



File Code: 1950

Date: February 24, 2016

Dear Interested Party:

The Mogollon Rim Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest is initiating the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) planning process for the proposed Cragin Watershed Protection Project (CWPP). We are informing you about this proposed action and inviting your comments on it because of your past interest in forest management projects on the Coconino National Forest, because you own property or have a special use authorization within or adjacent to the project area. The purpose of this scoping period is to allow the public early and meaningful participation on the proposed action prior to a decision being made by the Responsible Official.

Project Proposal

The Mogollon Rim Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest is preparing an Environmental Assessment (EA) under the authority of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) of 2003 as amended, Title I, Hazardous Fuel Reduction on Federal Land. The EA will document the environmental effects of the proposed action and any alternatives considered to meet the stated purpose and need. The analysis will evaluate and disclose the effects of vegetation treatments using mechanical and hand thinning and prescribed burning in the project area to reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire¹ to the wildland urban interface (WUI), critical developments, infrastructure and drinking water watersheds in and adjacent to the project area. Mechanical and hand vegetation treatments are proposed over about 39,000 acres and prescribed burning treatments are proposed over about 64,000 acres within the project area. Examples of uncharacteristic wildfires on the Coconino National Forest include the Schultz Fire in 2010, which encompassed thousands of acres and burned at high severity over 39% of the fire area. This fire caused large stands of trees to be killed and resulted in soils becoming hydrophobic (a condition where soils repel water). These conditions resulted in post-fire erosion and flooding in sub-watersheds within and downstream of the burned area.

Location

The CWPP area encompasses about 64,433 acres and is located about 55 miles south of Flagstaff on the Mogollon Rim Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest in Coconino County Arizona (Figures 1 and 2). The project legal location is listed on Figure 1. The CWPP area mainly includes the three sub-watersheds that drain into the C. C. Cragin Reservoir (formerly Blue Ridge Reservoir): East Clear Creek-Blue Ridge Reservoir, Bear Canyon and Miller Canyon. Together these sub-watersheds comprise about 45,485 acres or 71 percent of the project area. Additional areas (18,948 acres) surrounding the three sub-watersheds are included in the project area because the forest has a high crown fire hazard and includes various WUI and values at risk such as Forest Service Administrative sites, private lands, recreation sites and other critical infrastructure.

¹ Uncharacteristic wildfire means fire severity outside the historic fire regime, which was a low severity/high frequency fire regime.



