

DECISION MEMO FOR BLUE RIDGE / GUFFY VEGETATION AND FUELS MANAGEMENT PROJECT

USDA Forest Service, Angeles National Forest
Santa Clara/ Mojave Rivers Ranger District
Los Angeles County, California

Background

The area in and around Guffy Campground, along the eastern side of Blue Ridge, has experienced repeated catastrophic wildfires throughout the 1900's. The most notable wildfires occurring in the project vicinity included the Narrows and the Beiderbach fires in 1996 and 1997 respectively. Once populated with a variety of mixed conifers (White Fir, Jeffery Pine, and Sugar Pine), the numerous wildfires have converted the area from forest to mixed montane chaparral, dominated by Eastwood's Manzanita, wax current, and mountain whitethorn, leaving only scattered individual trees that survived the burns.

Following the fire of 1996, the decision was made to not salvage the fire-killed trees and to allow the area to regenerate through natural means. The majority of the burn area has failed to regenerate naturally, which has caused the area to type convert into a brush dominated environment. Over the years, the fallen remains of large burned trees mixed with the densely established brush have greatly increased the fuel for future wildfires. Considering the fact that the Guffy Campground is immediately adjacent to the fire-ravaged forest and the site is within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) of the Wrightwood community, this increased fuel hazard is of great concern from a fire management perspective. This proposed vegetation and fuels reduction project would help to meet the objectives of fuels reduction and fire protection set forth by the Wrightwood community.

Decision

It is my decision to reestablish a native mixed conifer stand within the project area, while reducing the hazardous fuels that have resulted from past management decisions following a series of stand replacing fires. This project follows the management direction of both the Regional Office and the Forest Land Management Plan (LMP), promoting the reforestation of areas that have been deforested by wildfire. The reestablishment of a mixed conifer stand will eventually return the area to a more natural fire regime, thereby reducing the potential for a large stand-replacing fire in the area. This project falls within the Wrightwood Project area, analyzed under an Environmental Analysis (EA) in 2007, however the Guffy project will be implemented separately due to the change in resource conditions since that decision was made. Therefore, this decision supersedes any previous decision that has been made within the project area (Figure 1). As part of this decision, avoidance and minimization measures and other design criteria are being required during implementation to reduce impacts to natural resources, and are referenced at the end of this document (Appendix A).

Proposed Action

This project involves mixed conifer tree planting, removal of chaparral, invasive species removal and illegal OHV trail rehabilitation throughout 52 acres along Blue Ridge, west of the Guffy Campground. This project will be implemented as an adaptive management project with various treatments throughout multiple years in an effort to minimize the spread of cheat grass and illegal OHV use within the project area. Various levels of treatments could be accomplished through a combination of methods and could include hand treatments, mastication, chipping and brush crushing. Implementation would be accomplished through service contracts, Forest labor and/or Forest volunteers.

The project area is located along the eastern side of Blue Ridge, south of Wrightwood. The area includes 52 acres that are bordered by Forest Service road 3N06.1 to the south and Guffy Campground to the east. This operation will occur within the Santa Clara/Mojave Rivers Ranger District of the Angeles National Forest and located within the SE ¼ of Section 13, Township 3 North, Range 8 West and SW ¼ of Section 18, Township 3 North, Range 7 West, as shown on the USGS 7.5 minute topographic San Antonio quadrangle. The project area has been divided into various sections based on potential treatment prescriptions (Figure 1).

Hand Treatment:

A variety of hand treatments may be implemented throughout the entire project area. Hand treatments could be accomplished through a combination of methods and could include the use of chain saws, hand saws and brush pruners. Hand treatments will be used to reduce fuels on slopes greater than 30% and within rocky areas where mechanical treatments may not occur. In addition hand treatments will be utilized to protect a variety of sensitive resources within the project area, including in and around sensitive plants and historical sites. Hand treatments will also occur within areas of high weed invasion in an effort to minimize the potential spread of weeds, including cheat grass.

Mastication:

A forest owned ASV skidsteer with masticating head will be used in those sections where mastication is approved. The brush will be masticated to a depth not to exceed four inches in these units. The masticated material will remain on site to provide a barrier to the noxious weed invasion into the treated areas. A maximum of 80% of the standing brush will be treated in the units. The presence of slopes in excess of 30% and rocks may decrease the overall treatment percentage below 80% within any single unit. All tree-form oaks within the units will be retained. Untreated pockets no smaller than ¼ acre in size will be retained in the masticated units. Where feasible, sage, Manzanita and ceanothus species will be favored in the retained pockets.

