



File Code: 1950 NEPA

Date: September 18, 2008

Golondrino Wildlife Management Prescribed Fire Project

Proposed Action: The Cuba Ranger District, Santa Fe National Forest, proposes to use prescribed fire and wildland fire-use (allowing lightning fires to burn) in the approximately 33,800-acre Golondrino Wildlife Management Prescribed Fire Project Area. Approximately 28,500 acres of the project area, outside of the Chama River Canyon Wilderness, would be managed by prescribed fire and wildland fire-use. The remaining approximately 5,300 acres of the project area, including the Wilderness, would be managed only through wildland fire-use. Up to 1,065 acres along existing roads and private property boundaries would be mechanically treated to allow use of existing roads as fire lines for firefighter safety and to protect resources. There would be no management ignited prescribed fires or mechanical treatments initiated within the Chama River Canyon Wilderness. The Project Area is located between the Chama River Canyon Wilderness and Rio Gallina (east and south) Highway 112 (west), and the Forest boundary (north). Project activities associated with this project possibly may also occur on adjacent State and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands as well. In these situations, the State and/or BLM would be approving these projects separately. The Project area ranges from T25N to T26 N and R1W to R2E. Please see the attached map.

The project area boundary includes parts of the Chama River Canyon Wilderness and the Rio Gallina River because prescribed fire may be applied to the slope on the west side of and outside the Wilderness. This slope creates a natural barrier that may be used as a boundary for prescribed fire treatment. If prescribed fire were to burn into the Wilderness it would burn downhill into cliffs that form natural barriers to fire. Prescribed fires burning downhill typically burn at low intensities and are not likely to negatively impact wilderness values.

The Project Area would be broadcast burned with low to moderate fire intensities (flame lengths less than 6 ft) with the objective of reducing surface and ladder fuels. Approximately 1,065 acres of mechanical thinning and/or mastication (chainsaws and/or grinders) is proposed around the Dead Man lookout tower; Forest Roads 6, 7, 505, 507, and 510; and on the east side of a private land inholding. Mowing would be used in areas identified for mechanical treatment with sagebrush. Thinning, mastication, or mowing activities would occur approximately 200-250 feet on either side of the aforementioned roads and private land. No new road construction is proposed.

Following the initial prescribed fires, the Project Area would be maintained either through wildland fire-use or through periodic prescribed fire. The proposed project may be implemented beginning in the fall of 2008 and would continue until completed. We plan on burning up to 6,000 acres a year dependent on weather conditions and available funding. The size of the prescribed fires would be determined by forest conditions, terrain, weather, and time of year.

The proposed action includes the following design elements:

Fire and Fuels: to minimize human health and safety risks

- Prescribed fire treatments would occur in compliance with an approved burn plan.



- Prescribed fire treatments would comply with New Mexico state air quality standards and any other applicable regulations.

Wildlife: to avoid impacts to sensitive species

- No mastication/thinning/mowing would occur in areas with known Northern goshawk nests.
- Mastication/thinning/mowing would occur outside of peak breeding season from March 1 to August 31st.

Water and soil resources: to minimize and avoid impacts to soil and water resources

- No new roads would be constructed. Existing roads used for the project may be maintained to provide safe access to the project area.
- Project treatments would not include the use of pesticides or herbicides.

Cultural resources:

- All identified archaeological sites would be flagged and avoided in areas to be treated by mechanical means.
- Sites that are susceptible to fire (i.e., those with perishable remains) would require additional fuels removal in and around the site and/or other methods to avoid impacts prior to the application of prescribed fire treatments.

Purpose and Need: The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish has identified this area as a priority for managing mule deer and Rocky Mountain elk. There is a need to increase the quantity and quality of browse and forage species. Gambel oak, mountain mahogany, snow berry, and New Mexico locust grow throughout the area and are forage for mule deer, Rocky Mountain elk and other wildlife. Low and moderate intensity prescribed fire would enhance the quality and quantity of the forage while maintaining diverse forest conditions.

