

**Record of Decision
USDA Forest Service**

**Tonto National Forest
Land and Resource Management Plan
Final Environmental Impact Statement**

Gila, Yavapai, Pinal, and Maricopa Counties, Arizona

I. INTRODUCTION

This Record of Decision documents my decision approving a land and resource management plan for the Tonto National Forest for the next 10 to 15 years. The Plan will normally be revised every 10 years but must be reviewed at least every 15 years.

This Record of Decision also describes alternatives considered and provides rationale for the selected alternative. It also identifies the environmentally preferred alternative and the most economically efficient alternative. Mitigation and monitoring measures, implementation, and appeal rights are also described.

The Environmental Impact Statement discloses alternatives for land and resource management on the Tonto National Forest. The Environmental Impact Statement also describes the environment that will be affected and the potential environmental consequences of implementing the selected plan and the alternative plans.

II. DECISION

I have decided to approve implementation of Alternative 10 to guide the management of the Tonto National Forest for the next 10 to 15 years.

Under Alternative 10, the Tonto will be managed to increase grazing capacity above present levels along with reductions in permitted livestock use, as necessary to achieve proper management of the forage resource; to improve forest-wide watershed conditions; to provide a high quality wilderness recreation experience; to improve the developed recreation experience through construction of new developments, rehabilitation of existing sites, and capacity controls; to enhance dispersed recreation experience with better transportation access (roads and trails) and controlled off-road vehicle use; to promote conservation of State and Federal Threatened and Endangered species; to improve fish and wildlife habitats by balancing successional stages of vegetation through commercial timber sales, fuelwood harvest, prescribed burning, coordination with other resource activities, and direct habitat improvement; and to provide a balance between priced and nonpriced benefits within anticipated budget limitations.

This is a realistic approach to management of the Tonto National Forest since it ranks number one among the National Forests in the Nation for recreation (including wildlife and fish user days), and Phoenix is among the fastest growing cities in the Nation. Also, the majority of the public comments received on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement emphasized these resource areas. Revisions to Alternative 10 have been made based upon comments received. Alternative 10 provides for a rapid resolution (10-20 years) of the overgrazing problem, and corresponding improvement in watershed condition and riparian habitat.

The plan provides standards and guidelines for management of the land and resources on the forest, but does not address various administrative activities to carry on day-to-day internal operations. For example, personnel matters, fleet equipment, or internal organization changes are not covered in the plan.

III. OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

Other alternatives considered in detail were:

Alternative 4 - No Action Alternative

Alternative 4 projects current resource management. This is the No Action Alternative required by the National Environmental Policy Act regulations.

Alternative 3

Alternative 3 strives to meet Resource Planning Act objectives assigned by the Regional Guide.

Alternative 1

Alternative 1 emphasizes water yield in the Ponderosa pine and chaparral vegetative types.

Alternative 2

Alternative 2 emphasizes optimum watershed condition.

Alternative 6

Alternative 6 manages the forest at a low investment/low intensity level.

Alternative 7

Alternative 7 emphasizes developed and dispersed recreation management forest-wide.

Alternative 8

Alternative 8 emphasizes opportunity for hunting, fishing, and non-consumptive wildlife use and wildlife habitat management.

Alternative 9

Alternative 9 emphasizes the production of forage, wood products, and developed recreation.

Additional descriptions of alternatives considered in detail are found in the Environmental Impact Statement, Chapter 2.

Alternatives Considered, But Eliminated From Detailed Study

A number of alternatives were considered, but eliminated from detailed study in the Environmental Impact Statement. These alternatives were designed to estimate naturally occurring outputs and unavoidable costs of maintaining the forest as part of the National Forest System; and to maximize single resource outputs while maximizing present net value for timber, range permitted use, recreation, wildlife, water yield, and watershed condition.

Benchmark levels for wildlife, recreation, water yield, and watershed condition were considered in further detail as Forest Alternatives 8, 7, 1, and 2 respectively.

The reasons for eliminating alternatives from detailed study are discussed in Chapter 2 of the Environmental Impact Statement.

