

**DECISION NOTICE
and
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

VICTORINE WILDLAND URBAN INTERFACE PROJECT

**USDA Forest Service
Mogollon Rim Ranger District
Coconino National Forest
Coconino County, Arizona**

BACKGROUND

An environmental assessment (EA) for the Victorine Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) Project was prepared to describe the potential environmental effects of implementing a fuel reduction project on the Mogollon Rim Ranger District. This fuel reduction project was developed to respond to the goals and objectives of the National Fire Plan and the Coconino National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan.

The Victorine WUI is in the southeast corner of the Coconino National Forest (Figure 1), and is in the east-central portion of the Mogollon Rim Ranger District. The Victorine project area encompasses 19,915 acres in the East Clear Creek Ecosystem, and includes 17,718 acres of Coconino National Forest land and 2,197 acres of private land. The legal location is within Townships 13 and 14 North, and Ranges 12 and 13 East (Figure 1). East Clear Creek is the northern boundary, Leonard Canyon the eastern boundary, Yeager Canyon is the western boundary, and Forest Road 298 to Dines Tank is the southern boundary.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROJECT

The purpose of this project is to reduce crown fire hazard in the Victorine WUI. There is a need to implement management activities that change the existing conditions toward a desired condition of lower amounts of live and dead fuel loadings which would reduce the crown fire hazard in the Victorine WUI.

Existing Conditions

The project area is at risk of stand-replacement crown fires originating on Forest Service lands that would threaten people, private property, and habitat for threatened, endangered, and sensitive species due to dead and down fuel accumulations, dense forest conditions, and low ground to live crown base heights.

The Victorine WUI area lies adjacent to and southeast of the Blue Ridge Urban Interface area that contains over 1,000 homes (Figure 1). There are approximately 10 homes within the 2,156 acres of private land in the Victorine project area.

Over a century of fire suppression has allowed the growth of dense thickets of small diameter trees into open areas and underneath stands of large trees.

The accumulation of surface and ladder fuels has contributed to the increased risk for large stand-replacing crown fires. Ground to live crown base heights are commonly less than 10 feet and canopy cover exceeds 40 percent on over half of the project area. In addition, high stand densities (also indicated by canopy cover) decrease tree growth and vigor across all diameter classes and tree species. These factors reduce resistance to pathogens such as insects and stressors such as drought at the single-tree, stand, and forest levels, which can further increase the potential future crown fire hazard. Lightning fires, increasing recreation use, and a growing local population contribute to fire risk by providing ample ignition sources.

Project Objective, Units of Measure, and Desired Conditions

The project objective is to reduce crown fire hazard in the Victorine WUI through thinning and prescribed burning. The units of measurement of attaining the objective are:

- Change in surface fuels (tons/acre)
- Change in stand density (trees/acre)
- Change in crown base height (ft)

Treatments implemented by the project are focused on reaching the following desired conditions:

- Reduction in the threat of stand-replacing crown fires to people, private property, developments, and habitats for sensitive and threatened species.
- Future crown fires are confined to isolated pockets as occurred during pre-European settlement times because of high ground to live crown base heights, low stand densities, and low dead and down fuel loading;
- Ground to live crown base heights of ponderosa pine stands averaging 10 feet or greater and average stand densities ranging from 40 – 80 square feet of basal area per acre.
- Dead fuel loading ranges from 1-30 tons per acre but would average less than 10 tons per acre on sites dominated by ponderosa pine and average less than 5 tons per acre in openings with grasses and forbs.

The ultimate desired conditions may not be met immediately following proposed treatments due to limitations of the existing vegetation conditions and other constraints. Units of measure that trend from undesirable existing conditions towards desired future conditions are considered an improvement in overall condition.

DECISION

Based on my evaluation of the alternatives in the Victorine WUI Project EA dated July 2005, the supporting documentation, and a review of public comment, I have selected **Alternative C, Modified Proposed Action** for implementation as described on pages 18-26 of the EA.

Implementation of Alternative C will result in initial prescribed burning and thinning over a total of 8,678 acres of the project area and maintenance prescribed burning over 8,407 acres within 3-12 years following the initial treatments. The types of treatments are described below and are shown in Figures 2 & 3.

Proposed Activities	Alternative C
Maintenance Thin/Burn previously treated acres	805 acres
Maintenance Burn previously treated acres.	839 acres
Broadcast Burn previously untreated acres	6,083 acres
Burn/Thin/Burn previously untreated acres	468 acres
<i>Subtotal acres treated</i>	<i>8,195</i>
Thin and Chip	0 acres
Thin and Pile	483 acres
<i>Subtotal acres</i>	<i>8,678</i>
Maintenance Burn all treatment areas within 3 to 12 years after the completion of individual treatments	8,407 acres

Maintenance Thin/Burn: 805 previously treated acres

This treatment includes thinning of ponderosa pines up to 12” diameter at breast height (DBH) with a spacing guide of at least 15 feet between tree boles or three feet between crowns. Slash would be lopped, scattered, and bucked to a depth of no more than 2 feet. Slash would be burned with low/moderate intensity prescribed fire to remove needles, small twigs, and branches. This treatment

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would be applied to previously treated areas¹ with moderate crown fire hazard to reduce the hazard to low.

Maintenance Burn: 839 previously treated acres

This treatment involves low intensity prescribed burning of previously thinned and/or burned areas. This treatment would be applied to previously treated areas with low crown fire hazard to maintain the existing low fire hazard.

Broadcast Burn: 6,083 previously untreated acres

This treatment applies prescribed fire to areas with moderate stand densities and low to moderate dead-down fuel loading. The broadcast burn treatment involves low to moderate intensity prescribed broadcast burning that may result in up to 10 percent conifer mortality. This treatment is prescribed for areas with low to moderate canopy closure and low to moderate surface fuel loading. The broadcast burn treatment is applied to stands with low to moderate crown fire hazard to maintain or reduce the existing crown fire hazard respectively by reducing surface fuel loading and, to a more limited extent, by reducing live ladder fuels. Pretreatment of fuels² would occur within some of the clumps of dense trees in order to cause patches of mortality ranging from less than one tenth of an acre to half an acre in size. Pretreatment and resultant clump thinning with fire would occur on approximately 10-20 percent of the proposed 6,083 broadcast burn treatment acres and could result in up to 20 percent conifer mortality where applied.

