Chapter 1. Background

Introduction

The "Land Management Plan for the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests" (hereinafter referred to as the plan or land management plan), covers the National Forest System (NFS) lands within the boundary of the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests (Apache-Sitgreaves NFs or the forests).

The Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests' 2.1 million acres[1]are managed as a single administrative unit by the Forest Service, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The forests are located in the White Mountains of east-central Arizona (figure 1). The Gila National Forest administers the portion of the Apache National Forest located in New Mexico.

The forests are divided into five contiguous ranger districts: Black Mesa, Lakeside, Springerville, Alpine, and Clifton. Ranger district offices are located in Overgaard, Pinetop-Lakeside, Springerville, Alpine, and Clifton. The Supervisor's Office is located in Springerville.

The forests share boundaries with the Gila, Coconino, and Tonto National Forests; Fort Apache and San Carlos Apache Indian Reservations; Bureau of Land Management; State land; several cities, towns, and communities; and private lands (figure 1).

The roles and contributions of the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs are described on page 11.

Purpose of this Land Management Plan

The planning process that was followed to create this plan aims to produce responsible land management for the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs based on useful and current information and guidance. The planning process used the provisions of the 1982 Planning Rule, as allowed per the transition language of the 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219.17(b)(3)). Land management planning guides the Forest Service in fulfilling its responsibilities for the stewardship of the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs to best meet the needs of the American people.

This plan provides broad guidance and information for project and activity decisionmaking on the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs for approximately the next 15 years. The plan is strategic in nature. It does not include project and activity decisions. Those decisions will be made later, after specific proposals are made and analyzed and there is additional opportunity for public involvement. Under the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 (Public Law 94-588), projects and activities must be consistent with the plan (see "Plan Consistency" section below).

The plan provides a framework that contributes to sustaining native ecological systems by managing toward desired conditions that support native plant and animal diversity. The plan integrates forest restoration, watershed protection, climate resilience, wildlife conservation, and contributions to social and economic values, goods, and services. The plan honors the continuing validity of private, statutory, or pre-existing rights.

[1] According to the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs' Geographic Information System (GIS) data, total forest acreage in 2012 was 2,110,196 acres (2,015,352 acres NFS land and 94,844 acres of non-NFS land).

