

**Gila National Forest (GNF)
Las Cruces Community Meeting
September 28, 2018
Meeting Summary – FINAL**

INTRODUCTION

Adam Mendonca, Forest Supervisor for the Gila National Forest (GNF), welcomed the group, shared his commitment to engaging with the public, and encouraged participants to share their thoughts and opinions. The goal of these community meetings is to consider the range of alternatives for specific topics related to management of the GNF and gather community feedback on whether there are perspectives that fall outside of the presented range. This input is critical as the GNF begins to analyze the alternatives.

OVERVIEW OF FOREST PLANNING PROCESS

Matt Schultz, Forest Planner on the GNF, provided an overview of the planning process.

- The GNF is in the process of revising its Forest Plan from 1986. This comprehensive document will guide the management of all resources on the GNF for the next 15 years or more. This revision is an opportunity for the knowledge and suggestions of community members to shape the GNF's future management. In the adaptive framework of planning, which consists of assessing, planning, and monitoring, the GNF is in the middle of the planning phase.
- Forest plans provide integrated direction for social, economic, and ecological sustainability and multiple uses. Forest plans provide overarching guidance, not site-specific direction. Desired conditions drive the plan and paint a picture of the preferred outcomes. Forest plans should be a strategic and practical framework for managing the land in a way that meets the needs of the people. Forest plans should also stay within US Forest Service (USFS) authority, fiscal capacity, and the inherent capability of the National Forest in question.
- The National Forest Management Act (1976) requires that forest plans be revised periodically. The GNF's 1986 Forest Plan has been amended at various times, but the GNF and surrounding areas have experienced significant changes since 1986. There are also elements of the 1986 Forest Plan that can be carried forward into the revised document.
- The first round of plan phase community meetings took place in June 2017; the GNF received helpful input on the desired conditions for forest management. Since June 2017, the GNF has hosted a range of technical meetings on topics such as sustainable infrastructure, monitoring, local economies, designated areas, multiple and traditional uses, and vegetation management tools. The GNF released a preliminary draft Forest Plan and is in the process of revising the document based on stakeholder feedback. The feedback received has helped the GNF understand the areas in which stakeholder perspectives align or diverge. While there is common ground on certain issues, there are a handful of issues that had multiple perspectives on a change in direction. These significant issues help to drive the development of alternatives.
- When the GNF planning staff received comments on specific topics (e.g., grazing, riparian area management, etc.), they began to sort the input into a range of perspectives. The goal

of this meeting is to ensure that all perspectives are represented in the range of alternatives. If there is an idea presented during one of these community meetings that falls outside of the current range, the GNF could expand the range before conducting its alternative analysis.

- The alternatives represent different ways of managing the Forest and are often grouped by theme on a variety of issues. It is important to note that any “no action” alternatives allow the GNF to continue using the 1986 Forest Plan. There will be an opportunity during the analysis to compare tradeoffs and impacts of the different alternatives. The Forest Supervisor will ultimately make an informed choice among the alternatives based on this analysis. While it is possible to use elements from any alternative on a particular issue in a given decision, the decision must remain within the range that was analyzed, or the analysis would have to be redone to include the element that fell outside of the range.
- It is fairly clear what will be included in the draft Forest Plan for topics for that have no expected change in management direction from the 1986 Forest Plan. The same is true of topics that will have a change from current management direction but for which public comment was consistent in suggesting one approach. The GNF needs community input to ensure that they have captured the range for topics for which there will be a change from the management direction and there was a range of preferences proposed in the public comment.

REAL-TIME POLLING OF PRELIMINARY RANGE OF ALTERNATIVES AND GROUP DISCUSSION

Matt Schultz provided an overview of the preliminary range of alternatives on several significant issues. Participants provided feedback about the range of perspectives presented for each of the significant issues via real-time polling devices and discussed the outcomes of the polling exercise.