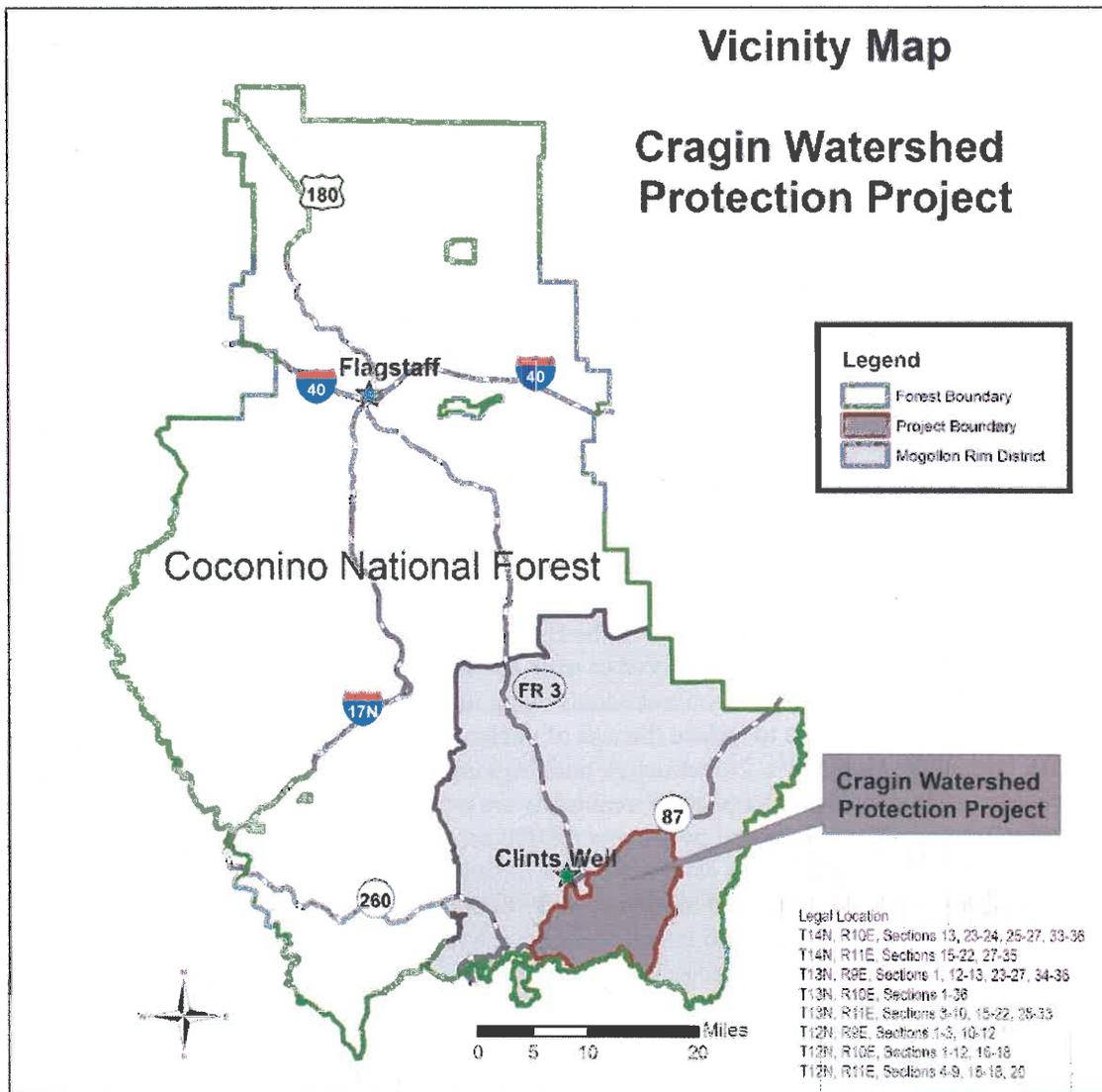


Figure 1. Vicinity Map, CWPP

Background

The purpose of the CWPP is to reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire and subsequent flooding and sedimentation within and adjacent to the three sub-watersheds that drain to C.C. Cragin reservoir through a combination of mechanical thinning and prescribed fire. Under the 2004 Arizona Water Settlements Act (Act) (Public Law 108-451, 43 USC 1501), title to the Blue Ridge dam, reservoir, and associated water diversion infrastructure was transferred from the Salt River Project Agricultural Improvement and Power District (Salt River Project or SRP) to the U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, for the exclusive use and benefit of the Salt River Federal Reclamation Project. In addition, the reservoir and dam were re-named the C.C. Cragin Project and SRP and the Salt River Valley Water Users' Association were assigned responsibility for the care, operation, and maintenance of the reservoir, dam, and associated water diversion infrastructure. The Act allows use of up to 3,500 acre-feet/year of water for municipal