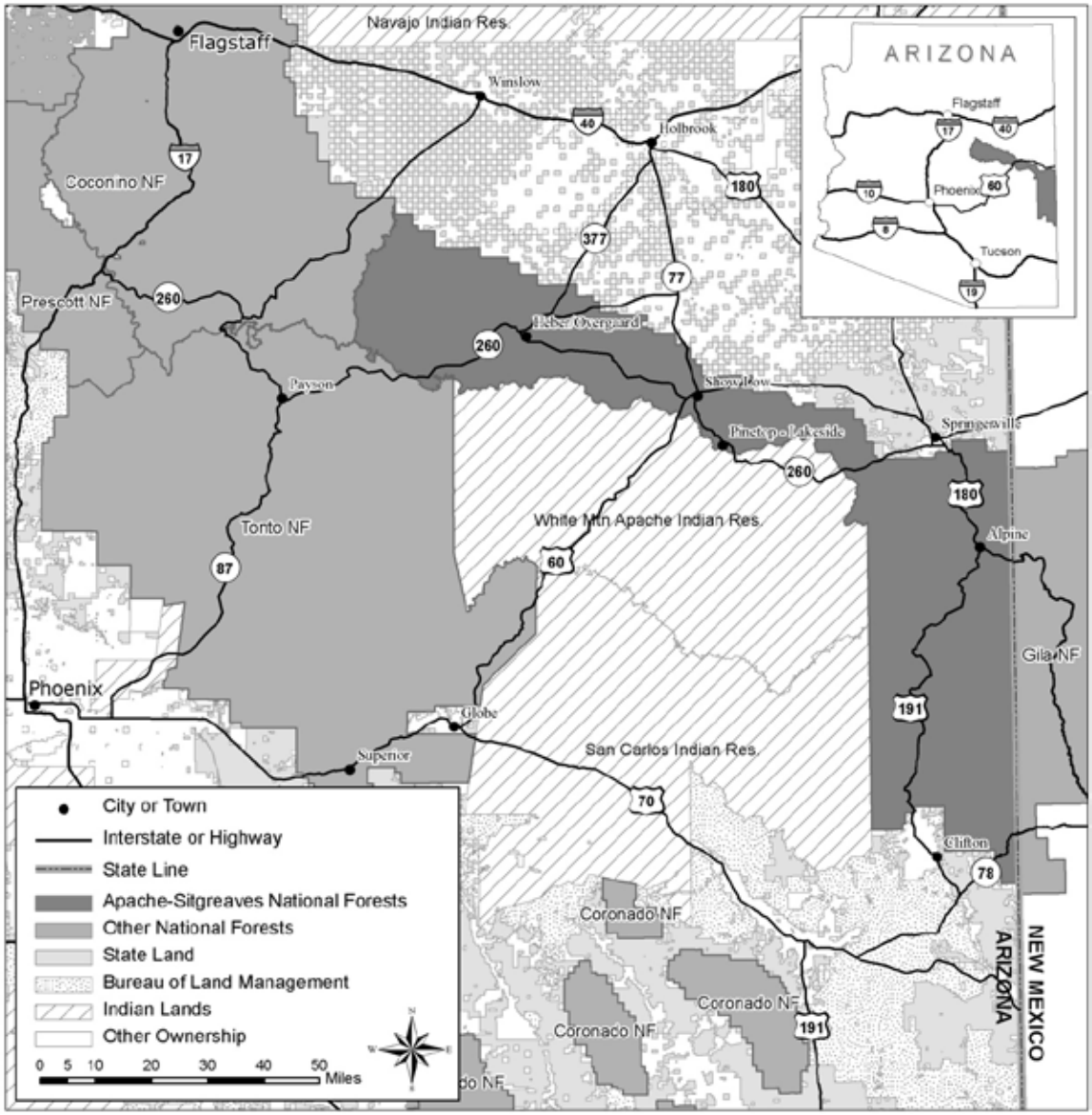

Figure 1. The Apache-Sitgreaves NFs and adjacent landowners

Summary of the Analysis of the Management Situation

The management situation is described in the "Comprehensive Evaluation Report" or CER (2008a) and "CER Supplement" (2010). Together these documents meet the content requirements of the Analysis of the Management Situation or AMS, as required by the procedures of the 1982 Planning Rule, by describing the social, economic, and ecological conditions and trends in and around the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs. The CER integrates key findings from the "Ecological Sustainability Report" (2008b), the "Economic and Social Sustainability Assessment" (2009), "Resource Evaluations" (2008c), and input from the public and Forest Service employees. The CER notes where the former land management plan (the 1987 plan) does not provide adequate management guidance for the present and future, and it identifies where the conditions and trends indicate a need for change from the 1987 plan.

The CER/AMS identifies three primary areas, or revision topics, where there are priority needs for change in program direction.

1. Maintenance and Improvement of Ecosystem Health
2. Managed Recreation
3. Community–Forest Interaction

Maintenance and Improvement of Ecosystem Health

Conditions have changed since the forest plan was issued in 1987 including the recognition that vegetation conditions (structure, composition, and function) are divergent from reference conditions; forest conditions indicate a substantial departure from the natural fire regime; and there are plant and animal species which need further consideration in the planning process. There are also emerging issues not addressed by the 1987 plan (e.g., nonnative invasive plants and animals, climate change).

