United States Department of Agriculture **Forest Service** **Sacramento Ranger District** **Hwy 82 & Curlew, PO Box 288 Cloudcroft, NM 88317 (505) 682-2551**

File Code: 1950
Date: December 2, 2008

Dear Interested Parties,

Enclosed you will find the Jim Lewis Central Priority project scoping document.

The Jim Lewis Central Priority project is being proposed in part to respond to the region's desire to restore the functionality of fire in fire adapted ecosystems and the fuel reduction element of the Region 3 Central Priority Strategy, the Lincoln National Forest 2005 Capability Assessment, the Lincoln National Forest Strategic Plan and the Lincoln National Forest Land Management Plan.

In 2004, Region 3 brought forth a strategy, referred to as Central Priority, to help restore the ecological functionality of fire to fire adapted ecosystems in the region. In 2006 the Lincoln National Forest developed a Strategic Plan for implementation of the regions strategy. Jim Lewis is one of three areas the Forest identified to focus on ecosystem restoration and fuels reduction.

The Forest would like to know what you think of the enclosed ideas for decreasing stand density and where appropriate, increasing forage production and soil productivity as identified in the enclosed draft Proposed Action. The Forest would also like you to provide your ideas and concerns for achieving the identified needs.

To assure your comments are fully considered during this scoping phase of the project, we request that you submit comments by January 2, 2009. Written comments regarding this project can be sent electronically via email, mailed via the post office, or faxed to one of the following:

Email: comments-southwestern-lincoln-sacramento@fs.fed.us

Jim Lewis Central Priority Project Scoping Comments
Att: Kathy Wallace
P.O. Box 288
Cloudcroft, NM 88317

Fax: (575)682.3394

If you would like additional information about this project please contact Kathy Wallace, Jim Lewis Central Priority IDT Leader, Sacramento Ranger District, at (575) 682-2551, or Terry DeLay, Jim Lewis Central Priority Project Manager at (575) 434-7214.

Sincerely,

DONNA L. OWENS
District Ranger

Enclosure

Introduction

The Jim Lewis Central Priority project is being proposed in part to respond to the region's desire to restore fires functionality in fire adapted ecosystems and the fuel reduction element of the Region 3 Central Priority Strategy, the Lincoln National Forest 2005 Capability Assessment, the Lincoln National Forest Strategic Plan, and the Lincoln National Forest Land Management Plan.

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The overall purpose of the Jim Lewis Central Priority project is to implement the Lincoln National Forest Land Management Plan, R3 Central Priority Strategy, and the Lincoln NF Strategic Plan for Central Priority as it relates to:

- Hazardous fuels
- Suitable timber land
- Forage production
- Watershed condition
- Historic Structure Restoration

In 2008 the Forest approached the Ecological Restoration Institute (ERI) at Northern Arizona University (NAU) to assist with site specific, historical (pre-Anglo-American settlement) stand structure information for use in the planning process.
ERI used the rapid assessment survey method to gather information for the project. With this method the data is not gathered with a strict scientific approach but in a manner that gives quick representative stand conditions prior to the exclusion of fire (e.g. no replications, no control plots). Based on the field data collected by ERI and other scientific references, ERI was able to determine that all the surveyed areas were outside their natural range of variability.

A need to decrease stand density, improve timber land condition and, where appropriate, increase forage production and soil productivity in the Jim Lewis project area was identified based on the following:

- ERI information
- Sacramento Ranger District interdisciplinary team (IDT) initial review of existing vegetation, fire, range, and watershed condition
- A public field trip of the area in August 2008
- Past history of fire suppression and grazing practices

The historic Carrisa fire lookout was identified as being at risk from fire and a lack of maintenance. As identified in the Lincoln National Forest Land Management Plan on Replacement page 12, correction notice 4, June 1996 and page 162, historical resources are to be protected and managed, and cultural resources listed in the National Register of Historic Places should be monitored for maintenance of their historic characteristics. The Carrisa lookout fits both of these criteria.

Project Area Description:

The project area covers approximately 38,000 acres in the south central portion of the district (See Vicinity Area Map and General Project Area Map). The closest population centers are Weed and Sacramento to the north and Avis to the south east. The area is covered by portions of six Management Areas (See Table 2.). The majority of the area is covered by Management Area 4K – Carrisa, 4M – Bluewater and 4N – Lower Agua Chiquita.

