

DECISION MEMO

SANTA CLARA DIVIDE FUELS AND VEGETATION MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES FUELBREAKS

USDA FOREST SERVICE LOS ANGELES RIVER RANGER DISTRICT ANGELES NATIONAL FOREST LOS ANGELES COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

BACKGROUND

Re-establishment of existing fuel break system in accordance with the Angeles National Forest Land Management Plan. Characteristics of the project site are summarized in Table 1 and the location of the project site is illustrated in Figure 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Project Site

Project Name	Location	Acreage	Elevation Range
Santa Clara Divide Fuel Break	EAST: Township 4N, Range 13W, Sections 29, 30, 32 and 33; Range 14W, Sections 25 and 34-36; Township 3N, Range 14W, Sections 3, 4, 8, and 9. CENTER: Township 3N, Range 14W, Section 7; Range 15W, Section 12. WEST: Township 3N, Range 15W, Sections 8-11 and 14-16. These areas are located on the <i>Agua Dulce, California, San Fernando, California, and Sunland, California</i> U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) 7.5 minute topographic quadrangles.	982± acres	2,325 to 4,930 feet

DECISION

It is my decision to proceed with the Santa Clara Divide Fuel Break Project. This project would re-establish an existing fuel break system and would not result in adverse environmental effects.

Project Description

The purpose of the project is to provide for public, employee, and fire fighter safety by reducing the fuel loading and arrangement of fuels at the Santa Clara Divide fuel break project site. The project will follow the National Fire Plan (see <http://www.fireplan.gov/>) for defensible space.

Fuels will be reduced by means of hand, mechanical, and prescription fire treatments. Chain saws, pruning saws, hand tools, dozers, tracked and rubber tired equipment with mastication heads, along with prescription fire, will be the primary sources of fuels reduction and maintenance treatments. Vegetative manipulation on the fuel break system will be accomplished to provide defensible space along ridgelines to widths of 300-500 feet maximum. Treatments will be focused to reduce fuels to 4 tons or less per acre along the fuel break system.

The project will include primary and secondary treatments. On slopes 30% or less the primary treatment will consist of mechanized equipment. Dozers pulling disking implements and tracked and/or rubber tired equipment will be used. Where mastication is used, the stump height will be left at 1-2 inches above ground level in order to reduce soil disturbance. Masticated material will be chipped to an average of 2-4 inches in diameter and 4-6 inches in length. Prescribed fire can be used in masticated areas, if deemed necessary, to achieve the desired goal of 4 tons per acre or less. On slopes greater than 30% prescribed fire will be the primary treatment. Prescription fire will be conducted to accomplish 60-70% blackened acres. Control lines will be provided by use of hand line construction and road system where feasible. The depth of hand lines will be to mineral soil with an effort to keep ground disturbance to a minimum where possible.

Secondary maintenance treatments will rely on mechanized mastication equipment and prescribed fire at intervals necessary to maintain the desired tons per acre. There will be no disking due to a population of Plummer's mariposa lily (*Calochortus plummerae*). Intervals of between 3 and 5 year return treatments are anticipated to maintain this desired condition.

REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action falls under the following category of actions that may be excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or environmental assessment (EA) and normally does not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment:

Categorical Exclusion 31.2 #6 (FSH 1909.15): "Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction (Service level D, FSH 7709.56)."

The environmental analysis conducted for the proposed action determined that there were no extraordinary circumstances or conditions that would result in significant adverse effects. Extraordinary circumstances include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Threatened and Endangered Species or Their Critical Habitat

It is my determination that project activities will not affect any threatened, endangered, proposed, or candidate species. Project activities will not affect designated or proposed critical habitat for any listed species (Angeles National Forest, 2007).

2. Forest Service Sensitive Species

It is my determination that project activities may affect individuals, but will not lead towards a trend in federal listing or loss of viability for any Forest Service sensitive species (Angeles National Forest, 2007).

3. Flood Plains, Wetlands, or Municipal Watersheds

The proposed project is not anticipated to adversely affect floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds.

4. Congressionally Designated Areas, Such as Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas, or National Recreation Areas

There are no congressionally designated areas within the project area (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2005).

5. Inventoried Roadless Areas

The project area is not located within an inventoried roadless area (Angeles National Forest, 2000).

6. Research Natural Areas

There are no research natural areas within the project area (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2005).

7. American Indians and Alaska Native Religious or Cultural sites

Regularly scheduled meetings and correspondence with the Native Americans on general Forest issues and mutual concerns have not identified any American Indian or Alaska Native religious or cultural sites of concern located within the treatment areas.

8. Archaeological Sites or Historic Properties or Areas

The forest Archeologist conducted an Archaeological Reconnaissance and produced a report on December 10, 2008. Cultural resources were encountered during the survey. Additionally, not all areas within the project site were subject to a pedestrian survey (Angeles National Forest, 2004a). The Forest Heritage Resource Program Manager has deemed project activities as an undertaking where management measures are necessary for protection of historic properties and it is necessary to notify Project planner, manager, or implementer (Stip. I(B)[2]. Ground disturbance will not be permitted in areas of mapped cultural resources without consultation with the Forest Heritage Resource Staff. The Forest Heritage Resource Program Manager must be contacted to approve ground-disturbing treatment in areas that were not surveyed (Angeles National Forest, 2004b).