Burn/Thin/Burn: 468 previously untreated acres

This is a three-stage process of fuel reduction in areas with high to moderate crown fire hazard due to high existing dead-down fuel loading, high stand density, and low average crown base heights. The first activity in this treatment is to broadcast burn to reduce the existing dead-down surface fuel loading. Thinning of ponderosa pines up to 12" DBH with a spacing guide of at least 15 feet between tree boles or three feet between crowns would be the second treatment. Slash would be lopped, scattered, and bucked to a depth of no more than 2 feet. Finally, the slash would be burned with low/moderate intensity prescribed fire to remove needles, small twigs, and branches.

Thin and Pile: 483 acres

This treatment is applied to areas immediately adjacent to developed private land, within or adjacent to sensitive wildlife habitat, and in areas with very high existing surface fuel loading. This treatment is utilized to improve control of fire effects adjacent to private land and residual stand structure. The treatment consists of thinning trees up to 12 inches DBH and piling of slash. Sites adjacent to private property would be hand piled. Sites with excessive pre-existing surface fuel loading that are not immediately adjacent to private property would be hand or machine piled. Some of the pre-existing coarse woody fuel would be incorporated into piles with thinning slash on these sites. Piles would be burned.

Maintenance Burning:

This treatment involves broadcast burning of 8,407 acres (Figure 3). Thin and pile treatments located within old growth and goshawk habitat would be excluded (271 acres). This treatment is intended to mimic the historic fire regime in both fire occurrence and fire severity and intensity. The maintenance burns would be conducted within 3 to 12 years after completion of the initial treatments and would be implemented as needed to keep surface fuel loading low, sustain a low crown fire hazard, and achieve desired conditions of ground to live crown base heights, stand density, and dead fuel loading (EA, p. 4-5).

Resource protection measures are incorporated into Alternative C, based on Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines and Regional Best Management Practices (BMPs) to protect soil and water quality (EA, p. 22-25). Required and project-specific monitoring of heritage, wildlife, invasive plants, insects and disease would occur prior to and during project implementation (EA p. 26). Thinning and prescribed fire

¹ Previously treated areas are areas that received understory thinning and/or burning within the last 20 years.

² Pretreatment of fuels, in this case, involves the selective felling of ponderosa pine trees less than 9 inches diameter at breast height from within the clumps that are to receive fuel pretreatment. Felled trees are left intact and in place to create fuel ladders, resulting in isolated occurrences of crown consumption and/or high crown scorch within their immediate vicinity.

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treatments would also be monitored during and after implementation to evaluate effectiveness in meeting project objectives and resource protection measures (EA, p. 26). Implementation of this project is expected to occur over the next 20 years. After initial thinning and prescribed burning treatments are completed, 8,407 acres of the project area will become part of a maintenance program with prescribed burning occurring on an as-needed basis.

RATIONALE FOR THE DECISION

Alternative A, the no action alternative, does not meet the purpose and need of decreasing surface fuels, stand densities, and crown base heights through thinning or prescribed burning treatments. For these reasons, I decided not to choose Alternative A.

Of the two action alternatives, I have chosen Alternative C over alternative B because overall, it best meets the purpose and need for the project. Alternative C treats 1,170 more acres than Alternative B with combinations of maintenance burning, thinning and broadcast burning of previously treated and untreated acres. Alternative C removes fuels over 483 acres by thinning and pile burning adjacent to private lands, sensitive wildlife habitat and in other areas of very high existing surface fuel loading. Alternative B treats fewer acres adjacent to private land and also does not treat fuel loads in other areas of concern. Maintenance burning of 8,407 acres is also included in Alternative C which would remove most of the pine regeneration and small numbers of saplings, thereby keeping stand densities lower over a longer time frame than Alternative B, which proposes no maintenance burning.

Pretreatments of fuels is included in the broadcast burn treatment in Alternative C because low intensity broadcast burning alone in young stands of ponderosa pine regeneration with light ground fuels would not alter stand characteristics enough to reduce current and future crown fire hazard. The additional acreage of proposed broadcast burning activity within Alternative C addresses a concern that the location and amount of broadcast burning in Alternative B provided inadequate protection to private property within the project area. Thinning, piling and burning proposed in Alternative C addresses a concern that broadcast burning may pose a greater risk to private property at the property boundaries with the existing high fuel loads or with the thinning slash fuel loads. Thinning, piling and burning costs the same or less than chipping and ultimately removes more fuel from the site. Thinning and piling also addresses a concern that broadcast burning of thinning slash in sensitive habitats would cause undesirable losses of logs and snags.

Maintenance burning of initial entry treatments is an important inclusion in Alternative C to address a concern that the reduction of crown fire hazard gained by initial entry treatments would not persist without active management of future surface fuel accumulations. Other differences in treatment locations and acreages between Alternatives B and C occurred primarily to minimize potential effects to the Mexican spotted owl (MSO) and Little Colorado spinedace habitats. The rest of the differences in proposed treatment acreages from Alternative B and C are to lessen the potential for spread of invasive weeds from fire line construction. This was accomplished by using existing open and closed roads for treatment area boundaries wherever possible to limit the need for fire line construction.

Alternative C best addresses environmental and social needs when considered in the context of all the conflicting needs and concerns related to managing the Mogollon Rim District. It treats vegetation and fuels on more than 8600 acres in the project area, and provides for maintenance burning after initial treatments to manage fuel accumulation over time. The Alternative reduces the risk of stand-replacing crown fires adjacent to private property and within the WUI. In my judgment, Alternative C will best lead to achieving the goals and desired conditions in the Coconino Forest Plan.

