

Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact

**Laguna Water System Improvement
Environmental Assessment (EA)**

**USDA Forest Service
Descanso Ranger District, Cleveland National Forest
San Diego County, California**

1. Background

The Mount Laguna water system presently serves over eight recreation sites, a Forest Service fire station, a local private Volunteer fire station, a Volunteer Headquarters, a Forest Service Residence, a Sierra Club Lodge, and a Visitor Center. Altogether, the water system serves approximately 1,700 members of the public.

The existing wells that serve these water needs on Mount Laguna have issues that resulted in a 2010 decision to drill the carefully-sited Los Rasalies well to bolster the system. The purpose of this project is to connect the new well to the water system and thereby supplement the existing Agua Dulce well and system storage capacity to meet the demands on the entire water system. Connecting this new well will also provide backup alternatives when the Agua Dulce well is down. Altogether, this purpose would fulfill the following Land Management Plan direction: “Improve, remove or replace aging developed recreation infrastructure to meet current needs and future demand.” (LMP 2005, p. 103)

The project is located in San Diego County within the Mount Laguna Recreation Area in the vicinity of the Red-Tailed Roost Volunteer Headquarters and the Laguna Meadow. Specifically, proposed water system improvement work would occur in Sections 13-15 and 22-24 of Township 15 S, Range 5 E along the San Bernardino Meridian. See Figures 1 and 2 below for maps of the project area and activities.

2. Decision and Rationale

Based on evaluation of alternatives in the Laguna Water System Improvement EA, supporting documentation found in the project record, and review of public comments, I have selected Alternative 2, the proposed action, for implementation.

This selected alternative will involve providing a new electrical utility drop/service to the Los Rasalies well via underground installation of approximately 1,590 linear feet (LF) of electrical conductors, and the installation of a new underground waterline extension from this well to the existing Mt. Laguna water system, as shown in Figure 1. Specifically, the waterline extension includes the installation of a 100,000 gallon water tank, approximately 8,000 LF (~1.5 miles) of

control line, and approximately 15,000 LF (~3 miles) of new water main to the existing Cuyapaipe reservoir. Water system control grade boxes, control line pull boxes and water main drain laterals would be included in this installation. If needed, the work may also include the installation of a water treatment system at the Los Rasalies wellhead, installation of a booster pump station, well development work on the Agua Dulce well, and existing pump control system upgrades at Los Huecos reservoir.

For permanent vehicle access to the proposed water tank site atop a hill shown on the project map, a light-duty administrative road, 12 feet wide and approximately ¼ mile in length, would be constructed on top of the first portion of an existing National Forest System Trail, the Red-Tailed Roost Loop Spur, that begins at the Red-Tailed Roost Volunteer Headquarters. The new tank access road would need to be bladed to allow for delivery of tank materials and equipment, and wet portions may need gravel. After construction, the road would be gated and allowed to revert to a two-track, light-duty, 8-foot-wide road, occupying 0.3 acres of National Forest System land along the existing trail. Oaks would be avoided to the extent possible during the blading. If funding permits, a lateral waterline would be buried in the tank access road to provide water for administrative and emergency use at the Red-Tailed Roost Volunteer Headquarters.

The water tank and fenced pad would occupy 0.1 acres of National Forest System land. The new water and electric lines would be installed using a miniature backhoe or backhoe to dig a trench, 12” to 24” wide and up to 36” deep, resulting in approximately 5,000 LF (~1 mile) of ground disturbance outside of the existing road prism. The equipment tread impact would occur within a 40’ wide corridor along the line shown in Figure 1 for portions of the project beyond existing roads, resulting in a maximum of 5 acres of new, temporary ground disturbance. Soil and vegetation removed to dig the trench would be set aside and put back in place after line installation, and the disturbed portions of Old County Road and Agua Dulce Road would be stormproofed. In addition, applicable best management practices (BMPs, listed below) for erosion control will be used throughout the project area and duration. Unauthorized public use of disturbed areas would be deterred by obscuring them from sight. The project is anticipated for implementation from spring through fall of 2015.

In response to concerns raised by the public during the comment period on the Draft EA, a new singletrack trail would be constructed to avoid the trail segment that would be transformed into a tank access road prior to other project construction. The trail would begin at the Red-Tailed Roost Volunteer Headquarters and connect to the existing Red-Tailed Roost Loop Spur Trail just beyond the site of the proposed water tank (Figure 2).