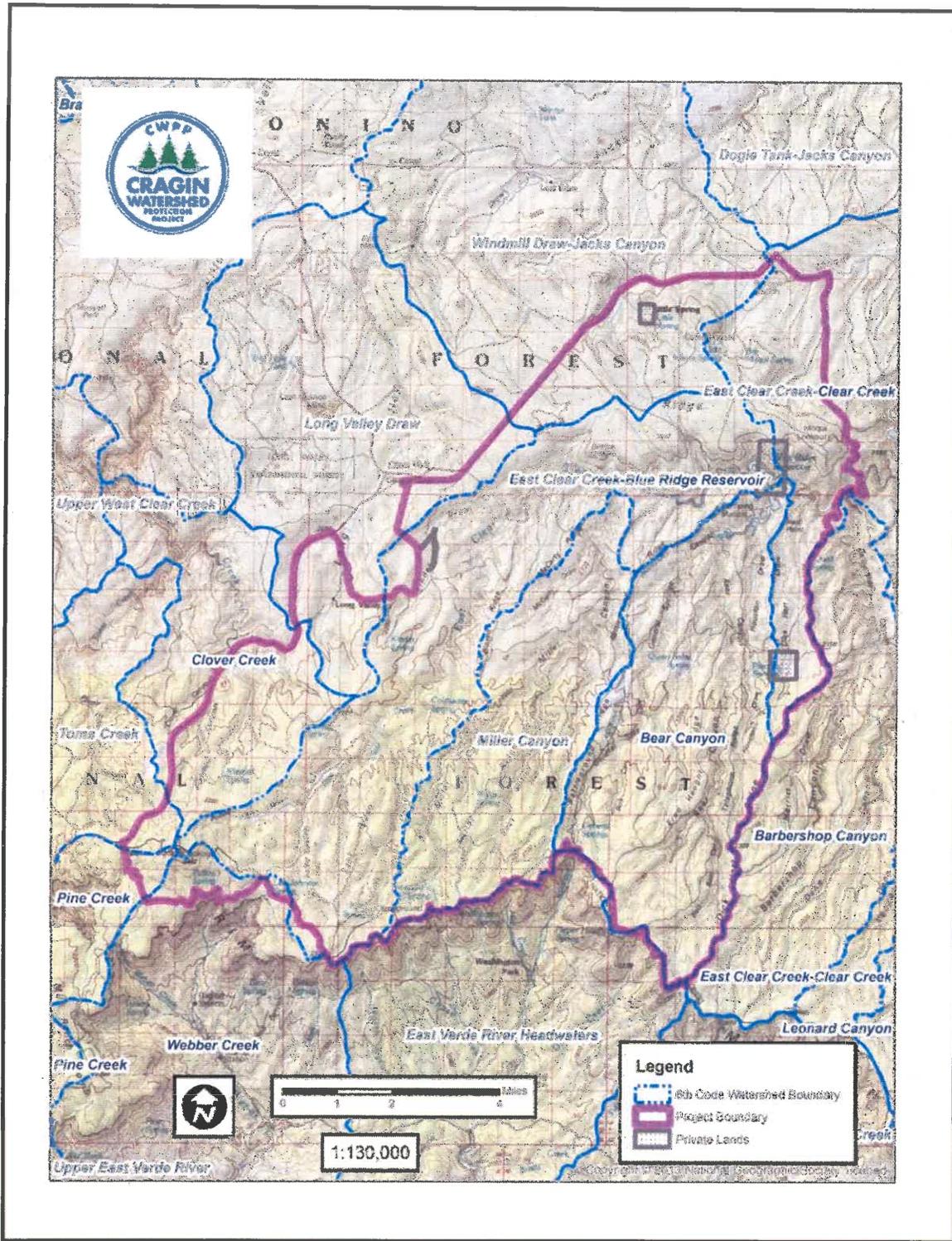


Figure 2. CWPP Project Location and Boundary Map

and domestic uses in Northern Gila County, Arizona. Currently, the Town of Payson relies exclusively on groundwater to meet its demand for potable water. In 2011, the Land Withdrawal and Reservation for the Cragin Project was enacted which clarified the jurisdiction of the Secretary of Interior with respect to the C.C. Cragin Dam and Reservoir, and administrative

jurisdiction of the Secretary of Agriculture over various land management activities on the covered land (Public Law 112-45). Water from the reservoir (one of seven reservoirs within SRP's reservoir system) is used by SRP and is currently a part of water rights resolution agreements between SRP and various communities in Northern Gila County and as a potential source of water supply for the Tonto Apache Indian Community.

Through collaborative efforts that include the Forest Service, Salt River Project (SRP), Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) and the Town of Payson, a pipeline and water treatment facility are being constructed by the Town of Payson that will allow Payson to use water from the reservoir. The Town will have access up to 3,000 acre feet – approximately 1 billion gallons – of water for its drinking water supply per year, beginning in 2018. When the pipeline is fully operational, surface water from C.C. Cragin reservoir will become the primary source of potable water for the Town Payson allowing this municipality to meet its projected build-out demand for water resources. The build out of the Payson C. C. Cragin project includes modernization of C. C. Cragin Reservoir pumping and transmission facilities and construction by the Town of Payson of new raw water and finished water pipelines, a hydroelectric facility and a water treatment plant. More information on the Town of Payson, C. C. Cragin Project and the pipeline and water treatment facility can be found at this website:

<http://www.paysonaz.gov/Departments/water/Cragin.html> .

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of the Cragin Watershed Protection Project is to:

- Reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire to the WUI and drinking water watersheds in and adjacent to the project area.
- Reduce the risk of post-fire erosion and/or flooding that could impact reservoir operations and storage which could affect the water supply for the Town of Payson, the community of Mesa del Caballo, the Salt River Project, Native American Indian tribes and other northern Gila County water users.
- Begin to initiate the re-establishment of a fire-adapted, resilient, diverse and sustainable forest ecosystem

The following needs would be met as part of achieving the purpose of the project:

