

OPPORTUNITY TO COMMENT

PENA BLANCA LAKE VEGETATION REMOVAL PROJECT

**USDA Forest Service
Coronado National Forest
Nogales Ranger District
Santa Cruz County, Arizona**

Proposed Action

The U.S. Forest Service, in a cooperative effort with the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD), has developed a proposal to reduce the amount of aquatic vegetation [primarily coontail (*Ceratophyllum demersum*)] in Peña Blanca Lake (Lake), which is located on National Forest System lands in the Pajarita Mountains, Santa Cruz County, Arizona (T23, R12E, Sections 23 and 26), about 14 miles west-northwest of Nogales, Arizona (see map). If the proposal is approved, the aquatic herbicide Reward® would be applied by AGFD to approximately 19 acres of the 49-acre lake in the vicinity of primary shoreline access points, the few coves scattered around the lake, and around the boat ramp and handicapped accessible fishing pier.

Background

Peña Blanca Lake was constructed in 1957 by AGFD as a Federal Aid in Fisheries Restoration project. The Lake is managed as a winter put-and-take catchable trout fishery and a year-round self-sustaining warm-water fishery and provides approximately 21,298 angler hours per year. In cooperation with the Forest Service, AGFD is responsible for fish-management activities with the objective of providing a high-quality angling and recreational experience for the public.

Since the mid 1990's, the quantity of submerged aquatic vegetation in the Lake has progressively increased, adversely impacting angler access. Today, shoreline anglers cannot access open water, handicapped anglers cannot utilize the handicap-accessible fishing pier, and boaters have difficulty launching. The increased aquatic vegetation impacts the aesthetic value of the Lake for non-anglers as well.

Past treatment by AGFD has involved the use of specialized equipment to cut and harvest

nuisance vegetation. These efforts have had limited success and have only proven to be a short-term solution. In fact, published data on the life history of coontail reports that harvesting by cutting actually encourages growth, because coontail spreads readily when fragmented.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is to establish the foundation of a long-term aquatic vegetation management program at the Lake. The program is necessary to facilitate a high-level of satisfaction among anglers and other recreational users of this facility on the Coronado National Forest.

With regard to aquatic vegetation management and public recreational opportunities, the Forest Service is committed to

Maintain or improve occupied habitat of commonly hunted species, listed threatened and endangered species, and management indicator species through mitigation of Forest activities with cooperation of New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, Arizona Game and Fish Department, and US Fish and Wildlife Service. Where applicable consult with other wildlife and plant oriented groups and affected agencies.

in the Coronado National Forest Plan (The Land and Resource Management Plan for Coronado National Forest, 1986, as amended.

Project Description

The proposed action would be conducted as follows:

- Pre-treatment Assessment – Surveys would be made to confirm the surface area

currently affected by severe aquatic vegetation prior to treatment. This data will also serve to evaluate the attainment of project objectives.

- Treatment Schedule- The herbicide would be applied in early spring, when plants begin to actively grow, but at a time that does not interfere with the bass spawn. Treatments areas would be limited in area, and time between treatments would be 14 days, in accordance with the directions for application of Reward®. This period of time reduces the likelihood that decaying vegetation will decrease the dissolved oxygen content of the aquatic ecosystem.
- Special Closure Orders – Forest Service to temporary closure of public access may be necessary.
- Herbicide Application – Reward® can be applied by means of a water carrier through boom-trailing hoses below the surface of the water, and by surface application, either poured directly from the container in strips or as a surface spray mixed with a carrier. The boat ramp and handicapped-pier areas would be treated first. The coves and bank fishing areas would follow. Herbicide treatments would not be undertaken during the summer and fall months, because of higher water temperatures and lower dissolved oxygen content in the Lake. To protect against possible negative impacts to water quality from decaying plant material during aquatic herbicide treatments, the project proposes multiple applications with small areas of the lake being treated with each application.
- Post-treatment Monitoring – Treated areas would be regularly re-sampled after initial treatment to further measure the attainment of project objectives and identify the need for further treatment.
- Future Treatments – Based on the success indicated by post-treatment monitoring, additional areas of the lake may be treated in the same manner. Likewise, if it is determined that the initially treated areas need additional spraying, these areas would be re-treated at the appropriate time of year.

Request for Comments

This Opportunity to Comment is being offered to interested parties, agencies, and tribes to assist the Forest Service in its National Environmental

Policy Act (NEPA) review of the proposed project. You are encouraged to offer comments to the Forest Service within thirty days of publication of this notice in the Nogales International Newspaper.

Written comments may be submitted via U.S. mail, facsimile, or electronic mail to Debbie Sebesta, District Biologist, Coronado National Forest, Nogales Ranger District, 303 Old Tucson Road, Nogales, AZ 85621; fax number (520) 670-4598; and email, dsebesta@fs.fed.us. For further information about the project and to offer verbal or in-person comments, please contact Ms. Sebesta at (520) 281-2296.

Comments related to advocacy of the project shall not be considered as part of the project scope unless they are based on or linked to a specific issue or concern.

Regarding privacy issues, please note that comments received by the Forest Service in response to this Opportunity to Comment, including the names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the administrative record for this NEPA review, and as such, are available for public dissemination and/or inspection, in accordance with provisions of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

However, pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27 (d), any person may request that the Forest Service withhold a comment/submission and/or personal information from the public record based on an exemption granted in the FOIA. Requests for confidentiality are allowed under very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. Determination of eligibility for confidentiality will be made by the Forest Service, and the requester informed of the agency's decision. If a confidentiality request is denied, the agency will return the comment/submission to the requester and advise that the same comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address within 21 days of return.