

File Code: 1950

Date: July 14, 2008

Dear Forest User,

The Peaks Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest is seeking comments as part of the scoping process (environmental analysis) associated with the proposed Railroad Forest Health Improvement and Fuels Reduction project. The project area consists of approximately 421 acres of National Forest System lands located in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) directly associated with the City of Flagstaff and two parcels of private land with homes. The project is split by the BNSF Railroad. The area north of the railroad begins near the A-1 Mountain interchange and parallels Interstate 40 to the railroad over pass on the southwest boundary and extends northward along private land boundaries for approximately ½ mile. The north boundary extends from this point east to the southeast corner of the Bell Springs private property. The project area south of the railroad is between the railroad on the north and I-40 on the south, extending from the railroad overpass on I-40 to private land on the east boundary. Route 66 and the Naval Observatory road travel through this portion of the project area. The project area is located within all or portions of T21N, R6E, Sect. 13, 14, 15, and 23.

Background

This project is located within the Greater Flagstaff Forest Partnership (GFFP) area, a 300,000 acre area surrounding the city of Flagstaff and surrounding communities. This small area was inadvertently excluded from the larger landscape scale projects the Forest Service has planned in collaboration with the GFFP because of its location being somewhat separated from these other landscapes. However, it is in a critical WUI location in an area with a high occurrence of transient camping. A number of human caused fire starts have occurred in the area over the years and the threat of escaped fire is high for the area. Just a few hundred feet east of the project area is the site of the 2006 Woody Fire which burned intensively in similar conditions and required an intensive effort to control. Adjacent WUI treatments in the area were a factor in containing the Woody Fire to a much smaller burned area than would have otherwise been possible. If this fire had not been stopped where it was it presented a significant threat to numerous homes in the area and the City of Flagstaff. The GFFP has been apprised of the project and has worked in collaboration with the Forest service in developing this Proposed Action.

The exclusion of natural fire in the area has resulted in an accumulation of forest litter and fuels. The area includes several stands of dense, overstocked small ponderosa pine trees immediately adjacent to the west and southwest sides of Flagstaff and two parcels of private land. These conditions contribute to high fire hazard ratings in this forest area. This high fire hazard rating makes it more difficult for firefighters to control a wildfire starting in this area. The high tree density also effects forest health, reducing the growth and development of the trees and increases susceptibility to bark beetle attack. Proposed treatments will have the dual benefit of restoring the forest to a more natural condition and improving overall forest health and reducing the fire risk.

A wildfire fire igniting in this part of the forest could move in a northeasterly fashion towards homes and businesses by the prevailing winds.

Purpose and Need

The purpose and need of this project is to improve forest health by reducing tree density, and reduce the fire hazard rating within this important WUI. Achieving this Purpose and Need will reduce the probability of a crown fire initiating and/or spot fires occurring. Meeting the Purpose and Need of improved forest health and fuel hazard reduction on this project will help protect the community of Flagstaff and the adjacent private lands from a wildfire in this area.

Proposed Action

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

- Thin up to 327 acres of ponderosa pine (approximately 25 acres is hand thinning only).
- Conduct prescribed burns on the 327 acres following thinning
- Conduct prescribed burn only treatments on 63 acres where thinning is not required
- Conduct maintenance burning on 420 acres every 7 to 10 years or as needed
- Construct up to 1 mile of temporary road
- There will be no treatment on 30 acres

Thinning of Ponderosa Pine

Dense stands of ponderosa pine located in the project area are proposed to be thinned (see Figure 1).

Methods of thinning would either be mechanical or by hand.

Hand thinning would occur in those stands where density objectives can be met by thinning trees up to 9" DBH, and in stands with limited or poor vehicle access or on steeper slopes. Only smaller trees (9" DBH or less) can feasibly be thinned by hand.

Stands thinned using mechanical methods will have a range of 40 to 60 trees left per acre, basal area will range from 30 to 60, and canopy cover will range from 30 to 40 percent. The majority of trees to be cut will be less than 12 inches in diameter.

Treatments will be designed to meet the Coconino National Forest Plan standards and guidelines for management of Northern Goshawk habitat.

All the stands in this project are even-age single story stands. To meet the Goshawk guidelines and move the stand toward uneven age conditions, small openings will be created across the stands, up to 20% of the treated areas. Most openings will be approximately one acre in size.

Trees will be left in groupy and clumpy arrangements which mimic the natural historic arrangement of tree patterns. Even spacing of trees will be avoided.

This project does not contain any old growth stands. Analysis has determined that adjacent projects/areas have sufficient allocations of developing and existing old growth to preclude the need to manage for additional old growth in this project.