VEGETATION TYPES ON WHICH TO FOCUS RESTORATION EFFORTS

- During the assessment community meetings, people provided feedback on the trends and conditions that they had observed on the GNF. Community members observed that there was increased woody vegetation (especially with infill in woodlands) and that forests were encroaching into grasslands and other gaps and openings. Several vegetation types have departed from desired conditions. There can be desired conditions for socioeconomic and ecological resources and for vegetation types (e.g., “what do we want our ponderosa pine forests to look like?”). The ability to achieve desired conditions through restoration may be constrained by funding, workforce, and industry capacity. Therefore, restoration efforts on different vegetation types must be prioritized.
- The GNF received a range of comments on this issue. On one end of the spectrum, the GNF received suggestions to focus on grasslands and open woodlands (to the exclusion of other vegetation types). On the other end of the spectrum, the GNF received suggestions to focus restoration efforts on forests and timberland (to the exclusion of other types). In the middle, the GNF received suggestions to focus restoration efforts on a mix of grasslands, woodlands, and forest/timberland types.

Clarifying Questions

Participants asked clarifying questions about the range of alternatives on vegetation types on which to focus restoration efforts. Questions are indicated in italics, followed by the response.

What are woodlands?

Woodlands are pinion-juniper communities and are typically found in mid-elevation areas.

How do you restore a grassland and does the GNF reseed those areas?

In this context, restoration often involves the removal of encroaching juniper. The GNF relies on the natural recruitment of seed types.

Are the restoration efforts funded by the GNF or are there grants that cover the cost?

The GNF can fund some efforts, but the GNF also receives funding for restoration in priority areas and works in partnership with other entities (e.g., the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish). The GNF has also received funding from New Mexico State Forestry to work in different vegetation types.

Does focusing on restoration imply that the current conditions are not good?

Yes, the forests are overgrown. The GNF thinks of restoration as making the forest more resilient to disturbance (e.g., insects, disease, and drought).

Polling Exercise

<i>Is your perspective on this issue represented in the range shown?</i>	
Yes	100%
No	0%
Not sure	0%

Group Discussion

Participants discussed the polling results and provided suggestions for reconsidering or expanding the range of alternatives.

- The GNF should only use native plant seeds if it does any seeding.

RESTORATION TOOLS TO USE

- There are a variety of potential vegetation management tools that can be used to help achieve desired conditions, and each have associated benefits and risks. Community members have observed that there has been re-sprouting of alligator juniper and evergreen oak after restoration treatments are conducted and that these species dominate the understory.
- The GNF received a range of comments on this issue. On one end of the spectrum, the GNF received suggestions to rely on mechanical methods, limit the use of prescribed fire, and use herbicide on noxious, invasive species and re-sprouting alligator juniper and evergreen oak. On the other end of the spectrum, the GNF received suggestions to rely on prescribed fire

and wildfire only (excepting the wildland-urban interface, which is usually where the Forest borders private property with developments) and use herbicide on noxious, invasive species only. In the middle, the GNF received suggestions to use a mixture of mechanical, prescribed fire, and wildfire methods.

Clarifying Questions

Participants asked clarifying questions about the range of alternatives on restoration tools to use. Questions are indicated in italics, followed by the response.

Is herbicide included in the middle of the range?

Yes, it is implied.

In terms of mechanical methods, does this range include the allowance for more harvesting of the Forest’s waste (i.e., opportunities for small businesses)?

The GNF works with small businesses to do mechanical treatments.

How difficult is it to get approval for herbicide use, and are all the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) processes folded into the Forest Plan?

The USFS must do a NEPA analysis for the Forest Plan. After going through that process, the GNF receives clearance to use herbicide but must have licensed applicators conduct the herbicide treatment in keeping with the instructions on the herbicide labels and other plan direction found in the Forest Plan.

Does the GNF have to renew the herbicide use clearance periodically?

The NEPA documents last approximately ten years. After the NEPA document lapses, the GNF does not have to go through the process again but must check for new threatened and endangered species. The GNF does not include specific chemicals in the Plan to use because they would have to use that specific chemical, even if advancements in technology or science occurred.

Polling Exercise

<i>Is your perspective on this issue represented in the range shown?</i>	
Yes	100%
No	0%
Not sure	0%

Group Discussion

There was no additional discussion on this topic after the polling.