Chipping:

In areas that have been treated by hand, chipping will take place to remove the treated brush that is less than 3 inches in diameter. In an effort to minimize soil disturbance within the project area and to minimize the potential spread of cheat grass, chipping will take place along preexisting Forest Service approved roads. Hand treated brush will be hand carried to the road edges in preparation for chipping. All chips will be broadcasted into the treatment areas. In an effort to control cheat grass within the project area, chips will be distributed up to 3 inches deep.

Brush Crushing:

Crushing will be achieved with a dozer operated cylinder that is lowered down-slope by a cable system. The dozer will operate off of ridge tops only. Crushing will be primarily utilized on slopes greater than 30%. The district may choose to burn in those areas approved for crushing in order to reduce the dead fuel loading generated by the proposed crushing. A maximum of 80% of the standing brush will be treated in the units. All tree-form oaks within the units will be retained.

Guffy Campground:

Within Guffy campground the objectives are to establish a replacement stand under the current overstory trees and to provide campsite vegetative screening. Dense clusters of White fir and Jeffrey pine will be planted around each of the existing campsites in three staggered rows, 4 feet apart, mimicking the natural dense grouping of white fir regeneration in the area. As the trees mature, release activities would allow for sapling removal as needed. The initial plantings will be augmented in the future with scattered

plantings of Jeffrey pine. Other approved native species may be planted within the campground for aesthetic diversity, to include Sugar pine, Incense Cedar, Big Cone Douglass Fir and Ponderosa pine. Over time, these larger shade trees will replace the older trees on the site as they die from various natural causes.

Illegal OHV:

Any illegal OHV trails created as a result of vegetation reduction will be rehabilitated. The unauthorized user trails will be rehabbed using any, if not all of the following: cover trails with cut shrub vegetation, cover with down logs, cover with large rocks and boulders, invasive species removal and seeding with appropriate native, locally collected seed. If illegal OHV is not a problem, then this activity will not take place.

Invasive Species:

Invasive species removal will be an ongoing part of this project. Cheat grass is likely to spread as a result of this project unless active removal is an ongoing process. If cheat grass becomes established and spreads, the fire frequency will increase. Herbicide treatment is not part of this NEPA project. As a result, there will be two methods of removal for cheat grass: hand pulling and mulching. Both methods will need to be used for successful eradication.

The following will be implemented as part of the treatment prescriptions.

1. Where slope is less than 30 percent, masticate or crush brush to ground surface height.
 - *To decrease hazardous fuels in the area and to reduce inter-plant competition for moisture and sunlight.*
2. Where mastication or crushing occurs, leave shredded material on site to create a layer approximately 3 inches deep of organic material.
 - *To minimize erosion, retain soil moisture and minimize invasive species spread. This layer will also decrease the success of reestablishing brush on site by limiting its access to sunlight.*
3. Plant the masticated or crushed areas using traditional planting methods with a proposed spacing of 10 x 10 feet.
 - *Plant a mixture of Sugar pine (Blister Rust Resistant Stock), Jeffrey pine, Ponderosa pine, Big Cone Douglass Fir, Incense Cedar and White fir, to mimic the surrounding stands and to restore a mixed conifer stand to the area.*
 - *Use the remaining logs as seedling protection from high winds and heat scorching by planting trees alongside.*
4. In areas where mastication is not permitted due to restrictions including slope and resources protection, hand tools will be used to cut 20 foot diameter openings offset and spaced 100 feet apart.
 - *To mimic natural occurring breaks in chaparral vegetation. Future vegetation removal may also be necessary to reduce competition for water and sunlight, resulting in increased survival of the tree seedlings.*
5. Wherever hand tools are used to remove brush, the cut material with a diameter of less than 3 inches will be carried to Forest Service approved roads and will be chipped immediately. Those limbs with a diameter of 3 to 6 inches will be lopped into lengths of 3 feet or less and scattered across the ground in a single layer.
 - *Hand cut brush may also be used to disguise illegal trails.*
6. Plant the hand cut openings using traditional planting methods with a proposed spacing of 8 x 8 feet.

- *To establish clumps of scattered trees in order to reestablish a seed source that can provide future regenerative opportunities as openings develop within the chaparral.*
- 7. Invasive species will be removed throughout the life of this project, including cheat grass.
 - *Active removal of cheat grass will greatly reduce the potential of substantial spread as a result of implementing this project.*
- 8. Tree seedlings will be genetically appropriate for the site.
 - *The seedling will be grown out from seeds collected within the same seed zone.*

This project will be implemented using the following design features and guidelines.