- There is a need to reduce active and passive crown fire in the drinking water watersheds and in the WUI and to increase the ability of fire suppression crews to control a wildfire within the project area.
- There is a need to reduce the crown fire potential in and adjacent to Mexican spotted owl PACs.
- There is a need reduce the buildup of natural fuels to reduce the threat of uncharacteristically severe stand-replacing fire and post-fire sedimentation and flooding which would move the forest towards a fire adapted ecosystem.
- There is a need to shift the vegetation condition class from high and moderate departure to dominantly low and moderate departure from historical conditions.
- There is a need to remove trees that obscure the landscape from Baker Butte Lookout Tower that optimally has a 360 degree view of the watersheds on the Coconino and Tonto National Forests. There is a need to reduce the crown fire potential and fuels buildup around the tower that comprises a safety risk to safe escape from the tower by the fire lookout employee.
- There is a need to reduce fuels and dense thickets of small young trees adjacent to State Highway 87 to reduce crown fire potential and to maintain safe travel ways.

- There is a need to reduce fuels, remove hazard trees² and dense thickets of small young trees along forest roads to reduce crown fire potential, maintain safe travel ways and improve sight distances along roads.
- There is a need to treat ladder fuels on steep slopes next to selected private lands and around two campgrounds to prepare the area for prescribed burning.
- There is a need to amend the Forest Plan to: allow cutting of a limited amount of old and large trees to create and maintain an adequate viewshed for fire-start detection over the long term at Baker Butte Tower; to better align treatments in CWPP Mexican spotted owl habitats with the revised Mexican Spotted Owl Recovery Plan (USDI FWS 2012) and to bring the project into alignment with the best available science that provides desired conditions for restoring fire-adapted ponderosa pine in the Southwest.

PROPOSED ACTION

In order to meet the needs described above, the proposed action consists of a variety of vegetation treatments, fuels reduction, and prescribed burning actions over the next 20 years. Mechanical and hand vegetation treatments are proposed over about 38,881 acres and prescribed burning actions are proposed over about 63,876 acres within the project area (Tables 1 and 2). The proposed action would begin to change surface fuels, stand density, tree basal area and fire type to move towards desired conditions. The desired forest structure may not be fully met by the initial silvicultural treatment. The locations of vegetation treatments and prescribed burning treatments are shown in Figures 3 and 4. The acres of treatments are estimates used for analysis and will be refined based on additional fieldwork. Treatment units may vary after unit layout and after project design features have been applied.

Table 1. Proposed Cragin Watershed Protection Project Vegetation Treatments

Vegetation Treatment	Estimated Treatment Acres
Baker Butte Treatment	27
Hand Thinning, Burn Preparation Treatment	77
Highway 87 Right-of-Way Treatment	200
Mexican Spotted Owl Protected Activity Center Thinning	2,986
Mexican Spotted Owl Recovery Habitat, Uneven-aged Management	19,644
Mexican Spotted Owl Recovery Habitat, Uneven-aged Management – Roadside Treatment	7,093
Northern Goshawk Habitat Outside of Post-Fledging Areas – Uneven-aged Management	6,137
Northern Goshawk Post-Fledging Area Maintenance	211
Northern Goshawk Habitat Outside of Post-Fledging Areas – Thin from Below	2,081
Mexican Spotted Owl Recovery Habitat – Thin from Below	394
Total All Vegetation Treatments	38,850 (60%)
Total No Vegetation Treatment (no thinning)	25,583 (40%)
Total Project Acres	64,433

² A hazard tree refers to any potential tree failure due to a structural defect that may result in property damage or personal injury. USDA Forest Service. 1981. Tree Hazards: Recognition and Reduction in Recreation Sites. Forest Pest Management. Denver, CO. Accessed online at: <http://na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/hazardtrees/treehazards/thazards.pdf> (5/24/11)

Table 2. Proposed Cragin Watershed Protection Project Prescribed Burning Treatments

Prescribed Burning Treatment	Estimated Acres
Hand Pile Burn, Maintenance Burn	157 (<1%)
Activity Fuels Treatment, Broadcast Burn, Maintenance Burn	38,692 (60%)
Broadcast Burn, Maintenance Burn,	24,938 (39%)
Total Prescribed Burning Treatments	63,787 (99%)
No Treatment (Private Lands and LEARN Study)	646 (1%)
Total	64,433

Existing roads would be used to the extent possible for hauling harvested trees and biomass. Forest Roads (FR) 123, 141, 141H, 147, 218, 300, 308, 612, 751 and State Highway 87 would be used as the main haul routes. Minor road maintenance activities on several of these roads would be necessary prior to implementation, including, but not limited to reconditioning and resurfacing. Based on an analysis of potential treatment areas, it is estimated that 121 miles of existing roads that are closed to the public and managed for administrative use would need to be used. Twenty (20) miles of decommissioned roads would need to be re-opened and used as existing temporary roads, and an estimated 12 miles of newly constructed temporary roads would be necessary to transport harvested material.

