



File Code: 1950-1

Date: September 5, 2007

Dear Friend:

Enclosed is a copy of the Environmental Assessment for the Oak Creek Canyon Fuel Reduction Project under Healthy Forest Restoration Act. The EA is also available for review at:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/coconino/nepa/index.shtml>.

The Proposed Action (Alternative 2) includes thinning, hand piling, pile burning, chaparral cutting and broadcast maintenance burning on approximately 653 acres of ponderosa pine/mixed conifer/oak woodland, pinyon/juniper and chaparral vegetation types in Oak Creek Canyon north of Sedona, Arizona. Alternative 2 is further described in Chapter 2 of the EA. The area affected by the proposal includes the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) area north of Sedona and Midgely Bridge to just south of the Sterling Springs Fish Hatchery, Red Rock Ranger District, Coconino National Forest.

Healthy Forests Restoration Act Authority

This project is being 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 district to implement the Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) for the Greater Flagstaff area and Surrounding Communities that was developed by numerous local and state organizations and agencies.

Planning processes under HFRA are different than projects planned under traditional NEPA procedures. This EA includes analysis of a no-action alternative (Alternative 1), and the original Proposed Action (Alternative 2) with mitigation measures. HFRA requirements in areas with an approved CWPP, the project is consistent with the CWPP and the project is within 1-1/2 miles of a community at risk require one action alternative to be analyzed. Public comments and interest in this project have been minimal with few suggestions on different treatments. The topography, Wilderness boundaries and riparian corridor limit the opportunities for treatments on a larger scale in the over 8000-acre WUI area.

Preferred Alternative

It is my decision to select Alternative 2 as the preferred alternative for this project. This alternative includes:

- Approximately 250 acres of thinning ponderosa pine to 60 square foot basal area density or crown spacing (subject to 9-inch diameter or smaller)
- 400 acres of tree and vegetation removal as follows:
 - Juniper and pinyon will be removed to 40 square foot basal area,.



- Oak 12-inches or greater diameter will be retained,
- Limited removal of dead and down material in riparian areas and.
- Removal of brush species.
- Broadcast prescribed burning over much of the 653 acres for maintenance after initial treatments (subject to mitigation measures, weather, containment lines and other safety considerations).
- Up to 653 acres of pile burning (subject to mitigation measures) or chipping and removal of slash if economical.

A complete description of Alternative 2 activities is located in Chapter 2 of the EA. Specific mitigation measures are identified in Appendix A.

I have selected Alternative 2 as the preferred alternative based on the following rationale.

Through this alternative, we would implement the goals and objectives for forest management approaches that improve and restore ecosystem health of ponderosa pine forest ecosystems in Oak Creek Canyon. Vegetation will be treated to reduce the risk of intense fire and better protect private property and recreation sites. Treatment areas with ponderosa pine fuels will have up to 90% of the “ladder” fuels removed, with a basal area of 60 square feet as the desired future condition in areas that are typically accessible, safe for workers and less than 40 percent slopes. Spacing between the trees will be irregular. Mixed conifer stands will be healthy with minimal areas of bug kill or blow down. Horizontal fuel continuity will be broken up in the chaparral fuels, to reduce the probability of intense fire behavior adjacent to private property, developed recreation facilities and State Route 89A. These breaks in the fuels will be large enough to be an effective tactical tool for firefighters, but will not be so large as to create watershed and/or long-term visual concerns. Pinyon juniper stands will be open with a good grass component in the understory. Treatments will minimize impacts to Mexican Spotted Owl PACS, riparian habitat and riparian obligate plants and animals. Scenic quality values will be protected for treatment actions will have short-term impacts and irregular appearance.

Objections Process

This project is subject to the objection process pursuant to 36 CFR Part 218 Subpart A and is not subject to notice, comment, and appeal procedures under 215 (218.3). The Red Rock Ranger District is providing respondents with a 30-day objections period. Objections will be accepted only from those who have previously submitted written comments specific to the proposed authorized hazardous fuel reduction project either during scoping or other public involvement opportunities on the EA (218.6). Individual members of organizations must have submitted their own comments to meet the requirements of eligibility as an individual, objections received on behalf of an organization are considered as those of the organization only. If an objection is submitted on behalf of a number of individuals or organizations, each individual or organization listed must meet the eligibility requirement of having previously submitted comments on the project (218.6)

Objection Requirements

The objection must contain at a minimum, a sufficient narrative description of those aspects of the proposed project objected to, specific issues related to the project, and suggested remedies

which would resolve the objection. Incorporation of documents by reference shall not be allowed; rather complete copies of references should be included.

Individuals and organizations filing an objection must also provide the following information: (218.7)

- Objector's name and address; with telephone number if available.
- Signature or other verification of identity upon request. (A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic objections.)
- For objections with multiple names or multiple organizations, identification of the lead Objector is required. Verification of the identity of the lead Objector shall be provided on request.
- The name of the proposed project, the name and title of the Responsible Official, and the name(s) of the National Forests(s) and/or Ranger District(s) on which the proposed project will be implemented.

Written objections, including any attachments, must be filed (regular mail, fax, email, hand-delivery, or express delivery) with Nora Rasure, Reviewing Officer, at 1824 S. Thompson St., Flagstaff, AZ 86001; by fax at (928) 527-3420; or by email at *comments-southwestern-coconino@fs.fed.us* within 30 days following the publication date of the legal notice in the Arizona Daily Sun. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered objections are 8:00 to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays. Electronic objections must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), and Word (.doc). It is the responsibility of objectors to ensure their objection is received in a timely manner (218.9).

The publication date in the *Sedona Red Rock News*, newspaper of record, is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an objection. Those wishing to object to this proposed project should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. Time extensions of the objection time period are not permitted (218.9).

Timing of Project Decision and Implementation

When the objection-filing period has ended and responses have been made to any objections by the Reviewing Officer, the Responsible Official may make a final decision on the project. The Reviewing Officer shall issue a written response to any Objectors within 30 days following the end of this objection-filing period (218.9). If no timely objections are filed, a decision can be made on the 5th business day following the close of the filing period (218.11). Implementation may begin immediately after the decision is made.

For more information on how this objection process works or additional information regarding the project, contact Scott Spleiss, Assistant Fire Management Officer, at the Verde Ranger District, 5075 N. Hwy 260, Camp Verde, AZ, 86322; by phone at (928)567-1156; or by email at *sspleiss@fs.fed.us*. Objections process information under 36 CFR 218 Subpart A can be found electronically on the national Forest Service website at <http://www.fs.fed.us/emc/applit/36cfr218a.htm>.

I would like to thank those who participated in this planning effort. This EA is the culmination of several years of discussions on the best approach to safely reduce fuels in this project area. I believe this alternative will reduce the risk of a catastrophic fire in the project area while balancing the need to protect slope stability, public safety and the unique setting and resources in Oak Creek Canyon.

Sincerely,

/S/ HEATHER C. PROVENCIO

HEATHER C. PROVENCIO
District Ranger