The project area covers two, sixth level watersheds, Perk Canyon and Perk Canyon-Cuevo Creek. Both watersheds are identified as being in Condition Class II (Watersheds that exhibit moderate geomorphic, hydrologic, and biotic integrity relative to their natural potential condition. Portions of the watershed may exhibit an unstable drainage network. The physical, chemical, and biologic conditions suggest that soil, aquatic, and riparian systems are at risk in being able to support beneficial uses.). The majority of the streams in the area such as Bluewater Creek, Perk Creek, and Perk Canyon Creek are ephemeral with a few perennial such as Picket and Trail Creek's. The majority of the identified riparian areas are along the existing streams. They are also in close proximity to the roads or have the roads going through them. There are no identified jurisdictional wetlands in the project area. There are a few flood plains in the project area, mainly associated with the Bluewater and Perk Canyon creek. There are no wild and scenic waterways or areas proposed for wild and scenic. There are no identified municipal watersheds in the project areas.

The topography ranges from open meadow areas in the bottom to steep, greater than 40 percent slope, mountain sides, and ridges. The area is dominated by limestone and sandstone geology.

There are 32 Terrestrial Ecological Map Units (TEU) covering the area ranging from very deep bottom loam soils to shallow gravely and very cobbly loam soils on the ridges. Many of the bottom and meadow area soils are being encroached upon by coniferous vegetation such as pinyon-juniper and ponderosa pine. Other areas in the bottoms and along roads have active head cutting, rill and gully erosion and compaction.

The project area has one of the largest remaining, contiguous areas of ponderosa pine dominated ecosystems on the Forest. The area also has pinyon-juniper, oak, mixed conifer and meadow ecosystems. Based on a report by the Ecological Restoration Institute in 2008 on the historical (pre-Anglo-American settlement) stand structure of the project area, all of the stands they looked at were outside their natural range of variability based on the filed measurements and other historical evidence (Kaufmann et al., 1998). Some of the mixed conifer blocks are presently experiencing high mortality of White fir due to a fir

engraver, which can be a reflection of poor stand health conditions. Since the 1980s there have been several timber sales in the project area. The last, a 400 acre leave tree sale called Rail Splitter, was in 2003.

There have been three large wildfires fires within the project area, Circle Cross in 1953, Spring in 1974, and Scott Able in 2000. These fires have created a mosaic of existing conditions, leaving patches or small stands of the original ecosystems. Most burned areas have been re-vegetated with mostly juniper and oak. Although oak has always been a component of the historic ecosystems of the Sacramento Mountains, the exception has been in the higher mixed conifer stands where aspen and locust were standard components. The large wildfires have converted many of these once conifer stands to juniper and oak.

The area is home to mule deer and elk. The area has experienced an increase in pinyon pine and juniper densities which has led to a reduction in forage quality and quantity for wildlife. The area is also home to the Mexican Spotted Owl (*Strix occidentalis lucida*) (MSO), a federally listed threatened species. Critical Habitat has been identified in the area for the MSO. The presences of this species and its critical habitat means there will be timing restrictions for implementation of activities from March 1st through August 31st within identified MSO Protected Activity Centers (PAC's). There will also be restrictions on the size of trees that can be cut in the identified MSO critical habitat areas as well as with in PAC's unless an overriding management situation requires removal to protect human safety and/or property. At this time there have been no threatened or endangered plants identified in the project area.

There are portions of 11 active grazing allotments which permit both year long and seasonal grazing. At this time all the allotments are identified as being in good condition. The herbaceous component of the up land range and meadow areas is gradually decreasing due to encroachment of coniferous trees. Musk thistle, considered a noxious weed has been identified in several of the drainage ways. Treatment for control of this species has been on going for several years.

There are a number of developed private in-holdings in the north eastern portion. Many of these areas fall into the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). These are priority areas for fuels reduction based on the direction in the Forest Plan and the Lincoln NF Strategic Plan for Central Priority.

The transportation system in the area, which includes all motorized roads and trails, consists of level I, II and III roads. Here the term level is referring to the maintenance level, which is based on a roads purpose and use. All the level I roads, which are the closed roads, are in poor condition (Poor - most or all elements of the road that is not operating correctly), and the majority of the level II and III roads are in good (Good - road template is defined and would take minimal work to keep road to its existing operational objective) condition with less than 15 percent of the level II in poor condition.

The area has several dispersed camp sites. The Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) is designated as Semi Primitive Motorized and Roaded Natural. There is an increasing amount of legal and illegal Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) use in the area.

