



File Code: 1950-1

Date: January 8, 2007

Dear Interested Participant,

The Peaks and Mormon Lake Ranger Districts are pleased to announce the completion of the comprehensive analysis process and Environmental Assessment (EA) and Decision Notice/FONSI for the Eastside Fuels Reduction and Forest Health Project. The Final EA, appendices, maps and Decision Notice/FONSI are included in this package. This cover letter briefly describes background information for the project, the selected alternative, discussion of actions taken in reply to objection, 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 Districts to implement the Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) for the greater Flagstaff area that was developed by numerous local and state organizations and agencies. Appendix B 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 the original Proposed Action as compared to No Action. HFRA requirements in areas with an approved CWPP and/or within one and one half miles of the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) only require complete analysis of the Proposed Action. This project meets both of these requirements.

I also considered one additional alternative, but did not analyze it in detail. The alternative not analyzed in detail asked for a diameter cutting cap of 16 inches diameter breast height (dbh). There was also a variation on this alternative suggested in response to comments, suggesting a 12 inch dbh cutting limit. It was determined that the cutting caps would prevent meeting the Purpose and Need for the project and would negatively affect numerous ecosystem restoration and forest health goals. In addition, the Districts and GFFP have worked extensively on criteria for when and where cutting trees larger than 12 or 16 inches dbh would be desired and acceptable considering other resource objectives, on other projects. The Proposed Action 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 Districts have included criteria for the removal of large trees to better define large tree harvest activities. Appendix B 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 the Proposed Action.

### **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 Peaks and Mormon Lake Ranger Districts 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 December 8, 2006, Joe Stringer, Deputy Forest Supervisor and Objection Review Officer, issued a letter to the Center For Biological Diversity describing the findings of the review and instructions he provided to the District Ranger in response to the objections. The Reviewing Officer asked that the Districts correct some discrepancies between habitat definitions and some of the analysis tables had errors or needed further explanation. The Districts were asked to further demonstrate how old-growth allocation was being met to meet Forest Plan Standards. We were also asked to include and update additional references in the project record. The Districts have completed all of the requested items directed by the Reviewing Official, and these are included in the Final EA, and summarized in the Decision. Requested updates to the project record have been completed. As the EA was being finalized the Districts also took the opportunity to provide additional description and clarification in Chapters 2 and 3, and in Appendix E. We also used the opportunity to correct a number of edit and typographical errors missed in the original EA.

### **Selected Alternative**

It is my decision to select the Proposed Action, as I have detailed in the Decision Notice as the preferred alternative for this project. The Proposed Action alternative includes:

- Mechanically thin approximately 3,819 acres to achieve an average canopy cover of 40% in northern goshawk habitat with a range of 35-45% (3411 acres), and an average of 45% in Mexican spotted owl habitat, with a range of 40-50% (408 acres). Mechanical thinning areas are designated where treatments and access may allow for product removal and hauling through timber sales, or as stewardship contracts. Under either operation product removal would occur. The various silvicultural treatments analyzed would reduce tree density, especially in excess small diameter trees and progress toward an uneven-aged forest structure, and reduce wildfire risk.
- Hand Thin approximately 3404 acres, cutting up to 12" diameter breast height (dbh), to achieve an average canopy cover of 45%, with a range of 10 to 60%. Hand thinning is designated in areas where access for mechanical equipment is limited or where the impacts of mechanical thinning cannot be sufficiently mitigated to achieve resource objectives.
- To restore grasslands invading ponderosa pine trees will be removed on approximately 220 acres in those sites. Yellow Pine, regardless of size will not be removed in these treatments.
- Conduct initial prescribed burns on approximately 7,820 acres after thinning and on 12,356 acres without thinning (prescribed burn only), or a total of approximately 20,176 acres, to reduce fuel

loads and reintroduce low to moderate intensity surface fire. Conduct follow-up maintenance burns on the 20,176 acres after initial prescribed burns to maintain fuel loads, as needed.

- Hand and mechanical thinning at the Elden Electronics Site on approximately 21 acres, to reduce wildfire threat to electronics sites.
- Construct a fuel break on approximately 377 acres (6.9 miles) in the pinyon/juniper (Woodland forest) surrounding urban interface areas adjacent to private property in the Cosnino area. Additional treatments in the pinyon/juniper woodland along the Townsend-Winona road, Slaton Ranch road area, and around the base of Turkey Hills are included in mechanical and hand thinning acreages.
- Restore and provide fencing protection to approximately 10 acres of aspen forest.
- 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 the Proposed Action activities and mitigation and monitoring measures is located in Chapter 2 of the EA.

I have selected the Proposed Action 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 and pinyon/juniper 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 Cliffrose research proposal is a good example of adaptive management approaches to treatment design that GFFP, Arizona Game and Fish Department, and the Ranger Districts developed during the analysis. The coordination between the Districts and the National Park Service at Walnut Canyon National Monument, to blend treatments at the boundary, work toward coordinated implementation of similar fire hazard reduction and restoration projects within the Monument, and mitigate project hauling impacts on the access road was a good example of interagency coordination.

#### ***Addressing the Purpose and Need for Action***

The Proposed Action 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. The Proposed Action would reduce flame lengths, fuel loads, and crown fire potential, and allow low to moderate surface fires to take place. The Proposed Action would reduce canopy cover and stand densities while restoring a diverse, uneven-age forest structure that is essential for understory diversity and wildlife habitat.

#### ***Addressing Public Issues***

Significant issues raised for the Eastside Fuels Reduction and Forest Health 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 consideration of new alternatives.

***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 Final 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