



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Southwestern
Region



Scoping Report for Proposed Wildland Fire Amendment to the Land and Resource Management Plan

Coronado National Forest



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Abstract

The Coronado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP), approved in 1986, reflects agency fire management policy at that time. The fire management direction was to “develop the most cost efficient operations for fire management activities depending on the resources, property, and lives to be protected.” Under the 1986 LRMP, the fire suppression objective is to manage wildland fires at a minimum cost consistent with land and resource management objectives and fire management direction. This direction is not consistent with the current Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy.

The Forest Service proposes to amend the LRMP to align it with the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy, revised in 2001. This Federal Fire Policy recognizes the essential role of fire in maintaining natural systems and allows managers a broader range of options when responding to wildland fires.

Currently, suppression is the only fire management option allowed by the LRMP in areas outside of congressionally designated wildernesses, wilderness study areas, and research natural areas. The proposed amendment would allow fire managers Forest-wide discretionary use of a full spectrum of fire management options from aggressive initial attack to the management of natural ignitions (lightning-caused fires) for resource benefits. Discretionary use of wildland fire is essential to reducing hazardous fuels and sustaining wildland ecosystems.

Introduction

The Forest Service has prepared this scoping report to inform the public of a proposed federal action to amend the Coronado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan and is distributing it to interested parties and the general public to solicit comments on the scope of a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review of the action. Information on how to provide comments is provided at the end of the report.

Background

Coronado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan

The Coronado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) was approved in 1986, and its goals, standards and guidelines reflect agency fire management policy at that time. Fire management direction in the LRMP is to “develop the most cost efficient operations for fire management activities depending on the resources, property, and lives to be protected.” [LRMP, p. 45]

Under the 1986 LRMP, the fire suppression objective is to manage wildland fires at a minimum cost consistent with land and resource management objectives and fire management direction. Managers have been afforded a full array of responses to naturally ignited (lightning-caused) fires in wildernesses, wilderness study areas, and research natural areas, ranging from aggressive initial attack to the management of wildland fires to achieve resource benefits. Outside of these specially designated areas, however, suppression has been the only permitted response to wildland fires.

Fire Management Zones

The Coronado National Forest (Forest) is divided into two Fire Management Zones identified in the LRMP. These zones are based on resource management objectives, with consideration given to the value of property and resources to be protected. The appropriate response in Fire Management Zone 1 is predicated upon preventing fires from reaching or damaging high value resources and improvements. In Fire Management Zone 2, the appropriate response is predicated upon responses that will suppress wildfires at the least cost with acceptable damage to improvements, and maintenance of sufficient forage to sustain livestock grazing operations and ground cover to keep watersheds in satisfactory condition.” [LRMP, p. 87]

Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy

During the mid-1990s, issues associated with forest health, environmental concerns, public and firefighter safety, and wildland/urban interface precipitated a major change in the Forest Service’s fire policy. As a result, the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior adopted the *Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and Program Review* on December 18, 1995. This Federal Fire Policy recognized the importance of the safety of firefighters and the public, the essential role of fire in maintaining natural systems, the importance of increased interagency cooperation, and the need to allow managers a broader range of options when responding to wildland fires.

In 2000, the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior requested a comprehensive review of the 1995 Federal Fire Policy. The working group found that the Policy was generally sound and provided a solid foundation for wildland fire management. However, the group recommended changes and additions that clarified the purpose and intent of the policy and addressed issues not fully covered in 1995. The resulting 2001 *Review and Update of the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy* (www.nifc.gov/fire_policy/index.htm), hereafter referred to as the 2001 Federal Fire Policy, replaced the 1995 Policy.

The 2001 Federal Fire Policy provides the philosophical and policy foundations for federal interagency fire management activities conducted under the National Fire Plan. The National Fire Plan is composed of various documents, including (1) a September 8, 2000, report, *Managing the Impact of Wildfires on Communities and the Environment*, from the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to the President of the United States in response to the wildland fires of 2000; (2) congressional direction accompanying substantial new appropriations for wildland fire management for fiscal year 2001; (3) *Protecting People and Sustaining Resources in Fire-Adapted Ecosystems: A Cohesive Strategy*, released by the Forest Service in 1999 in response to the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) Report, *Western National Forests: A Cohesive Strategy is Needed to Address Catastrophic Wildfire Threats (GAO/RCED-99-65)*; and (4) several draft and approved strategies to implement all or parts of the plan.

