DECISION NOTICE
AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

CHAMBERLAIN ANALYSIS AREA
PLEASANT VALLEY RANGER DISTRICT, TONTO NATIONAL FOREST
GILA COUNTY, ARIZONA
USDA FOREST SERVICE
REGION 3

LOCATION

The Chamberlain Analysis Area is located on the Pleasant Valley Ranger District of the Tonto National Forest, in an area north of Young, Arizona. The northern boundary is the Mogollon Rim and the southern boundary is approximately 3 miles north of the town of Young, the east boundary is the Fort Apache Indian Reservation, and the west boundary is Gordon Canyon. The area has the following legal description with all or portions of these sections included: Sections 1-2, 11-12, of T10N, R13E; Sections 1-17, of T10N, R14E; Sections 2-11, 14-17, 21-23, 26-27 of T10N, R15E; Section 36 of T10 1/2N, R13E; Sections 21-23, 25-29, and 31-36 of T10 1/2N, R14E; Sections 20-23, and 26-35 of T10 1/2N, R15E; Sections 34-36, and 25-27 of T11N, R14E; Section 30-31 of T11N, R15E; G&SRBM. The Chamberlain Analysis Area is comprised of Compartments 101.01 thru 101.03, 102.01 thru 102.05, 103.02 thru 103.04, 104.01 thru 104.07, 105.01 thru 105.04, 107.01 thru 107.03, and Compartment 108.01. This analysis area encompasses approximately 30,762 acres, of which approximately 456 acres are identified as private land.

DECISION

It is my decision to implement Alternative A as the Proposed Action, as presented in the Environmental Assessment (EA). No single fact or single piece of information led me to my decision to implement this alternative. Rather, a combination of factors contributed to my decision. Alternative A has the greatest potential to reduce catastrophic fire occurrence, while improving the overall health of the forest and wildlife habitat diversity of the area. Alternative A has also addressed watershed, visuals and threatened, endangered, sensitive (TES) species habitat. This alternative was not primarily chosen for any potential future revenue benefit (if any) from wood products, biomass, or fuelwood.

Tree harvesting is limited to suitable lands and is made in such a way that these lands can be naturally reforested within five years, and is also suited to the multiple-use goals established for the area. Potential effects on residual trees and adjacent forested stands were also considered. Permanent impairment of site productivity is avoided and soil and water resources are conserved. Uneven-aged management meets Forest Plan objectives and requirements. All practicable means have been employed to avoid and/or minimize environmental harm. Detailed descriptions of required mitigation can be found in Chapter 2 of the EA. Additionally, the effectiveness of these measures will be monitored and evaluated, as stated in the Monitoring Plan found in Appendix E of the EA.

Alternative B, the "no action" alternative, was not considered because none of the above described concerns for the analysis area would be addressed.

Reasons for the Decision

Purpose and Need

The purpose of this analysis is to identify project activities to improve forest health, reduce fire risk, and improve wildlife habitat within the analysis area. The need for this action is based on the unhealthy condition of the vegetation within the analysis area and its overall affect on forest health, increased fire risk, and the reduction of wildlife habitat diversity. These same concerns are representative of the present conditions found on many of our public lands today. In June and July of 2002, after the initial analysis process for this project was completed, approximately 10,711 acres of the analysis area was burned by the almost one-half million acre Rodeo-Chediski Fire. The increasing potential for future catastrophic events has become an issue of national concern. This is reflected in changing national direction and policy in the last five years including the National Fire Plan[1], Healthy Forest Restoration Act[2] and the Southwestern Region's Central Priority[3]. The purpose of this changing direction is to improve and maintain the ecological health of our public lands for today and for future generations.

Public Involvement and Scoping

The following are a list of concerns identified by the Interdisciplinary Team (IDT), interested members of the public, and representatives of special interest groups as significant to the proposed project

Scoping activities identified three concerns:

1. Forest health is declining because of fire suppression, overstocked stand conditions and dwarf mistletoe infections.
2. There is a high risk of wildfire throughout the analysis area due to a successful historical fire suppression program. This program, which eliminated natural fire occurrence from the ecosystem, has resulted in increased fuel loadings and tree densities.
3. There is not adequate habitat diversity to support a variety of wildlife species (game and non-game).