The project area is predominately ponderosa pine with piñon-juniper and sagebrush flats at the lowest elevations. Meadows are scattered throughout the project area. Forest conditions range from dense thickets of pole and sapling sized trees to closed and open stands of medium to large diameter pine. This variability in forest composition and structure provides habitats for a variety of wildlife. Prescribed fire would reduce the potential for crown fire while maintaining and improving diverse forest conditions.

This project area is also a logical continuation of the Chama Wildlife Management Prescribed Fire Project, which is an approximately 90,000-acre prescribed fire/fire use project, which abuts the eastern boundary of this proposal. The Chama Wildlife Management Prescribed Fire Project is currently in the planning process as well. More information about this project is available through the Coyote Ranger District.

Forest Plan Management Direction - The proposed project area is located in Management Area R (84% of project area) and H (16% of project area). Emphasis in Management Area R cultural resource location, inventory, nomination, and protection are emphasized. The emphasis is also on wildlife habitat improvement and essential habitat protection and enhancement. Page 169 of the Forest Plan states, "Prescribed fire will be used primarily for fuels reduction and wildlife habitat enhancement as long as cultural resources can be protected." Management Area H consists of Congressionally designated Wilderness. The management area emphasis is on primitive recreation opportunities. The Forest Plan, however, recognizes low-intensity fire as a potential positive management tool in wilderness areas. The Plan states, "Low-intensity fire will have no size limitations, but will be monitored to insure they remain within wilderness resource objectives. Wildfires will be allowed to cross the wilderness boundary only if the objectives of the entered management area can be achieved."

Preliminary Effects Analysis: The proposed project has been initially reviewed for impacts to wildlife

habitat, sensitive species, cultural resources, air quality, visual resources, old growth, snags, forest vegetation, water resources, fuels, and fire intensity. The following effects includes summarized information on these subjects:

- **Wildlife** – No adverse affects are expected for any threatened, endangered, or FS sensitive species. Proposed project activities would not have any impacts to Management Indicator Species or migratory birds. The project is designed to facilitate low-intensity fire, which would primarily act to reduce the number of small diameter trees and ladder fuels. These treatments are expected to maintain existing canopy cover to support the habitat needs of sensitive species such as Northern goshawk, and various other species including Abert’s squirrels, Northern flickers, red squirrels, jays, woodpeckers, and cottontails.
- **Heritage Resources** – Analysis of the project area would include archaeological survey of the proposed treated areas. Sites identified during the survey would be flagged and avoided during fireline construction. If necessary, additional measures would be taken to clear fuel adjacent to archaeological sites, if it is determined that they are susceptible to impacts from fire.
- **Air Quality** – Emissions from prescribed burning are regulated by New Mexico Environmental Department (NMED) Air Quality Board. Daily limits on acres burned, and thus emissions are set by the Smoke Management Program in order to ensure compliance with National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS). Prescribed fire activities would be visually monitored for smoke and clearnace from NMED would be attained prior to the initiation of each day of prescribed fire activities.
- **Visual Resources** – The proposed project is located adjacent to State Highway 112. Design elements to adjust mechanical treatments so as to maintain visual quality along the roadway have been incorporated into the project to minimize effects to visual resources.
- **Water and Soil Resources** – The proposed project area is located adjacent to the Rio Chama Wild and Scenic River and contains a number of small intermittent streams that run primarily in the spring. Proposed project activities may slightly increase peak flows and sediment flowing into local streams and the Rio Chama in the short-term, but are not expected to be measurable at the larger watershed level or in the long-term at the local level and thus would not affect Clean Water Act compliance. Project activities may result in soil loss at rates that could reduce soil productivity in some areas; however, treatments are expected to result in an overall increase in satisfactory conditions as prescribed fire activities increase nutrient cycling and soil productivity as a result.
- **Old growth** – Based on site visits, the project area is primarily an intermediate ponderosa pine forest, with some patches of immature and mature forest intermixed. Since mastication would only occur adjacent to existing main roads, pine forest with old growth characteristics is not likely to be impacted from mechanical treatments to create firelines. The overall effects of the proposed project would be to enhance old growth attributes in the project area by using prescribed fire to reduce overall stand density and improve nutrient cycling for the remaining older, mature trees. Prescribed fire treatments and fire use is expected to reduce the number of small trees and ladder fuels in over-dense stands, making the remaining presettlement trees and maturing forestlands more resistant to pest and disease, and high-intensity wildfire. The proposed project would also help maintain existing old growth outside the project area by reducing the risk of high intensity fire at the landscape level.
- **Snags (dead standing trees)** – The proposed project would not include the removal of any snags unless necessary for safety reasons during implementation (e.g. where a dead trees is leaning over a primary access road). A small number of snags may be cut (if considered a hazard tree during implementation) or consumed by fire during prescribed fire treatments. The overall effect of the project, however, would be to create more dead standing trees as a result of prescribed fire treatments. As a result the proposed project would include minimum impacts to snags and would maintain compliance with the Santa Fe National Forest Plan.

