

Decision Notice
Wildland Fire Use Amendment
to the Prescott National Forest
Land and Resource Management Plan

USDA Forest Service
Prescott National Forest
Yavapai County, Arizona

Decision and Reasons for the Decision

Background

The Prescott National Forest (PNF) Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) was approved in 1986 and amended over time. Goals, standards and guidelines in the Forest Plan reflect agency fire management policy at the time of its approval. The current fire management goal is to *“provide for fire management support services necessary to sustain resource yields while protecting improvements and investments, and providing for public safety. In as much as possible, return fire to its natural role in the ecosystem.”* (p14).

The objective expressed in the Forest Plan is to suppress wildland fires at a minimum cost, consistent with land and resource management objectives and fire management direction. The current Forest Plan fire management direction allows wildland fire use (formerly called prescribed natural fire) in wilderness only. Beyond these specially designated areas, suppression is the sole response allowed for wildland fire. Today, these standards and guidelines limit the ability of the United States Forest Service (USFS) to effectively use wildland fire to restore fire-adapted ecosystems, manage hazardous fuel loads, restore and maintain historic vegetation communities and structures, and improve wildlife habitats.

In 1995, the United States Department of Agriculture and the United States Department of the Interior adopted an interagency fire management policy, the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and Program; this policy was updated in 2001. Acceptance of the new policy rendered the current Forest Plan fire management direction outdated.

The PNF proposes to amend the Forest Plan to be consistent with current Federal fire management policy, direction, and terminology. The goal of the amendment is to assist Forest Service resource managers with the restoration of the natural fire cycle and its role in defining the vegetation and ecosystems of the PNF.

An environmental assessment (EA) was prepared in compliance with NEPA; the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations (40 CFR 1500 through 1508) for implementing NEPA; USDA’s NEPA Policies and Procedures (7 CFR Part 1b); Forest Service Manual (FSM) 1950; and FSH 1909.15. The EA documents the results of a study of the potential environmental impacts resulting from this Proposed Action and the No Action alternative.

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Data, information, and documents supporting the analyses presented in the EA are contained in the project record (PR) and may be reviewed at the Prescott National Forest Office, 344 South Cortez Street, Prescott, Arizona.

Decision

Based upon my review of the environmental assessment and the alternatives considered, I have decided to implement the Proposed Action which would allow fire managers discretionary use of a full spectrum of fire response and management options. This would include both suppression actions, as well as wildland fire use, which involves managing natural ignitions to achieve resource benefits, within the areas identified in **Figure 1**. The ability to implement wildland fire use on a landscape scale is needed to reduce fuel loading and sustain fire-adapted ecosystems into the future, as well as meet the current plan goal of returning fire to its natural role in the ecosystem.

When compared to the no action alternative, this alternative would update the Forest Plan to be in compliance with current federal policy and management direction for wildland fire use. This alternative would meet the concern raised by the public regarding the issue of air quality degradation. State and federal air quality standards for wildland fire use would preclude unacceptable degradation of air quality. This alternative meets requirements under the;

- National Environmental Policy Act of 1969,
- Endangered Species Act of 1973,
- Clean Water Act of 1977 as amended,
- Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 as amended,
- National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 as amended, and
- 2001 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered one other alternative, the No Action alternative. A comparison of these alternatives can be found in the EA in Table 1. For the No Action alternative, the Forest Plan, as written, would continue to guide management of wildland fire suppression and wildland fire use on the PNF. No wildland fire use would be permissible beyond designated wilderness areas. Appropriate management responses to natural ignitions would be limited to suppression.

Public Involvement

Scoping for the proposed amendment was initially conducted in October of 2001 as part of a proposal that included changes in direction for fire use, fuel wood management, and forest plan monitoring. This was accomplished by mailing post cards announcing the proposed amendment to the Prescott Forest Plan to 595 individuals, organizations, and agencies on the Forest's mailing list of potentially interested parties in October 2001 (PR # 3, 5, & 6)¹. The announcement briefly described the proposed amendment and indicated that the amendment was available for review at the Forest's Website (www.fs.fed.us/r3/prescott); at the Forest's offices in Prescott, Arizona; and at Prescott area libraries. The announcement was also posted on the Forest's Website. Fifteen

¹ The proposed amendment that was scoped in October 2001 also included changes in policy and direction for fuelwood management and the monitoring program. In February of 2005, the scope of the amendment was revised to address only wildland fire use.

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responses were received, in the form of letters, e-mails, a telephone conversation, and one visit in person to Prescott National Forest offices in Prescott, Arizona. All comments received and the names of the submitting persons and organizations are located in the project record (PR #11-22).

In addition, the completed Environmental Assessment for the above described amendment was mailed out for comment in October of 2002. A total of three responses were received from individuals and organizations and are included in the project record (PR # 42-46). The project has been listed on the PNF Schedule of Proposed Actions since November 2000 and subsequently on the PNF Schedule of Proposed Actions on the Forest's internet website.

This project is subject to appeal regulations at 36 CFR 217. These regulations do not require a separate 30-day comment period on the EA to determine appeal eligibility (see 36 CFR 217.6).