The impacts of Alternatives B and C are similar. Wildlife habitat elements such as downed logs and snags would be reduced from the prescribed burning treatments, and a small percentage of larger overstory trees would be killed. This would be a minor negative impact. New snags would be created by prescribed burning to off set some of snags lost. Efforts would be made to protect existing large snags and downed logs by implementing wildlife resource protection measures WL 5, 6, 10 and 11 (EA p. 23-24). Opening up stands, increasing the growth of grass and forbs and other understory vegetation would

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diversify and improve habitat components. The effects of prescribed burning on aquatic habitat and fisheries include short-term silt and ash sedimentation and wind deposition into stock tanks and streams in the project area. These effects would be minor short term negative effects which have been moderated by project design of treatments such as utilizing buffer strips adjacent to channels (SW4, 5, and 8) and locating the vast majority of treatments on gently sloping ridge top areas away from streams. I have reviewed these effects described in the EA and in associated project record files and have found them to be minor and not significant. Fuel treatments and returning prescribed fire to the project area would reduce the threat of stand replacement crown fire and would be a beneficial effect of the project.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The Victorine WUI project was first listed in the Coconino Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions in January of 2000 (PR # IDT-20). In September of 2000, a scoping letter providing project information and seeking public comment was mailed to approximately 500 individuals and groups. This included federal and state agencies, federally recognized American Indian Tribes, municipal offices, businesses, interest groups, and individuals. A total of 63 responses to the initial mailing were received and are summarized in the EA on p. 6, and detailed responses to the comments are provided in Appendix B of the EA p. 124-130. Announcements about the project were printed in the High Country Informant in 2003 and 2005 (PR# P86, P93, P94). Representatives from the Arizona Game and Fish Department and the Blue Ridge Fire Department participated in interdisciplinary team meetings and site visits (PR# IM1). Representatives from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have been involved in the project proposal development and have been consulted.

Comments from the initial public scoping in 2000 ranged from no comment at all to support or disagreement with the proposed action or specific concerns with project implementation. There was general support of the proposed action by 14 respondents. Another six respondents supported thinning of small diameter fuels and prescribed burning. Six respondents expressed disagreement with the overall fire hazard of the area, opposition to the use of prescribed fire to reduce fuels, dislike of past thinning in the area, concerns of fire escape, dislike of smoke associated with prescribed fire, and distrust of Forest Service management activities. Another eight respondents presented specific concerns about the project relating to issues of air quality, visual quality, socio-economic impacts, and snags and down wood. Another 10 respondents were very concerned about prescribed fire control, fire escape, potential property loss, and forest closures during prescribed fire and five respondents requested prior notification of prescribed fire and thinning activities.

Analysis of the public comments resulted in the development of Alternative C along with some of project specific resource protection measures described in Chapter 2 of the EA (p. 22-26). Alternative C addresses public concerns with prescribed fire control by proposing more acres of thinning, piling and burning adjacent to developed private land rather than prescribed or broadcast burning of thinning slash. Piling and burning slash in sensitive wildlife areas would also reduce the potential loss of snags and down logs compared to broadcast burning. Additional acres of prescribed burning and maintenance burning treatments are proposed in Alternative C to address concerns of inadequate protection to private property over the long term.

The Environmental Assessment was completed in July 2005 and a letter requesting public comments on the EA was mailed to individuals that have shown interest in the project. Information was mailed out to 67 individuals, agencies and other groups. The Proposed Action and Alternatives were summarized in an attachment to the letter requesting public comment (PR# P90, P91). A legal notice requesting formal comments was published in the Arizona Daily Sun on July 27, 2005 (PR# P92, P103). The Victorine WUI Environmental Assessment and the letter requesting public comments were posted on the Coconino National Forest web site on July 27, 2005 (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/coconino/nepa/index.shtml#July27>).

Public comments on the EA were received from 8 individuals. Alternative C was supported by all eight respondents. The public comments and our responses to the comments are described in detail in Appendix D of the EA (EA p. 137-142). I have concluded that the existing analyses provide sufficient information for a reasoned decision to be made.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT ELIMINATED FROM DETAILED ANALYSIS

A prescribed burn only alternative was considered to address the objective of fuel reduction in the project area. This would reduce ground fuels but not ladder fuels, and would not change the low ground to base heights or stand density conditions. Therefore it would not entirely meet all established objectives for fuels reduction as stated in the purpose and need in Chapter 1 and was dropped for these reasons.

A thin and chip only alternative was considered to reduce fuels minimizing the impacts to air quality, and the risk of escaped prescribed fires. This would reduce ladder fuels and continuous canopies and thus crown fire potential, but ground fuels and potential surface fire intensity would increase because thinning residue is chipped and broadcast on site. Therefore it would not entirely meet all established objectives for fuels reduction as stated in the purpose and need in Chapter 1 and was dropped for these reasons.

A thin, lop and scatter only alternative was considered to reduce fuels minimizing the impacts to air quality, and the risk of escaped prescribed fires. This would reduce ladder fuels and continuous canopies and thus crown fire potential, but ground fuel and potential wildfire intensity would increase because thinning residue is lopped and scattered on site. Therefore this alternative would not entirely meet the objectives of the project and was dropped for these reasons.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on the site-specific analysis summarized in the Victorine WUI EA and the associated Project File Record, I have determined that Alternative C is not a major Federal Action and will not significantly effect the quality of the human environment and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required. Under the 1978 Council on Environmental Quality regulations (40 CFR Parts 1500-1508), significance is evaluated for both context and intensity.

(a) Context: *The significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts, such as society as a whole, the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting. Both short- and long-term effects are relevant.*

The context of this action is limited in scope and duration. Actions are limited to 8,678 acres (44%) of the Victorine Project area (19,915 acres), and about 4% of the Upper Clear Creek 5th field watershed. The initial treatments are anticipated to occur over the next 5-7 years. Following these initial treatments, maintenance prescribed burning would occur over 8,407 acres of the project area at intervals ranging from 3 -12 years. Maintenance burning treatments would be implemented over a period of 20 years after initial treatments to reduce future surface and ladder fuel accumulations.

The project will locally implement the elements of the National Fire Plan (NFP) and the Cohesive Strategy. The problems addressed by the NFP are national in scope. The overall goal of the project is to reduce crown fire hazard on National Forest System lands adjacent to privately held lands in the wildland urban interface zone as well as within and adjacent to sensitive wildlife habitat. The Victorine WUI project is designed to take immediate steps to reduce fuel hazards in strategic areas, and through maintenance prescribed burning, it will mimic the historic fire regime in fire occurrence as well as fire severity and intensity. The effects of Alternative C will be felt at the local area of the Victorine WUI. The Victorine WUI is south of the Blue Ridge Urban Interface area in which fuel treatment, prescribed fire and maintenance burning has occurred since 2000. Implementation of fuel reduction treatments of Alternative C in the Victorine WUI would further protect the Blue Ridge Urban Interface to the north (Figure 1).

