



File Code: 1950

Date: September 12, 2007

Dear Forest User,

I have decided to implement the Munds Park Fuels Reduction project. The project area consists of 2,960 acres of National Forest System lands located south and southwest of the Pinewood/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. The information that follows provides additional details about this decision.

Background

Pinewood/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, RV resort and campground, hotel, restaurants, gas stations/convenience stores, and several other 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. There are also several stands of dense, overstocked ponderosa pine trees immediately adjacent to the southwest and south sides of Munds Park. These conditions contribute to high fire hazard ratings in the forest surrounding Munds Park. This high fire hazard rating makes it more difficult for firefighters to control a wildfire starting in this area under severe weather conditions that occur between April and June, and sometimes September and October. Given the prevailing southwest winds, a wildfire igniting in this part of the forest would likely move in a northeasterly direction towards homes and businesses.

Decision

A combination of prescribed burning and thinning treatments will be used to help reduce the high fire hazard rating on 2,950 acres of National Forest System lands located south and southwest of Pinewood/Munds Park. Specifically, the following activities (see Figure 1) are authorized under this decision:

- Thin up to 990 acres of ponderosa pine
- Conduct initial and maintenance prescribed burns on approximately 2,950 acres of forest
- Construct up to 2 miles of temporary road
- The 10 acres of forest around O'Dell Lake will not be thinned or burned



Thinning Ponderosa Pine

Dense stands of ponderosa pine located southwest and south of Munds Park will be thinned (see Figure 1). Methods of thinning will either be mechanical (approximately 740 acres) or by hand (approximately 250 acres).

Stands identified for hand thinning treatment have been modified slightly since the Proposed Action was published in July. Based on concerns expressed by residents, the hill directly south of the powerline/homes along Navajo Road will be hand thinned prior to prescribed burning (see section 22 in Figure 1). Hand thinning previously identified in the area west of I-17 and south of Munds Creek (see section 23 in Figure 1) will be changed to a prescribed burning treatment only. This change provides a greater fuels reduction benefit immediately adjacent to private property, keeps all hand thinning treatments in the project area grouped together for more efficient implementation, and maintains the total number of thinning acres within the scope of the published proposed action.

In areas treated with mechanical thinning, emphasis will be placed on leaving trees in variable groups to mimic the spatial arrangement that existed prior to European settlement. Pre-settlement evidences (e.g. stumps, stump holes, and downed logs) will be used to guide placement or retention of tree “groups,” interspaces, and openings. Mechanical thinning will also emphasize retaining and enhancing existing groups of older, larger trees (18” dbh or greater). Groups may be even- or uneven-aged, depending on the existing stand structure.

Hand thinning areas are not accessible to mechanical thinning equipment and only trees up to 9 inches diameter breast height (dbh) will be removed. Due to the inability to thin larger diameter trees, the leave tree arrangement will be less groupy in this part of the project area, with fewer grassy interspaces and openings for regeneration. However, compared to no thinning, these areas will exhibit decreased stand densities, resulting in decreased inter-tree competition, increased growth and vigor, and increased understory production.

Prescribed Burning

A total of 2,950 acres will be treated with initial and maintenance prescribed broadcast burns. The entire area would receive initial prescribed burns over the course of several years; this includes the 990 acres that will be thinned. Thinning areas would be burned *after* trees are harvested in order to remove activity-created slash, duff, and needle-cast. Slash is gathered into piles, which can be burned soon after they dry out. The remainder of the project area will receive a “burn-only” treatment (no thinning of trees). Maintenance burns would be conducted as needed to maintain low and moderate fire hazard conditions for up to 20 years without additional thinning.

Burning will be planned for times when weather and other environmental factors such as wind, fuel moisture and humidity are suitable for burning, primarily during the fall and early spring. Any prescribed burn will be approved in advance by the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality to ensure it meets air quality standards. Public notification of burning will take place prior to the ignition of any prescribed fire.