The following are needs for change to the 1987 plan. They include the need to:

- Better describe desired conditions for the vegetative communities of the forests. The vegetative communities include ponderosa pine, wet mixed conifer, dry mixed conifer, spruce-fir, and aspen forests; piñon-juniper and Madrean pine-oak woodlands; Great Basin, semi-desert and montane/subalpine grasslands; interior chaparral, mixed broadleaf deciduous, montane willow, and cottonwood-willow riparian forests; and wetland/cienega riparian areas. There is a need to describe the desired composition, structure, and cover of these vegetation communities that will result in resilient, functioning ecosystems.
- Identify the desired fire regime that will help to restore fire to a more natural role as one of the forests' primary disturbance agents.
- Provide direction to guide future vegetation management activities, including burning and mechanical treatments, to move toward or maintain desired conditions.
- Incorporate management direction to guide future projects to provide habitat to maintain viable populations of existing native and desired nonnative vertebrate species in the planning area.
- Include appropriate standards and guidelines to provide direction to maintain species diversity and viability across the planning area.
- Reevaluate and update the management indicator species (MIS). MIS are species whose population changes are believed to indicate the effects of management activities. MIS are selected to allow evaluation of the differences between alternatives in the environmental impact statement.
- Add plan components to provide future project direction to control, treat, and eradicate nonnative plant and animal invasive species.
- Address the emerging issue of climate change by incorporating adaptive management strategies and describing ecological conditions that are resilient to change.

Managed Recreation

There are several concerns related to unmanaged recreation that are not adequately addressed in the 1987 plan. These include increasing recreational use of the forests and changing demographics of forest users. There are also special areas that were not mentioned in the 1987 plan (e.g., scenic byways), as well as rivers that are eligible for the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. There may be National Forest System lands that could be recommended to Congress for designation into the National Wilderness Preservation System.

The following are needs for change to the 1987 plan. They include the need to:

- Update the spectrum of recreation opportunities to reflect current and projected recreation needs, natural resource impacts, and public input. This includes identification of areas that are developed for high use and areas that resemble more natural landscapes.
- Identify the suitability of areas on the forests for motorized vehicle use and other recreational activities.
- Incorporate direction for special areas that were not included in the 1987 plan, including recommended research natural areas, the Heber Wild Horse Territory, scenic byways, and national recreation trails.
- Recommend additional special areas (i.e., research natural areas) where needed. The intent is to recommend these areas in the revised forest plan; subsequent analyses would determine whether they should become official designated areas.
- Recognize the management requirements for rivers that are eligible or suitable for the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.
- Evaluate lands for wilderness potential and, if determined to be appropriate by the responsible official, recommend designation by Congress and provide interim management guidance.

Community–Forest Interaction

There are several social concerns that cause a need to change the 1987 plan. Communities are at risk from uncharacteristic wildfire. There are increasing demands for goods, services, and forest access from growing populations and urban developments that border the forests. Many communities are surrounded by the forests and can be affected by adjustment to the forests' land ownership. Commodity use and production have shown declines from the past. However, these forest uses contribute to sustaining the lifestyles and traditions of local communities. Energy resource demands also continue to grow.

The following are needs for change to the 1987 plan. They include the need to:

- Provide direction to address communities at risk from uncharacteristic wildfire. This includes describing the appropriate vegetation desired conditions and fire regime and treatment of the wildland-urban interface.
- Provide guidelines and suitability determinations for addressing urban interface demands (e.g., access, trailheads, special use permits).
- Update guidelines regarding land ownership adjustments that better reflects community expansion needs and preservation of open space.

- Continue to provide a sustainable supply of forest and rangeland resources that is consistent with achieving desired conditions and supports local communities. Determine the suitability of lands for timber production and the allowable sale quantity of timber.
- Identify major existing energy (utility) corridors and provide management direction for these areas. Update the criteria for establishing new energy corridors.

Other needs for change have been and will continue to be identified. New information and changing conditions will necessitate changes in management. As these become ripe for action, iterative and adaptive management may result in changes to the plan. For example, following the 538,000-acre Wallow Fire of 2011, a changed condition assessment (Forest Service, 2012b) was conducted and the information was used in the development of this plan, in particular the "Landscape Scale Disturbance Events" section in chapter 2.

Plan Consistency

As required by the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) and the National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule, all projects and activities authorized by the Forest Service must be consistent with the plan. As projects and activities are planned, an interdisciplinary team assesses the potential environmental, physical, biological, aesthetic, cultural, engineering, and economic impacts on the area.

