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 trees 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.
Polling Exercise

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Group Discussion

- The GNF should use thinning and herbicide to maintain meadows.
- The GNF should conduct more thinning treatments and juniper removal.
- The GNF should restore watershed and grasslands.
- The GNF should reduce conifer infestation through mechanical thinning.
- Vegetation is not threatened.

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.

Why would the GNF limit prescribed fire?

If this alternative were chosen, there would be an emphasis on mechanical methods. There is a certain amount of money allocated for vegetation treatments, so it is a matter of treatment prioritization.

Polling Exercise

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

- Each part of the GNF is unique. The GNF should have the ability to use whatever tools are necessary. Balance is good if it is genuine.
- There should be an alternative that emphasizes the use of community resources, rather than a reliance on USFS management. For example, timber harvesting helps to develop a good small business base. That should be spelled out.
- Herbicide use is a valuable tool and should always be included in the toolbox. Add herbicide to the middle of the range.
- Use herbicide for juniper removal; use mechanical methods to remove juniper; use chainsaws to thin ponderosa pines; conduct proper logging in small communities.
- Fire does not efficiently deal with “down” trees or keep juniper from coming back. Mechanical control is the best. Trees can be logged and thinning is a more controlled method to deal with this.
- Logging and wood-cutting should be “spelled out” in the range.
- The GNF should restore logging and guarantee enough timber to bring in companies.
- The GNF should use chainsaws and cattle for fuel reduction.

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.

*What are “desired conditions”?
The GNF has stated desired conditions in the preliminary draft Forest Plan. All vegetation types have desired conditions that the GNF is trying to achieve.*

*Do any of the vacant grazing allotments have riparian areas?*
Yes, it is likely that some do.
How does management relate to the desired conditions?
Management should be designed to move toward desired conditions, which is why they are carefully defined in the Forest Plan.

Polling Exercise

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

- Grazing is only one factor to consider with riparian management. Managing threatened and endangered species, thinning near rivers, pesticide use, and recreation are also key considerations.
- Desired conditions should not be established by an outside entity; it should be a local-level decision.
- Grazing in riparian areas should be included in the range. A lot of ranchers do not trust best management practices (BMPs), so there should be an option that does not include BMPs or adaptive management processes.
- Riparian management should also include management for erosion control and wildlife use.
- Grazing should be allowed in riparian areas.
- New Mexico Office of the State Engineer confirmed that the riparian waters are under state jurisdiction and are considered livestock waters. The GNF must cooperate with the state and ranchers on allotment management and riparian areas located in allotments, which are owned by the rancher.
- Livestock grazing can benefit riparian areas.
- The GNF should work with producers to understand proper land management; the producers are the day-to-day caretakers of the land.

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.

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

*Who determines “balanced use”?
Balanced use can be determined on a case-by-case basis.*

Polling Exercise

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

- The standards used for livestock grazing should be taken from the Society for Range Management (which is a national standard).
- The range is too vague to establish alternatives.
- It is important that the GNF adopt science-based grazing management standards and guidelines. These are readily available from local livestock boards or national livestock organizations.
- The draft Forest Plans include biased and detrimental language throughout the document when referencing livestock grazing. This type of biased language is not found with other uses. Congress historically intended for these lands to be grazed.
- There should be an increase in animal unit per month (AUM) where allotments are in good shape.
- The GNF should continue to allow and restore livestock grazing and should stop supporting the demise of producers.

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.

Why are the grazing allotments vacant?
The reasons for vacancy depend on the site. Sometimes a grazing permittee moves or can no longer manage the land.

Polling Exercise

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

- Vacant allotments should only be allowed to remain vacant if the permittee is unable to use it for health or financial reasons, not because they do not “want” it and abandon the allotment. This is a financial loss to the county but could be detrimental to the resource.
- Vacant grazing allotments should be utilized and made available to current leaseholders for use when their allotments have been damaged by fire. If they go unused for a period of two or more years, the allotments should be offered to other grazing permittees.
- There is an ongoing problem with allotments being vacant. The GNF needs to allow property owners to stock those allotments. County and state economies rely on those allotments and circulate dollars from the allotments to fund community and government business. Diamond Bar and Hot Cold Spring need to have cattle back on them.
- The GNF should replace the cattle on the vacant allotments to full capacity for the benefit of local economies.