Temporary Roads

Up to 2 miles of temporary road may be constructed to facilitate the harvest and removal of trees; this will mostly occur within timber stands located in T18N, R7E Sect. 16. A temporary road in this area will primarily follow an authorized motorized trail. To accommodate logging trucks, the route would be widened and surfaced into a temporary road. After harvesting is complete, the road will be reconstructed and narrowed back into a motorized trail. The two mile estimate also includes short temporary road segments within the northeast corner of T18N, R7E, Sect. 13. All temporary roads will be rehabilitated after harvesting is completed.

This action can be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environmental assessment (EA) under category 31.2(10) of Forest Service Handbook 1909.15: “*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.*” Standard mitigation measures and best practices will be utilized during project implementation in order to limit impacts to natural and cultural resources and forest activities (see Attachment 1).

Decision Rationale

This project meets the purpose and need of reducing the high fire hazard rating within the Munds Park wildland-urban interface (WUI). A categorical exclusion is appropriate because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects that may significantly affect the environment. I considered the following resource conditions in determining whether extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action warranted further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS:

- Threatened and endangered species or their critical habitat: Burning and/or thinning operations, including preparation for these activities will not occur within 0.5 mile of known Mexican spotted owl nests from March 1 through August 31. By employing this mitigation measure, it has been determined the project “may affect, is not likely to adversely effect” MSO and its critical habitat. The US Fish and Wildlife Service were consulted about this project and concur with this determination (AESO/SE 22410-2007-I-0387). 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.

Furthermore, the following criteria under category 31.2(10) have also been met:

- 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

This project has been listed on the Coconino National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) since January 1, 2007. Residents were first personally notified about the project in early June 2007. A detailed proposed action was mailed to approximately 70 interested individuals and organizations requesting a copy of the proposal. Additionally, notification of the proposed action and opportunity to comment was published in the *Arizona Daily Sun* on July 31 and *The Pinewood News* on August 1, 2007.

During the official comment period, the Forest Service hosted a community open house at the Pinewood Fire Department. Presentations about the project were also provided by agency staff at both the Munds Park Trails Stewards (MUTS) work day event and the Munds Park Fire Auxiliary community potluck. Approximately 100 individuals in total, mostly residents, participated in these combined outreach events.

Two letters were submitted in response to the proposed action. One letter requested clarification about several components of the proposal. After answers to their questions were provided, the respondent replied that they hope the project would be approved and commence as planned. The other letter expressed concern about prescribed burning treatments immediately adjacent to private property. The Forest Service contacted this individual by phone to discuss their concern in more detail and to explain the standard operating procedures for conducting prescribed fires. The respondent thanked us for the time to follow-up with their comments and no additional concerns were expressed.

Additionally, several residents attending the open house expressed concern about the high fire hazard on the slope directly south of Munds Park. In response, three Forest Service employees

met a week later with at least eight property owners to look at the area directly south of the powerline and their homes along Navajo Road. After observing the condition of the forest on this slope and determining access into the area, the original proposed action was modified to add hand thinning treatments to this part of the project area (see page 3, *Thinning Ponderosa Pine*).

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunity

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to regulations at 36 CFR 215. Individuals or organizations who submitted comments or otherwise expressed interest during the official 30-day comment period may appeal this decision. The appeal must be filed (regular mail, fax, email, hand-delivery, express delivery, or messenger service) with the Appeal Deciding Officer. Submit appeals to: Nora Rasure, Appeal Deciding Officer, 1824 S Thompson St, Flagstaff, AZ 86001-2529 or fax to (928) 527-5620.

If hand-delivered, the appeal must be received at the above address during business hours (Monday-Friday 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.), excluding holidays. Electronic appeals may be submitted to appeals-southwestern-coconino@fs.fed.us (.doc, .rtf, or .txt formats only). The appeal must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic appeals. When emailing an appeal, 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 215.15).

Appeals, including attachments, must be in writing, fully consistent with 36 CFR 215.14, and , filed (postmarked) within 45 days following the date a legal notice is published in the *Arizona Daily Sun*, the newspaper of record. The publication date in the *Arizona Daily Sun* is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframes provided by any other source.

