

## DECISION MEMO

**Eckleberger Prescribed Fire Rx**

USDA Forest Service  
Reserve Ranger District  
Gila National Forest  
Catron County, New Mexico

**Description of Decision to be implemented**

The Reserve Ranger District proposes to continue implementation of prescribed fire including maintenance burning throughout the 18,610 acre Eckleberger project area (Legal: various sections in T7 S, R18-19 W; T8 S, R16-19 W; T9 S,R 16-17 W). A previous decision was signed September 14, 2000 however, maintenance burning was not included. Approximately sixty percent of the area has been treated by fire. These treatments include the Eckleberger Prescribed Fire (2001) and the Fork Wildland Fire Use Fire (2005). Since then numerous dead trees have accumulated along with debris and needle cast along the forest floor. Historical data indicates that fire intervals ranged between 3-7 years.

The purpose and need for this project is to improve wildlife habitat and timber stand health by restoring fire adapted ecosystems, reducing the risk for catastrophic wildfire, managing for forests that are resilient to insect and disease epidemics, and reduced risk for life, property, structures, and improvements near or adjacent to national forest system lands. Located near and adjacent to the project boundary are several ranch houses, campgrounds, private in holdings, and Negrito work center/fire base. Continued implementation of the project will help to reduce the risk of catastrophic fires within these Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) areas.

Prescribed fire will be ignited on ridge tops along Eckleberger Divide, Eckleberger Canyon, Telephone Canyon and Sheppard Canyon. Ignited fire will be allowed to back down into forested stands. The project will be treated with various tactical ignition patterns and techniques to optimize desired fire behaviors in order to meet objectives. Prescribed fires are expected to burn with low to moderate intensities which are essential to remove the excessive fuel accumulations and maintain generally low fuel hazards. Fire intensities will consume fine to medium fuels such as grass, pine needles and small woody debris as well as downed logs and snags. Prescribed fire will also be allowed to reduce dense ponderosa pine stands and create new snags and future down logs for wildlife habitat. Objectives of the burn are to reduce fuel loads to lessen the risk of catastrophic fires; increase herbaceous plant growth by reducing the amount of duff, woody debris, and small woody regeneration; improve wildlife habitat by restoring a more natural mosaic of vegetations types; and prepare the area for future applications of low intensity fires.

The Eckleberger Rx project is located within Management Area 6B and 6C in the Gila National Forest plan. This project is consistent with the intent of the Forest Plan's long term goals and objectives. This project was designed to the Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines that are included in the Fire Management Plan for the Gila National Forest. Smoke management is consistent with the New Mexico Environmental Department Smoke Management Plan.

### **Decision**

It is my decision to continue implementation and to include maintenance burning throughout the Eckleberger prescribed fire project area. The prescribed fires will prepare the area to sustain natural ignitions without severe resource damage, improve wildlife habitat, and increase herbaceous plant growth. The following measures for protecting the environment and assuring that impacts are mitigated will be observed in the implementation of the action:

1. Protect fire sensitive cultural resources prior to implementation.
2. Develop a detailed burn plan prior to implementation.
3. Site monitoring plots will be established in Mexican Spotted Owl (MSO) restricted habitat prior to implementation.
4. Apply for smoke registration and secure a smoke management plan prior to implementation
5. Utilize existing roads to access and implement the project.

### **Scoping and Public Involvement**

Issues and concerns for this project were determined from responses during the scoping process. Besides obtaining input from Forest Service specialists, scoping letters dated 02/04/2008 were mailed to members of the public as well as legal notice published 02/07/2008 in the Silver City Daily Press. Input was also solicited from grazing permittees and from private landowners in and around the affected areas. Also contacted were N.M. Dept. of Game and Fish, N.M. Environment Department, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Catron County Commissioners, and environmental groups. The only comments received were in support of the project. The project has been listed in the Gila National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions.

### **Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Proposed Action**

An environmental analysis was conducted for this proposed action. As a result of the analysis, a determination has been made that the action is in a category of actions that are excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment or an Environmental Impact Statement. That category of exclusion is Category 31.2(6), Prescribed burning to reduce natural fuel build-up and improve plant vigor, Chapter 30, Forest Service Handbook 1909.15.

It was also determined through the environmental analysis that there were no extraordinary circumstances or conditions related to this proposal that might cause the action to have significant effects. Specifically, this determination is based upon the absence, among others of the following:

1. Threatened or endangered or sensitive species or their critical habitat. Per the Biological Assessment and Evaluation (BAE), 03/23/2006, concurrence letter with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service dated 07/26/2006 determination of 'no effect' for loach minnow and proposed critical habitat and a 'may affect, not likely to adversely affect' on Mexican Spotted Owl and critical habitat. Another BA was conducted 04/20/2008 for the eastern half of the project area to include any MSO critical habitat in response to the new regulations of the recovery plan. A determination of 'no effect' was concluded.
2. The proposed project is not within a floodplain, wetland, or a municipal watershed.
3. The proposed project is not within a wilderness area, wilderness study area, National Recreation Area or Research Natural Area.
4. There are no inventoried roadless areas within the project. No roads are proposed for construction.
5. Cultural resource inventories were conducted (#2000-06-015) and are on file at the District office. No significant effects are foreseen and no loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources is anticipated.

### **Findings Required by Other Laws**

All management practices and activities of the proposed action are consistent with the management direction, including standards and guidelines, in the final Land Management Plan for the Gila National Forest (June 14, 1986), as amended, and its provisions which were developed in accordance with the National Forest Management Act of 1976.

This project is also consistent with the National Wilderness Preservation Act, the Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and the Forest Land Policy and Management Act.

### **Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunity; Implementation Date**

The 30-day comment period for this project ended on March 10, 2008. Since no substantive comments expressing concerns were received, or only supportive comments were received during the comment period, this decision is not subject to appeal (36 CFR 215.6).

**IMPLEMENTATION DATE**

This decision pursuant to 36 CFR 215.6 , is not subject to appeal and may be implemented immediately.

**Contact Person**

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Pete Delgado at Reserve Ranger District, PO Box 170, Reserve, NM 87830 or call 505-533-6231

Approved by:

*/s/ John Pierson*  
John D. Pierson  
District Ranger

Date: 06/30/2008