Projects and activities include all actions under 16 U.S.C. 1604(i). A project or activity must be consistent with the plan by being consistent with applicable plan decisions (see the "Plan Decisions" section below).

Plans also contain other content (see the "Other Content" section below). Projects and activities are not required to be consistent with this other content.

Where a proposed project or activity would not be consistent with a plan decision, the responsible official has the following options:

- To modify the proposal so that the project or activity will be consistent;
- To reject the proposal; or
- To amend the plan at the same time as the approval of the project or activity so that the project or activity is consistent with the plan as amended. The amendment may be limited to apply only to the project or activity.

Plan Content

This plan includes plan decisions and other content. Any substantive changes to plan decisions will require a plan amendment. A change to other content may be made using an administrative change process. See the "Changes to the Plan" section below for more information.

Plan Decisions

Plan decisions include goals (hereafter identified as desired conditions), objectives, standards, guidelines, suitability, special areas, and monitoring. Plan decisions for the portion of the Apache NF located in New Mexico can be found in the Gila National Forest land management plan.

Plan decisions for forestwide direction and management areas are displayed in shaded boxes to distinguish them from other sections of the plan.

Plan decisions for suitability and monitoring are found in their respective tables in chapters 4 and 5.

Desired Conditions

Desired conditions set forth the desired social, economic, and ecological attributes of the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs. They attempt to paint a picture of what we (the public and Forest Service) desire the forests look like or the goods and services we desire them to provide. Desired conditions are normally expressed in broad, general terms and are timeless in that there is no specific date by which they are to be completed. Desired conditions may only be achievable over a long timeframe (in some cases, several hundred years). In some cases, a desired condition matches the current condition, so the goal is to maintain the existing condition. Desired conditions are aspirations and are not commitments or final decisions approving projects.

To be consistent with the desired conditions of the plan, a project or activity, when assessed at the appropriate spatial scale described in the plan (e.g., landscape scale), must be designed to meet one or more of the following conditions:

- Maintain or make progress toward one or more of the desired conditions of a plan without adversely affecting progress toward, or maintenance of, other desired conditions; or
- Be neutral with regard to progress toward plan desired conditions; or
- Maintain or make progress toward one or more of the desired conditions over the long term, even if the project or activity would adversely affect progress toward or maintenance of one or more desired conditions in the short term; or
- Maintain or make progress toward one or more of the desired conditions over the long term, even if the project or activity would adversely affect progress toward other desired conditions in a negligible way over the long term.

The project documentation should explain how the project is consistent with desired conditions and describe any short-term or negligible long-term adverse effects the project may have concerning the maintenance or attainment of any desired condition.

Objectives

Objectives are concise, time-specific statements of measurable planned results that make progress toward or maintain desired conditions. An objective forms the basis for further planning to define the precise steps to be taken and the resources to be used in achieving desired conditions. The objectives represent just some of the expected outcomes or actions required to accomplish movement toward desired conditions. Not every action or objective the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs may initiate is identified in the plan, just the primary ones.

Variation in achieving objectives may occur during the next 15 years because of changes in environmental conditions, available budgets, and other factors. Objectives are strongly influenced by recent trends, past experiences and anticipated staffing levels, and short-term budgets.

A project or activity is consistent with the objectives of the plan if it contributes to or does not prevent the attainment of any applicable objectives. The project documentation should identify any applicable objective(s) to which the project contributes and document that the project does not prevent the attainment of any objectives. If there are no applicable objectives, the project must be consistent with the objectives of the plan, and the project document should state that fact.

Standards

Standards are constraints upon project and activity decisionmaking. A project or activity must be consistent with all standards applicable to the type of project or activity and its location in the plan area. A project or activity is consistent with a standard when its design is in exact accord with the standard; variance from a standard is not allowed except by plan amendment. The project documentation should confirm that the project is consistent with applicable standards.