The guiding principles of the 2001 Federal Fire Policy are as follows:

- Firefighter and public safety is the first priority in every fire management activity.
- The role of wildland fire as an essential ecological process and natural change agent will be incorporated into the planning process.
- Fire Management Plans, programs, and activities support land and resource management plans and their implementation.
- Sound risk management is a foundation for all fire management activities.
- Fire management programs and activities are economically viable, based upon values to be protected, costs, and land and resource management objectives.
- Fire Management Plans and activities are based upon the best available science.
- Fire Management Plans and activities incorporate public health and environmental quality considerations.
- Federal, State, tribal, local, interagency, and international coordination and cooperation are essential.
- Standardization of policies and procedures among Federal agencies is an ongoing objective.

Purpose of and Need for Action

The purpose of the proposed action is to amend the LRMP so that it conforms to the 2001 Federal Fire Policy and to Forest Service Manual direction. To implement the proposed action, Chapters 4 and 5 in the current LRMP would be rewritten to reflect current policy.

The amendment is necessary to allow fire managers the Forest-wide discretionary use of a variety of fire response and management options. These options would include aggressive suppression actions as well as management of natural ignitions to achieve resource benefits. Wildland fire use for resource benefits on a landscape scale is needed to help reduce hazardous fuels and to sustain wildland ecosystems into the future.

Proposed Action

Proposed Changes in Chapter 4, “Management Direction”

Existing goals, standards and guidelines for wildland fire use would be deleted from the LRMP. New fire management goals, standards and guidelines applicable to all areas of the Forest would

be added. Current LRMP language to be changed by the proposed action is shown in the left-hand column of the following table, with page numbers for reference. The proposed replacement language is in the right-hand column.

<p style="text-align: center;">CURRENT</p> <p style="text-align: center;">1986 Land and Resource Management Plan</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">PROPOSED</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Wildland Fire Amendment</p>
<p>Management Direction – Goals</p> <p>Protect life, property and resources from wildfire while using prescribed fire as a tool to meet management objectives. [p. 11]</p>	<p>Management Direction – Goals</p> <p>Reduce the costs, resource damage, and threats to public and firefighter safety from future wildland fires.</p> <p>Manage naturally occurring fires to restore and sustain ecological processes in fire-dependent ecosystems.</p> <p>Create and maintain fuel conditions for low risk of extreme fire behavior and high-intensity wildland fires.</p>
<p>Management Areas and Prescriptions – Forest-wide Standards and Guidelines</p> <p>Develop the most cost efficient operations for fire management activities depending on the resources, property, and lives to be protected.</p> <p>Keep the level of prevention and pre-suppression activities commensurate with the increasing risks and hazards.</p> <p>Conduct fire suppression activities in a way to protect watershed and visual resource values.</p> <p>Appropriate fire suppression responses will protect life and property. [p. 45]</p>	<p>Management Areas and Prescriptions – Forest-wide Standards and Guidelines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Firefighter and public safety shall be the first priority in all fire management activities. • All human-caused fires shall be suppressed using appropriate suppression response strategies. • Wildland fire suppression responses shall minimize costs of suppression, resource impacts, and risks to life and property. • The appropriate management response for each natural ignition will vary across the Forest, but will include the full spectrum of options, from aggressive initial attack to management to achieve resource objectives. • For all management areas, management of lightning-caused fires should be considered to restore fire’s natural role in maintaining a healthy, diverse, and resilient ecosystem resistant to natural disturbances. • Wildland fire use shall follow direction specific to the Forest’s Fire Management Plan. Use the established protocols identified in the Fire Management Plan for minimizing resource impacts.

Chapter 4 of the current LRMP also contains fire and fuels management direction for each Management Area in the Forest. (See the LRMP for Management Area definitions.) Under the proposed action, the following Management Area-specific direction for fire management would be deleted. The Forest-wide standards and guidelines for fire management, as shown in the right-hand column of the previous table, would apply to all Management Areas.