Design Features

- To limit impacts to a known nesting location for California spotted owls adjacent to the project area, a limited operating period (LOP) shall be instituted unless protocol surveys determine that owls are not nesting. The LOP would restrict project activities from occurring between February 1 and August 15.

- All equipment used on site shall be washed prior to entering the project area to remove seeds and plant material from noxious weeds to prevent the introduction and spread of weeds not already present on Mount Laguna or the Cleveland National Forest.
- Should any previously unrecorded cultural resources be encountered during implementation of this project, all work would immediately cease in that area and the Forest Heritage Program Manager (HPM) would be notified immediately. Work could resume after approval by the HPM, provided any recommended Standard Protection Measures were implemented. Should any cultural resources become damaged in unanticipated ways by activities proposed in this project, the steps described in the Regional Programmatic Agreement for inadvertent effects would be followed.
- Should the project boundaries or activities be expanded beyond the current area of potential effect, National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 compliance for this project would be incomplete until additional cultural resource review was completed. The HPM would be kept informed of the status of various stages of the project, so that subsequent field work could proceed in a timely fashion.
- Project implementation would require dry soil conditions during all activities.
- After project implementation, ground cover on disturbed sites outside the road prism would be required to be at least 90 percent of existing pre-project levels.

Region 5 BMPs from R5 FSH 2509.22—Soil and Water Conservation Handbook Ch. 10 (2011)

- BMP 2.2 - General Guidelines for the Location and Design of Roads (pp. 81-85) applies to the location and design of access road for new tank.
- BMP 2.3 - Road Construction and Reconstruction (pp. 86-89) applies to the access road and reconstruction of roadbed after project implementation.
- BMP 2.6 - Road Storage (pp. 101-103) applies to the access road.
- BMP 2.8 - Stream Crossings (pp. 107-112) applies to the water main crossing of Agua Dulce Creek.
- BMP 2.11 - Equipment Refueling and Servicing (pp.118-119) applies to equipment used during project implementation.
- BMP 2.13 - Erosion Control Plan (pp. 122-129) applies to all ground disturbing activities.
- BMP 4.2 - Providing Safe Drinking Water Supplies (pp. 142) applies to the new tank.
- BMP 4.3 - Documenting Water Quality Data (pp. 143) applies to the new tank.
- BMP 7.4 - Forest and Hazardous Substance Spill Prevention Control and Countermeasure Plan (pp. 206) applies to all management activities involving mechanical equipment.

National BMPs from National Best Management Practices for Water Quality Management on National Forest System Lands (2012)

- AqEco-2. Operations in Aquatic Ecosystems (pp. 21-23) applies to stream crossing of Agua Dulce Creek by the water main.

Figure 1. Map of Alternative 2 (Proposed Action)