(b) Intensity: This refers to the severity of impact. The following were considered in evaluating intensity:

Beneficial and Adverse Impacts

(1) Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if, on balance, effects are believed to be beneficial.

Alternative C has both adverse and beneficial effects, as summarized in Chapter 3 of the EA (p. 30 – 121) and described in detail in specialist reports prepared for this project. Adverse short-term effects of the Selected Alternative include: increases in fuel loading in thinned stands prior to treatment by prescribed burning; pockets of tree mortality; locally severe soil effects mainly from burning machine-constructed piles over less than 2% of the project area; increased potential for noxious weed infestation in areas of high intensity burn within the prescribed burned treatment areas; increased potential for pine beetle activity in green thinning slash in drought years; soil compaction from mechanized equipment skidding and machine piling logs; and an increased potential for sediment and ash mobilization to channels from prescribed burning. These adverse impacts are limited in scope and magnitude and have been mitigated by incorporating resource protection measures and monitoring into the project (EA p. 22-26).

Alternative C could adversely affect the Mexican spotted owl due to losses of key habitat elements, primarily snags, logs and large trees. There would be no effect or minimal effects from project activities that cause noise disturbance or generate smoke due to seasonal operating restrictions. Other threatened and endangered species are not likely to be adversely affected by the project due to negligible effects to habitat and implementation of Best Management Practices to limit sedimentation or ash input to streams.

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Alternative C would have minor effects to habitat components for wildlife, mainly from some loss of down wood and snags. There would be no effect or minor adverse effects for all other listed or special interest wildlife and plant species.

Beneficial effects of Alternative C for wildlife include: a reduction in the risk of high intensity wildfire over time in important habitat areas; and an increase in understory vegetation, foraging habitat and open pine habitat important for big game, birds and other wildlife species. Fuel reduction treatments and thinning would reduce the risk of severe stand-replacing wildfires that would remove habitat, increase stream sedimentation, and negatively impact habitat for aquatic species.

Resource protection measures, Best Management Practices, and Monitoring have been incorporated into the project design to minimize impacts to wildlife habitat components, breeding wildlife, soil productivity, and water quality (EA p. 22-26). Monitoring planned for the project would survey for invasive plants, beetle activity, Mexican spotted owls, and wildlife microhabitat (EA p. 26). With these measures in place, adverse effects have been moderated to an accepted level within the local and watershed context.

I have reviewed the adverse effects described for the project; the resource protection measures and monitoring incorporated into the project and have found the effects not to be significant. Beneficial effects have not been used to offset or compensate for the potential adverse effects in making this determination of no significant effect.

Public Health and Safety

(2) The degree of effects on public health or safety

Alternative C will avoid adverse impacts to public safety and health through expert project design and implementation. The project will be governed by standard public health and safety clauses which will be included in any contract mechanisms chosen to implement the project. Actions such as public notification, signing of roads, identifying the area as an active prescribed fire, conducting fire patrols, staffing lookouts, are standard precautionary measures that would be employed. Felling hazard trees would provide for public safety on Forest Service roads, consistent with the requirements of the Federal Highway Safety Act and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration regulations.

Short-term adverse effects on public safety health from smoke and reduced visibility during prescribed burning are possible. These impacts are of limited scope and duration and would be minimized to the extent possible through timing of burning during favorable weather conditions, implementing smoke management practices, and measures to maintain control of burning (EA p. 23, 25; p. 116-118). All prescribed burning would be coordinated daily with the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality and smoke management procedures would be employed to reduce smoke impacts. Emissions from prescribed burning would not exceed Federal or State air quality standards.

Alternative C will reduce the fuels available to be consumed during a future wildfire and the resulting particulate emissions during wildfire would reduce adverse effects to public health over the long term. Reducing fuel hazards along roads, cutting hazard trees, and improving access and egress during a wildfire emergency will also provide beneficial effects to public health and safety.

Unique Characteristics

(3) Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers or ecologically critical areas.

The project area does not include park lands, prime farmlands or wetlands.

Historic and cultural resources have been identified in the project area and will be subject to resource protection measures HR1-HR4 (EA p. 25) during project activities. The risk of disturbing unknown cultural or historic properties is considered low with the proposed action based on site density of the area (EA p. 114). If a cultural or historic site is discovered during project implementation, special measures will be taken to protect the resources as required by law (HR 1, EA p. 25).

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A segment of Leonard Canyon along the eastern boundary of the project area is recommended as a Recreational river under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and has one outstandingly remarkable value consisting of fisheries habitat. Broadcast burning, maintenance burning and some areas of thinning and piling are proposed within ¼ mile distance from Leonard Canyon. Because of the distance from the canyon, and scope of the activities, it was determined that there would be no change or adverse effect to its outstandingly remarkable values. The proposed fuel treatments may enhance Wild and Scenic River values because the return of a natural fire regime to the area may allow the area to become more stable ecologically and less vulnerable to severe large wildfire events.

Controversy

(4) The degree of controversy over environmental effects.

Legitimate controversy must be based on credible scientific evidence. Public involvement efforts have not revealed any significant controversies regarding the environmental effects of Alternative C, and comments received on the EA have indicated support of the fuel reduction treatments proposed (Appendix D, p.137-142). Analysis of public and internal comments and concerns about the Victorine WUI project identified no significant issues, and non-significant issues are thoroughly discussed in the EA (p. 11-13; Appendix A, p. 124-130). Federal and state agencies were consulted with during project development and kept informed of project alternatives. Effects to listed species and their habitats were discussed and potential adverse effects of Alternative C have been consulted on and effects minimized where possible. Through continued involvement and information sharing with regulatory agencies including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Arizona Game and Fish Department, and the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality, controversy over environmental effects were minimized.

The activities and treatments of Alternative C are standard practices on the Forest and the Mogollon Rim District.

