



File Code: 1950

Date: July 23, 2007

Dear Forest User,

The Mormon Lake Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest is seeking comments as part of the scoping process (environmental analysis) associated with the proposed Munds Park Fuels Reduction project. The project area consists of 2,960 acres of National Forest System lands located south and southwest of the Munds Park community and approximately 20 miles south of Flagstaff along Interstate 17. The project area is located within all or portions of T18N, R7E Sect. 8, 13, 14, 16, 17, 20-23, 26-28; and T18N, R6E Sect. 12, 13, and 24.

Background

Munds Park is a small mountain community of approximately 3,000 homes and lots surrounded by the Coconino National Forest. The community includes a private golf course and country club, an RV resort and campground, a small hotel, two restaurants, three gas stations/convenience stores, and several other small businesses. The community supports both full-time and part-time residents as well as tourists traveling through the area.

The exclusion of natural fire in the area has resulted in an accumulation of forest litter and fuels (i.e. dead trees, down logs, needle cast). There are also several stands of dense, overstocked small ponderosa pine trees immediately adjacent to the southwest and southeast sides of Munds Park/I-17. These conditions contribute to high fire hazard ratings on the forest surrounding Munds Park. This high fire hazard rating makes it more difficult for firefighters to control a wildfire starting in this area.

Given the prevailing southwest winds in this region, this project is focusing on fire hazard in the area south and southwest of Munds Park. A wildfire fire igniting in this part of the forest could move in a northeasterly fashion towards homes and businesses by the prevailing winds (whereas an ignition either north or east of Munds Park would be "pushed" away from the community by the same prevailing winds). The Interstate is also within this path of prevailing winds from the southwest and therefore is also at risk; a wildfire ignition southwest of the freeway would likely disrupt traffic on the Interstate as well as in and out of the community.

The original project area included 3,680 acres of National Forest System land. However, during our preliminary analysis, we withdrew 600 acres of land with impaired soil condition from further consideration. These acres currently support very few trees and only sparse ground vegetation. Some additional acres directly east of Munds Park (north of Forest Road 240) were also withdrawn from analysis based on their low fire hazard rating/threat to the community. The 10 acres of forest around O'Dell Lake are not proposed for any treatments.



Purpose and Need

The purpose and need of this project is to reduce the fire hazard rating within the Munds Park wildland-urban interface (WUI) to the south and southwest. This includes reducing the probability of spot fires or a crown fire initiating. The project is intended to help protect the community of Munds Park from a wildfire igniting in this area.

Proposed Action

To meet the project's purpose and need, the Forest Service is proposing a combination of prescribed burning and thinning treatments to help reduce the fire hazard in this area and to better protect the Munds Park community from wildfire. Specifically, the following activities are proposed:

- Thin up to 980 acres of ponderosa pine
- Conduct prescribed burns on approximately 2,950 acres of forest
- Construct up to 2 miles of temporary road

Thinning of Ponderosa Pine

Dense stands of ponderosa pine located southwest and southeast of Munds Park are proposed to be thinned (see Figure 1). Methods of thinning would either be mechanical (approximately 740 acres) or by hand (approximately 240 acres). Hand thinning would occur in those stands with limited or poor vehicle access or on steeper slopes. Only smaller trees (9" DBH or less) can feasibly be thinned by hand. Some portions of stands included in the "mechanical thinning" estimate also have limited access and/or steeper slopes and would be limited to hand thinning methods as well.