9. Clean Air Act General Conformity

The proposed action has been analyzed as required under section 176(c) of the federal Clean Air Act, as amended, and 40 CFR 93.156, and has been determined to conform to the applicable State Implementation Plan for the purpose of attaining and maintaining all National Ambient Air Quality Standards (Angeles National Forest, 2005). This project does not exceed threshold levels and therefore meets federal conformity guidelines. No additional air quality analysis is required.

Therefore, I find that there are no extraordinary circumstances or conditions that might cause the action to have significant effects.

SCOPING & PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Internal scoping was conducted by the following resource specialists: District Biologist, District Botanist, Forest Archaeologist, and Los Angeles River Ranger District staff. No significant issues or extraordinary circumstances precluding the action were raised. A legal notice was published in the Los Angeles Daily News on October 6, 2008. Scoping letters were sent out to the forest scoping list on September 3, 2008. The public was made aware of the project through the publication of the Angeles National Forest NEPA Quarterly Report. The proposed action has been posted since September 2008.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

This action is consistent with management direction and the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as required by the National Forest Management Act (FSM 1922.41, and FSH 1909.12).

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

Implementation may occur on, but not before, five business days after publication of legal notice of this decision in the Los Angeles Daily News newspaper, published in Los Angeles, California.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

In accordance with the October 19, 2005, order issued by the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of California in Case No. CIV F-03-6386JKS, these decisions would be subject to administrative review (appeal) pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215 if comments expressing concerns are received during the 30-day comment period.

Since no comments expressing concerns were received during the 30-day comment period for the above decisions which ended on February 13, 2009, these decisions are not subject to appeal (36 CFR 215.12).


Michael McIntyre
District Ranger
Los Angeles River Ranger District

APPROVED

DATE 20 February 2009

REFERENCES

- Angeles National Forest. 2000. Inventoried Roadless Areas Map. Roadless Area Conservation. September 15, 2000. Available: <http://www.roadless.fs.fed.us/states/ca/ange.pdf>.
- Angeles National Forest. 2005. Clean Air Act – Air Quality General Conformity Report for Santa Clara Divide. Prepared by Earth Matters, Inc., December 16, 2005.
- Angeles National Forest. 2007. Biological Evaluation/Biological Assessment for Santa Clara Divide. Prepared by North State Resources, Inc., June 2007.
- U.S. Department of Agriculture 2005. Land Management Plan – Part 2 Angeles National Forest Strategy. Pacific Southwest Region R5-MB-076. September 2005.

Appendix A

Avoidance and Minimization Measures

Avoidance and Minimization Measures

The following avoidance and minimization measures shall be implemented to avoid the potential for significant adverse effects to sensitive environmental resources. These measures are mandatory conditions of project authorization:

1. All materials, wastes, and equipment will be removed from the project site(s) at the completion of the project.
2. Vehicles will not be driven off of designated access roads and fuelbreaks during the course of project implementation.
3. Where feasible, safety zones and escape routes will consist of the existing roads and trails.
4. Where feasible, snags and down wood will be left in place.
5. To the extent feasible, rock outcrops should be excluded from hand treatments and mechanical equipment.
6. In order to minimize potential disturbance impacts, work crews should be trained about ANF special status species.
7. Work crews must immediately notify the ANF Biologist of any sightings of TEPCS species and of any injured/sick/abandoned animals.
8. Where feasible, the removal of trees and other vegetation will be conducted outside of the general nesting season for migratory birds (approximately April 1st –September 1st).
9. In areas of marginal or suitable habitat for the coastal California gnatcatcher, brush removal activities (hand or mechanical) will not be implemented between March 1 through August 1.
10. For treatments within 500 feet of suitable southwestern willow flycatcher habitat, noise generating activities that require the use of large equipment or mechanized equipment such as chain saws will be scheduled to occur outside of April 1 to August 31. Beyond the 500 foot buffer, no seasonal restriction is recommended for the flycatcher. Noise generating activities can proceed during this timeframe if surveys during the current breeding season have determined that southwestern willow flycatchers are not present in the project area.
11. If suitable nesting habitat for the California spotted owl is present in the project site or within ¼ mile of the project site, limited operating periods may apply. Limited Operating Period Guidelines from the June 2004 *Conservation Strategy for the California Spotted Owl (Strix occidentalis occidentalis) on the National Forests of Southern California* will be in place, unless surveys confirm that spotted owls are not nesting in the proximity of the project. If protocol surveys determine that spotted owls are nesting within 0.25 mile of the project area or nesting owls Protected Activity Center (PAC) is within 0.25 mile of the project area, project activities in this area may not occur from February 1st - August 15th.
12. TEPCS plants observed within the project area will be flagged and treatments will be designed to minimize negative impacts. For example, Plummer's mariposa lily (*Calochortus plummerae*) occurs in close proximity to the project site. Populations of this species will be flagged and avoided.

