Review/Appeal Opportunities and Implementation Date

Decision Not Subject to Appeal

The 30 day comment period for this project ended on October 17, 2005. Since no substantive comments expressing concerns were received, or only supportive comments were received during the comment period, this decision is not subject to appeal (36 CFR 215.12).

Implementation may begin immediately after the publication date of this notice in the *Arizona Daily Sun*, the newspaper of record.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Judy Adams, Lands Staff, Red Rock Ranger District, PO Box 20429, 250 Brewer Road, Sedona, AZ 86341, (928) 203-7506.

/s/ Nora B. Rasure

February 17, 2006

NORA B. RASURE
Forest Supervisor
Coconino National Forest

Date