Current LRMP language that would be deleted by the proposed action is as follows:

Management Area 1: *The management area is divided into fire suppression zones 1 and 2 based on resource protection and cost objectives. See Chapter 5 and map for definition and location of zones. [p. 49]*

Management Area 2: *The management area is in fire suppression zone 1 based on resource objectives. See Section 5 for definition of zones. [p. 53]*

Management Area 2A: *Allow fire to assume its natural role in wilderness areas. [p. 54-5] The management area is within fire suppression zone 1. (See Glossary “Fire Zone 1”). [p. 54-5]*

Management Area 2B: *Wet Canyon is within fire suppression zone 1 (i.e., immediate suppression action to protect high value resources). [p. 54-7]*

Management Area 3: *The management area is divided into fire suppression zones 1 and 2 based on resource protection and cost objectives. See Section 5 for definition of zones. [p. 58]*

Management Areas 3A and 3B: *The management area is in fire suppression zone one based on objectives for resource protection. See Section 5 for a definition of zones. [p. 61]*

Management Area 4: *The management area is divided into fire suppression zones 1 and 2 based on resource protection and cost objectives. See Section 5 for definition of zones. [p. 65]*

Management Area 7, Prescription A: *The management area is divided into fire suppression zones 1 and 2 based on resource protection and cost objectives. See Section 5 for definition of zones. [p. 70]*

Management Area 7, Prescription B: *The management area is divided into fire suppression zones 1 and 2 based on resource protection and cost objectives. See Section 5 for definition of zones. [p. 74]*

Reduce slash from fuelwood harvest and right-of-way clearing to a level that is compatible with Forest Service ability to protect the remaining resources and still provide needed wildlife habitat. [p. 74]

Management Area 8: *The management area is divided into fire suppression zones 1 and 2 based on objectives for resource protection and cost of suppression. See Section 5 for definition of zones. [p. 76]*

Management Area 8A: *The management area is in fire suppression zones 1 and 2 based on objectives for resource protection. See Section 5 for definition of zones. [p. 78]*

Management Area 9: *Fire management emphasis will be to permit lightning caused fires to play, as nearly as possible, their natural ecological role within wilderness. [p. 79]*

Due to external constraints, fire management options to have lightning fires play a natural role in wilderness resource management may be accomplished by both natural and management ignitions. [p. 82]

The management area is divided into fire suppression zones 1 and 2 based on objectives for resource protection and cost of suppression. See Section 5 for definitions of zones. [p. 82]

Conduct suppression in a manner compatible with overall wilderness management objectives. Preference will be given to the method that will cause the least:

- a) Alteration of wilderness landscape.*
- b) Disturbance of the land surface.*
- c) Disturbance to visitor solitude.*
- d) Reduction of visibility during periods of visitor use.*
- e) Adverse effect on other air quality related values. [p. 82]*

Management Area 14: *The South Fork Area is within fire suppression zone 1 and the Guadalupe Canyon Area is within fire suppression zone 2. See Section 5 for definition of zones. [p. 85]*

Management Area 15: *The Rock Corral Watershed is in Fire Suppression Zone 2. [p. 86-1]*

All other language in Chapter 4 not mentioned in this scoping report would remain unchanged under the proposed action.

Proposed Changes in Chapter 5, “Summary of Fire Management Activities”

All of Chapter 5, pages 87-88 of the current LRMP, would be removed by the proposed action. The chapter is included here, in italics, for reference only. There would be no replacement text:

The Forest has been divided into two fire suppression zones. These zones are based on resource management objectives with consideration of property and resource values to be protected. The following fire suppression zones are shown on the Fire Management Map.

Once the final alternative is selected and the final plan is implemented, any fire suppression zone boundaries not coinciding with management area boundaries will be used to further subdivide the management areas as necessary to clearly incorporate the zones into management areas.

Each wildfire ignition requires an appropriate suppression response. This response will be one that most efficiently meets fire management direction under current and expected burning conditions. The response may range from a strategy of prompt control to one of containment or confinement. Life and property will be protected in all suppression responses.

Fire Management Zone 1:

The appropriate suppression response in this zone will be predicated upon preventing fires from reaching or damaging high value resources and improvements. Containment and control will be used to accomplish this objective during very high and extreme fire danger.