RIPARIAN MANAGEMENT

- Riparian areas are affected by the presence of water and are composed of unique vegetation. Riparian areas are more productive than adjacent areas where water is more limited. As a result, these areas are a focal point for human, wildlife, and livestock activities.

- The GNF received a range of comments on this issue. On one end of the spectrum, the GNF received suggestions to maintain the use of livestock grazing in riparian areas but use adaptive management and best management practices to move toward and maintain desired conditions. On the other end of the spectrum, the GNF received suggestions to phase out grazing in riparian areas and increase the distance of the buffer from new road construction.

Clarifying Questions

Participants asked clarifying questions about the range of alternatives on riparian management. Questions are indicated in italics, followed by the response.

Does “phase out” grazing mean that there will be a fence? How would the GNF provide water?

Water provision would be determined on a case-by-case basis. If there are exclusions from riparian areas, there are fences around that area, but there can still be opportunities to create gaps. Some stipulations require permittees to pick up some of the cost (often the GNF pays for installation of water infrastructure, and the permittee pays for maintenance). However, if the GNF has concerns about riparian areas, the GNF pays for the cost of the infrastructure and maintenance.

Are the fences pipe or wire?

The fences are usually wire, but there are areas on the GNF where people cut the fence and drive ATVs through, so in those areas, the GNF may use a different material.

Who determines the desired conditions for riparian areas?

Desired conditions are outlined in the draft Forest Plan. The vegetation desired conditions have been developed on a regional basis, and reflect science behind the health of ecological systems. The desired conditions look at the natural range of variation in the areas and have some allowances for change in the future; they are not meant to be static.

Polling Exercise

<i>Is your perspective on this issue represented in the range shown?</i>	
Yes	100%
No	0%
Not sure	0%

Group Discussion

There was no additional discussion on this topic after the polling.

LIVESTOCK GRAZING

- Livestock grazing on the GNF contributes to the livelihood of the permittees and the economy of local communities. It is a traditional cultural use of the GNF and one of the multiple-use elements for which the GNF is managed.

- The GNF received a range of comments on this issue. On one end of the spectrum, the GNF received suggestions to increase flexibility of livestock management with fewer strict standards and more guidelines. On the other end of the spectrum, the GNF received suggestions to have more restrictive standards and fewer flexible guidelines. In the middle of the spectrum, the GNF received suggestions to have a balanced use of standards and guidelines. Standards are mandatory constraints and do not allow for deviation without a Forest Plan amendment; guidelines are also constraints but allow for deviation as long as the intent of the guideline is met and the justification is documented.

Polling Exercise

<i>Is your perspective on this issue represented in the range shown?</i>	
Yes	83%
No	0%
Not sure	17%

Group Discussion

There was no additional discussion on this topic after the polling.

VACANT GRAZING ALLOTMENTS

- Ten of the 138 grazing allotments on the GNF are vacant.
- The GNF received a range of comments on this issue. On one end of the spectrum, the GNF received suggestions to have no vacant allotments (i.e., to keep them all fully stocked) and to issue permits for vacant allotments. On the other end of the spectrum, the GNF received suggestions to keep these allotments vacant and unused or even remove them from grazing and use them for wildlife and watershed. In the middle of the spectrum, the GNF received suggestions to use the vacant allotments to increase flexibility and allow current permit holders to use them during times of need such as drought, wildfire, and livestock-wildlife conflicts.

Clarifying Questions

Participants asked clarifying questions about the range of alternatives on vacant grazing allotments. Questions are indicated in italics, followed by the response.

What is a “time of need”?

When there is a wildfire or prescribed burn in a certain area, the cattle could be moved to a vacant allotment. If an allotment is a denning site for the Mexican wolf, the GNF would work with the permittee to move their cattle.

Polling Exercise

<i>Is your perspective on this issue represented in the range shown?</i>	
Yes	100%
No	0%

Not sure	0%
----------	----

Group Discussion

There was no additional discussion on this topic after the polling.