Uncertainty and Risk

(5) The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

Alternative C was designed to achieve objectives identified in the Forest Plan and the National Fire Plan and Cohesive Strategy. Project design features and resource protection measures incorporated into project implementation will minimize adverse effects to resources. Years of local expertise with these types of projects minimize the chance of highly uncertain effects or effects which involve unique or unknown risks. Alternative C is routine in nature, employing standard practices and protection measures and the effects are well known. Numerous scientific studies have been conducted on fuel reduction treatments, fire and vegetation management, and fire effects in forest ecosystems (Appendix C, p. 133-136).

Precedent

(6) The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

Due to the routine nature of Alternative C, no precedent would be set for any future action. Future projects will consider all relevant scientific and site-specific information available at that time.

Cumulative Effects

(7) Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulatively significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by breaking it down into small component parts.

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Alternative C was designed to reduce or avoid adverse environmental effects. Past actions, ongoing actions and reasonably foreseeable future actions were considered in the cumulative effects analysis for various resources (EA, p. 31-32). Implementation of Alternative C will not cause significant, cumulative, or adverse impacts.

The cumulative effects of the project on surface erosion, soil productivity, and water quality were evaluated using soil disturbance as an indicator. Soil disturbance from Alternative C, is estimated to range from 165 -780 acres of ground disturbance and high intensity burns. Considering past, ongoing and future projects involving soil disturbance from timber sales, thinning and prescribed burning, less than 9% of the Upper Clear Creek watershed would be disturbed. The past use of BMPs to protect soil productivity and water quality has been effective in mitigating the impacts from ground disturbance during past management actions. The effects from Alternative C would be minimal to soil resources within the watershed would not be significant as similar BMPs are incorporated into the project. All of the treatments proposed in the Victorine WUI project are designed with sediment reduction BMPs in place (SW1-SW8 EA p.22-23). Alternative C is not expected to detrimentally affect water quality or beneficial uses in the Upper Clear Creek drainage system. Implementation of resource protection measures for soils, water, aquatics and fisheries should result in minor adverse, to negligible non-significant cumulative effects to the Chiricahua leopard frog, Little Colorado spinedace, Northern leopard frog, Arizona southwestern toad, Roundtail chub and the Little Colorado sucker.

Alternative C will result in minor adverse, non-significant cumulative effects to threatened, endangered and Region 3 Sensitive wildlife species (EA p. 88-90; 96-98). Considering past, ongoing, and future projects involving tree thinning (< 12" DBH) and prescribed burning, minor amounts of habitat for these species will be affected by a short-term decrease in logs and snags, and canopy cover. The cumulative effect of the loss of logs, snags and cover would occur over 22% of the Upper Clear Creek watershed, considering the Victorine Project in combination with the Blue Ridge Urban Interface and the East Clear Creek Watershed Health projects. Over time, snags and logs would increase from mortality due to prescribed fire. Effects to PACs and PFAs, have been minimized by limiting acres of treatments and piling and burning rather than broadcast or maintenance burning in the most sensitive areas. Fuel treatments proposed by this project in combination with other ongoing and future projects would reduce the risk of high intensity fire and increase tree growth in areas that are currently stagnant with slow incremental growth. This would improve wildlife habitat over the long term.

Alternative C would have beneficial cumulative effects by treating fuels and reducing tree density in areas of past timber sales and in areas proposed for thinning as part of Buck Springs Allotment Management Plan and the East Clear Creek Watershed Health Project. Thinning and fuel treatment would move the area toward the desired vegetation structural stage which would be a beneficial cumulative effect.

Potential cumulative local and air basin effects will be minimized by smoke management practices such as limiting burning to periods of favorable atmospheric conditions to disperse smoke, and burning on burn days as granted by the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality (AQ1-2, EA p. 25).

Significant Scientific, Cultural or Historic Resources

(8) The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structure, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss of destruction of significant, cultural or historical resources.

Portions of the Victorine WUI project area (16%) have been intensively surveyed for heritage resources (EA p. 114). Five sites have been recorded and are potentially eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. Each known site has been inspected and marked for avoidance following resource protection measure HR1 (EA p. 114-115; 25). All known sites will be protected from project impacts. The archaeological clearance document for this project (PR# SR10, SR11) specifies that non-ground disturbing treatments that would contribute to the accomplishment of project objectives may be allowed within archaeological sites (HR2, EA p. 25). Ground disturbing treatments and pile burning may not take place within known sites, and historic sites must be avoided during broadcast burns. This would result in the project having no adverse effect on sites in the project area (HR3 and HR4, EA p. 25).

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Furthermore, reducing fuel loads using methods that are non-ground disturbing on and around archaeological sites are effective for reducing the severity of potential wildfire damage to these non-renewable resources. Consultation requirements under section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act have been fulfilled, and consultation with native American tribes resulted in no specific concerns about the effects of any actions proposed in the Selected Alternative (EA p. 116).

Threatened and Endangered Species

(9) The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the endangered Species Act of 1973.

Alternative C would not jeopardize the continued existence or adversely modify designated critical habitat for any fish, wildlife or plant species potentially affected by the project and protected under the Endangered Species Act.

Formal Consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) was completed on February 10, 2006 with the issuance of a Biological Opinion. The five species and habitat addressed in the Biological Opinion are the threatened Mexican spotted owl, bald eagle, Chiricahua leopard frog, Little Colorado spinedace, and the endangered southwestern willow flycatcher.

Mexican spotted owl: The concurrence opinion determined that Alternative C “may affect and is likely to adversely affect” MSO and designated critical habitat for the MSO, but will not likely jeopardize the continued existence of the Mexican spotted owl or adversely modify designated critical habitat. This determination is based on the evaluation that several MSO critical habitat primary constituent elements may be adversely affected by the proposed action. Snags, large coarse woody debris, and large trees may be lost during project implementation. However, the USFWS found that the effects to the function and conservation role of critical habitat relative to the Recovery Unit and the entire designation are not significant because the impacts will be temporary and occur in a very small area relative to the Recovery Unit and the overall critical habitat designation. They concluded that the primary constituent elements of MSO critical habitat will continue to serve the intended conservation role for the species with the implementation of the Victorine WUI Fuels Reduction Project. Their conclusions are based on the following three reasons: (1) Treatments within the Weimer PAC (PAC# 040708) are in compliance with the Recovery Plan; (2) although there may be some loss of primary constituent habitat elements, Alternative C will increase the long-term viability of MSO habitat by reducing the threat of severe, stand-replacing wildfire, and (3) implementation of Alternative C is not expected to impede the survival or recovery of MSO within the Upper Gila Mountains Recovery Unit. The USFWS made a conservation recommendation to create a more clumpy forest structure following maintenance thinning that would ideally retain trees with interlocking canopies, surrounded by small openings. This is addressed in a resource protection measure WL9 on p. 24 of the EA.

