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## UPDATED SCOPING INFORMATION: CATALINA-RINCON FIRESCAPE PROJECT

### *Dear Friends and Neighbors of the Coronado National Forest:*

I am writing to you today with an update about the proposed Catalina-Rincon FireScape Project (CR FS), which was first announced in May 2011 in a Scoping Notice that was distributed publicly by U.S. mail, electronic mail (email) and posted on the Forest website. (The project description in the initial notice remains available for your information on the internet at <http://www.azfirescape.org/catalina/home>.)

To date, we've received eight comment letters in response to the notice; these were submitted by individuals, Pima County, and the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality. From among these letters, we have identified 14 distinct comments regarding the scope of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis.

As you may recall, the CR FS is a proposed vegetation management project that focuses on fire management and fuels reduction on the Santa Catalina Ranger District of the Forest, and adjacent lands in Pima, Pinal, and Cochise counties, Arizona. The CR FS area comprises approximately 475,000 acres, including the Forest, Saguaro National Park, Oracle State Park, State Trust, Bureau of Land Management and private lands (see Figure 1). The Coronado manages 260,000 acres inside the CR FS project boundary, among which are two wilderness areas (WAs), two research natural areas (RNAs), and six inventoried roadless areas (IRAs).

Included in the information package with the Scoping Notice was a description of 81 treatment parcels. This update provides you with an expanded description of each parcel, including more detailed and site-specific information. In order to organize this information succinctly, we grouped the 81 treatment units into seven geographically-distinct land areas. As we prepared this information update, we noted that two RNAs and six IRAs had not been mentioned in the original scoping notice. These have been added to this updated notice.

The text that follows provides additional details and special management considerations for each of seven geographic groups. At the end of this update notice, the treatment parcels within each group are listed, and further information is provided regarding treatment options (Table 1). The groups within the CR FS boundary, in relation to special management areas and land ownership, are depicted on Figure 1. The treatment parcels and the corresponding geographic groups are displayed in Figure 2.



## **Northeast Group**

General information about this group is as follows:

- Total size: 49,754 acres; 21 treatment units
- Elevation range: 3,200 – 8,500 feet; average slope: 51 percent
- Land ownership (acres), Forest Service: 35,089; private: 7,055; state: 7,608
- Ecological types proposed for treatment: Chihuahuan Desert, Mesquite Grassland, Mountain Mahogany, Oak-Juniper-Pinyon
- Use features: off-highway vehicle (OHV) use areas, trailheads
- Special management considerations: Butterfly Peak RNA, IRA, proximity to Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI), Mexican spotted owl and goshawk habitat

This group comprises treatment units lying between the crest of the Catalina Mountains and the San Pedro Valley. Lower elevation sections contain Sonoran Desert, Chihuahuan Desert and Mesquite Grassland ecological types. Oak-juniper-pinyon types dominate middle elevations, and pine-oak forest and woodland types are at the top of this part of the mountain. The Northeast Group is located south and east of the Oracle Ridge vegetation management project, where mastication followed by prescribed fire are proposed as ecological and WUI treatments.

More than half of the Northeast group burned during the 2002 Bullock Fire. Preliminary modeling of fire behavior that would occur with current vegetation conditions reveals a potential for moderate and high flame lengths. Vegetation also shows a departure from historic open-canopy conditions.

The primary treatment proposed in the Northeast Group is prescribed fire, with associated pretreatment, in all ecological types except the Sonoran Desert. Within the 52,619-acre Northeast Group, thinning in the high-elevation Alder, Crystal, Diablo, Horse Camp, Leopold, and Marble units could total about 800 acres.

## **Cañada del Oro Group**

General information for this group is as follows:

- Size: 33,346 acres, 12 units
- Elevation range: 3,100 – 9,100 feet; average slope: 55 percent
- Land ownership (acres), Forest Service: 28,726; private 1,579; state 3,039
- Ecological types for treatment: Mesquite Grassland, Desert-Oak Transition, Oak-Pinyon-Juniper Woodland, Oak-Conifer
- Use features: trailheads, adjacent to Oracle and Saddlebrooke communities, University of Arizona Mt. Lemmon Sky Center, various communication sites, OHV use
- Special management considerations: Inventoried Roadless Areas, Small area of Wilderness, Mexican spotted owl and goshawk habitat, WUI

The Cañada del Oro group lies above residential communities at the foot of the west side of the Catalina Mountains. Much of the area burned during the 2003 Aspen Fire, and post-fire erosion and flooding were

serious problems in this drainage. Prescribed fire is proposed as the primary ecological and fuels reduction treatment for this group. Small bands of mastication are proposed for the west side of the NW Gap unit and the north edge of the Copper Hill unit (800 acres total). Cargodera, the southernmost treatment unit within the Cañada del Oro group, contains a small corner of the Pusch Ridge Wilderness. Any mechanical treatments in the Wilderness must be reviewed and approved by the Regional Forester for Region 3, prior to implementation.