LAND ADJUSTMENTS

- Since the GNF was created, there have been numerous real estate transactions that have added and subtracted (i.e., adjusted) portions of the area via land exchanges, purchases, donations, and sales. A land exchange entails a piece of property being exchanged for another piece of property of equivalent value. Peak Facilitation Group conducted a web survey to collect stakeholder ideas on how the GNF should conduct these land adjustments in the future.
- The GNF received a range of comments on this issue. On one end of the spectrum, the GNF received suggestions to acquire desirable lands for public access and resource management when available and dispose of isolated, unmanageable lands or lands that support community development when possible. On the other end of the spectrum, the GNF received suggestions to direct more emphasis on land exchanges so that no net loss of private property value in a county occurs and property taxes remain the same.

Clarifying Questions

Participants asked clarifying questions about the range of alternatives on land adjustments. Questions are indicated in italics, followed by the response.

How common are land adjustments?

The most common land adjustment is the purchasing of private land. Since 2015, the GNF has been approached by a few landowners who would like the GNF to buy their land. The GNF only buys land that abuts the Forest. The most important land is riparian area. 20 land parcel owners have applied for their land to be purchased by the GNF, but since the allocation of funds is prioritized on a national scale, it is not common and is a slow process. The GNF is working with the community of Santa Clara; their community is surrounded by the Forest, and they have requested that lands be transferred to them for community development.

When the GNF disposes of land, does that mean it is sold?

Yes, although there is a regulated process on how this can occur. When cemeteries and wastewater treatment plants have been built on USFS-administered lands, the GNF first had to determine if that event was an egregious act. If the GNF determined that was not an egregious, that land can be donated or exchanged because of what occurred.

Do individuals ever request that their land be sold?

Individuals often ask for land exchanges. For example, if an inholding is surrounded by forest and is hard to access, the landowner often approaches the GNF.

Why would land be “unmanageable”?

There may be parcels that become difficult to access or difficult to administer. Some land may have more value to a private person, and a sale could be mutually beneficial.

Polling Exercise

<i>Is your perspective on this issue represented in the range shown?</i>	
Yes	60%
No	40%
Not sure	0%

Group Discussion

Participants discussed the polling results and provided suggestions for reconsidering or expanding the range of alternatives.

- Disposing of unmanageable or useless land is good, but that should not only be done for community development. The GNF should dispose of any land that does not benefit the GNF, no matter what.

AMOUNT OF RECOMMENDED WILDERNESS

- Each National Forest undertaking plan revision is required to complete a process of identifying and evaluating lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. The four-step process concludes with a determination of whether to recommend any of the evaluated lands to the US Congress for wilderness designation. Only Congress may designate wilderness. Community members recently had the opportunity to comment during the second step (evaluation), which examines the level of wilderness characteristics on areas of the Forest. During the upcoming third step (analysis), the GNF will consider all the factors that have relevance for areas that may be recommended, not just wilderness characteristics (e.g., impacts to local existing or future forest product uses, effects to restoration needs, defensive space from wildfire/wildland-urban interface, etc.). Different criteria will be applied for each alternative.
- The GNF received a range of comments on this issue. On one end of the spectrum, the GNF received suggestions to recommend no new wilderness. On the other end of the spectrum, the GNF received suggestions to recommend a significant amount of new wilderness. In the middle of the spectrum, the GNF received suggestions to recommend some new wilderness, taking into consideration other forest uses and restoration needs.

Clarifying Questions

Participants asked clarifying questions about the range of alternatives on the amount of recommended wilderness. Questions are indicated in italics, followed by the response.

Does the GNF have any recommended wilderness areas that have not been acted upon by Congress that could be reconsidered in this Forest Plan?

There are no recommended wilderness areas from the last planning cycle. Congress designated two wilderness study areas, and there was a recommendation made in the last Forest Plan that these be

removed from the GNF, but Congress has not taken any action on them. If there were a recommendation about that area, it would be lumped into the next planning cycle inventory and evaluation.

Could the Forest Plan recommend that no new wilderness be designated?

Yes.

What is the difference between a wilderness study area and a wilderness area?

A wilderness study area is a designation from Congress, but it is not a wilderness area designation. In wilderness study areas, the GNF would preserve any wilderness characteristics, and eventually submit an official wilderness area recommendation to Congress, which will reconsider it and either designate it or give it to the GNF for some other type of management.