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.

*Exchanging property has not worked out in the past, and properties have been poorly managed. Is “not exchanging property” in the range?*
No, stopping land adjustments altogether is not included in the range.

*If a company wants to install a solar field, would that be possible?*
The GNF would have to go through a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process to obtain environmental clearance. The solar field could then be operated through a permit, and the GNF would retain ownership of the land. The NEPA process takes approximately three years, depending on the size of the area.

*Why is land ownership important for the GNF? Does the GNF have to retain a certain number of acres?*
Land disposal requires that the GNF meet certain regulations. When those regulations cannot be met, leasing is the next best option.

*Can the USFS donate lands? (The Bureau of Reclamation is attempting to make a 2,200-acre land donation to the City of Elephant Butte because they do not want to go through the process of land disposal).*
The Bureau of Reclamation falls into the Department of the Interior, and the USFS is part of the Department of Agriculture, so the rules regarding land adjustments are different. The USFS can donate lands only if new infrastructure (e.g., cemeteries, water treatment plants, etc.), has unintentionally expanded onto USFS land. The Forest Supervisor can transfer that land, but there are a lot of checks and balances required to allow that to happen.

*Does this range include exchanges between government entities (e.g., between the USFS and New Mexico)?*
That can be specified in the range. The assumption was that it was exchanged between the USFS and private entities.

Polling Exercise

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

- The Black Range District includes one of the largest landowners in the US, and some residents are concerned that that land may come off the county tax rolls. The USFS should not take any more private land.
- Land exchanges are acceptable in certain areas if they benefit both parties (the USFS and private property owners).
- There should not be a solar plant.
- Any exchange of land that would decrease PILT funds should be prohibited, unless the swap would result in the local taxing authority assessing and taxing said lands.
- There should be a no net loss of grazing and water uses that benefit communities. The public should not lose access to the forest.
- The range did not address water rights and the integration of these rights into grazing plans.

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 (e.g., impacts to local existing or future forest product uses, effects to restoration needs, defensive space from wildfire/wildland-urban interface, etc.), not just wilderness characteristics. 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.

*How can people provide public comments on wilderness designation?*
There have been several opportunities for public comment. When the GNF releases the draft Plan and the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), there will be a public comment process. There will also be a public comment process after the GNF has made recommendations to Congress.
Is the removal of the current wilderness area included in the range?
No, that is not included in the range.

Polling Exercise

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Group Discussion

- The GNF should not recommend any new wilderness. The USFS loses all management abilities in wilderness areas.
- The proposed areas do not meet wilderness criteria. These are populated areas that have private homes. The wilderness as it stands boasts no wildlife or water. If more wilderness is recommended, even more water sources will fall into disrepair.
- There is no need to expand or add new wilderness areas. It may be okay if the parcel is small and isolated, but there are too many ranchers who need to check water, fences, etc., and people who need access to power lines, fuel, etc.
- The GNF should not designate new wilderness and should minimize roadless areas. All members of the public need access.
- The GNF should decrease the amount of wilderness.

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.

Are there any forests in this region that have botanical areas?
The Prescott National Forest has one.

Is there a minimum size for botanical areas?
No, there is no required minimum size.

What type of management is associated with these areas?
There would be specific desired conditions outlined in the Forest Plan that are focused on education. The proposal looks at concentrations of rare plants and where they were co-located.

How would the designation of botanical areas impact other uses (e.g., grazing, recreation, etc.)?
That would have to be clarified. Restrictions associated with the designation have not yet been discussed.

There are so many invasive species in the area. How would the GNF determine the thresholds for “rare” species?
The Plan would define “rare” plant species. They would be native plants only found on the GNF.

How would the GNF promote education about these rare plants?
There would likely be information available on site (i.e., interpretive signs), but any ideas would be welcome.

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Group Discussion

- The creation of botanical areas should not encourage management similar to what is done for threatened and endangered species.
- The GNF should not create botanical areas. If the GNF does this, they will have lawsuits filed by many parties to prevent the obstruction of multiple uses.
- If the public land borders private property, trading is good and benefits all parties.
- Residents do not want to give up any more land. There is a big difference between managing the land for recreation and trying to make a living off the land.
- This would or could create additional restrictions; community members are against further restrictions.
- Only a small area should be considered.
- The GNF is not a park, so there is no need for botanical areas. This land is set aside for economic purposes, and not for the preservation of plants. The GNF should stop burning the plants.