Prehistoric archaeological properties and materials consist of small lithic scatters and isolated artifacts. Historic sites include isolated homesteads and Carrisa fire lookout. Management Area 4K is named for the lookout. Carrisa is on the National Register of Historic Places and the New Mexico State Register of Historic Places. The lookout has been poorly maintained, is in need of repair and stabilization and is in danger of being destroyed from wildfires due to a lack of defensible space.

Proposed Action

The following are the proposed actions to accomplish the purpose and need:

Table 1. **Proposed Actions**

Proposed Activity	Number of Acres	Description
Meadow Restoration	100 - 750	This would involve removal of woody vegetation such as Pinyon Juniper, Ponderosa Pine, etc., that is encroaching into the meadows through various methods such as thinning, harvest and burning. See map 1 of 2 for locations.
Wildlife Prescriptions	1000 - 9800	This could involve the creation of 5 acre openings through various activities such as thinning, burning etc. See map 2 of 2 for locations.
Roads/Watershed Restoration	Approximately 10 - 14 miles of road to be obliterated; 3 - 5 miles of road relocated and 3 to 5 miles of road to be closed. 10 – 50 acres of watershed restoration.	This involves decommissioning roads, closing roads, obliterating roads and the placement of one culvert at Jeffers Spring on FSRD 171. The relocation of the roads, closing of roads, decommissioning of roads including erosion control, and the decrease in the Pinyon-Juniper in the meadow areas may all contribute to the improvement of the watershed condition and restoration. See map 1 of 2 for locations.
Thinning/Harvest	1000 – 10,500	This could include hand and mechanical treatments. This will also include areas of personal and/or commercial fuel wood. See map 2 of 2 for locations.
Oak Regeneration/Conifer Reforestation	100 - 1030	This could involve roller chopping, mowing, burning, or removal of the small diameter oak brush to encourage new regeneration. This may also involve the planting of conifer seedlings in selected areas. See map 2 of 2 for locations.
Aspen Restoration	100 - 1000	This could involve opening up the canopy through thinning, harvest and burning activities and protection of the seedlings from wildlife with fencing or other barriers. See map 2 of 2 for locations.

Table 1. **Proposed Actions**

Proposed Activity	Number of Acres	Description
Prescribed Burning/Wildland Fire Use	10,000 -38,000	Burning could include pile, broadcast and wildland fire use. This could be implemented in phases and coordinated with wildlife and timber. The wildland fire use would be implemented on a case by case basis. Other fuel reduction activities could include thinning, mastication, or other mechanical activities through out the entire project area. See map 1 of 2 for locations.
Carrisa Lookout Restoration	1 – 3	This could involve the restoration of the lookout tower, cabin, flagpole and shed to its historic character.

Table 2. **Management Area Description**

Management Area	Emphasis	Notes
4J – Upper Agua Chiquita	Wildlife and Timber Management	Wildlife focus is on structural and non-structural improvements and road closures to benefit game and non-game species.
		Timber will be intensively managed for sawlogs, fuelwood, and decreasing loss from insects and disease. Vegetation includes Aspen, Mix Conifer and Ponderosa pine
		There are portions of 4 allotments covering this management area.
* 4K - Carrisa	Wildlife and Timber Management	Wildlife focus is on structural and non-structural improvements and road closures to benefit game and non-game species.
		Timber will be managed for sawlogs, fuelwood, and to decrease losses from insects and disease. Vegetation includes Aspen, Mix Conifer, Ponderosa pine and Pinyon-Juniper.
		There are portions of 4 allotments covering this management area.
4L – Lick Ridge	Preserving Soil Productivity	All resources managed at low levels except timber.
		Some timber production in Mixed Conifer, Ponderosa pine and Pinyon-Juniper.
		There are portions of 5 allotments covering this management area.
* 4M - Bluewater	Management of Wildlife Habitat	Wildlife focus is on structural and non-structural improvements to benefit game and non-game species.
		Moderate amount of fuelwood from the woodlands and some suitable timber lands in Mixed Conifer, Ponderosa pine and Pinyon-Juniper woodlands.
		There are portions of 10 allotments covering this management area.
* 4N – Lower Agua Chiquita	Range Management	The large number of existing structures will be maintained and additional fences and water storages developed to distribute and control livestock.
		Some timber will be produced and the woodland types will be intensively managed to produce a moderate amount of fuelwood.
4Q – Quevo Canyon	Preserving Soil Productivity	Habitat for a Threatened & Endangered plant will be protected.
		The woodland type will produce small amounts of fuelwood.

* - Indicates the management areas making up the majority of the project area.