- **Fuels and fire intensity** –Proposed treatments are expected to reduce the risk of high-intensity wildfire in treated areas. Mechanical thinning along roads to create firelines and prescribed fire combined resulted in the most effective at reducing the risk of high-intensity wildfire and promoting fire behavior that is low-intensity.
- **Cumulative Effects** – Cumulative effects of the proposed project were initially considered for each resource. It is expected that the proposed project would avoid or minimize negative impacts to each resource, and that it would likely improve habitat for several forest dwelling species such as elk, deer, Northern goshawk, Abert's squirrels, Northern flickers, red squirrels, jays, woodpeckers, cottontails, and other species that have evolved in fore-dependent ponderosa pine forests of northern New Mexico. The primary cumulative effect of this project would be to reduce the likelihood of a wildfire becoming a high-intensity crown fire, while improving existing habitat for the aforementioned wildlife species. This proposed project combined with the adjacent landscape-level Chama Wildlife Management Prescribed Fire Project would reduce the likelihood of a high-intensity wildfire fire starting within the landscape as well as increase the resilience of wildlife habitat in case of a large-scale wildfire.

Public Participation: The planning for this proposed project is beginning and your involvement is important. I encourage you to share your thoughts on this proposal so we can use them in our planning and decision-making process. Whether you provide your comments written or verbally, please make them as specific as possible to the proposal as they would help ensure a thorough and complete analysis of the proposed project.

Please provide your thoughts and comments by the end of the scoping period, **October 17, 2008** as they will help guide the planning effort. For more information contact Tom Fuchtman (Fuels Specialist) at the Cuba Ranger Station, (505) 289-3264, or write to PO Box 130 Cuba, NM 87013. You may also provide your comments electronically at comments-southwestern-santafe-cuba@fs.fed.us.

Comments received in response to this scoping letter, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed project and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered.

