

Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact

Jack Smith/Schultz Fuels Reduction and Forest Health Project

**USDA Forest Service
Peaks and Mormon Lake Ranger District, Coconino National Forest
Coconino County, Arizona**

Decision

I have decided to implement Alternative 2 for thinning and/or prescribed burning on approximately 9,662 acres within the 11,827 acre Jack Smith/Schultz Project area as described in the Jack Smith/Schultz Fuels Reduction and Forest Health Project Environmental Assessment (EA). The project area is within the Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) for the Flagstaff area. Alternative 2 includes:

- Mechanical thinning – Uneven-aged Treatments on approximately 7,078 acres. These treatments occur on 6,381 acres outside of Protected Fledgling Areas (PFAs) and 697 acres inside of PFAs. 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 excess small diameter trees, enhance progress toward an uneven-aged forest structure, and reduce wildfire risk.
- Hand and or mechanical thinning on approximately 1,110 acres. 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. This hand and or mechanical thinning acreage includes, 305 acres in Mexican spotted owl (MSO) Protected Activity Centers (PACs) where the cutting diameter is limited to 9” dbh or less. Also included are approximately 151 acres thinned in stands designated for developing old-growth.
- Mechanical thinning – Uneven-aged treatments on approximately 445 acres within MSO Restricted and Protected Habitat.
- Mechanical thinning – Uneven-aged treatments on approximately 158 acres within MSO Threshold Habitat.
- To restore grasslands, invading ponderosa pine trees will be removed on approximately 27 grassland acres.
- Yellow Pine, regardless of size, will not be removed in any of these treatments.
- Initial prescribed burns on approximately 8,818 acres after thinning and on 844 acres without thinning (prescribed burn only), for a total of approximately 9,662 acres, to reduce fuel loads and reintroduce low to moderate intensity surface fire. Follow-up maintenance burns on the 9,662 acres after initial prescribed burns to maintain fuel loads will be conducted as needed.
- Restoration will be conducted on approximately 150 acres across 35 sites of aspen forest. Fencing protection will be provided as needed.

- Approximately 2 to 5 miles of temporary road construction will occur.
- Obliteration of 38 miles of roads in excess to the desired open road system, or are otherwise damaging the resource.
- Closure of 28 miles of roads in excess to the desired open road system, but may be needed administratively in the future.

Implementation will follow the description of the alternative, the Design Features/Mitigation Measures, and Monitoring sections in the EA.

My decision is based upon a review of the EA and the supporting documentation contained in the project record.

I have attached an errata sheet that makes a slight correction to acreage treated under prescribed burning that also adjusts the total acres of treatment for the project. This error was due to a mathematical area discovered in a final edit of the documents. This adjustment was mathematical and does not affect acres analyzed or the effects analysis. See Attachment 1, pages 11 and 12.

Decision Rationale

Alternative 2 best meets the need to reduce fire hazard to threatened communities in the wildland urban interface (WUI) and restore health to a fire-dependent ecosystem, while maintaining and protecting key wildlife habitat and meeting forest plan direction. As implementation of the alternative progresses, the desired condition of the reintroduction of low to moderate intensity surface fire will be realized. In addition, aspen and grassland ecosystems will be restored.

Alternative 2 will reduce wildfire threat to the community of Flagstaff and several adjacent urban interface areas such as Doney Park and Timberline. The project complements similar efforts in progress with the adjacent Eastside and Fort Valley Fuel Reduction and Forest Health projects. The Jack Smith/Schultz project will reduce risk to the Kachina Peaks Wilderness area and numerous key wildlife habitats and improve forest health. The result will be a forest where low intensity fire is more likely to occur, eventually allowing for a return of fire's natural role in the landscape. The activities will result in forest vegetation that will be healthier, increase species and structural diversity, improve forage condition and diversity, and reduce susceptibility to insect attacks.