Southwestern Willow Flycatcher: The concurrence opinion determined that Alternative C “may affect, but is not likely adversely affect” the southwestern willow flycatcher or its habitat. There is no suitable habitat for the flycatcher within or adjacent to the analysis area and no flycatchers have been detected during surveys of potential habitat. Though there are approximately eight miles of potential flycatcher habitat along East Clear Creek bordering the project area, this habitat is only marginally suitable and potential habitat will not be impacted by the proposed action.

Bald Eagle: The concurrence opinion determined that Alternative C “may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect” the bald eagle or its habitat. There are no known winter roosts within the analysis area, though potential sites are located on canyon slopes within the analysis area. However, potential roost habitat on canyon slopes will not be treated. Some snags that serve as potential perch trees may be lost during broadcast burning operations. However, recruitment snags will be created through large tree mortality, and existing snags on over 10,000 non-treatment acres of the analysis area will be maintained. Proposed project activities should not affect foraging opportunities for bald eagles.

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Chiricahua Leopard Frog: The concurrence opinion determined that Alternative C “may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect” the Chiricahua leopard frog or its habitat. Though the analysis area contains perennial and intermittent streams as well as stock tanks that may be potential habitat for this species, no frogs have been detected during ranid frog surveys. Best management practices will be followed to limit the input of ash and sediment into creeks and stock tanks following thinning and burning treatments. This will aid in maintaining the integrity of these aquatic habitats and should result in insignificant and discountable effects to these habitats.

Little Colorado Spinedace: The concurrence opinion determined that Alternative C “may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect” the Little Colorado spinedace or its habitat. No treatments are proposed for steep slopes (>40%) adjacent to East Clear Creek, Leonard Canyon, or Yeager Canyon, or within riparian buffer zones. This will reduce potential sediment and ash delivery to spinedace habitat and help maintain water quality. Best management practices and unburned vegetation buffers to riparian systems will protect critical habitat by reducing ash and sediment inputs into streams. No channel-spanning wood will be bucked or removed from the stream channel and no vegetation that overhangs live streams or waters potentially containing Little Colorado spinedace will be removed.

Plants: No Federally listed threatened, Endangered, or Proposed plant species are known to occur within the project area and none were found during botanical surveys of the project area.

Federal, state and Local Laws

(10) Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, state or local law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment.

Alternative C does not threaten a violation of Federal, State, or local environmental protection laws. As discussed throughout the EA and in supporting documents, Alternative C is consistent with the Forest Plan as required by the National Forest Management Act, (EA p. 6-9), the National Environmental Policy Act, (EA), the Clean Water Act (EA p. 63-67), the Clean Air Act (Ea p. 116-118), Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (Ea p. 102-107), the National Historic Preservation Act (Ea p. 114-116), and Executive Order #12898, Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations, (EA p. 121). The Selected Alternative is consistent with the Endangered Species Act (see 9 above).

The National Forest Management Act requires projects to be consistent with the Forest Plan and minimum specific management requirements. Resource Protection 219.27(a) is discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 of the EA. Vegetative Manipulation 219.27(b), Silvicultural Practices 219.27(c) are addressed on pages 40-53 of the EA. Riparian Areas 219.27(e) and Soil and Water 219.27(f) are addressed on pages 54-67 of the EA. Diversity, (219.27(g)) is addressed in the Vegetative and Wildlife sections of Chapter 3 of the EA (EA p. 40-53 and p. 67-102).

The project complies with the direction in Forest Service Manual 7700, Chapter 7710 – Transportation Atlas, Records and Analysis, effective December 14, 2001. Alternative C is consistent with recommendations made in the Coconino Forest-level Roads Analysis, January 10, 2003. No changes to the current road system are proposed with this project.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This project will not be implemented sooner than five business days following the close of the appeal filing period established in the Decision Notice. If an appeal is filed, implementation will not begin sooner than 15 calendar days following a final decision on the appeal.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR RIGHT TO APPEAL

This decision is subject to administrative review (appeal). Individuals or organizations that submitted comments during the official notice and comment period specified at 36 CFR 215.6 may appeal this decision. The notice of appeal must meet the appeal content requirements at 36 CFR 215.14.

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A written notice of appeal, clearly stating it is a Notice of Appeal being filed pursuant to 36 CFR 215.7 shall be filed within 45 days of the date of publication of legal notice of this decision in the newspaper of record, the **Arizona Daily Sun**. The publication date in the **Arizona Daily Sun** is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal, 36 CFR 215.7. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Written appeals must be filed with the Appeal Deciding Officer:

Nora Rasure, Forest Supervisor
Coconino National Forest
1824 S. Thompson Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
Fax: (928) 527-3620

In accordance with 36 CFR Section 215.14, it is the responsibility of those who appeal a decision to provide the Appeal Deciding Officer sufficient evidence and rationale to show why the Responsible Official's decision should be remanded or reversed.

- State that the document is a Notice of Appeal filed pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215.
- List the name, address and telephone number of the appellant.
- Identify the decision document by title and subject, date of decision, and name and title of the Responsible Official.
- Identify the specific change(s) in the decision that the appellant seeks or portion of the decision to which the appellant objects.
- State how the Responsible Official's decision fails to consider comments previously provided either before or during the comment period specified in 36 CFR 215.6 and , if applicable, how the appellant believes the decision violates law, regulation, or policy.

The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered appeals are 7:30 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. An appeal, plus attachments, can also be filed regular mail, fax, e-mail, hand-delivered, express delivery or messenger service. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), Adobe (.pdf), and Word (.doc) to **appeals-southwestern-coconino@fs.fed.us**. The appeal must have an identifiable name attached or other verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic appeals. When using the electronic mailbox, you will receive an automated reply if the message is received. If you do not receive this automated reply, it is the responsibility of the appellant to ensure the appeal is received by the deadline (36 CFR 215.6).