IV. REASONS FOR DECISION

My decision is based on evaluation of the alternatives to determine which alternative maximizes net public benefits. Net public benefits are an expression of the overall long-term value to the Nation of all benefits less all costs whether they can be quantitatively valued or not. Net public benefits are measured by both quantitative and qualitative criteria rather than a single measure or index.

Net public benefits were determined by evaluating how well each alternative responded to issues, by weighing environmental consequences disclosed in the Environmental Impact Statement, by assessing budget requirements, and by considering public comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement and Proposed Plan.

Alternative 10 is selected because it provides the highest level of issue resolution and environmental protection within a realistic budget level and therefore maximizes net public benefits.

Issue Resolution

Although all of the alternatives provide multiple use products and benefits while protecting or enhancing environmental quality, issues are treated differently in each alternative and each alternative resulted in varying degrees of issue resolution, quantifiable economic values, and net benefits.

Alternative 10 is equal or superior to all other alternatives in improvement of watershed condition; level of law enforcement; meeting projected dispersed recreation demand; rate of riparian improvement; providing high quality wilderness recreation in all wilderness; management of the transportation system; management of off-road vehicle use to minimize soil loss, maximize water quality and minimize resource conflicts, while providing ample opportunity for ORV use of trails and primitive roads; providing for mineral exploration and development in accordance with laws and regulations; and harvesting timber to provide the diversity of tree sizes and age classes needed for wildlife, sustained in stream flows, and positive visual attributes.

While not superior to other alternatives, alternative 10 is also highly responsive to water yield, fuelwood production, wildlife and fish recreation, and grazing issues. When compared to the alternative producing the highest level of issue resolution, alternative 10 produces 94 percent of the water yield produced in Alternative 1; 74 percent of the fuelwood produced in Alternative 3; and 89 percent of the wildlife and fish recreation produced in Alternative 8.

Alternative 10 achieves 92 percent of the forest's potential grazing use and resolves the overgrazing problem in 10-20 years. Only Alternative 2 resolves the overgrazing problem faster than Alternative 10. However, Alternative 2 only achieves 65 percent of the forest's grazing potential. Implementation of Alternative 2 would require a 39 percent reduction in grazing use. Major reductions over a short time period would cause a hardship for permittees dependent on National Forest permits for their forage. Studies by the Economic Research Service have shown that Tonto National Forest grazing permittees are dependent on Tonto permits for about 75 percent of their forage and on other National Forests for an additional 24 percent for a total dependency on National Forest forage of about 99 percent.

Also, large scale permit reductions in a short time period are not practical from an administrative standpoint. The cost and staffing required to develop sufficient detailed data to support contested adjustment actions exceeds reasonably expected funding. In addition, it is expected that some contested adjustments could be overturned through legal and political procedures and thereby slow progress presently being made on resolving the problem.

Although Alternative 2 balances permitted grazing capacity with use in 10 years, the rate of watershed condition improvement and riparian recovery does not exceed Alternative 10 because major stocking

adjustments in Alternative 10 also occur in the first 10 years and Alternative 10 maintains a much higher level of control of livestock movements. In other words, season long grazing is replaced with grazing systems which allow range rest and recovery. Alternative 2 takes approximately 20 years longer than Alternative 10 to achieve satisfactory watershed conditions forest wide.

The combination of reduction in permitted use along with capacity enhancement and improved management practices in Alternative 10 is the most reasonable approach to solving the overgrazing problem. Therefore, Alternative 10 is preferred.

Alternatives 3, 7, and 8 are also highly responsive to most issues. However, they produce 17 to 26 percent less permitted grazing use than Alternative 10, and balance capacity with use in 40-60 years, which was a primary concern expressed in public comment received on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement. All three alternatives provide a lower quality wilderness experience, and take approximately 20 years longer than Alternative 10 to achieve satisfactory watershed conditions forest wide. Alternatives 3 and 7 maintain a slower rate of riparian recovery, which was also a primary concern expressed in public comments received on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement. Alternatives 3 and 7 provide 12 and 57 percent higher outputs respectively in developed recreation visitor days. However, average annual budgets in the first period exceed realistic funding levels by \$3.6 million and \$14.9 million. Alternative 8 exceeds realistic funding levels by \$1.2 million annually. Most of this additional funding is tied to capital investments for recreational facilities and slightly higher operation and maintenance costs.