Sincerely,



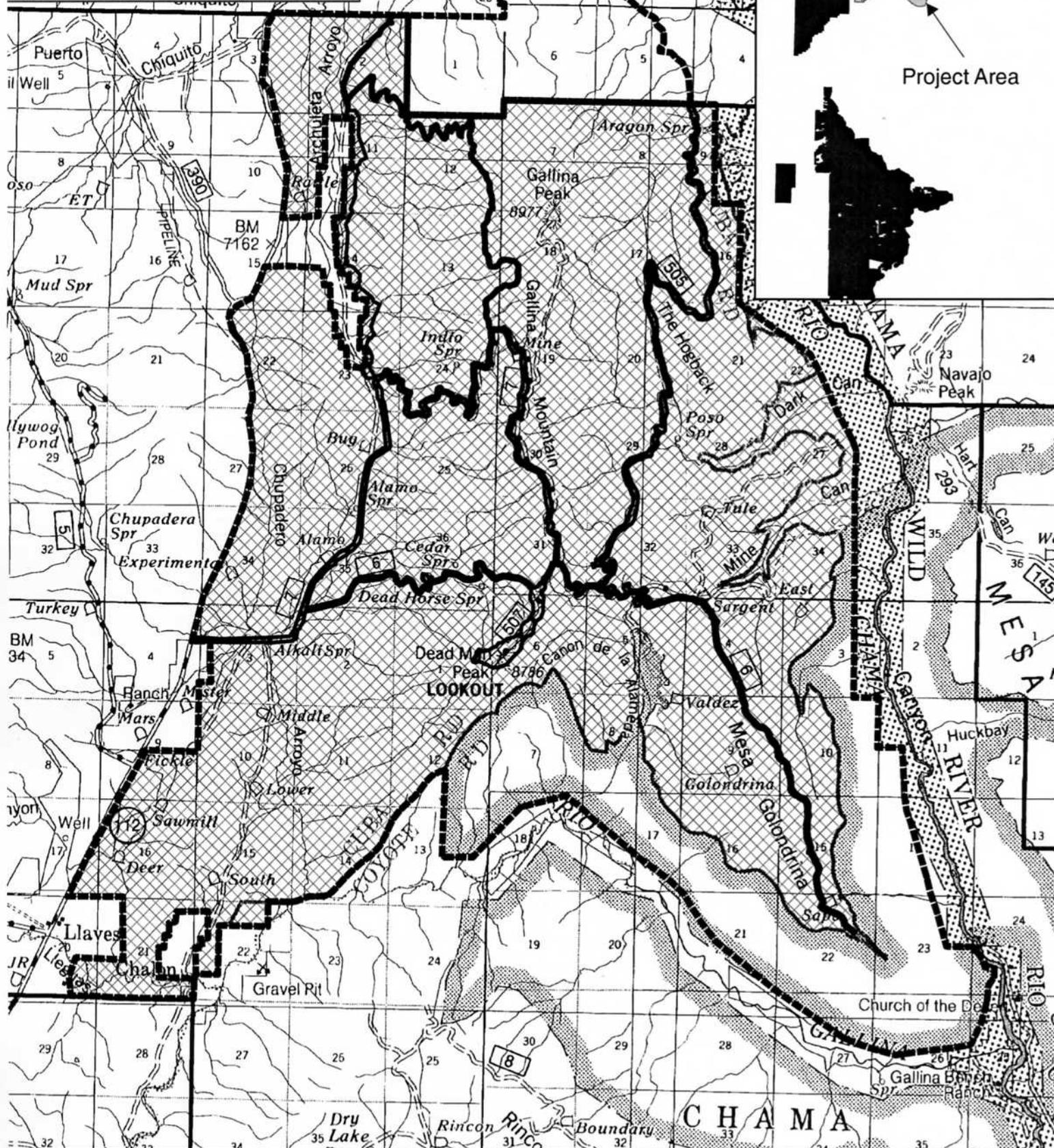
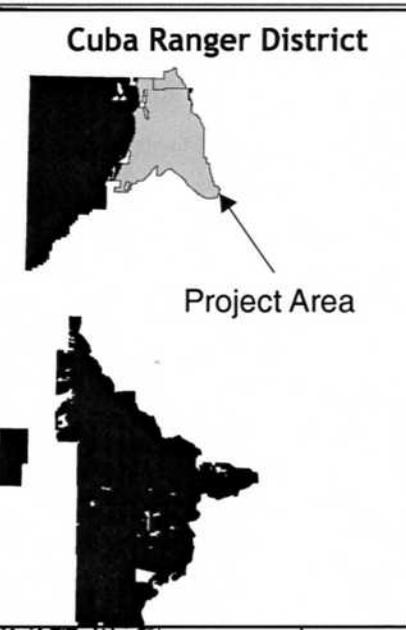
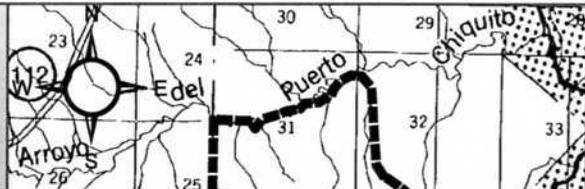
DEREK PADILLA
Cuba District Ranger

Attachment: Project Location Map

Golondrino Wildlife Management Prescribed Fire Project

Legend

-  Fire use boundary
-  Mechanical treatment
-  Prescribed fire treatment area



Created by: Mike Dechter, 9/2008

Available at: J:/sfiles/office/jem_cub_projs/Golondrino_Rx/maps