CONTACT PERSON

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Mindee Roth, District Ranger, Mogollon Rim Ranger District, Coconino National Forest, **Victorine Wildland Urban Interface Project**, HC 31, Box 300, Happy Jack, Arizona 86024, (928) 477-2255.

/s/ Melinda D. Roth

MELINDA D. ROTH
District Ranger
Mogollon Rim Ranger District

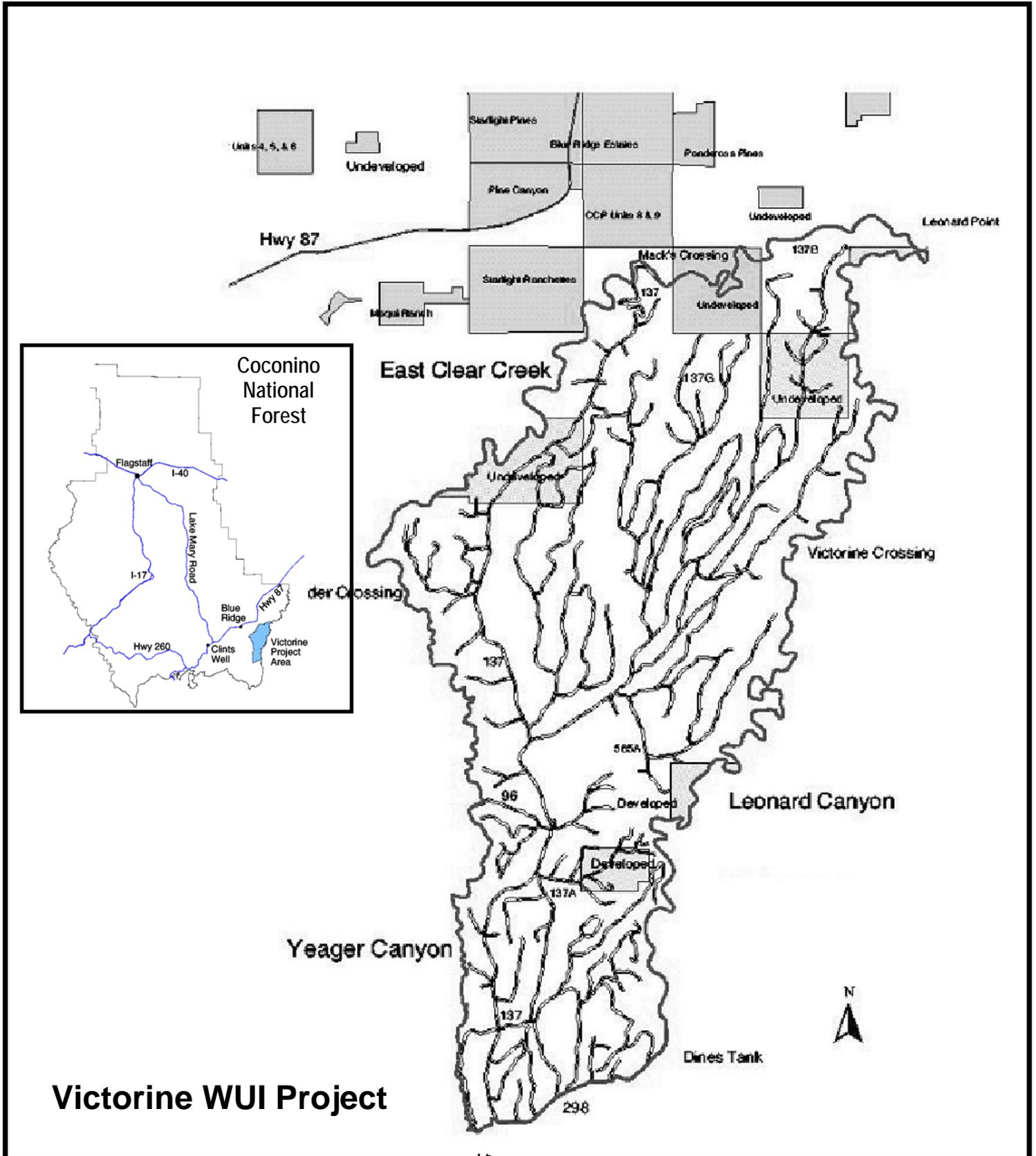
March 3, 2006

Date

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination, write to USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410, or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

Figure 1. Victorine WUI Project Vicinity and Location Map. Blue Ridge Urban Interface is located to the north of the project area, where private lands are shown as shaded blocks.