Alternative 10 requires an annual budget of \$8.7 million. With National priorities for reductions in government spending, the annual budget for Alternative 10 represents the upper limit for a budget that could realistically be expected.

Economic Efficiency

Alternative 10 ranks fifth in present net value (PNV) which is the primary economic criteria for comparing the alternatives. Alternatives having higher present net value were Alternatives 3, 1, 8, and 7 in descending order.

Alternative 3 has a higher PNV than Alternative 10 because it produces higher levels of timber harvest, developed recreation, and wildlife recreation.

Alternative 3 produces 18 million board feet of timber per year compared to 7.9 million board feet per year in Alternative 10. The average annual volume sold since 1974 has been 9.2 million board feet. The reduction in timber harvest in Alternative 10 is due to the limitation to maintain a realistic budget level and public sentiment opposing increased harvest levels.

Alternative 10 produces less developed recreation than Alternative 3 because the budget limitation in Alternative 10 prevents the major capital investments needed to meet developed recreation

demand. Less wildlife recreation is produced in Alternative 10 because of fewer acres of habitat improvement, particularly in the chaparral vegetative type.

Another reason Alternative 10 has a lower PNV than Alternative 3 is because Alternative 10 produces a higher quality wilderness experience, improved water quality, improved watershed conditions, improved management of the transportation system, and improved law enforcement which are nonpriced benefits that increase the cost of Alternative 10 and make it more attractive than Alternative 3 and the other alternatives with higher PNV.

Alternative 1 has a higher PNV than Alternative 10 because it produces higher levels of dispersed recreation managed at full service level increased water yield, and wildlife recreation. Alternative 1 yields more water because it is specifically designed to increase water yield. However, Alternative 10 is more attractive because it is superior to Alternative 1 in all issue areas except water yield and produces more nonpriced benefits.

Alternative 8 has a higher PNV than Alternative 10 primarily because it produces more dispersed recreation managed at full service level, wildlife recreation, and developed recreation opportunity. However, Alternative 10 is more attractive because it has a more realistic budget level, is superior in all issue areas except wildlife recreation, and produces more nonpriced benefits.

Alternative 7 has a PNV slightly higher than Alternative 10 because of increased developed recreation. While Alternative 7 fully meets projected demand for developed recreation, it requires a budget about three times larger than Alternative 10 which is unrealistic. Alternative 10 is also superior in responding to issues and production of nonpriced benefits. Therefore, Alternative 10 is preferred.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

Alternative 10 is superior or equal to all other alternatives in terms of reduction in soil loss and achieving long term acres in satisfactory watershed condition. Alternative 10 also provides direct environmental benefits and/or mitigation measures in the areas of visual quality, soil and watershed protection, cultural resources, wildlife habitat, riparian recovery, vegetative diversity, water quality, and air quality. None of the other alternatives provide additional increments of environmental protection. Formal consultation, as required by the Endangered Species Act of 1973, with the Fish and Wildlife Service resulted in a favorable biological opinion for threatened and endangered species that may be affected by the proposed action.

Alternative 10 is the environmentally preferable alternative.

IX. APPEAL RIGHTS

This decision is subject to administrative review in accordance with the provisions of 36 CFR 211.18. Notice of appeal must be made in writing and submitted to Sotero Muniz, Regional Forester, Southwestern Region, USDA Forest Service, 517 Gold Avenue SW., Albuquerque, New Mexico 87102, within 45 days from the date of this decision. A statement of reasons to support the appeal and any request for oral presentation must be filed within the 45 day period for filing a notice of appeal.

Sotero Muniz

SOTERO MUNIZ
Regional Forester

_____ Date