

NEWS RELEASE

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U.S. FOREST SERVICE ISSUES FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT – RESPONSE TO COMMENTS – PERK-GRINDSTONE FUELS PROJECT – LINCOLN NATIONAL FOREST

Alamogordo, NM (May 6, 2008) – The U.S. Forest Service has completed an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and Response to Comments (closing date for comments was February 11, 2008) addressing the Perk-Grindstone fuels reduction project on the Smokey Bear Ranger District, Lincoln National Forest. On May 9, 2008, the Forest Service expects to publish and distribute the EIS, Response to Comments and the Notice of Opportunity to Object.

The objective of Perk-Grindstone is to restore fire-adapted forest systems and structural characteristics that are in line primarily surface fires, rather than large-size crown fires, and to have a more complex mosaic of stand densities across the landscape. There would be a shift toward larger-sized trees and less under growth. This would achieve a more balanced size-class distribution; reduce the amount of ladder fuels and create more canopy gaps through more widely spaced groups of trees. Perk-Grindstone is designed to reduce the potential for crown fire spread and allow dominant trees to grow into large trees with less risk of tree mortality from bark beetles. Opening the canopy would increase the abundance of grasses, forbs and shrubs in the small openings.

Acting Lincoln National Forest Supervisor Jacqueline Buchanan stated, “Treating the steep slopes as well as other interior areas is essential to community protection. Our treatments will be designed to moderate potential wildfire intensity on National Forest System Lands adjacent to or near Ruidoso and Mescalero Apache Reservation.” Smokey Bear District Ranger Buck Sanchez said, “Perk-

Grindstone, a Healthy Forest Restoration Act Project, will be a focused effort to reduce hazardous fuels and restore healthy forest ecosystems on our National Forest lands that lie west and south of the Ruidoso area. The project is a collaboration that will continue to connect community protection, firefighter safety, and forest restoration in the complex and scenic landscapes of the Lincoln National Forest, Mescalero Apache Reservation, and Greater Ruidoso Wildland Urban Interface Area. The Perk-Grindstone project will conduct forest thinning and prescribed burning treatments on about 4,900 acres.”

Sanchez added: “We are gearing-up for project implementation and plan to award contracts for 875 acres of mastication in July 2008. Masticators shred trees, scattering the shredded wood pieces across the forest floor for later broadcast burning. They turn woody material into light mulch that remains on the ground, retaining soil moisture, reducing soil erosion and adding nutrients. Later in the summer, we intend to award contracts for an additional 300-400 acres of ground-based utilization involving tractors, harvesters, forwarders or skidders used on slopes less than 40 percent. The cut wood pieces larger than 6 inches in diameter would be skidded on designated trails to roadside landings to be hauled away. This spring and summer, we also are looking at our options for roads and logging engineer design with the potential to initiate critical access road construction in summer or fall.”

Village of Ruidoso Mayor L. Ray Nunley said, “The Perk-Grindstone project is absolutely necessary for the Greater Ruidoso area. It will provide a critical anchor point to protect our communities and is crucial to the effectiveness of our continuing fuels reduction and fire mitigation work within the Village of Ruidoso.” Thora Padilla, Director of the Department for Resource Management and Protection for the Mescalero Apache Tribe added that “The Perk-Grindstone project is essential to connecting past and ongoing fuels reduction and forest restoration projects among Tribal, Forest Service, and the Greater Ruidoso Urban area. In addition, this project includes vital access to Tribal lands for future forest management and fire suppression and prevention.” Eddie Tudor, District Forester for the New Mexico State Forestry Division (Capitan, NM) echoed with his support for the Perk-

Grindstone project by saying, “The Perk-Grindstone project is state of the art. It provides a workable response to reducing the threat of wildfire in the Greater Ruidoso area, including portions of the Mescalero Apache Reservation and Lincoln National Forest, an area rated by the State Forester as the number one New Mexico community at risk from catastrophic wildfire.” Lincoln County Emergency Services Director James Mason noted, “I think the Perk-Grindstone project is the right approach to address our local forest and fuels conditions. In addition to protecting our communities and firefighters, it will aid in sustaining our local economy, both short-term with contract work and jobs, and in the long-term because healthy forests are good for our tourism economy.”

In an April 29, 2008 letter addressed to Acting Lincoln National Forest Supervisor Jacqueline Buchanan, Mescalero Apache President Carleton Naiche-Palmer, Ph.D., requested that the Perk-Grindstone project be developed as a Tribal Stewardship contract, in association with the 16 Springs project on the Lincoln National Forest. President Naiche-Palmer stated, “The Perk-Grindstone Planning Unit offers the Tribe a unique opportunity for cross-jurisdictional collaboration to restore healthy ecosystem conditions to this densely forested area, as well as partnering with our neighbors in the Greater Ruidoso Area Wildland-Urban Interface workgroup to reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire. Tribal Division of Resource Management and Protection staff have been working with the Bureau of Indian Affairs Branch of Forestry to design treatments to reduce hazardous fuels and implement strategies to provide defensible space for firefighters along this boundary, including Flume Ridge adjacent to the Upper Canyon residential area in Ruidoso. Active Tribal participation in the implementation of the Perk-Grindstone treatments will facilitate critical access to reservation projects and provide for a more balanced approach to restoring forest health on both National Forest and Tribal lands.” Buchanan added, “The Lincoln National Forest is reviewing the Tribes’ request and intends to move forward with this as a Tribal Stewardship project.”

Because the project is a vital component of a Community Wildland Protection Plan for the Greater Ruidoso Area Wildland Urban Interface, it is authorized under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act. As a HFRA project, it is subject to a pre-decisional objection process pursuant to 36 CFR 218. The publication of the Notice of Opportunity to Object in the Alamogordo Daily News starts a 30-day period in which those who submitted comments on the EIS may file an objection to the EIS. If an objection is filed during that period, the Forest Service Regional Office will review the project record and respond to the objection, before a decision may be made to authorize this project. If no objection is filed, the Forest Supervisor will issue a Record of Decision on this project, and that decision will not be subject to further administrative review.

For additional information on the Lincoln National Forest or this project, please contact the Smokey Bear Ranger District Office at (575) 257-4095, between 7:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, or visit our website at: www.fs.fed.us/r3/lincoln.

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