Guidelines

A project or activity must be consistent with all guidelines applicable to the type of project or activity and its location in the plan area. A project or activity is consistent with a guideline in either of two ways:

1. The project or activity is designed exactly in accord with the guideline; or
2. A project or activity design varies from the exact words of the guideline, but it is as effective in meeting the purpose of the guideline to contribute to the maintenance or attainment of the relevant desired conditions and objectives.

Guidelines must be followed, but they may be modified for a specific project if the intent of the guideline is followed and the deviation is addressed in a decision document with supporting rationale. When deviation from a guideline does not meet the original intent, however, a plan amendment is required.

Special Areas

Special areas are lands that have designations by Congress or another delegated authority. Special areas are designated because of their unique or special characteristics. This plan provides direction for the following special areas: scenic byways, national recreation trails, eligible and suitable wild and scenic rivers, a botanical area, designated and recommended research natural areas, wild horse territory, designated and recommended wilderness, and a primitive area.

Where the plan provides plan decisions specific to a special area, a project or activity must be consistent with those area-specific decisions. The project documentation should describe how the project or activity is consistent with the area-specific decisions of the plan.

Suitability

Suitability describes the appropriateness of applying certain resource management practices (uses) to a particular area of land. A unit of land may be suitable for a variety of individual or combined uses.

A project with the purpose of timber production may only occur in an area identified as suitable for timber production (16 U.S.C. 1604(k)). The documentation for the project should confirm the project area meets the suitability requirements.

Except for projects with a purpose of timber production, a project or activity can be consistent with plan suitability determinations in either of two ways:

1. The project or activity is a use identified in the plan as suitable for the location where the project or activity is to occur; or
2. The project or activity is not a use identified in the plan as suitable for the location (i.e., the plan is silent on the use or the plan identifies the use as not suitable), but the responsible official determines that the use is appropriate for that location's desired conditions and objectives.

The project documentation should describe that the project or activity is either: (1) a use for which the area is specifically identified in the plan as suitable or (2) not a use for which the area is specifically identified in the plan as suitable, but it is nonetheless appropriate for that location.

Monitoring

Monitoring is used to determine the degree to which on-the-ground management is maintaining or making progress toward desired conditions. The monitoring strategy includes questions and performance measures designed to inform implementation and effectiveness of plan decisions. It helps ensure that the plan remains adaptive, in that new knowledge and information can be analyzed and the plan modified as needed.

Other Content

Besides the plan decisions mentioned above, the plan also contains other content. Other content includes: chapter 1; certain sections in chapters 2 and 3 that are not displayed in shaded boxes and sections of chapters 4 and 5 that are not displayed in tables (i.e., background, other sources of information, management approaches, related plan content); and all appendices.

Background

The "Background" section provides a narrative regarding resource conditions. The primary sources for the information found in this section are the "Comprehensive Evaluation Report," "Ecological Sustainability Report," "Economic and Social Sustainability Assessment," "Resource Evaluations," and the "Wallow Fire Changed Condition Assessment."

Other Sources of Information

The "Other Sources of Information" section includes information that exists outside the plan. These other sources are referenced for context and convenience to help in designing projects and managing activities.

Management Approaches

The "Management Approaches" section identifies probable management actions for achieving desired conditions and objectives. Management approaches describe the priorities and

expectations for future program implementation. Partnerships and collaborative arrangements for accomplishing desired conditions are also included as part of management approaches. Management approaches are strongly influenced by recent trends, past experiences, and anticipated staffing levels and short-term budgets. Decisions about what projects or activities are actually proposed and approved, as well as details of project design, are determined by public involvement, science, and professional experience at the project or activity level.

Related Plan Content

The “Related Plan Content” section lists other portions of the plan that contain associated information.

Other

It should be noted that acreages and mileages listed in the plan are approximate. They were calculated using the most current data available in the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs’ Geographic Information System (GIS). As the GIS database is updated, these measurements may change.

Changes to the Plan

A change to the plan requires either an administrative change or amendment. The following summarizes circumstances that warrant administrative changes or amendments to the plan.