Scoping for the Chamberlain Analysis Area included: 1) public meetings for adjacent landowners and special interest groups in Phoenix, Arizona; 2) public meetings in Christopher Creek, Arizona; 3) site visits with riparian, watershed, and soils specialists from the Tonto National Forest; and 4) site visits and additional meetings with ID Team members. Input from other Forest Service specialists, as well as comments from State and other Federal agencies were also used in the process. Scoping also included review of the Forest Plan. The ID Team process, together with input from the public and special interest groups, resulted in no significant Issues being identified.

1 See the National Fire Plan internet site for more information: http://www.na.fs.fed.us/nfp/
2 See Healthy Forest Restoration Act site for more information: www.frswebgate.access.gpo.gov
3 See SW Region News http://fsweb.r3.fs.fed.us/swrn/2005/feb

Comments received from the first comment copy (March 2000) of the EA were positive, except for the concerns of one environmental group and their members. This environmental group's concern was that large and old-growth trees should not be harvested. The ID Team addressed these concerns and concluded that the same desired conditions could still be achieved within this analysis area by establishing a maximum 18 inch diameter at breast height (dbh) size limit on trees to be thinned. Future dbh limits may not be applicable to achieve the same desired conditions in other analysis areas. Project area size was also analyzed and reduced due to the Rodeo-Chediski Fire. As a result, a second comment copy (revised EA, August 2003) received all positive public comments, with no response from the environmental group or its members. A summary of responses to comments, including both comment periods, can be found in the project record index, index tab #88 and #131.

Alternatives Considered

Alternatives included a no action alternative and one action alternative. The Proposed Action is the action alternative, and was collaboratively developed in response to the Purpose and Need. Chapter Two of the EA contains a discussion of alternatives. Chapter 3 of the EA contains the Environmental Impacts of the alternatives.

Alternative A – Proposed Action

This is the action alternative which manages the vegetative component of the analysis area, with the objectives of: 1) improving general forest health and vigor by restoring the areas to be treated to more historical conditions; 2) reducing the potential for stand replacement wildfire on National Forest Land; and 3) improving wildlife habitat. The results of some of these proposed actions may provide a sale and/or free use product. To achieve these objectives, treatments would include: 1) 7,072 acres of various tree thinning treatments, 2) 20,050 acres of prescribed burning and 3) 1,000 acres of shaded fuelbreaks.

Alternative B – No Action

This alternative provides a baseline for comparison with Alternative A. There is no project work associated with this alternative. There would be no vegetative or fuels management to reduce the catastrophic wildfire potential of the area. Also, general improvement of forest health and wildlife habitat is not considered. Under this alternative the analysis area would not be treated.

FINDING REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

Alternative A was developed with consideration of the best available science. All actions of this alternative are also consistent with the Tonto National Forest Plan (1985) as amended. These actions will further the long-term goals and objectives listed in the Plan. The proposed actions are located in Management Area 5D, and are consistent with the stated management emphasis for that area. Project design and implementation will adhere to the standards and guidelines in Management Area 5D. It has been determined that the Proposed Action is in compliance with the National Forest Management Act of 1976. Biological Assessment and Evaluation and Management Indicator Species Analyses have been completed, and a resulting letter of concurrence for determinations of impacts to federally listed and proposed species has been received from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. All sites of proposed activities will be professionally surveyed for heritage resources prior to project implementation. Clearances will be obtained prior to any ground disturbing activities.

Finding of No Significant Impact

A. Context

The geographic and social extents of the environmental effects of the proposed projects, considered singularly and cumulatively, are limited to the locality in which they occur and to the specific parties interested in particular resources. No effects of consequence at regional, national, or society-as-a-whole levels were evidenced during the analysis process. Resource specific areas of analysis and extent of effects (short- and long-term) are described in specialist reports within the Project Record. Best available science was utilized by all specialists.

B. Intensity

The severity of the environmental effects of the proposed projects, considered singularly and cumulatively, were tested against 10 criteria listed in NEPA regulations at 40 CFR 1508.27.

1) Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.

   Anticipated environmental effects and their intensity have been disclosed for the action alternative in Chapter Three of the Environmental Assessment. The severity of any impacts, beneficial or adverse, was determined to be insignificant both in the short- and long-term. The design of this alternative and mitigation measures imposed on specific activities greatly hedge against undesirable effects.

2) Effects on public health or safety.

   Public health and safety were considered along the major haul roads within the analysis area. No significant effect on public health and safety would result from implementing the Proposed Action, with enforcement of standard sale contract provisions and the purchaser's cooperation. Such safety measures as posting warning signs, abiding by speed limits, using headlights under dusty conditions, avoiding hauling during weekends and holidays, obeying other regulations of commercial transporting, and adhering to other mitigation measures relative to truck traffic and harvesting operations have proven effective in protecting the public.

