

Decision Notice

USDA FOREST SERVICE
Eldorado National Forest
Placerville Ranger District
El Dorado County, CA

Last Chance Fuels Reduction Project

Decision and Reasons for the Decision

I have read the Last Chance Fuels Reduction Project Environmental Assessment (EA), reviewed the analysis in the project file, including documents incorporated by reference, and fully understand the environmental effects disclosed therein. I have also considered the comments submitted during the public scoping for this project and in response to the EA. The comments to the EA with responses are available in the project file.

Decision:

It is my decision to select Alternative 1, Proposed Action, which is fully described in the EA on pages 4 through 8. My reasons for the decision are based on the purpose and need for the Last Chance Fuels Reduction Project, which includes the following:

- Need for reduced fuel loading in the wildland urban interface zone around the community of Grizzly Flat.
- Need for a defensible fuel profile zone in the vicinity of Grizzly Flat, Henry's Diggings, and Leoni Meadow.
- Need for secure critical habitat for California spotted owls and northern goshawks.
- Need for reduced risk of catastrophic wildfire in the watersheds of Clear Creek, Dogtown Creek, Lower Lower Middle Fork Cosumnes River, Upper Steely Fork Cosumnes River, and Lower Steely Fork Cosumnes River.
- Need for improved wildlife habitat, improved watershed conditions, and reduced risk of human caused fire to the degree these are affected by unneeded roads.

Response to Purpose and Need

The proposed action will effect an immediate change in potential wildfire behavior by reducing the rate of spread and the intensity of fire. It will effect a change in the vegetation conditions allowing fires to burn with lower intensities, in ground fuels, providing a good opportunity for fire crews to stop the fire spread quickly.

The proposed action will reduce fuel loading on approximately 1700 acres in the wildland urban interface around the community of Grizzly Flat. It will establish a system of fuel reduction zones in the vicinity of Grizzly Flat, Henry's Diggings, and Leoni Meadow that will strategically connect to existing fuels reduction projects along Caldor Railroad Grade, Plummer Ridge, and Clear Creek. The proposed action will remove

dense undergrowth adjacent to and within critical wildlife habitats reducing the potential for high intensity wildfire to devastate these areas.

The proposed action will reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire in the Clear Creek, Dogtown Creek, Lower Lower Middle Fork Cosumnes River, Upper Steely Fork Cosumnes River, and Lower Steely Fork Cosumnes River watersheds. The Proposed Action will close unneeded roads, thereby improving wildlife habitat and watershed conditions, and reducing the risk of human caused fires.

Understory thinning within California spotted owl and northern goshawk PACs

The public expressed concern/opposition during the comment period to mechanical thinning to a 20-inch diameter limit on 21 acres of northern goshawk PACs (within the defense zone) and 21 acres of California spotted owl PACs (within the defense zone). In addition, concern was expressed about mechanical thinning to a 30-inch diameter limit within 298 acres of Home Range Core Areas (HRCAs within the defense zone). I have decided to implement these actions for the following reasons:

- No disturbance to breeding owls or goshawks would occur in response to thinning within PACs, because no operations will be allowed from February 15 to September 15 within northern goshawk PACs and March 1 to August 31 for California spotted owls.
- The proposed mechanical thinning to a 20-inch diameter limit within PACs and proposed mechanical thinning to a 30-inch diameter limit in HRCAs will reduce the level of fuel hazard adjacent to private property and allow for a safer and more effective fire suppression environment. The thinning will reduce ladder fuels and improve the ability of the PACs to survive a wildfire.
- The portions of PACs treated will remain suitable California spotted owl and northern goshawk habitat after the fuel reduction is complete because the canopy structure and down woody material will be maintained. The District Wildlife Biologist will participate in the layout of these units and the implementation of the thinning to ensure habitat elements are maintained.

Alternatives Considered

Alternatives analyzed in detail included:

1. Establish a system of fuel reduction zones (approximately 1700 acres) in the wildland urban interface around Grizzly Flat, Leoni Meadow, and Henry's Diggings that strategically connect to existing fuel reduction projects. This includes: closing seven roads to vehicle traffic, rehabilitating two waterholes, thinning the understory vegetation on approximately 560 acres, masticating brush and burning piles on approximately 150 acres, hand pruning trees within 100 feet from private property on approximately 50 acres, and low intensity underburning on approximately 1255 acres to effect a change in potential wildfire behavior, improve wildlife habitat and watershed conditions and comply with LRMP and SNFPA direction.
2. Do not establish a system of fuel reduction zones (approximately 1700 acres) in the wildland urban interface around Grizzly Flat, Leoni Meadow, and Henry's

Diggings that strategically connect to existing fuel reduction projects. Do not close seven roads or rehabilitate two waterholes.