Design features are part of the proposed action and would be incorporated into the project to protect soil, water, scenery values, wildlife and aquatic species and habitat, facilities, infrastructure and rare plants. Mitigation measures and best management practices would be implemented during the project to minimize watershed impacts, prevent the introduction and spread of invasive plants, to reduce impacts to wildlife, to protect heritage and cave and karst resources and to protect public health and safety.

The Coconino National Forest is currently operating under the 1987 Coconino Land Management Plan, as amended; the Forest is in the process of revising the Forest Plan, with the Record of Decision (ROD) for the revised plan anticipated for release in 2017. Two project specific Forest Plan amendments are required if this decision is signed prior to implementation of the revised Forest Plan. This project is proposing to amend the Forest Plan under the 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219.13); the two amendments below are not significant per 36 CFR 219.13(b) (3).

The purpose of amendment 1 is to bring the alternative in alignment with the revised Mexican Spotted Owl Recovery Plan (USDI FWS 2012) to the extent possible, while allowing site-specific activities that do not follow the Recovery Plan recommendations, and defer monitoring to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biological opinion that is specific to this project. Amendment 2 clarifies existing direction related to managing canopy cover and interspace in the forest plan. The purpose of amendment 2 is to bring the project into alignment with the best available science that provides desired conditions for restoring fire-adapted ponderosa pine in the Southwest.

Cooperating Agencies

The CEQ regulations define “Cooperating agency” as any Federal, State or local agency and Federally recognized Indian Tribe which has jurisdiction by law or has special expertise with respect to any environmental impact involved in a proposal or major Federal action affecting the quality of the human environment (40 CFR 1508.5). Cooperating agencies for the CWPP include the Bureau of Reclamation, Phoenix Area Office, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Arizona Ecological Services, Salt River Project, the Town of Payson and the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

More Information

More information about proposed treatments, design features, and Forest Plan amendments can be found on the Coconino National Forest project planning website

<http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=46075>. A project website also was developed to provide public information and useful links about the project, <http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/coconino/CWPP>.

How to Provide Comments

The purpose of this notification is to allow the public early and meaningful participation on the proposed actions prior to a decision being made. Written, facsimiles, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments on this action will be accepted.

Written or oral comments may be submitted via mail, fax, telephone, or in person (Monday through Friday, 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., excluding holidays) to: Polly Haessig, Project Manager, Mogollon Rim Ranger District, 8738 Ranger Road, Happy Jack, AZ 86024; TEL: 928-477-2255; FAX 928-527-8282. Comments may also be sent by e-mail to: FS-comments-southwestern-coconino-mogollon@fs.fed.us. The name and address of the person submitting electronic comments must be included.

Comments received in response to this scoping notice, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this project and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered but will not be eligible for objection per §218.5. Additionally, 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.

This project is subject to the objection process pursuant to 36 CFR part 218 subparts A and C (March 27, 2013), and is being authorized under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA). As such, those who provide specific written comments during the scoping or the comment period in accordance with §218.5 will be eligible to participate in the objection process. Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted, timely, specific written comments regarding the proposed project unless new information arises after designated opportunities (36 CFR 218.7).

Your comments will help us identify issues and possibly alternatives to analyze potential effects of the project to multiple forest resources. **To be the most helpful in the planning process, we are requesting that you provide your comments by March 25, 2016.** If you provide comments to this Proposed Action, you will notification of the Preliminary Environmental Assessment (EA) which is anticipated to be completed in the fall of 2016.

Multiple public meetings will be held throughout the planning process for the CWPP project. A general information sharing, discussion group and comment meeting is scheduled for March 2, from 6 pm to 8:30 pm at the Payson Unified School District Office Boardroom, 902 W. Main Street, Payson, Arizona. A second general information sharing, discussion group and comment meeting is scheduled for March 5, from 10 am to 12:30 pm at the Starlight Pines Community Center, 2740 Arapaho Drive, Happy Jack Arizona (Southeast corner of Starlight Drive and State Highway 87, milepost 305.5). Please visit the CWPP project website at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/coconino/CWPP> for more information and a calendar of upcoming meeting dates.