<i>Fire Danger Class</i>	<i>Appropriate Response</i>
<i>(1) Low</i>	<i>Confinement, Containment or Control</i>
<i>(2) Medium</i>	<i>Confinement, Containment or Control</i>
<i>(3) High</i>	<i>Confinement, Containment or Control</i>
<i>(4) Very High</i>	<i>Containment, Control</i>
<i>(5) Extreme</i>	<i>Containment, Control</i>

Control for Danger Classes Very High and Extreme will be accomplished through maximum use of people and equipment needed to control and suppress any wildfire within as short a time as possible, by the most direct method possible.

Fire Management Zone 2:

The appropriate suppression response in this zone will be predicated upon responses that will suppress wildfires at the least cost with acceptable damage to improvements, and maintenance of sufficient forage to sustain livestock grazing operations and ground cover to keep watersheds in satisfactory condition. Confinement, containment, and control will be used to meet these objectives.

<i>Fire Danger Class</i>	<i>Appropriate Response</i>
<i>(1) Low</i>	<i>Confine</i>
<i>(2) Medium</i>	<i>Confine</i>
<i>(3) High</i>	<i>Confine</i>
<i>(4) Very High</i>	<i>Confine, Contain, Control</i>
<i>(5) Extreme</i>	<i>Confine, Contain, Control</i>

The appropriate response will be accomplished through minimum use of people and equipment.

For each fire, the responsible line officer shall evaluate and document the suppression response prior to each subsequent burning period. If the response is no longer consistent with fire management direction, or is anticipated to become inappropriate, the fire shall be considered an “escaped fire.”

Definitions:

Confine: To limit fire spread within a predetermined area principally by use of natural or pre-constructed barriers or environmental conditions. Suppression actions may be minimal and limited to surveillance under appropriate conditions.

Contain: To surround a fire, and any spot fires therefrom, with control line as needed, which can reasonably be expected to check the fire’s spread under prevailing and predicted conditions.

Control: To complete the control line around a fire, any spot fires therefrom, and any interior islands to be saved, burn out any unburned area adjacent to the fire side of the control line and cool down all hot spots that are immediate threats to the control line, until the line can reasonably be expected to hold under foreseeable conditions.

Escaped Fire: A fire which has exceeded, or is anticipated to exceed, pre-planned initial action capabilities or the fire management direction. [pp. 87-88]

Decision Framework

The Supervisor of the Coronado National Forest is the Deciding Official with regard to implementation of this proposed action. Prior to rendering a decision, the Forest Supervisor will review the proposed action, the alternatives, and potential environmental consequences presented in the environmental assessment. Based on this review, the Forest Supervisor will decide whether to implement the proposed action (amend the LRMP as proposed), select an alternative amendment or other action, or take no action.

Public Involvement

The Forest Service is distributing this scoping report to inform the public of this proposed action and to solicit comments on its scope. To receive full consideration during the NEPA review process, your comments must be received within a 30-day comment period that begins upon publication of a legal Notice of Intent to conduct a NEPA review of the proposed action. Publication of the legal Notice of Intent is scheduled for January 26, 2004, in the *Arizona Daily Star*, Tucson, Pima County, Arizona; and in the following newspapers during the week of January 25, 2004:

The Daily Dispatch, Douglas, Cochise County, Arizona
Nogales International, Nogales, Santa Cruz County, Arizona
Sierra Vista Herald, Sierra Vista, Cochise County, Arizona
Eastern Arizona Courier, Safford, Graham County, Arizona

The Forest Service has established an Internet site for public review of the proposed amendment: www.fs.fed.us/r3/coronado/wfa. This scoping report is available on the website for public review and comment. Also on the website are the 1986 Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) and links to the 2001 Federal Fire Policy and to other documents related to the proposed amendment. Additional information and documents related to this proposal will be posted on the website as they become available.

Following the comment period on the proposed amendment, the Forest Service will prepare an environmental assessment to analyze and document the effects of implementing the proposed action and a range of alternatives to the proposed action, including the no action alternative. Issues raised during the scoping process may be used to develop other alternatives. The target date for completion of a draft environmental assessment is late spring of 2004.

Written comments can be mailed to Sherry Tune, Team Leader, Coronado National Forest, 300 West Congress St., Tucson, Arizona 85701. Electronic mail comments may be sent to comments-southwestern-coronado@fs.fed.us. Please reference "WFA" in the Subject line for electronic mail comments.

Questions and oral comments may be directed to Sherry Tune at (520) 670-4552.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including the names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27 (d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that, under FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and, if denied, the Agency will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address within five days.