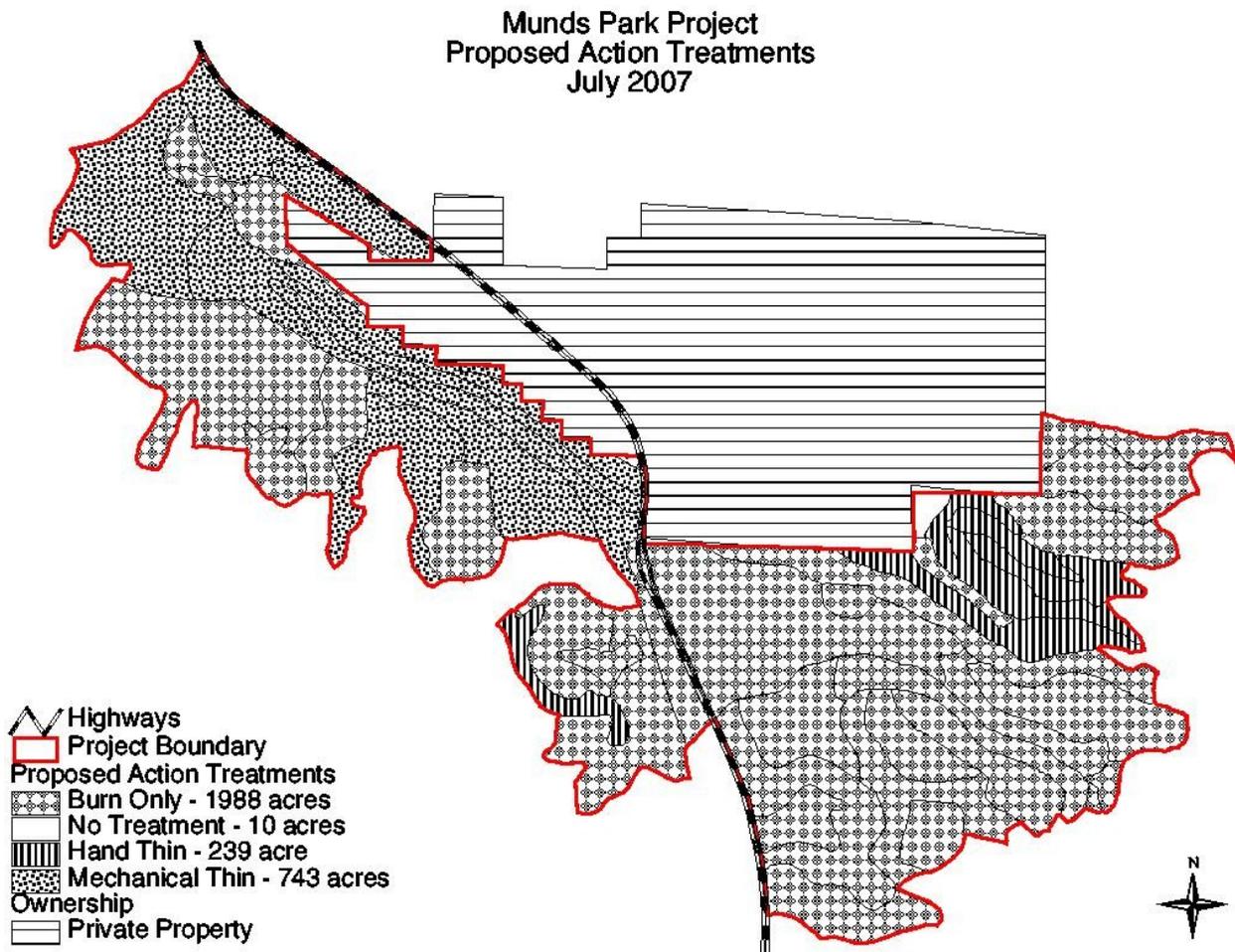
Prescribed Burning

A total of 2,950 acres are proposed for prescribed broadcast burns. This includes the 980 acres planned for thinning; these stands would be burned after trees harvesting to remove activity-created slash, duff, and needle-cast. The remainder of the project area would receive a "burn-only" treatment (no thinning of trees). Burning would occur when weather and other environmental factors such as wind, fuel moisture and humidity are suitable for burning. Therefore only a limited number of acres could be burned on an annual basis and it is anticipated it will take several years to complete all planned prescribed burning. Any prescribed burn would have to be approved in advance by the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality to meet air quality standards.

Temporary Roads

Up to 2 miles of temporary road would be constructed to facilitate the harvest and removal of trees; this would mostly occur within timber stands located in T18N, R7E Sect. 16. There are few Forest System roads available this section and the Forest Service does not have right of way on community roads to the north. A temporary road in this area would primarily follow a motorized trail route. This trail was a user-created route authorized under the recent Munds Park Road and Trails Project Decision Notice (2005) as a Forest System motorized trail. To accommodate logging trucks, the route would need to be widened and surfaced into a temporary road. For public safety, this road would be closed to public use during mechanical harvesting operations. After harvesting is complete, the road would be reconstructed and narrowed back

Figure 1. Location of proposed treatments in the Munds Park fuels reduction project area



into a motorized trail. The two mile estimate also includes short temporary road segments within the northeast corner of T18N, R7E, Sect. 13.

Standard mitigation measures and best practices will be utilized during project implementation in order to limit impacts to resources and forest activities. Applicable Forest Plan direction, Best Management Practices, and Forest Service Manual and Handbook direction will be incorporated into the project design. Specifically, design features and mitigation measures for this project will focus on:

- Maintaining habitat for wildlife species and sensitive plants
- Preventing the spread of noxious or invasive weeds
- Preserving historic resources
- Minimizing impacts to forest users and neighbors

Environmental Analysis

Based on resource information gathered to date, I am moving towards analyzing this project as a categorical exclusion. A proposed project may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment if it is within a category listed in Section 31.2 of Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 and there are no extraordinary circumstances. Scoping comments along with a resource analysis will confirm whether this project can be categorically excluded.