Wildlife and Botanical Resources Design Features

- The design features described in the Biological Evaluation/Biological Assessment will be incorporated into this project as part of the decision as summarized in **Appendix A**.

Non-Native Invasive Weeds Design Features

- The design features described in the Invasive Species Risk Assessment, will be incorporated into this project as part of the decision as summarized in **Appendix A**.

Watershed Design Features

- Best Management Practices, as described in the Hydrology/Soils Report, will be implemented during this project.
- The design features described in the Hydrology/Soils Report will be incorporated into this project as part of the decision as summarized in **Appendix A**.

Visual Design Features

- The design features described in the Visual Assessment will be incorporated into this project as part of the decision as summarized in **Appendix A**.

Heritage Resources Design Features

- The project will be implemented in accordance with stipulations of the first amended Regional Programmatic Agreement (2001) between the California State historic Preservation Officer, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the USDA Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Region, thereby satisfying the Forest's responsibilities under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended. Impacts to heritage sites will be avoided through specific measures described in **Appendix A**.

Reasons for Categorically Excluding this Action

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment as described in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15, Chapter 30, Section 31.2(6): Timber Stand and or wildlife improvement activities, which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction. [36 CFR 220.6(e)(6)]

As a result of the analysis of the proposed project, I have determined there are no extraordinary circumstances that would cause this action to have significant environmental effects. This determination is based on the absence, among others, of adverse effects on the following resource conditions:

1. **Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species**

- There will be no impacts to threatened or endangered species or their habitats from this project as planned. A biological evaluation/biological assessment (BE/BA) was completed, including discussion of threatened/endangered species occurrences and potential impacts. No designated or proposed critical habitat is included in the project area. In addition, this BE/BA analyzed the effects on sensitive species. Impacts may occur to individuals but will not cause a loss of viability or cause a trend towards listing. Implementation of the proposed project may have short-term impacts to Management Indicator Species, however no threat to viability of any species is expected.
2. **Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds**
 - There are no flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds within the project area.
 3. **Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas**
 - There are no congressionally designated areas in the project area.
 4. **Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas**
 - There are no inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas within the project area.
 5. **Research natural areas**
 - There are no research natural areas within the project area
 6. **American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites.**
 - No religious or cultural sites were found in the archaeological survey mentioned below.
 7. **Archaeological sites or historical properties or areas.**
 - The project area has been surveyed and reviewed for archaeological sites and historic properties or areas. Any archaeological sites, historic properties or areas which have been found will be flagged and no ground disturbing activities will take place within these flagged areas.

Scoping

Internal scoping of the project entailed correspondence between Natural Resources Management Corporation and Forest Service specialists including; Janelle Walker – Acting Heritage Resource Program Manager; David Peebles, Archeologist; Pete Johnston – Wildlife Biologist; Janet Nickerman - Forest Botanist; and Santa Clara Mojave Rivers Ranger District Resources Officer. A Biological Evaluation/ Biological Assessment, Management Indicator Species Report, Invasive Species Risk Assessment, Visual Assessment, Hydrology/Soils Report, Air Quality Report and National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 documents were prepared and/ or reviewed by the above Forest Service staff. No significant issues were identified during agency review.

Additionally, the project was published on the Schedule of Proposed Action (SOPA). Letters were also sent to all parties interested in district projects. A 30 day comment period extended from November 17, 2009 to December 17, 2009. No comments were received.

Findings Required by Other Laws

This proposed action is consistent with management direction (Angeles National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, revised 2005), as required by the National Forest Management Act (FSM 1926.41 and FSH 1909.12); National Environmental Policy Act; Endangered Species Act; National Historic Preservation Act; Clear Water Act; Clean Air Act; and all other applicable laws and regulations.

Implementation Date

This project may be implemented immediately upon line officer signature of this decision document.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This action is not subject to appeal pursuant to the Forest Service regulations at 36 CFR 215.12.

Contact Person

For additional information regarding Blue Ridge / Guffy Vegetation and Fuels Management Project, contact Tasha Hernandez, District Natural Resources Officer at the Santa Clara/Mojave Rivers Ranger Station; phone number 661-296-9710.

Approved By:



Date:

5/4/2011

Wilburn M. Blount
District Ranger
Santa Clara/Mojave Rivers RD
Angeles National Forest

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in its programs on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs). Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at 202-720-2600 (voice and TDD).

To file a complaint of discrimination, write the Secretary of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC 20250, or call 1-800-2456340 (voice) or 202-720-1127 (TDD). USDA is an equal employment opportunity provider and employer.