Implementation

This project may be implemented 5 business days following the close of the appeal filing period established by this legal notice of decision in the *Arizona Daily Sun*. If an appeal is filed, implementation may begin 15 business days following a final decision on the appeal.

Contact Person

Additional information regarding this project can be obtained from Skye Sieber at ssieber@fs.fed.us or (928) 527-8216.

Sincerely,

/s/ Gene Waldrip
GENE WALDRIP
District Ranger

**Attachment 1:
Munds Park Fuels Reduction Project Design Features and Mitigation Measures**

Mexican spotted owl

- The entire area project area plus a 0.5 mile buffer will be re-surveyed during the 2008 breeding season, prior to project implementation.
- Burning and/or thinning operations, including preparation for these activities will not be allowed within 0.5 mile of known Mexican spotted owl nests from March 1 through August 31.
- No trees greater than 24 inches diameter breast height will be cut within restricted, protected, target/threshold or critical habitats.
- Retain snags 18 inches in diameter and larger and logs over 12 inches midpoint diameter.

Bald eagle

- Between October 15 and April 15, within the known winter roost and 0.25 mile buffer around the roost, burning, thinning and hauling activities will be restricted between 1000 and 1600 hours each day.
- No thinning or burning will be allowed within the roost area from October 15 to April 15. Outside of the eagle winter season, only trees up to 9 inches dbh will be thinned from within the roost. No trees larger than 24 inches dbh will be removed within the 0.25 mile buffer around the roost.

Noxious or invasive weeds

- Incorporate noxious or invasive weed Best Management Practices into project planning and implementation. See Appendix B from the *FEIS for Treatment of Noxious or Invasive Weeds, Coconino, Kaibab and Prescott National Forests, 2005*.
- Contact the Noxious Weed Specialist before management activities in stands where biological control agents have previously been released. Specifically, coordination should occur before burning occurs in loc/site 439/001 and 439/002.
- Contact the Noxious Weed Specialist before initiating any management activity in the borrow pit east of I-17, specifically in loc/site 411/021 and 411/029 and loc/site 425/025 and 425/029.
- Monitor slash pile sites after burning for invasion of noxious or invasive weeds.
- Monitor the effects of management activities after implementation to assess the need for noxious or invasive weed treatments.
- Monitor the effects of noxious or invasive weed treatments incorporated into management activities after implementation.

Sensitive plants

- Mitigate loss of individuals and groups of Flagstaff beardtongue during management activities by avoiding known locations during management activities.
- Thinning slash and burn lines should not be placed within populations of Flagstaff beardtongue. Appropriate firing techniques should be used to minimize the effect of burning on known populations.
- Construct slash piles at least 10 to 20 feet away from known populations. Use previously disturbed areas including old pile sites or previously used decking areas where available instead of creating new sites to mitigate effects from slash pile construction.
- Prohibit temporary road construction or reconstruction within populations of Flagstaff beardtongue.
- Monitor the effects of treatments on the habitat and populations of Flagstaff beardtongue.

Soil and water conservation

- To minimize nonpoint source pollution, incorporate Best Management Practices from the Soil and Watershed Conservation Practices Handbook (FSH 2509.22) into project implementation.

Cultural and historic resources

- Historic and pre-historic resources will be excluded and protected from burning activities and a ground disturbing activities. An archeologist will flag sites prior to implementation. Sites will be lined and monitored during prescribed burning operations.
- Areas where temporary roads will be constructed will be inventoried prior to implementation.

Recreation and social considerations

- Provide advance notification of planned prescribed fire ignitions to Pinewood/Munds Parks residents and businesses.
- Coordinate access into loc/site 451/004 with the property owners on the south side of Navajo Road.
- Coordinate harvesting and burning activities with scheduled trail projects, Forest Service recreation staff, and the Munds Park Trail Stewards (MUTS).
- For public safety, close roads and trails to public use within active harvesting and burning areas.

I-17 Elk Fencing Project

Contact the Arizona Game and Fish Department's Research Branch when thinning and burning activities begin. This will help inform telemetry data collection regarding elk movement in the Munds Park area.