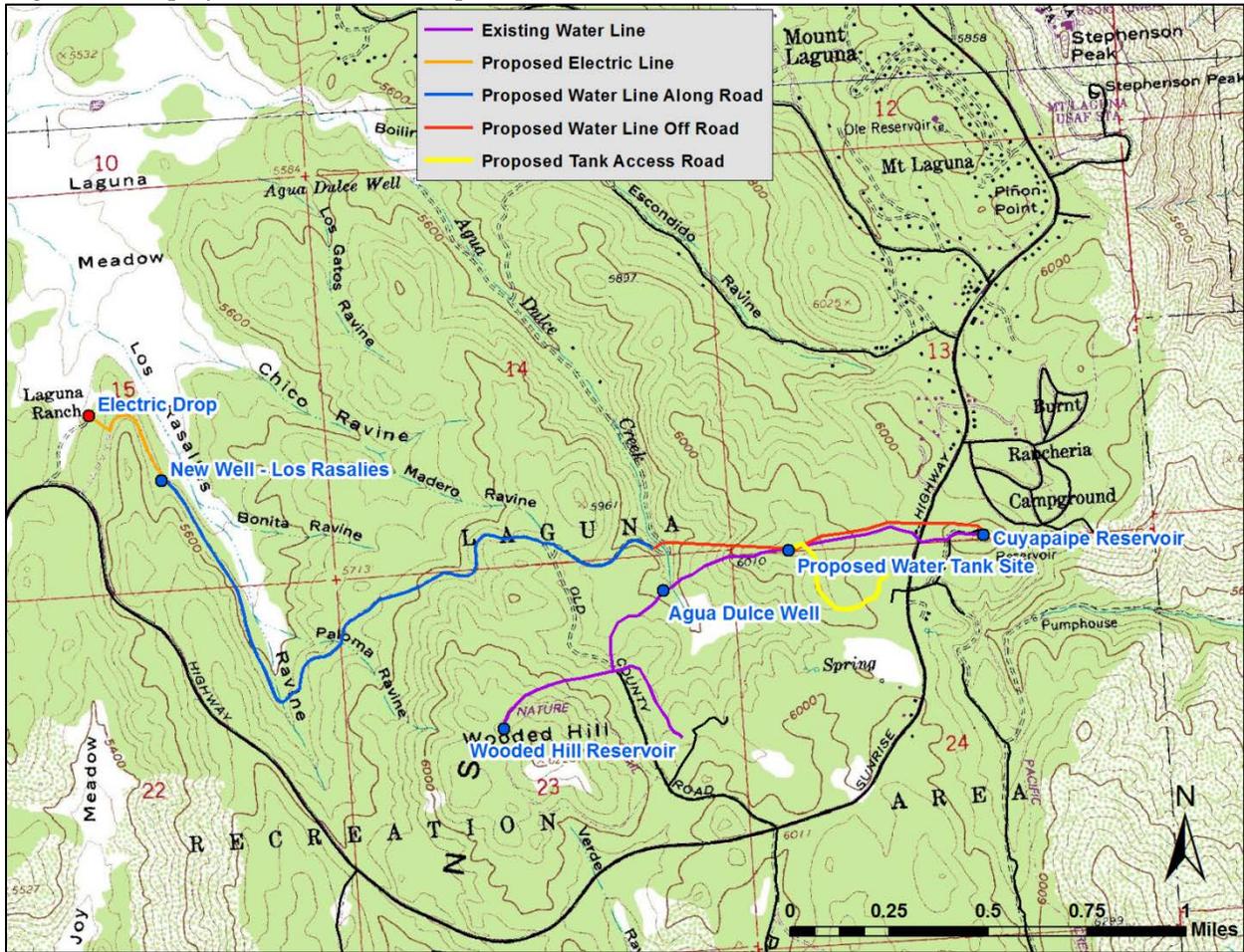
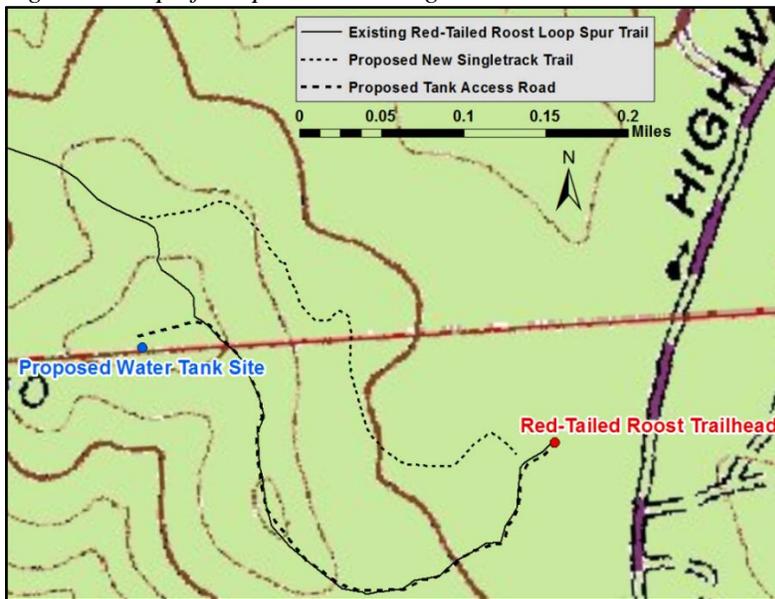