All mitigation measures included in the Proposed Action will be implemented. These include:

1. Known weeds, and any newly discovered occurrences, will be treated by hand pulling or lopping in the late summer/early fall.
2. Cultural resource sites will be flagged for protection and avoided during ground disturbing activities (mechanical and hand treatments).
3. Most activities within ¼ mile of a spotted owl activity center will be restricted from March 1 through August 31. Most activities within ¼ mile of northern goshawk nesting areas will be restricted from February 15 through September 15. Most activities will be restricted within critical deer winter range from October 15 through April 15.
4. Known occurrences, and any newly discovered occurrences of Pleasant Valley mariposa lily will be flagged and avoided during ground disturbing activities.

Public Involvement

A brief description of location and type of project was included in the Eldorado National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) each quarter since April 2001. An article was published in the Mountain Democrat on December 12, 2002 that discussed the Healthy Forests Initiative and the Pilot Projects (Last Chance). Approximately 250 letters were mailed out to adjacent property owners, potentially effected businesses, federal, state and local agencies, and local special interest groups. The letter contained the detailed proposed action, map, methods for participation, and an invitation to the Last Chance public meeting on February 1, 2003. The mailing list is included in the project record. Articles were published in the Mountain Democrat on January 20, 2003 and January 30, 2003 describing the proposed action and notification of the public meeting. A public meeting was held in Grizzly Flat on February 1, 2003. Approximately 60 people attended, including representatives of CDF, USFS, and El Dorado County Fire Safe Council. Meeting notes are included in the project record.

Nine individuals responded to the scoping. No significant issues were raised; therefore, no alternatives other than the proposed action and the no action alternative have been fully developed and analyzed.

The legal notice of comment was published in the newspaper of record on May 15, 2003 and copies of the EA were sent to 11 individuals, organizations, and government agencies. Four individuals responded during the comment period. No significant issues were raised. A copy of the Response to Comments is located in Appendix C of the EA.

Finding of No Significant Impact

A finding of no significant impact is attached to this decision notice.

Findings required by Other Laws and Regulations

The EA has been completed pursuant to Forest Service Handbook 1909.25. The issues brought up by concerned citizens are addressed in Appendix C, Response to Comments. The EA is sufficient for me to determine whether or not to proceed with the Last Chance Fuels Reduction project.

My decision is consistent with the National Forest Management Act and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act as well as the Eldorado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment Final Environmental Impact Statement (January 2001).

1. Soil and water resources will be conserved. Estimates of the threshold of concern and the equivalent roaded acres were confirmed for the affected watersheds. Short-term disturbances in the riparian conservation areas will be minimized through implementation of Best Management Practices. No in-stream work is planned.
2. Streams, shorelines, lakes, and fisheries in the project area will be protected.
3. As shown in the EA and determined in the wildlife and plant biological evaluations, the viability of populations of threatened, endangered, and sensitive species will be maintained.
4. The protection of heritage resources has been confirmed in the EA.
5. The project will not affect the eligibility of any rivers that are eligible for designation as a Wild and Scenic River.

Implementation Date

The project is planned for initial implementation in 2004.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

Pursuant to 36 CFR 215.7, this decision is subject to appeal. Any appeals must be filed with Jack Blackwell, Regional Forester, 1323 Club Drive, Vallejo, CA 94952, 45 days following the date of the published legal notice of this decision in the Mountain Democrat newspaper of Placerville, California. Appeals must be received or postmarked on or before the last day of the appeal filing period. It is the appellant's responsibility to comply with 36 CFR 215.14, Content of a Notice of Appeal.

Contact Person

If you have any questions about the Environmental Assessment for the Last Chance Fuels Reduction Project, please contact Laura Hierholzer at 530-642-5187.

/s/ Kathryn D. Hardy
KATHRYN D. HARDY
Placerville District Ranger

Date: 8/8/03