Administrative Changes

An administrative change is any future change to the plan (after the revised plan goes into effect) that does not require a plan amendment or plan revision. They are minor changes to the plan that do not substantively affect the management direction or create additional environmental consequences. These minor changes include the following:

- Corrections of clerical errors to any part of the plan;
- Conformance of the plan to new statutory or regulatory requirements;
- Changes to elements of the plan that are not plan decisions as described in the “Other Content” section above; and
- Changes to the plan monitoring strategy, after notice is made to the public of the intended change and consideration has been given to public comment and feedback.

The procedures for administrative changes are outlined in 36 CFR 219.13(c) of the 2012 Planning Rule.

Site Specific Plan Amendments

Site specific plan amendments allow specific projects or other activities to deviate from certain plan decisions. These amendments apply only to the specific project or activity; they do not permanently modify the plan. If changes are made to management area map GIS layers (data), they are made only for the area affected. Such amendments are usually proposed with appropriate environmental analysis for the site specific project proposal. The procedures for a site specific plan amendment are outlined in the applicable planning regulation.

Programmatic Plan Amendments

Programmatic plan amendments change the text and language of the plan decisions identified in the earlier "Plan Decisions" section and any other changes that cannot be addressed through the administrative change process or site specific plan amendments. These are permanent changes that apply to all future projects. The procedures for addressing a programmatic plan amendment are outlined in the applicable planning regulation.

Plan Organization

Chapter 1. Background – briefly describes the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs, the analysis of the management situation, the purpose of this plan, plan content, and plan organization. For a quick preview of the plan structure, glance at the table of contents. This chapter does not contain any plan decisions.

Chapter 2. Forestwide Direction – contains plan decisions and other content that are applicable forestwide.

Chapter 3. Management Area Direction – contains plan decisions and other content that is applicable to particular management areas. The Apache-Sitgreaves NFs are divided into 12 management areas.

Chapter 4. Suitability – describes the appropriateness of certain resource management practices (uses) across the forests.

Chapter 5. Monitoring Strategy – contains the monitoring plan decisions and provides a framework for subsequent monitoring and evaluation.

Glossary – provides definitions of select words from this plan. These words are noted by hypertext at least once in the main document.

Appendix A. Climate Change Trends and Apache-Sitgreaves NFs Land Management Planning – provides information and discussion about climate change in the Southwestern Region of the Forest Service and considerations for land management planning.

Appendix B. Vegetation Conditions and Management Practices – describes the current (2011) and desired future conditions for the 14 major potential natural vegetation types (PNVTs) on the forests, as well as management practices that may be used to maintain or make progress toward desired conditions.

Appendix C. Communications Sites – identifies the designated communications sites located on the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs.

Appendix D. Relevant Laws, Regulations, Policies, and Agreements – provides a partial listing of relevant statutes, regulations, policies, and agreements applicable to the Forest Service.

Appendix E. Proposed and Possible Management Actions – lists proposed and possible management actions that may take place on the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs at the project or activity level during the planning period.

Appendix F. Maps – contains maps of management areas.

Hypertext is used throughout the plan—it allows the user of the electronic version of this plan to click on a word (indicated by underlined text) and be redirected to another area of the plan or an external reference. Note: the first occurrence of words that are found in the glossary are hyperlinked, for example Glossary.

Roles and Contributions of the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs

The distinctive characteristics of the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs frame the roles it plays and contributions it provides to the local area, the State, the Southwestern Region, and the Nation. The forests are located along and below the Mogollon Rim, an abrupt escarpment which is the southern boundary of the Colorado Plateau and splits Arizona into low elevation deserts and high elevation mountains and plateaus. The forests encompass mountains, hills, cinder cones, plains, plateaus, deep canyons, and escarpments. Elevations range from about 3,500 feet in the Clifton area to 11,400 feet on Mount Baldy[2] near Springerville.

Figure 2. Fall colors, Apache-Sitgreaves NFs

The diverse vegetation ranges from semi-desert grasslands to high elevation spruce-fir forests. The Apache-Sitgreaves NFs contain a portion of the largest ponderosa pine forest in the world and the most extensive montane and subalpine grasslands in Arizona. Many of the unique riparian vegetation types of Arizona are found within the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs.