13. District staff including the district ranger, fire crews and recreation staff will be shown photographs of the sensitive plant. If necessary, staff will have an onsite visit to see Plummer's mariposa lily.
14. A monitoring plan for Plummer's mariposa lily will be developed in agreement with the Forest Botanist. The goal of the monitoring plan is to determine the success of the flag and avoid treatment option.
15. Riparian Areas:
 - 15a) For riparian areas, the Riparian Conservation Area (RCA) guidelines from the 2005 Forest Plan will be used (Appendix E). All treatments will be consistent with FSH 2509.22- Soil and Water Conservation Practices Handbook and Best Management Practices. This will ensure that ground disturbing activities will not contribute additional sediment to any streams or lakes. Where prescribed burns are planned, no direct burning will occur in the RCA. Fire may enter those areas by "backing" downslope, burning the understory at low intensity. However, no effort will be made to apply fire directly to those areas or start a hot fire upwind that would intentionally move into the riparian buffer zones. To the extent possible, low creeping fires would be used near riparian areas, minimizing the burning/thinning of cottonwoods, alders, willows, and other riparian overstory.
 - 15b) To prevent vehicle encroachment in riparian habitats, ensure that barriers to riparian areas are not removed as a result of treatments.
 - 15c) Construction of firebreaks within riparian habitat will be avoided except where handlines have to cross riparian zones. Those short lines will be constructed and maintained with handcrews using handtools and chainsaws. The width will be kept to a minimum and the length of handlines in riparian will also be kept to a minimum.
 - 15d) To the extent feasible, fuel reductions implemented in riparian areas will focus on the removal of non-native vegetation to achieve fuel hazard reduction objectives.
16. General Chaparral Habitat:
 - 16a) Through the use of waterbars and other erosion control techniques, minimize amount of erosion and reduce sedimentation flow into riparian areas.
 - 16b) Where prescribed burns are planned, the prescription objective for chaparral habitat will include creating a fire of sufficient intensity to ensure germination of cupleaf ceanothus, bigberry manzanita, and other obligate seeding species. These shrubs do not resprout from burls, but instead regenerate only from seed following fire. Seeds are apparently induced to germinate by heat. For purposes of obligate seeding species, fire intensity can be estimated by the burned-off diameters of stems: where burned stems are ¼-1" in diameter, the fire should be hot enough to induce germination.
17. To prevent the spread of noxious weeds:
 - 17a) Follow up noxious weed surveys will be conducted throughout the project site. For the first year following treatments weed surveys will be conducted. Ideally, surveys will be monthly between March and July.

- 17b) Ideally, for years 2 to 5 following the treatments, weed surveys will be conducted bi-monthly between March and July.
- 17c) If any new or expanding infestation of invasive species are discovered, the Forest Botanist will be notified and the plants will be removed using the most efficient and effective method.
18. FSM 2081.03, directs the Forest Service to require all equipment be cleaned when working in a site contaminated with noxious weeds. As a result of FSM 2081.03, the following will be required at all project sites:
- 18a) **WASH ALL EQUIPMENT AND VEHICLES:** Vehicles and all equipment must be washed BEFORE AND AFTER entering all project sites. This includes wheels, undercarriages, bumpers and all parts of the vehicle. In addition, all tools such as chain-saws, hand clippers, pruners, etc must also be washed BEFORE AND AFTER entering all project sites. For example, vehicles traveling into contaminated areas are the main dispersal mechanism for yellow star-thistle. All washing must take place where rinse water is collected and disposed of in either a sanitary sewer or a landfill.
- 18b) **KEEP WRITTEN LOGS:** When vehicles and equipment are washed, a daily log must be kept, stating:
- A) Location
 - B) Date and time
 - C) Methods used
 - D) Staff present
 - E) Equipment washed
 - F) Signature of responsible crew member
- 18c) **TURN IN WRITTEN LOGS:** These written logs will be turned in every week. Contractors should turn in written logs to the COR. Forest Service staff should turn in written logs to the project manager or to the Forest Botanist.

19. Protection of Archaeological Sites

19a) The Forest Heritage Resource Program Manager has determined that several sensitive areas exist within the project boundary or immediately adjacent to the project area. A representative from the Heritage Resources Department will be informed of all activities prior to beginning activities in these sensitive zones.

19b) Per the *Interim Protocol for Non-intensive Inventory Strategies for Hazardous Fuels and Vegetation Reduction Projects*, there are areas within the project area that were not surveyed and will need the Forest Heritage Resource Program Manager's approval before any ground disturbance treatments can occur in these areas. Maps in the project file shows the locations that will need approval from the Heritage Resource Program Manager before any ground disturbance can occur.

19c) If additional heritage resources are discovered during project implementation, work is to stop in the area until the Heritage Resource Manager evaluates the resource, and determines the appropriate management action.