Victorine WUI Project

Victorine Wildland Urban Interface Project
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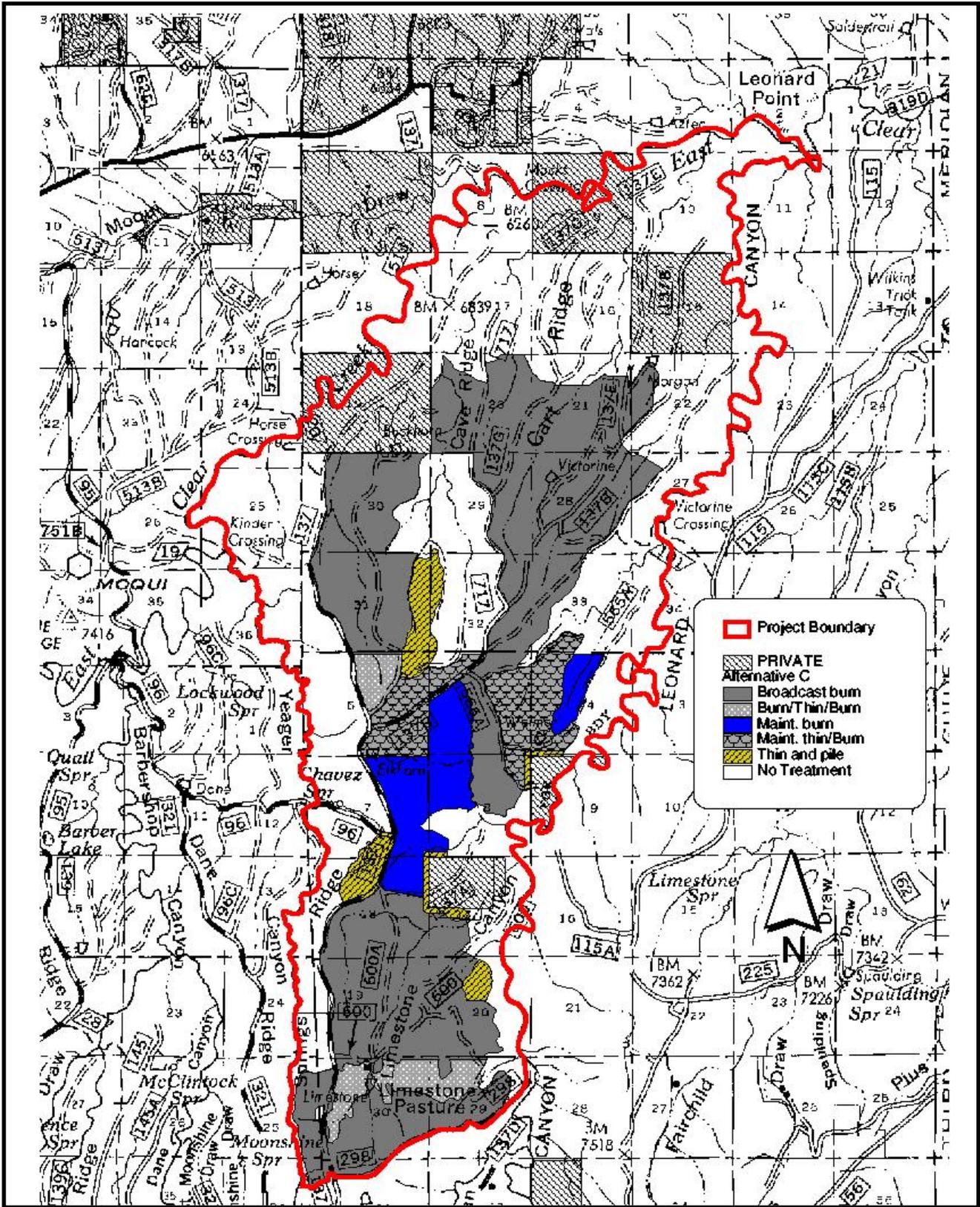


Figure 2: Alternative C Modified Proposed Action Initial Entry Treatments

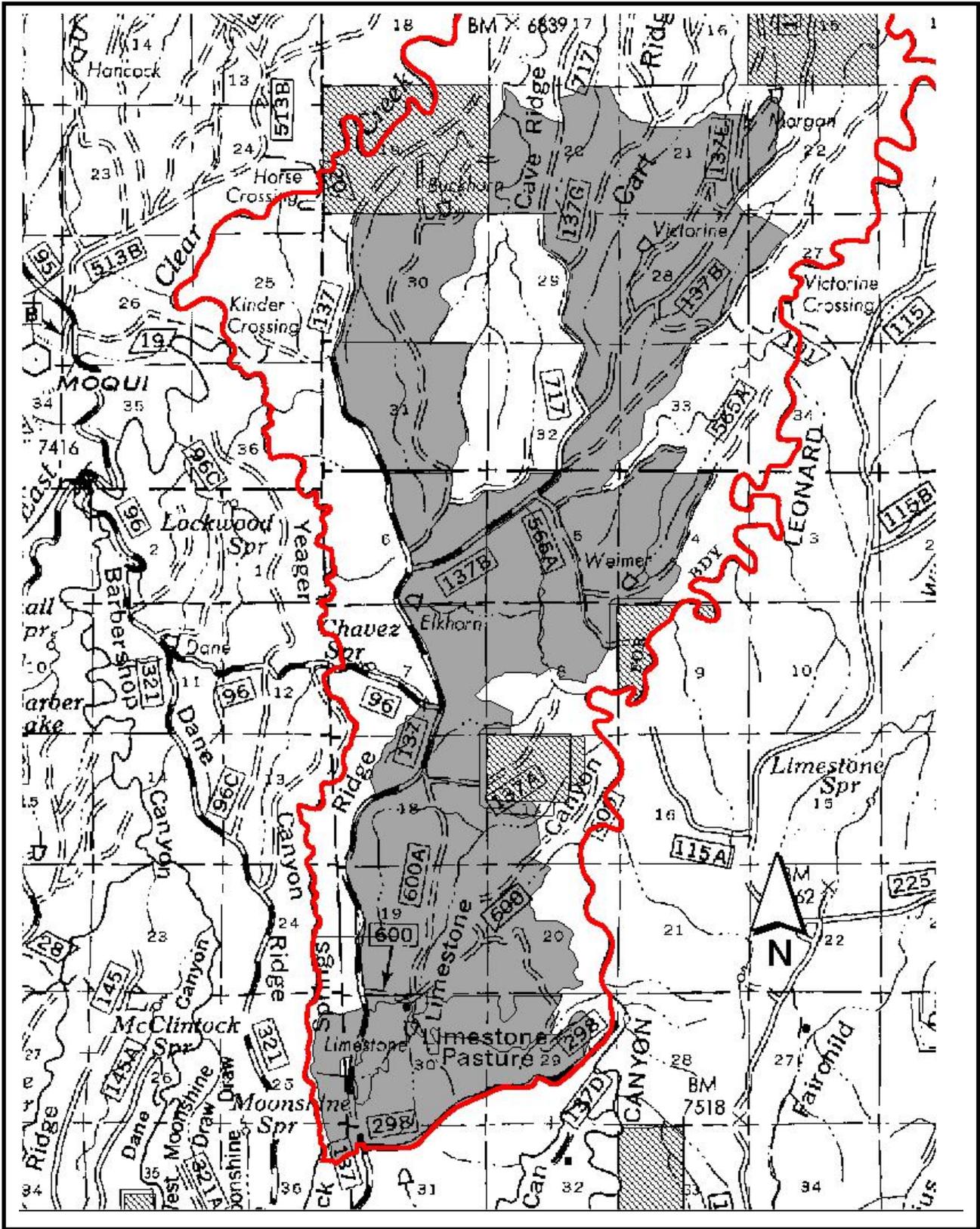


Figure 3: Alternative C Secondary Maintenance Burning. The gray area of the map indicates the initial entry treatment acres that are proposed for maintenance burning under Alternative C.