Most importantly, if a crown fire occurs and travels towards the communities of Flagstaff and the associated urban interface areas mentioned, suppression efforts are much more likely to be successful. Treatments will reduce the likelihood of running crown fires, instead transforming them to ground fires. Flame lengths will be low enough to allow suppression forces to take safer and more effective action. These conditions will not prevent fires from occurring in the area, but fires will be of a lower intensity. In addition, many of the treated stands will be less likely to initiate a crown fire.

Key wildlife habitat components such as hiding cover, travelways, and foraging/nesting areas will be maintained or improved for Mexican spotted owl, northern goshawk, Abert squirrels and other species. The risk to these components from fire will also be reduced. Alternative 2 is

responsive to the issues identified in the analysis process. The design, intensity, location, and timing of vegetation treatments address wildlife habitat issues regarding canopy cover and Vegetation Structural Stage (VSS) 1 size and extent criteria.

Project design features and mitigation measures have been incorporated to address air quality/smoke management, control of prescribed fire, soil disturbance, insect and disease concerns, sensitive plant species, yellow pine retention, and snags and logs retention and recruitment.

Invasive species are managed and mitigated as defined by the Best Management Practices as outlined in the Three Forest Final Environmental Impact Statement for Integrated Treatment of Noxious or Invasive Weeds. Specific actions in the alternative include some site specific treatments and monitoring as well as mitigation measures to reduce the introduction and/or spread of invasive species.

In areas with high densities of non-native and invasive plants, there may be an increase in undesirable weeds. However, project design features include measures to prevent further spread. In other areas, weeds will be eradicated as a part of project design. Activities may disturb wildlife with noise and human presence, but this disturbance is short-term. Many excess small diameter trees will be cut and removed, or burned in place, allowing more nutrients, sunlight and water, promoting growth for remaining trees and increased forage.

While road management emphasis is being covered in the ongoing Travel Management Planning process, some roads have been identified to be closed and/or obliterated and allowed to re-vegetate after thinning and initial burning activities are completed. This project specific analysis for the desired open road system and treatment of excess and poorly located roads that are damaging the resource was done in coordination with the ongoing Travel Management Rule Process (TMR) and is in line with current proposed actions under that analysis.

Monitoring has been incorporated into various areas including invasive weeds, archaeology, MSO habitat, fuels post burn evaluations, and soils and hydrology. Other monitoring being developed by the Greater Flagstaff Forest Partnership (GFFP) Monitoring and Research Team may be conducted as part of this project if funding and/or volunteer assistance is provided by GFFP or other interested parties.

This alternative meets requirements under federal laws and executive orders pertaining to project-specific planning and environmental analysis on federal lands. A list of the most applicable laws can be found in the EA (see pages 34 and 35). In addition to these laws and orders, the Jack Smith/Schultz Project was analyzed under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) authorities. A discussion and analysis of how the project meets requirements set forth under the HFRA can be found in the EA (Appendix B). A CWPP for Flagstaff and surrounding communities was developed by GFFP and the Ponderosa Fire Advisory Council, in October 2004. Appendix C of the EA discusses the relationship of this project and the CWPP.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered the Proposed Action – Alternative 1 and two alternatives considered but eliminated from detailed study.

Proposed Action – Alternative 1

The proposed action for the Jack Smith/Schultz Fuels Reduction and Forest Health Project proposed various silvicultural methods to treat forest vegetation including: uneven-aged management thinning, both by hand and mechanically; prescribed burning; aspen restoration and protection; and meadow/grassland restoration. The purpose is to improve declining forest health and reduce wildfire potential. Thinning prescriptions varied to create a mosaic of resulting stand densities. The Proposed Action was designed by the Forest Service ID Team members in collaboration with GFFP partners to meet the Need for Change for Action of the project while meeting requirements of the Forest Plan and other guiding documents such as the *Integrated Treatment of Noxious or Invasive Weeds EIS*. However, it was later determined that to proceed with the Proposed Action, a Forest Plan Amendment for the project would be required.