The Apache-Sitgreaves NFs are a distinctive and important component of the arid Southwest, containing over 30 lakes and reservoirs and more than 1,000 miles of rivers and perennial streams, more than any other southwestern national forest. The forests contain the headwaters of several major Arizona river systems, including the Little Colorado, Black, Blue, and San Francisco.

Diverse ecosystems provide habitat for a wide array of wildlife, fish, and plants; some of which can only be found in this area. Unique species include Apache trout, Springerville pocket mouse, White Mountains ground squirrel, Three Forks springsnail, and Mogollon paintbrush. The Apache-Sitgreaves NFs are one of two national forests in the Nation to provide a home for the recovery of the Mexican gray wolf (Mexican wolf).

[2] The summit of Mount Baldy is within the Fort Apache Indian Reservation just outside the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs' boundary.

Most visitors to the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs come from Arizona's metropolitan areas, seeking a respite from the desert heat or the noise and/or confinement of urban living. Many are drawn to the water-based activities; while others enjoy the diverse scenery of vast rolling grasslands, rugged desert terrain, and lush alpine forests.

Forest visitors enjoy the recreation opportunities of the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs, including three scenic byways and several popular developed recreation areas. The forests also provide an abundance of dispersed recreation opportunities. Three wilderness areas and the Nation's only primitive area provide opportunities for solitude and back-country experiences. Over a thousand miles of trails provide ample hiking, bicycling, horseback, and off-highway vehicle access to natural highlights of the forests' landscape. Big game hunting and fishing in some of the best lakes and streams of the Southwest are popular activities. The forests are also a destination for winter activities: snow play, snowmobiling, ice fishing, cross-country skiing, and sledding.

Many people, some of whom have long-time connections to the forests, have an interest in and use the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs. American Indian tribes and many local residents have traditional ties, such as forest product collection, hunting, and large group gatherings. Loggers and ranchers continue to be an important part of the forests' history, and their traditional uses remain an important part of the cultural landscape.

Additional values that make the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs unique in a national and regional context include:

- Visitors use the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs as a place to stay overnight more than any other forest in the National Forest System (Stynes and White, 2005).
- Aldo Leopold, known as the father of wildlife conservation, served as a timber cruiser on the Apache National Forest from 1909 to 1911.
- All but one of the Arizona big game species (bison) can be found on the forests. Species include: pronghorn antelope, black bear, bighorn sheep, elk, javelina, turkey, mountain lion, mule deer, and white-tailed deer.
- Nine of the 19 Outstanding Arizona Waters are on the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs. These streams are considered outstanding State resources.
- Twenty-one of the Apache-Sitgreaves NFs' rivers (and creeks) are eligible and two are suitable for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.
- At 50 miles long, the Blue River is one of the longest stretches in the State with native fish species.
- The highest lightning frequency in Arizona occurs along the Mogollon Rim and the White Mountains.

The Apache-Sitgreaves NFs Mission

The phrase, "Caring for the Land and Serving People," succinctly captures the Forest Service mission. The mission is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. The overall goal of managing National Forest System lands is to sustain the multiple uses of its resources in perpetuity while maintaining the long-term productivity of the land.

The Apache-Sitgreaves NFs staff strives to effectively and efficiently manage National Forest System lands and resources to meet the needs and desires of the public following applicable laws, regulations, and policies while enhancing the environment.

The Apache-Sitgreaves NFs Vision

The Apache-Sitgreaves NFs effectively manage for resiliency across the landscape. We ensure the perpetuation of a broad range of diverse habitats, exceptional recreation opportunities, functioning watersheds, robust rangelands, and a balanced flow of forest resources for future generations. We integrate community values and protection into all aspects of forest management.

Our employees are appreciated individually for their contributions and embrace safety as a core value. We embrace diversity and a collaborative approach with each other and the public. Our work is efficient, innovative, and adaptive.