3) Unique characteristics of the geographic area.

   The Chamberlain Analysis Area is typical of many areas below the Mogollon Rim in geology, soils, vegetative complexes, wildlife species, and cultural resources. Special considerations were given to wildlife habitat and scenic quality during design of Alternative A and selection of mitigation measures. There are regulated wetlands and/or flood plains in the assessment area. There is no expectation of significant effects on these or other unique characteristics of the geographic area.

4) The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

The activities associated with the Proposed Action will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment, and the affects are not likely to be highly controversial in a scientific sense. Alternative A was developed using Integrated Resource Management philosophy and concepts, and public involvement was sought and considered. Alternative A was designed and mitigation measures were imposed to address numerous issues, concerns, and opportunities that were expressed. While some National Forest users and watchers may not philosophically agree with vegetative thinning, harvest, or prescribed burning or certain management standards and guidelines, no evidence has been presented which raises substantial questions as to the quality or the correctness of the environmental consequences analyzed.

5) The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

   The proposed activities use techniques that have been commonly applied on Pleasant Valley District and throughout other National Forests in Arizona and New Mexico in recent years. The effects of activities on wildlife and plant habitats, visual quality, recreation, cultural resources, soils, forage, watershed, air quality, and socioeconomic concerns are known to the best of our current knowledge, and have been analyzed and disclosed. No unique or unknown risks are evidenced. No expected effects are believed to be highly uncertain.

6) The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

   No precedents are established as a result of the proposed activities. All activities and this EA are site specific. Future proposals in the Chamberlain Analysis Area and in surrounding assessment areas can be analyzed on their merits and implemented or not implemented independently of any actions currently proposed.

7) Cumulatively significant effects of actions.

   Chapter Three of the EA summarizes the potential cumulative effects of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions on particular resources. The ID Team determined there will be no significant cumulative adverse effects associated with Alternative A.

8) The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific or heritage resources.

   All sites of proposed activities will be professionally surveyed for heritage resources. All identified heritage resources will be avoided during implementation of any activity. The heritage resources within the proposed area will be evaluated according to the National Register of Historic Places criteria. Concurrence from the State Historic Preservation Officer will occur prior to any treatments. No significant effects are foreseen and no loss or destruction of significant scientific or heritage values are anticipated.

9) The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

   Threatened or endangered species and/or their habitats are known to exist in the Chamberlain Analysis Area. Implementation of Alternative A "may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect" the Mexican spotted owl, bald eagle, Chiricahua leopard frog or their critical habitat. This project is also in compliance with the Mexican Spotted Owl Recovery Plan. Wildlife biologists conducted site visits to the project area. Informal consultation with United States Fish and Wildlife Service was completed and they have provided concurrence with the Forest Service's determination of impacts to these species. Management indicator species and Forest Service sensitive species are also considered to not be adversely affected by Alternative A.

10) Legality of the action.

   Alternative A would not violate Federal, State, or local laws or regulations imposed for the protection of the environment.

C. Summary

The analysis and other evidence compiled for this site specific project proposal have not revealed any potential for significant environmental effects; therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement is not needed.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

If no appeals are filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of the decision may occur on, but not before, 5 business days from the close of the appeal filing period. When appeals are filed, implementation may occur on, but not before, the 15th business day following the date of the last appeal disposition.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to administrative review (appeal) pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215.
The appeal must be filed (regular mail, fax, email, hand-delivery, or express delivery) with the Appeal Deciding Officer, Corbin Newman, Regional Forester, c/o USDA Forest Service, 333 Broadway SE, Albuquerque NM 87102. By fax at (505) 842-3110 or email at appeals-southwestern-regional-office@fs.fed.us

The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered appeals are: 8:30am to 4:30pm to Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic appeals must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc). In cases where no identifiable name is attached to an electronic message, a verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature is one way to provide verification. Appeals, including attachments, must be filed within 45 days from the publication date of this notice in the East Valley Tribune, the newspaper of record. Attachments received after the 45 day appeal period will not be considered. The publication date in the East Valley Tribune is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

INFORMATION CONTACT PERSON

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Jerry Mastel, District Ranger, Pleasant Valley Ranger District Office, P.O. Box 450, Forest Rd. 63, Young, AZ 85554, (928) 462-4300.

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Gene Blankenbaker DATE
Forest Supervisor
Tonto National Forest

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