The proposed action is consistent with category 31.2(10): “*Hazardous fuels reduction activities using prescribed fire, not to exceed 4,500 acres and mechanical methods for crushing, piling, thinning, pruning, cutting, chipping, mulching, and mowing, not to exceed 1,000 acres*” (FSH 1909.15).

The extraordinary circumstances related to this project that have been considered to date are:

- *Threatened and endangered species or their critical habitat:* There are 58 acres of Mexican spotted owl (MSO) critical habitat within the area proposed for prescribed burning only. There are two protected activity centers (PAC) just outside, but immediately adjacent to, the project area. As a mitigation measure, no burning will occur within 1/2 mile of the PACs between March 1 and August 31. By employing this mitigation measure, it has been determined the project “may affect, not likely to adversely effect” MSO and its critical habitat. There are no other threatened or endangered species or their critical habitat present within the project area.
- *Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds:* The project area does not include any flood plains or municipal watersheds and no treatments will occur within the 10 acres around O’Dell Lake.
- *Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas:* The project is not located in any congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas.
- *Inventoried roadless areas:* The project is not located within an inventoried roadless area.
- *Research Natural Areas:* There are no Research Natural Areas within the project area.

- *Native American areas of traditional cultural importance, archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas:* The tribes were notified of this potential project in February 2006 and no concerns were brought up. An archeological survey has been completed; it was determined the proposal will have no adverse effect on cultural resources. Concurrence has been obtained from the Arizona State Historical Preservation Office.

The following criteria must also be met under category 31.2(10):

- *Within the wildland-urban interface:* This project is within the Munds Park wildland-urban interface.
- *Shall be identified through a collaborative framework:* This area was identified as a community at-risk from catastrophic fire in the Community Wildfire Protection Plan for Flagstaff and Surrounding Communities (2005).
- *Shall be conducted consistent with agency procedures and land and resource management plans:* Based on the above discussion, there are no extraordinary circumstances related to this proposed action and the project will be designed and implemented to meet Coconino Forest Plan standards and guidelines.
- *Shall not be conducted in wilderness:* The project does not overlap with wilderness or a wilderness study area.
- *Shall not include the use of herbicides or pesticides or the construction of new permanent roads:* The proposed action does not include the use of herbicides or pesticides or new permanent roads.

Public Involvement

The proposal was listed on the Coconino National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) beginning on January 1, 2007. Notification and project contact information was included as an insert to the Pinewood Sanitary District monthly mailing in late May 2007, reaching approximately 2,830 property owners. Additionally, an article describing the proposal was published in *The Pinewood News* on June 6, 2007, which was circulated to approximately 3,200 recipients.

To date, 56 residents have responded to this initial outreach and requested to be added to the project mailing list. No issues related to the proposal have been brought up during this early notification period; most residents agree with the concept of reducing wildfire risk around their community. Most importantly, residents wished to remain informed about the project, especially before the Forest Service initiates any prescribed burning.

A community open house has been scheduled on August 18, 2007 at the Pinewood Fire Department from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Forest Service resource specialists will be on hand at this event to answer questions and provide more details about the proposed action.

Opportunity to Comment on the Munds Park Fuels Reduction Project under 36 CFR 215

The purpose of this comment period is to allow the public early and meaningful participation on a proposed action prior to a decision being made. Additional information regarding this project can be obtained from Skye Sieber at ssieber@fs.fed.us or (928) 527-8216.

How to Comment and Timeframe

Written or oral comments on this action will be accepted for 30 calendar days following the publication of a legal notice in the *Arizona Daily Sun* (expected August 1, 2007). The publication date in the *Arizona Daily Sun* is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period.

Submit written comments to: Gene Waldrip, District Ranger, 5075 N US Highway 89, Flagstaff, AZ 86004; fax (928) 527-8288. Comments may be hand-delivered to the above address, Monday-Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., excluding holidays. Oral comments can be provided at the same office during normal business hours in person or by telephone (928) 526-0866. Written and oral comments may also be submitted at the open house scheduled on August 18, 2007 at the Pinewood Fire Department from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

Electronic comments may be submitted to: comments-southwestern-coconino-mormon-lake@fs.fed.us (.doc, .rtf or .txt formats only). The comment must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identify will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification of electronic comments.

Appeal Eligibility

It is the responsibility of persons providing comments to submit them by the close of the comment period. Only those who provide comments during this comment period are eligible to appeal the decision under the regulations. Individuals and organizations wishing to be eligible to appeal must meet the information requirements of 36 CFR 215.6.

/s/ Gene Waldrip
GENE WALDRIP
District Ranger