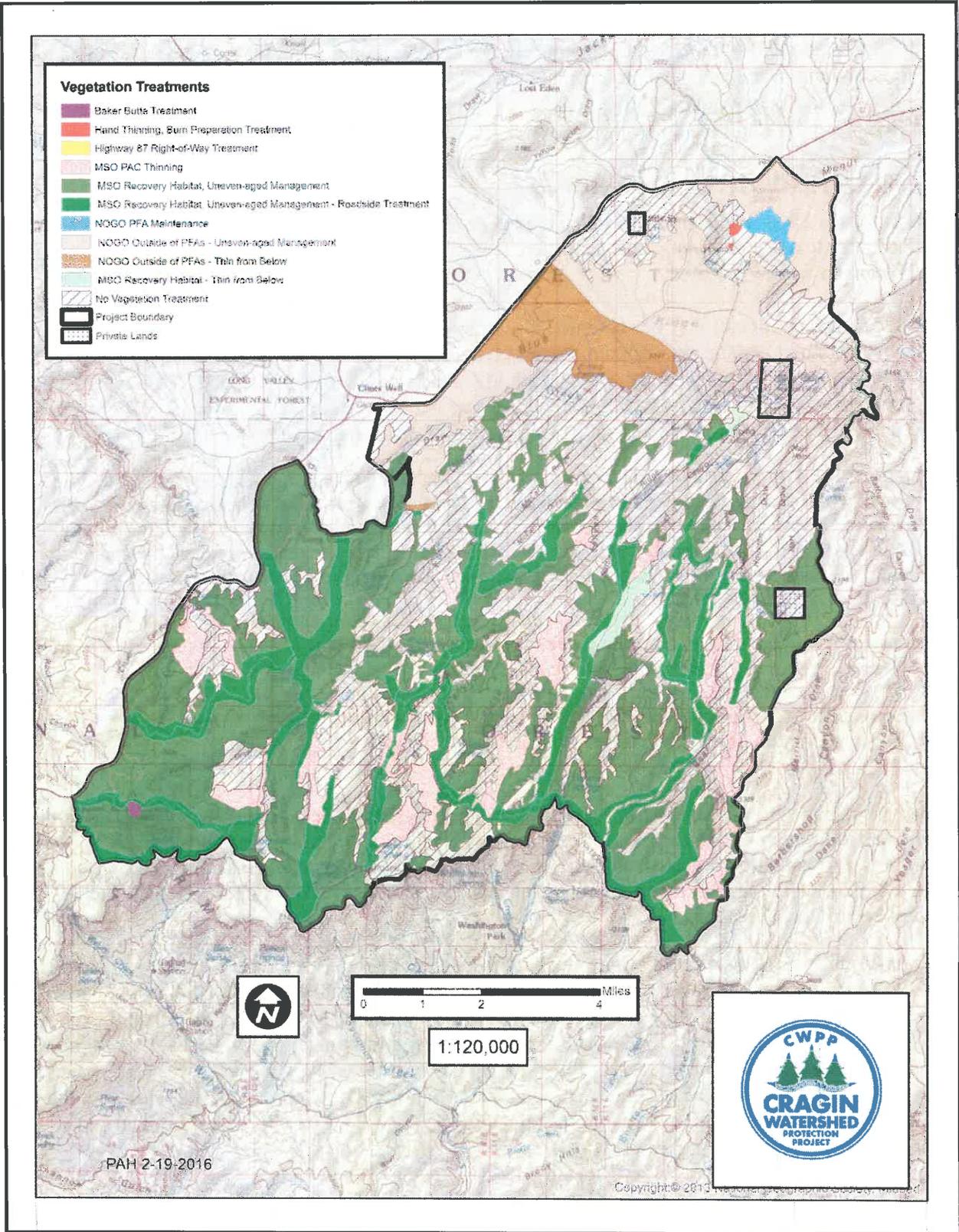


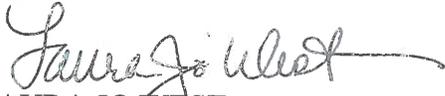
Figure 3. CWPP Proposed Action Vegetation Treatments



We appreciate your interest and continuing cooperation with our forest management programs. Should you have any questions, or need additional information about this project, please contact Polly Haessig, Cragin Watershed Protection Project Manager for at (928) 477-5007 or by e-mail at phaessig@fs.fed.us.

We welcome your comments during the scoping period. You are welcome to discuss the project with Linda Wadleigh, Mogollon Rim District Ranger at any time at the Blue Ridge Ranger Station in Happy Jack or at 928-477-5001.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Laura Jo West". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

LAURA JO WEST
Forest Supervisor

Enclosure