

OPPORTUNITY TO COMMENT

Placer Mining programmatic analysis

Coronado National Forest Nogales Ranger District Pima, and Santa Cruz Counties, Arizona

Background

The U. S. Forest Service, Coronado National Forest (CNF), is performing a programmatic analysis of small scale and commercial placer mining on National Forest System (NFS) lands in the Nogales Ranger District (NRD). (See attached maps).

This Opportunity to Comment is being offered to interested parties and Native American tribes to assist the Forest Service in its National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis of the placer program for the Nogales Ranger District.

Purpose and Need

The purpose and need for this programmatic review relates to the historic impacts that are known to have occurred on NFS lands and the potential for cumulative impacts with continued mining in the same location. The effects of historic placer mining operations prior to the designation of the NRD have never been evaluated in combination with impacts of current small scale-based placer mining on the district.

Further, in accordance with the Mining Act of July 26, 1866 (14 Stat. 253), all mineral lands of the public domain are declared open to exploration and occupation. Also, the General Mining Law of May 10, 1872, authorized placer and lode mining claims, mill sites and tunnel sites of specific dimensions.

Project Description

The proposed action is the approval of a program that would allow both small scale and commercial users to conduct placer mining on NFS lands. Small scale would be defined as an individual or group of less than ten individuals working in a single area of operation. Clusters of small groups working in relative close proximity, within fifty feet of each other, would generate a greater overall potential for resource impact than a single group, and less resource impact than a commercial operation. Operations would consist of metal detecting; use of hand tools (shovel, pick, rock bar); collecting placer material (digging, dredging, classifying); processing placer material (sluice boxes, gold wheel, panning)

The NEPA analysis would focus on the range of potential mining options and mitigation and specific parcels of land to be mined within the NRD. Areas to be analyzed will primarily be National Forest System lands, excluding areas withdrawn from mineral entry, within the boundaries of the Nogales Ranger District.

Based on the findings of the NEPA impacts analysis, we will determine the degree to which these options are acceptable to the Forest Service from an environmental perspective. Approval of requests to mine on NFS lands will follow the regulations set forth in the Forest Service Manual 2800; Title 36 Code of Federal Regulations 228; and Regional and Forest policies governing minerals management.

The program is expected to meet the following Forest-wide standards and guidelines, and direction applicable to Management Area 4,

which are presented in the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Coronado National Forest (LRMP):

The Coronado National Forest has a goal of supporting environmentally sound energy and minerals development and reclamation (p. 10).

The Coronado National Forest has the following standards and guidelines (p. 40).

1. To the extent possible, avoid construction of roads across sensitive soils and scenic lands. Prohibit the construction of roads across mountain meadows.
2. Mining and leasing activities will be allowed within the framework of applicable laws and regulations including environmental laws and regulations designed to mitigate the impacts of mining activities. Emphasis should be on gaining cooperation and control through the use of operating plans and bonds for rehabilitation to protect and restore surface resources.
3. Exploration and development of common variety minerals for efficient use of various quality aggregate sources must be based on needs identified in transportation plans. Allocation of mineral aggregate will be based on Forest Service needs and the most cost efficient use of various quality aggregates. Forest Service will have priority before personal or commercial use of aggregate materials.

Alternatives

The President's Council on Environmental Quality regulations implementing NEPA requires that the potential effects of a no-action alternative be analyzed by the ID team. Other alternatives may be developed based on the

results of field studies and comments received during the scoping process.

Requests for Comments

Your comments about the proposed project will be accepted by the Forest Service for thirty (30) days following publication in the Nogales International Newspaper. 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.

Written comments may be submitted via U.S. mail or electronic mail to Miss Lydia Goon, Minerals Assistant at the Coronado National Forest Supervisor's Office, 300 West Congress Street, Tucson, Arizona, 37901, and email, lgoon@fs.fed.us. For further information about the project and to offer verbal or in-person comments, please contact Miss Goon at (520) 670-4533.

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.