Figure 2. Map of Proposed New Singletrack Trail



- Fac-1. Facilities and Nonrecreation Special Uses Planning (pp. 40-41) applies to planning of new facilities (tank, access road, water main, etc.).
- Fac-2. Facility Construction and Stormwater Control (pp. 41-42) applies to ground disturbing activities during facilities construction.
- Fac-3. Potable Water Supply Systems (pp. 43) applies to the new tank.
- Fac-9. Pipelines, Transmission Facilities, and Rights-of-Way (pp. 48-49) applies to the water main and tank.
- Road-2. Road Location and Design (pp. 107-110) applies to the access road.
- Road-3. Road Construction and Reconstruction (pp. 110-111) applies to the access road and reconstruction of roadbed after installation of water main.
- Road-6. Road Storage and Decommissioning (pp. 115-117) applies to the access road.
- Road-7. Stream Crossings (pp. 117-120) applies to the water main crossing of Agua Dulce Creek.
- Road-10. Equipment Refueling and Servicing (pp. 123-124) applies to all activities involving mechanical equipment.
- WatUses-1. Water Uses Planning (pp. 142-143) applies to the water system (tank, water main, facilities, etc).
- WatUses-2. Water Wells for Production and Monitoring (pg. 143-144) applies to water use at Los Rasalies well.
- WatUses-3. Administrative Water Developments (pp. 144-147) applies to the water system (tank, water main, facilities, etc.).

By combining a number of approaches to address the purpose and need of this project, I find that Alternative 2, the proposed action, is an effective alternative for providing water to meet the demands on the Mount Laguna water system while protecting sensitive resources and recreational experiences.

Four resource areas were analyzed in the EA: impacts to biological resources, cultural resources, soil and water, and recreation and public safety. The only adverse impacts identified for the selected alternative in the EA were minor and short-term. By bringing the project area into better alignment with the Cleveland National Forest Land Management Plan, the selected alternative will help to ensure recreational access over the long-term.

Altogether, this project balances resource and social issues with public access to National Forest System lands and will have a long-term positive effect on recreation while protecting the sensitive resources of the Mount Laguna Recreation Area.

3. Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, a No Action alternative was considered and analyzed in detail as part of this project. Under the no action alternative, no new improvements would be

made to the existing water system on Mount Laguna. Existing wells would be maintained, while the new Los Rasalies well would remain isolated from the system.

Two alternatives were considered but eliminated from detailed study. The first would not have constructed a road to the water tank, but it was determined that vehicular access to the tank is critical for its long-term maintenance. Secondly, alternative water tank and road locations were eliminated because the locations proposed under Alternative 2 were determined through field surveys to have both the least resource concerns and the least engineering constraints relative to alternative locations.

4. Public Involvement

The Descanso Ranger District identified potentially interested stakeholders and invited them to comment on the proposed action. These stakeholders included recreation user groups, Tribal governments, local government and regulatory organizations, local environmental organizations, and other members of the public that have expressed interest in projects on the Descanso Ranger District of the Cleveland National Forest.

Scoping and public involvement for the project consisted of the following:

1. The proposal was first listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions in September 2013, and a mailing requesting input was sent to 24 potentially interested parties, including Tribal representatives, on September 19, 2013. Altogether, a single comment was received during the 30-day scoping period.
2. The Draft EA was made available for a 30-day comment period through publication of a legal notice in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* on May 9, 2014, along with mailings to potentially interested parties, including five people that were not on the scoping mailing list. Altogether, nineteen comments were received during the 30-day comment period.

Commenters expressed support, opposition, and recommendations for the project. All comments and responses can be found in Chapter 5 of the EA.

5. Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental impacts described in the EA and after examining supporting documentation found in the project record, I find that implementing the selected alternative will not have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment, considering context and intensity of impacts (see 40 CFR 1508.27). Therefore an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

1. The finding of no significant impact is not biased by the beneficial impacts of the selected alternative. The beneficial effects consist of replacing aging infrastructure to secure water for long-term use on Mount Laguna.

2. No significant impacts on public safety will occur due to the implementation of the project. Trail closures will prevent safety issues from occurring during project construction. The project will improve long-term public safety by providing water for fire suppression efforts when needed.
3. No significant impacts on the unique characteristics of the area will occur because this project affects only a small portion of the Mount Laguna Recreation Area.
4. The impacts on the quality of the natural environment are not likely to be highly controversial because there is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the project. Sections 3.1 and 3.3 of the EA describe the consequences of the alternatives to the biological and physical environments.
5. The Forest Service has considerable experience with the types of activities to be implemented. Analysis shows the impacts are not uncertain and do not involve unique or unknown risks.
6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant impacts because the purpose and need for the project will be addressed by the selected alternative.
7. The cumulative impacts associated with the selected alternative are not significant (see relevant cumulative effects sections in Chapter 3 of the EA). This EA analyzed the cumulative effects of this project with activities on adjacent National Forest System lands.
8. The action will have no significant adverse impact on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects either listed or eligible to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places, or on Tribes. A heritage resource and tribal relations specialist has confirmed that no heritage resources would be damaged by the proposed action (see section 3.2 of the EA).
9. The action will not adversely impact any endangered or threatened species, or habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended. Project area surveys were conducted by a Forest Service wildlife biologist and are documented in a project-specific biological evaluation and biological assessment (see section 3.1 of the EA).
10. The action will not violate federal, state, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws were considered in the EA. The action is consistent with the LMP, as documented in Section 6.1 below.

6. Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

My decision to implement the selected alternative is consistent with the long-term goals and objectives listed in the LMP. The project was designed in conformance with LMP standards and guidelines.

6.1 National Forest Management Act of 1976, as amended

All project activities fully comply with the LMP. This project incorporates all applicable LMP forest-wide standards, guidelines, and management area prescriptions, as they apply to the project area, and complies with LMP goals and objectives. In particular, the selected alternative implements the LMP strategy to “(i)mprove, remove or replace aging developed recreation infrastructure to meet current needs and future demand.” Application of LMP direction for the project ensures compliance at the project level. With the inclusion of LMP direction, this proposed project will move the existing condition of the project area toward its desired condition.

The project area falls within the Developed Area Interface land use zone defined by the LMP, where “developed facilities” including the proposed Laguna Water System Improvements are considered suitable. The project area falls within the Laguna Place, where the desired condition includes that “a continued supply of high-quality water is assured for recreation users and maintenance of aquatic habitats.” One program emphasis for the Place is to “Conduct groundwater study and analysis that identifies long-term solutions to a sustainable supply of water for public and private needs.” The selected alternative directly addresses this need and is consistent with the LMP.

6.2 Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended

The project area was surveyed for threatened and endangered species. Some areas are critical habitat for the endangered San Bernardino bluegrass and the endangered Laguna Mountain skipper. A biological assessment was prepared that determined that the project would not adversely affect these species (see section 3.1 of the EA).

6.3 National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended

Cultural resource surveys have been conducted, following inventory protocols approved by the State Historic Preservation Officer. Native American communities were contacted and public comment encouraged. The Cleveland National Forest heritage resource specialist determined in accordance with Cleveland National Forest Heritage Resources Management Program Programmatic Agreement Compliance Form that consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer was not necessary for this project. See section 3.2 of the EA.

6.4 Federal Water Pollution Control Act (Clean Water Act) of 1972, as amended

The design of project activities is in accordance with LMP standards and guidelines, best management practices, and applicable Forest Service Manual and Handbook direction. Monitoring and evaluation of the implementation and effectiveness of LMP standards and guidelines and Best Management Practices will occur. Project activities are expected to meet applicable state water quality standards. See section 3.3 of the EA.

6.5 Executive Order 11988, Clean Water

This project is fully consistent with this executive order.

6.6 Executive Order 13112, Invasive Species

Implementation of the selected alternative is not anticipated to cause or promote the introduction or spread of invasive species. The selected alternative is designed to reduce the extent and spread of invasive species.

6.7 Executive Order 13186, Migratory Birds

Management objectives of this executive order will be met. No impacts on migratory bird species are expected. See section 3.1 of the EA.

7. Administrative Review or Objection Opportunities

This decision was subject to objection pursuant to 36 CFR 218. A legal notice of the opportunity to object was published in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* on December 31, 2014, and those who provided comments were directly notified of the opportunity. No objections were received.

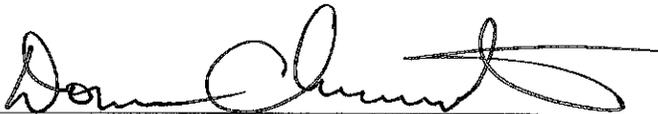
8. Implementation Date

As per 36 CFR 218.12, since no objection was received within the legal objection period, this decision may be signed and implemented on, but not before, the fifth business day following the close of the objection-filing period.

9. Contact

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service objection process, contact:

Jeff Heys, Forest Planner
Cleveland National Forest
10845 Rancho Bernardo Rd, Suite 200
San Diego, CA 92127
Phone: (858) 674-2959



DONN CHRISTIANSEN
District Ranger

2/5/15
Date

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD).

To file a complaint of discrimination, write to USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20250-9410, or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.