The largest difference between the Proposed Action and Alternative 2 is the amount of continuously forested area and the visual appearance of tree groups. The forested condition will be more continuous in Alternative 2, and groups will be less visually evident in general because the degree of openness between groups is constrained by the VSS 1 size and extent criteria of the Forest Plan.

Alternative 1 most closely represented the collaborative effort with the GFFP. This alternative was similar in scope and extent to Alternative 2 as far as the location and number of acres treated, and actually changed more acres of high, very high, and extreme fire hazard rated stands to the moderate and low categories. The alternative also included adaptive management efforts that incorporated “lessons learned” through the GFFP/Forest Service collaborative process. This effort emphasized looking at recent and past projects and making adjustments in treatment designs and intensities to meet our mutual goals. Elements of restoration were combined with recent clarifications on implementing northern goshawk guidelines and ideas for advancing desired spatial arrangements post treatment in a clumpy/groupy arrangement that represented the culmination of a decade of GFFP and Forest Service collaboration. In response to issues raised in the objection process, we determined this alternative would not be in compliance with the Forest Plan.

At my request, the ID Team incorporated many ideas derived in Alternative 1 into Alternative 2. Many of the objectives of Alternative 1 are still being met. Restorative elements designed in Alternative 1 and eliminated in Alternative 2, such as the ideas of interspace and group canopy cover, could be implemented in the future if it is determined through either Forest Plan Revision or Amendment that these additional actions would be desirable.

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study

1. An alternative was proposed by the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) and Forest Guardians that called on the forest to propose a project that does not log any trees greater than 16 inches dbh in this area (see discussion on EA pages 36 and 37). In requesting a 16 inch dbh diameter cap, the CBD and Forest Guardians indicated that they “categorically oppose” logging large trees in the name of hazard reduction. The only quantification given specific to the Jack Smith/Schultz project is in the description “...*in this area where ‘the vast majority’ of large trees and old-growth habitat has already been logged*”. There is insufficient information provided in the request specific to the Jack Smith/Schultz Project to cause us to analyze the alternative in further detail. While recommendations from the CBD and Forest Guardians regarding large tree diameter limits will not be considered in detailed study, Chapter 3 does disclose the environmental effects of thinning some large trees to meet ecological objectives. In addition to the HFRA direction listed in the preceding paragraph, these proposals will not be considered in detail because:
 - Large tree management direction in the EA already limits the amount of large trees to be harvested based on project objectives;
 - Comments did not disclose how a large tree diameter cap better meets the intent of the CWPP as required under HFRA; and
 - A large tree diameter cap would not meet the Purpose and Need for Action which details a need for a sustainable, uneven-aged forest structure. See the Vegetation Section in Chapter 3 for further information on the effects of a diameter limit on uneven-aged project objectives.

The Forest Service has held numerous meetings regarding large tree management with GFFP over several years of collaboration to attempt to resolve some large tree management issues. Much of this history is documented in *Appendix B – Healthy Forests Restoration Act Authorities for the Jack Smith/Schultz Fuel Reduction and Forest Health Project, Attachment 1 to the Proposed Action, (Project Record Document #42)*. Also see *Appendix A – Responses to Scoping Comments* for responses to comments regarding large tree concerns.

2. The CBD and Forest Guardians requested an alternative to remove livestock from possible aspen regeneration sites. The issue with livestock grazing in aspen regeneration areas was not developed into an alternative considered in detail because there is currently no livestock grazing in aspen regeneration areas within the project area, nor is any anticipated in the foreseeable future. All damaging ungulate grazing on aspen is currently caused by elk. Though there are two grazing permits within the project area, the one that would include aspen regeneration areas has not been used for livestock grazing in the project area since the 1980’s. No change is anticipated. All pastures on the remaining permit that occur in the project area contain no aspen sites. See response to this comment located in *Appendix A – Responses to Scoping Comments*.