The responses that included remarks about the fire use portion of the amendment from both the October 2001 scoping and the October 2002 comment period were considered in this analysis. Using the scoping comments from the public and other agencies, the interdisciplinary team identified one issue regarding the effects of the proposed action. The main issue of concern is impacts to air quality (EA p8). To address these concerns, the Forest Service clarified the details and effects of the action alternative in the EA, as well as the regulations to be followed upon implementing a wildland fire use event.

Finding of No Significant Impact

The best available science was considered in the analysis of the Proposed Action and No Action alternative. After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

A. Context:

The effects of any wildland fire use occurring within the Prescott National Forest would be limited primarily to areas in the immediate vicinity of the wildland fire use event predominantly within Yavapai County. These areas are located away from wildland urban interfaces and areas with high concentrations of people and residences.

B. Intensity:

1. My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action. Both beneficial and adverse effects were considered in the environmental analysis.
2. There will be no significant effects to public health or safety. One of the key considerations to be made in determining whether to manage a fire as a wildland fire use opportunity or to suppress it with the appropriate management response would be if national ambient air quality standards are met. These standards were established by the Clean Air Act as amended (1990) to protect human health. All Federal, State and local laws and regulations would be adhered to during the course of managing any wildland

fire use incident (EA pp 11 & 16). Wildland fire use would not be allowed in the wildland urban interface or in areas with high concentrations of people or residences.

3. There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area. Allowing natural ignitions to burn within prescribed parameters in the area designated as the Verde Wild and Scenic River (VW&SR) would enhance some of the outstandingly remarkable values of scenic quality, fish and wildlife habitat, and historic and cultural resources. This amendment would not affect the eligibility status of the Paulden to Clarkdale river segment. Articulation of the fire-management policy change in an amendment to the Forest Plan is not considered an undertaking as defined in the National Historic Preservation Act. Accordingly, there would be no direct effects to heritage resources. Indirect effects of approval of the amendment may include the increased exposure of heritage sites to wildland fire, because a percentage of fires would not be quickly suppressed. However, if fire managers are aware of heritage resource concerns, such sites are less likely to be impacted during a low- or moderate-intensity fire managed for resource benefit (EA pp 13 & 19). The locations of known heritage sites are assessed for risk as part of the WFIP. Involving heritage-resource specialists in evaluating fire-management actions would largely mitigate the potential adverse effects of wildland fire use.
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial because the primary impact to the human environment would be smoke from a fire. As previously discussed, all wildland fire use incidents would adhere to the Clean Air Act. Arizona Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ) would be consulted during preparation of the Wildland Fire Implementation Plan (WFIP). Smoke emissions would be authorized by ADEQ and monitored for compliance with all Federal and state regulations pertaining to smoke emissions (EA Table 1).
5. We have considerable experience with the types of activities to be implemented. The effects analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk (EA Chapter 3).
6. This action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects. The proposed amendment is an administrative change that would not have any direct environmental impacts on the ground (EA p 8).
7. There are no “on the ground” site-specific effects for this policy change and therefore there are no cumulative impacts (EA pp 23-24).
8. The action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Articulation of the fire-management policy change in an amendment to the Forest Plan is not considered an undertaking as defined in the National Historic Preservation Act. This action will not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. Accordingly, there will be no direct effects to heritage resources (EA p 19).
9. This action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or habitat that has been determined critical under the Endangered Species act of 1973. The proposed

policy change does not have any direct effects to wildlife in and of itself. Impacts to federally listed species or habitat would be assessed on a site-specific individual basis and emergency Sec. 7 (ESA) consultation would be completed prior to implementation of a wildland fire use event in listed species habitat or critical habitat.

10. This action will not violate Federal, state, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA. This action constitutes a non-significant amendment to the Prescott National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (EA p 1, PR# 60)

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

Consistency with the Forest Plan

This decision to amend the Prescott National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan to allow wildland fire use in specified areas is consistent with current Federal wildland fire policy and with existing long-term goals of the Forest Plan (p 14). The proposed changes are additions to, alterations, or clarification of objectives and existing standards and guidelines.

Significance Determination

It is my finding that the actions of this decision comply with the requirements of the National Forest Management Act of 1976 and NFMA implementing regulations in 36 CFR Section 21.14. This amendment is being made primarily in response to new information regarding Federal fire policy. I followed the direction found in 16 U.S.C. 1604(f)(4), 36 CFR 219.14, and FSH 1926.51 and determined that this is not a significant amendment to the Forest Plan because it does not meet the required definition of significance found in FSH 1926.51. Details of the analysis that support my determination concerning this amendment have been placed in the Administrative Record (PR #60).

Implementation Date

If no appeals are filed within the 45-day time period, the Forest Plan will be amended as outlined in the proposed action on or after the 5th business day following the appeal period. When appeals are filed, the Forest Plan will be amended on the 15th business day following the last appeal disposition.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to administrative review pursuant to 36 CFR 217. A written notice of appeal must be filed within 45 days, with the appeal period beginning the day after the day of publication of the Legal Notice in the Prescott Daily Courier. The appeal must be filed (regular mail, fax, email, hand-delivery, or express delivery) with the Appeal Deciding Officer. Written appeals must be submitted to:

Appeal Deciding Officer
Harv Forsgren, Regional Forester

Figure 1: Prescott National Forest Proposed Wildland Fire Use Areas