Is it possible to remove wilderness areas?

That option is not in the range.

Polling Exercise

<i>Is your perspective on this issue represented in the range shown?</i>	
Yes	60%
No	40%
Not sure	0%

Group Discussion

Participants discussed the polling results and provided suggestions for reconsidering or expanding the range of alternatives.

- New Mexico has experienced many land grabs by the government. Some of the current wilderness areas should be removed, and there should not be any new designations.

BOTANICAL AREAS

- There are other types of designations open for consideration during the Forest Plan revision process to maintain unique special characteristics or purposes across the landscape. The GNF received a proposal to recommend botanical areas around the GNF. This was not part of the preliminary draft Forest Plan, but GNF planning staff made a logical assumption about the range of alternatives.
- On one end of the spectrum, no botanical areas would be designated. On the other end of the spectrum, there would be more botanical areas for rare plant conservation and education. In the middle of the spectrum, there would be some botanical areas for rare plant conservation and education.

Clarifying Questions

Participants asked clarifying questions about the range of alternatives on botanical areas. Questions are indicated in italics, followed by the response.

Who proposed the botanical area?

The Gila Native Plant Society submitted the proposal. They looked at the New Mexico rare plant conservation strategy, mapped concentrations of where there are rare or endemic species, and proposed botanical areas based on those groupings of species. The areas would still be open for human access.

Would the botanical areas impact grazing?

The Forest Plan would highlight the existing plant species and promote general appreciation for the species; it would not specify any impact to grazing.

Are there currently designated botanical areas on the GNF?

There are no current botanical areas on the GNF.

Does the GNF have a process for protecting other areas with rare plants?

The GNF has a process for analyzing rare plants when any activity is proposed. For example, if the GNF is planning to build a road, the location of rare plants is considered, and in most cases, the GNF will decide to build around that area.

Polling Exercise

<i>Is your perspective on this issue represented in the range shown?</i>	
Yes	100%
No	0%
Not sure	0%

Group Discussion

There was no additional discussion on this topic after the polling.

OTHER TOPICS THAT COULD BE CONSIDERED FOR A RANGE OF ALTERNATIVES

Participants discussed other topics that could be considered for a range of alternatives. GNF planning staff responded, summarizing what input has been received on these other topics to-date.

What are the management options or alternatives presented for the Continental Divide Trail?

The GNF has not heard a range of perspectives on the Continental Divide Trail. The GNF received comments that emphasized the importance of the GNF remaining a destination for dispersed recreation (backcountry trails and roads) but did not hear any comments that there should be more developed recreation. There is a section in the Plan about the management of the Continental Divide Trail. The GNF received comments from people who wanted to see the Continental Divide Trail aligned so that water access is not an issue.

Did the GNF receive any comments about making sure that private utilities had access through the Forest?

The GNF received some comments from utilities that wanted to maintain access for utilities management, so the GNF included a utility management area in the preliminary draft Forest Plan. There are allowances in the utility management areas to deviate from desired conditions for vegetation. These utility management areas allow and encourage companies to co-locate power lines. There are also non-recreation special uses permitted on the Forest to allow for communication towers, etc. Some of these allowances get stipulated in site-specific permits. The GNF has not heard from internet providers such as Verizon.

Has the GNF received any comments about the Wild and Scenic Rivers designation for the Gila River?

There are a range of views on this issue, but since the question is whether or not rivers are eligible, the range is simply “yes” or “no.” The Forest Plan includes an evaluation of streams and rivers, but it will only determine whether a river “could” be wild and scenic. The Forest Supervisor will later decide whether they “should” be designated outside of the plan revision process.

NEXT STEPS

- For more information, participants are encouraged to visit the Forest Plan revision website at <http://go.usa.gov/h88k> or email gilaplan@fs.fed.us.
- The GNF planning team will reconsider the preliminary range of alternatives based on the feedback received during this round of community meetings. Then, the GNF will analyze the alternatives and release a draft Forest Plan and draft EIS for feedback in 2019. The GNF will revise those draft documents based on stakeholder feedback.