No Action Alternative

No Action, where current management plans would continue to guide management of the project area was used to disclose and compare the existing and projected future conditions against the alternatives. No Action or no treatment does not reduce fire hazard, which keeps the community of Flagstaff and other associated WUI communities at risk to effects from uncontrolled crown fire. There is no restoration of damaged ecosystems. There is no progression toward the return of fire as a natural process in this fire-dependent ecosystem. No Action does not meet any of the goals of the Purpose and Need for the project. The analysis of No Action as compared to the Proposed Action is discussed in detail in Chapter 3 of the EA.

Public Involvement

The need for this action was initially identified as early as 1997 when the GFFP developed their 100,000 acre partnership project area. This need refined in 2006, and the proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping in the spring of 2007. As part of the public involvement process, the agency held public meetings in Flagstaff and Doney Park to answer questions and collect public comments related to the proposal. Initial analysis of public comments did not result in any new significant issues, as the comments had been addressed through design features/mitigation or additional treatment features developed in collaboration with GFFP.

On September 19, 2007, the original EA was distributed to those citizens and agencies that provided comments to the Proposed Action during scoping. A 30 day objection period was provided with this distribution. The forest received one objection that was co-signed by two respondents, the CBD and Forest Guardians. The objection review letter, dated November 16, 2007 (PRD #74), included a number of instructions directing further analysis and clarification to the EA.

When the issues of canopy cover measurement analysis and VSS (Vegetation Structural Stage) 1/interspace surfaced in objection, I instructed the District Ranger and ID Team to re-analyze the comments while considering the objection points. In this re-analysis, the issues of canopy cover and VSS 1/interspace were determined to be a significant issue (see, PRD # 76 – Updated Public Comment Analysis and Appendix A of the EA). At that point, I requested the District Ranger and ID Team develop Alternative 2. These issues have been addressed through Alternative 2, project design features, monitoring activities, and effects analysis located in Chapter 3, and as described under alternatives not considered in detail. A summary of the re-analysis and revisions to the EA is provided in PRD #86a.

The revised EA was mailed on March 7, 2008 (PRD #88). A second 30 day objection period was provided with a Legal Notice posted in the newspaper of record (The Arizona Daily Sun) on March 10, 2008 (PRD #90). An objection was received during the 30 day objection period on April 7, 2008, signed by Taylor McKinnon of the CBD and co-signed by Brian Byrd of the WildEarth Guardians. This second objection was forwarded to the Regional Office for review, and in a letter on May 2, 2008, the objectors were notified of the determination by the Reviewing Officer that the Jack Smith/Schultz analysis was affirmed.

Following completion of the objection process, field trips with members of the public, including the GFFP and CBD, to the project area were conducted to discuss project objectives and proposed treatments. A goshawk was observed at one location during a field trip, and surveys are ongoing to determine if a goshawk nest or fledglings are present in the vicinity where the goshawk was sighted. If a nest or fledglings are found, a post-fledgling family area will be established according to Region 3 protocols and project activities will be mitigated accordingly.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). An environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

This project is a site-specific action that by itself does not have international, national, region-wide, or statewide importance. The following discussion is organized around the Ten Significance Criteria described in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations (40 CFR 1508.27).

1. My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action. As described in the EA in Chapter 3 and Appendices D and E – Best Management Practices for the Jack Smith/Schultz Fuels Reduction and Forest Health Project, impacts from this project are both beneficial and adverse. The adverse effects of thinning, prescribed fire, road obliteration, and temporary road construction are minor in nature and will not impair land productivity. These effects are short-term noise, smoke and human disturbance to wildlife, and short term soil disturbance that is not expected to cause soil erosion beyond the project area, and is expected to primarily remain on-site. Long-term effects are beneficial for most species habitat and forest ecosystem health. Habitat, including the amount and location of forage and cover, is improved for most species. Future forest structure follows the Forest Plan with a greater percentage of the landscape containing large trees. Fire cycles are returned to intervals more closely resembling pre-settlement frequencies (see EA, Chapter 3, pages 73 – 246 and Appendix D).
2. There will be no significant effects on public health and safety, because standard Forest Service requirements will be used for all activities. There are no known adverse impacts to public safety (as stated in Chapter 3 of the EA).
3. There will be no adverse effects on unique characteristics of the geography, such as cultural resources and wetlands. Ecologically critical areas such as park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, etc. do not exist in the project area. Although cultural resources exist, they are similar to sites found throughout the region and consist of pithouses, pueblos, prehistoric lithic scatters, historic logging camps and railroads, and late 19th to 20th century pioneer homesteads. All sites will either be avoided or mitigation measures implemented to reduce the risk from wildfire while protecting site integrity. The project will increase protection of sites from effects of wildfire and associated suppression activities through these mitigations.