Prescribed Burning

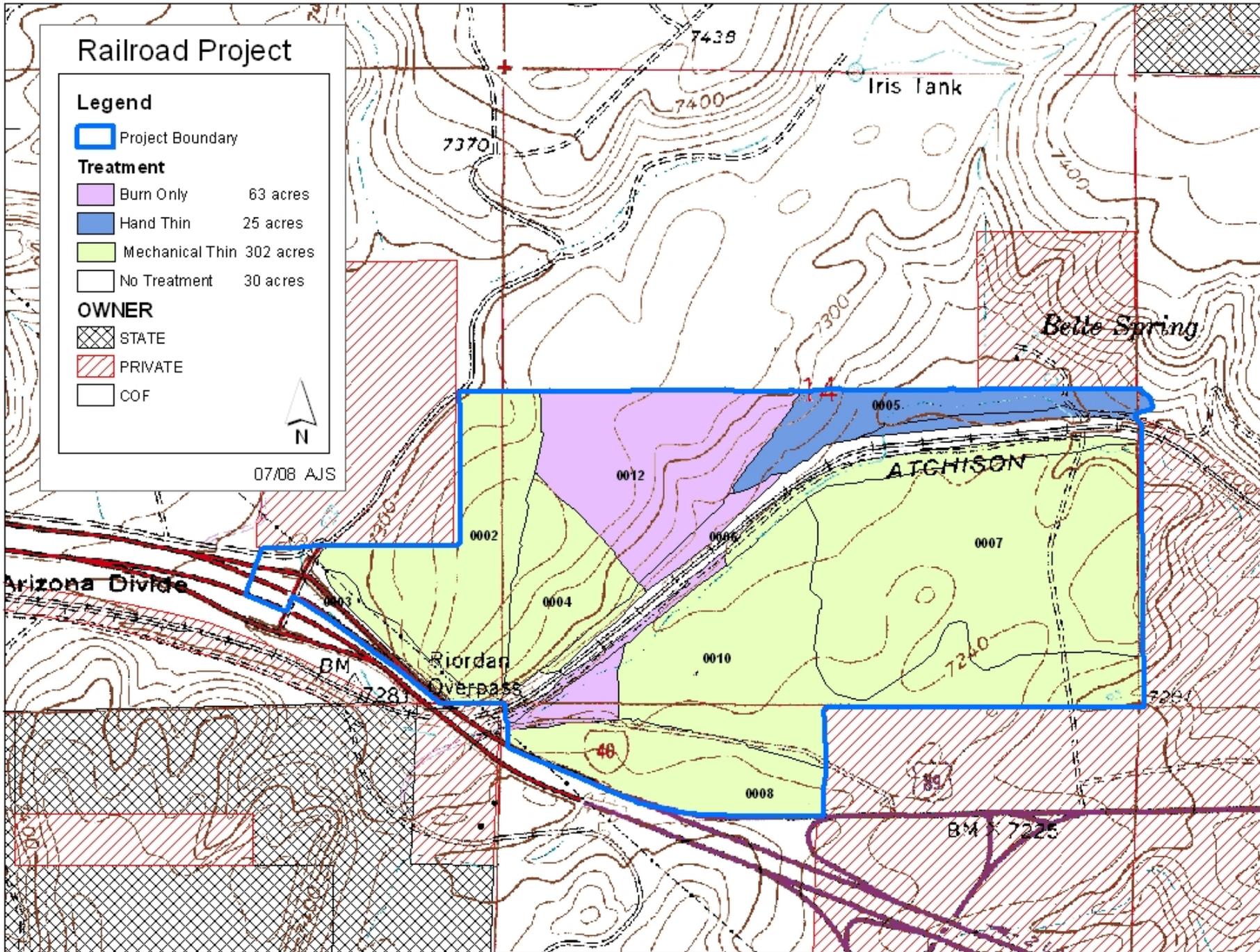
A total of 420 acres are proposed for prescribed broadcast burns. This includes the 327 acres planned for thinning; these stands would be prescribe burned after tree harvesting to remove activity-created slash, duff, and needle-cast. The remainder of the project area, approximately 63 acres, would receive 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. Maintenance prescribed burning would occur on a seven to ten year cycle or as needed. Maintenance burning will help complete the restoration action of returning fire to the ecosystem. The combination of thinning and prescribed burn treatments will reduce or maintain the current acreage of fire hazard rating to 420 acres of low fire hazard rating. Existing condition fire hazard rating include:

Very High:	47 acres
High:	72 acres
Moderate:	253 acres
Low:	48 acres

Temporary Roads

Up to 1 mile of temporary road would be constructed to facilitate the harvest and removal of trees; this would mostly occur within timber stands located in T21N, R6E Sect. 14. There are few Forest System roads available in this section. For public safety, this road would be closed to public use during mechanical harvesting operations. After harvesting is complete, the road would be removed and restored back to a natural condition.

Figure 1. (next page) Location of proposed treatments in the Railroad forest health and fuels reduction project area



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 including a specific wildlife corridor, where more horizontal cover will be maintained and no thinning will be done. The wildlife corridor is identified on Figure 1. Treatment in the corridor will be prescribed burn only.
- Preventing the spread of noxious or invasive weeds.
- Preserving and protecting pre-historic and 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(6): “Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction (Service level D, FSH 7709.56)”, (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 no 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.
- *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 July 2008 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.

Public Involvement

The proposal was listed on the Coconino National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) beginning on January 1, 2008.

On June 26, 2008 the Forest service conducted a well attended field trip with The Greater Flagstaff Forest Partnership and AZ Game and Fish. This was part of the collaborative process to involve the partners and interested agencies in the project. Several details were agreed to involving special arrangement of thinning and treatment and design of the wildlife corridor that have been incorporated into the Proposed Action. There have been no unresolved issues identified to date.

Opportunity to Comment on the Railroad Forest Health and 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 Alvin Brown at arbrown@fs.fed.us or (928) 527-8234.

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 July 18, 2008). The publication date in the *Arizona Daily Sun* is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period.

Submit written comments to: Dave Mertz, Acting 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.

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/Denny Nelson for

Dave Mertz
Acting District Ranger