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.
Has the GNF heard a range of comments on integrating water rights in the Plan?
The GNF has not heard a range of comments on this issue, but there is a section in the preliminary draft Forest Plan titled "water uses."

Has the GNF heard a range of comments on working with local businesses?
There is a section in the preliminary draft Forest Plan titled “community relationships” that focuses on collaboration and partnerships. The GNF will also be considering the impact of certain management decisions on local economies in their analysis.

Has the GNF heard about the incident in Albuquerque where two veterans were beaten by USFS personnel?
That is assault. The police should have been notified, and the employees should have been held to the same standard as any member of the public.

Did the GNF hear a range of perspectives on public access for mining?
No, the GNF did not hear anything about this topic in public comments, so would encourage input.

Did the GNF hear a range of perspectives on granting utility companies (e.g., Sierra Electric) the opportunity to do line extensions and access lines to do maintenance and fix outages?
The GNF received comments from other utility companies that requested a utilities management area that has a specific plan for utilities maintenance.

Did the GNF hear support for multiple uses (trapping, wood cutting, outfitting, etc.)?
Yes, the GNF received many comments in support of keeping the multiple use emphasis on the Forest.

Has the USFS ever considered pursuing an action similar to the Bureau of Land Management’s payment in lieu of taxes (PILT) payments?
The USFS is part of the PILT calculation.

How can residents provide further comments on wilderness areas? Wilderness areas take away management possibilities and make it impossible to access water.
During the next phase of the wilderness area designation process, the GNF will consider all factors, including access to water, defensible spaces, etc. Anyone can submit a public comment regarding this issue.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS
- The Forest Plan should include specifics about how the alternatives have been compared to the comprehensive land use plan developed with local entities.
- The GNF should consider local businesses—multiple use is almost always beneficial.
- The GNF should keep campgrounds and allow for wood cutting and hunting.
The GNF must manage for timber and a healthy watershed. Judge Rehnquist’s brief from US
versus New Mexico is the law; removing livestock grazing is illegal.

The methodology is too simplistic and will not allow for comprehensive public and
stakeholder input.

There should be no net loss to the county with private land holdings within the forest.

The GNF should consider mining; it is a historic use.

Multiple use is different from other uses. Timber and watershed should be considered first;
other uses must be allowed but are not equal to the primary priorities of the agency. The US
versus New Mexico is an important case, and the GNF should not undermine rulings.

The GNF should integrate grazing and ranching and realize that the rancher owns vested
water rights. Too many allotments are vacant because the agency does not follow their
mandate. State law protects valid existing or vested water and surface use rights.

WRITTEN QUESTIONS
Participants submitted written comments. They are below.

Why do established trails now restrict motorized vehicle use?

**GNF Response:** The Travel Management Rule (TMR) is a federal regulation that all National Forests
and Grasslands are required to implement. The TMR decision on the Gila National Forest limits
motorized use to designated roads, trails and areas. The intent of the rule is to protect natural
resources while also providing for motorized recreational opportunities. The Forest is open to
having discussions regarding adjustments to previous decisions when there is new information or
opportunities to consider.

What is really being accomplished with land adjustments? There is a concern that this is another land
grab and a tool to get rid of people and businesses on the GNF.

**GNF Response:** The main intentions of land adjustments (for example, exchanges, purchases,
donations, sales) are to help enhance public access and use and support resource management
objectives. Management emphasis is to work with local communities to understand their
community expansion needs and retain access to NFS land. For instance, the Forest recently
acquired a small private property parcel that crossed Forest Road 141 without an established right
of way that could have blocked recreational and commercial access to a large portion of the forest.
Another example is that the Forest has sold land to enable community development such as the
Glenwood Elementary School and Fort Bayard Veterans Administration Hospital.

NEXT STEPS

- For more information, participants are encouraged to visit the Forest Plan revision website
  at [http://go.usa.gov/h88k](http://go.usa.gov/h88k) or email [gilaplan@fs.fed.us](mailto: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.
District Ranger Michael Hutchins thanked participants for attending and emphasized the importance of public feedback in helping the Forest Supervisor make informed decisions.