4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial because there is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the project. The effects of the project are limited to the Jack Smith/Schultz Fuels Reduction and Forest Health project area. While disagreement exists with certain parts of the project, no evidence has been provided that the environmental effects of the project have been wrongly predicted; therefore the effects are not likely to be controversial.
5. We have considerable experience with the types of activities to be implemented. The effects analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk. The actions described in this decision are not new. The Forest Service has a long history of implementing these activities on the Coconino National Forest. These actions have been applied elsewhere on similar soil and vegetation types. The effects are not uncertain, unique or unknown (see EA, Chapter 3).
6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, nor does this represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. A decision to implement this decision does not establish any future precedent for other actions within or outside of the project area. Future actions will be evaluated through the NEPA process and will stand on their own as to the environmental effects and project feasibility. This finding is demonstrated through the analysis in the EA, Chapter 3.
7. The cumulative impacts are not significant. These actions are not related to other actions that, when combined, will have significant impacts. Cumulative effects are documented in Chapter 3 of the EA. There is no offsite soil erosion, impact to the overall watershed, or change to forest vegetation that would be cumulative to impacts from other activities. Effects to air quality are monitored and controlled through Arizona Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ) regulations. There are no adverse effects to cultural resources and therefore no cumulative effects. Effects to wildlife habitat are generally minor and do not cause significant effects when considered with other activities in the general area (described in detail in Chapter 3 of the EA).
8. The action will have no adverse effect on project area districts, highways, or structures, because none of these resources are in the project area. The action will not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources, and will increase protection from the threats of wildfire through fuel reduction in or around eligible historic properties. Project implementation and project area specific requirements are addressed in the Jack Smith/Schultz Cultural Resource Clearance Report, PRD #56. This report identifies site eligibility, survey coverage, site types, fire tolerant and intolerant sites, and other information specific to those surveys. All fire intolerant sites will be avoided and protected. No ground disturbing activities will be allowed within any eligible archaeological properties. Fire tolerant sites are identified in the report and describe the conditions and mitigations required before treatment.

9. The action will not adversely affect any threatened or endangered (T&E) species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species act of 1973. Possible effects to federally listed wildlife species were analyzed in the Forest Service's Biological Assessment and Evaluation (PRD #80) and in Chapter 3 of the EA. T&E species were addressed through consultation with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The USFWS has concluded that implementation of the project "may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect", threatened Mexican spotted owl and its critical habitat. Therefore, no significant effects to T&E species of plants or animals, or habitat critical for the management of these species, are anticipated (USFWS Letter of Concurrence, PRD #73, 10/30/2007).
10. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA (see EA pages 34 - 35). The action is consistent with the Coconino National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (see EA page 36 and Appendix F).

I find that implementing Alternative 2 does not constitute a major federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment in either context or intensity. I have made this determination after considering both positive and negative effects, as well as direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of this action and reasonably foreseeable future actions.

I find that the context of the environmental impacts of this decision is limited to the local area and is not significant. I have also determined that the severity of these impacts is not significant.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

The decision to implement Alternative 2 is consistent with the intent of the forest plan's long term goals and objectives. The project was designed to conform to land and resource management plan standards and incorporates appropriate land and resource management plan guidelines for the applicable management areas included in the Jack Smith/Schultz project. Table 1.2 of the EA, page 7, describes inclusive management areas. Specific and applicable standards and guidelines that help guide the intensity, timing, and extent of the activities included in this decision are identified in the Coconino Forest Plan in both the Forest Wide and Management Area sections. The Jack Smith/Schultz Fuels Reduction and Forest Health Project meets the requirements of an authorized hazardous-fuel reduction project, as defined by the HFRA (Section 101(2) for National Forest System lands analyzed in an EA (see Appendix B).

Implementation Date

This project may be implemented immediately.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

The pre-decisional administrative review process for hazardous fuel projects authorized under HFRA has been completed in compliance with 36 CR 218. This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12(i).

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision, contact:

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/s/ Joe Stringer

JOE STRINGER

Deputy Forest Supervisor
Coconino National Forest

August, 19, 2008

Date

ERRATA SHEET
TO
JACK SMITH/SCHULTZ Fuels Reduction and Forest Health Project
Environmental Assessment

August 11, 2008

A mathematical error was discovered in the final edit of the Environmental Assessment that affected the listed acreage of initial and maintenance prescribed burning treatments, which additively affected the total acres treated listings. These treatment acres have always been included in the mapped area of treatment and were considered in all effects analysis, and the error was of a mathematical nature only. The following corrections to the EA are made to correct this error:

- Chapter 1, Purpose and Need, Propose Action – Alternative 1, page 29, sentence 1, thinning approximately 8,520 acres is corrected to 8,818 acres, and sentence 2 is corrected to prescribed burning on approximately 9,518 acres. Under sub-heading Prescribed Burning, the first bullet is corrected from conduct initial prescribed burns on 8,520 acres to 8,818 acres and in bullet 3, conduct additional maintenance burns on 9,220 acres is corrected to 9,518 acres.
- Chapter 2, Alternatives: page 59, Prescribed Burning, Alternative 1 total acreage is corrected from 9,220 to 9,518 acres.
- Chapter 2, Alternatives: page 59, Prescribed Burning, Alternative 2, the sentence is corrected to say, Alternative 2 increases total burn-only treatment acres by 144 acres for a total of 844 acres of burn only treatment and a total treatment acreage of 9,662 acres.
- Chapter 2, Alternatives: page 67, Table 2.4 is corrected include a display of prescribed burn only treatment acres which is: No Action – 0 acres, Alternative 1 – 700 acres, and Alternative 2 – 844 acres. Initial and Maintenance Burning acreage is corrected from 9,220 acres to 9,518 acres in Alternative 1 and from 9,364 acres to 9,662 acres in Alternative 2.
- Chapter 2, Alternatives: page 70. Table 2.5, Understory development, Alternative 1 acreage is corrected from 9,220 to 9,518 acres and Alternative 2 is corrected from 9,220 with an additional 144 acres to 9,518 acres with an additional 144 acres for a total of 9,662 acres.
- Chapter 3, Environmental Consequences, Species Diversity, Meadow, page 98, is corrected from 28 acres to 27 acres.
- Chapter 3, Environmental Consequences, Cumulative Effects, Common to both Alternatives, page 128, corrects acreage in paragraph 1, ...burning the piled

thinning slash (8,845 acres) is corrected to (8,818 acres), as well as , prescribed burning of the forest floor (9,220) acres in Alternative 1 is corrected to (9,518) acres and (9,364) acres in Alternative 2 is corrected to (9,662) acres.

- Chapter 3, Environmental Consequences, Soil and Water, page 208, 1st paragraph, 9,220 acres is corrected to 9,518 acres.
- APPENDIX F, FOREST PLAN COMPLIANCE, page 75, Post Treatment Condition, Row 2, Alternative 1: Treatments improve size and age class diversity over time on 9,220 acres is corrected to 9,518 acres. Alternative 2: is corrected from 9,364 to 9,662 acres.
- APPENDIX F, FOREST PLAN COMPLIANCE, page 76, Treatment Effects, Row 1, Alternative 1 is corrected from 9, 220 acres to 9,518 and Alternative 2 is corrected from 9,364 acres to 9,662 acres.