### **Mountain Top Group**

General information for this group is as follows:

- Size: 4,872 acres, 8 treatment units
- Elevation range 6,000 – 9,000 feet; average slope: 48 percent
- Land ownership (acres), Forest Service: 4,566; private: 306
- Ecological types proposed for treatment: Desert-Oak Transition, Oak-Pinyon-Juniper, Ponderosa Pine, Mixed Conifer
- Use features: Summerhaven community, Willow Canyon and Soldier Camp summer homes, Organization Ridge (church camps, Boy Scout and Girl Scout camps), Palisades Visitor Center, Ski Valley, trailheads, Campgrounds/Picnic Areas (Spencer Canyon, Marshall Gulch, Rose Canyon, Alder, Inspiration Rock, Loma Linda, Showers Point, Whitetail, Bear Wallow, General Hitchcock), vista points, Catalina Highway corridor, various communication towers
- Special management considerations: small IRA, Mexican spotted owl and goshawk habitat, WUI

The Mountain Top group contains high-use recreational areas, residential developments, and habitat for protected species, all of which add complexity to fire management. This area was heavily impacted by the 2003 Aspen Fire. The fire-adapted coniferous types within the group will eventually be sites for prescribed fires, but careful thinning treatments are necessary as initial steps to reduce risk of crown fire.

### **Northwest Group**

General information about this group is as follows:

- Size: 6,846 acres, 3 treatment units
- Elevation range: 2,600 – 4,000 feet; average slope: 33 percent
- Land ownership (acres), Forest Service: 6,826; private: 16
- Ecological types proposed for treatment: Mesquite Grassland
- Use features: Catalina State Park, trailheads
- Special management considerations: IRAs, WUI

This small group contains three treatment units that span an area from the base of the mountain west towards Oracle Road. It includes Forest land operated by the state as Catalina State Park. Sonoran Desert areas are not included in CR FS treatment plans; however, thinning followed by broadcast prescribe fire is planned for Mesquite Grassland areas.

## **Redington Group**

General information about this group is as follows:

- Size: 24,860 acres; 5 treatment units
- Elevation range: 3,200 – 7,100 feet; average slope: 49 percent
- Land ownership (acres), Forest Service: 22,519; private: 2,162; state: 179
- Ecological types proposed for treatment: Desert-Oak Transition, Mesquite Grassland, Oak-Conifer, Oak-Juniper-Pinyon; secondary treatments in riparian areas
- Use features: trailheads, OHV use, Bellota Ranch, Bear Canyon and Cypress Picnic Areas (Bug unit)
- Special management considerations: IRAs, Mexican spotted owl (Bug unit)

Prescribed fire and its associated activities are proposed for this area. Ecological units include Mesquite Grassland types on lower slopes and Oak-Juniper-Pinyon above. A Desert-Oak transition on granitic soil lies between those types at the west end of the group. The grassy understory within these types is believed to historically have carried frequent fire that kept areas as more open savannas rather than woodland. The Forest is currently applying prescribed fire just south of this group. The Guthrie Fire in 2009 was managed to benefit resources in the Guthrie and Bullock Spring units. With continued application of prescribed fire, the Redington area can be maintained in a condition that would generate manageable fire behavior and protect important ecological, range, and recreational values. About 300 acres in Bear Canyon at the top of the Bug unit are proposed for thinning; the area includes popular recreation sites and a stretch of the Catalina Highway.

## **Rincon Group**

General information about this group is as follows:

- Size: 62,898 acres; 14 treatment units
- Elevation range: 3,800 – 8,700 feet; average slope: 60 percent
- Land ownership (acres), Forest Service : 36,682; National Park Service: 24,180; private: 1,524; state: 596
- Ecological types proposed for treatment: Desert-Oak Transition, Mesquite Grassland, Oak-Juniper-Pinyon, Oak-Conifer, Ponderosa Pine, Mixed Conifer
- Use features: trailheads, Saguaro National Park facility (Manning Camp), OHV use
- Special management considerations: Rincon Mountain and Saguaro Wilderness areas, IRAs

The Rincon Group comprises Forest Service, National Park Service, private and state lands. With the exception of about 400 acres of proposed mastication on the northeast edge of the Rincon Peak unit, prescribed fire is the principal treatment for the Rincon Group. This area of decadent manzanita lies along a road. The lowest elevations on the east side are dominated by Mesquite Grassland types that benefit from frequent fire. The treatment units on the west side of the group start at 4,500 feet elevation, after the Sonoran Desert—which Saguaro National Park manages for fire exclusion—transitions into fire-adapted communities. Mid-elevations within the Rincon Group include a number of oak types—Desert Oak Transition, Oak-Juniper-Pinyon, and Oak-Conifer-Manzanita—whose open aspect is maintained by fire.

A few pockets of thinning in Bear, Boulder, Hidden, Mesquite, Rincon Peak, San Juan, and Turkey Creek total 700 acres and create fire control features along roads where there is access to cut material for fuelwood. Mica Mountain and Chimenea units contain the largest expanse of ponderosa pine forest in the CR FS area.

Using managed wildfire and prescribed fire, the National Park Service has maintained open pine forests in the Rincon Mountains; continued application of prescribed fire and management of wildland fire for resource benefits is key to keeping those forests healthy. Mixed conifer units on top and Oak-Pinyon-Juniper on the north slope make up the rest of the Rincon units. Prescribed fire is the preferred treatment for these units, assisted by managed wildland fire. There are heavy fuels present that could generate extreme fire behavior. The Rincon Group includes congressionally designated Wilderness on both National Park Service (Saguaro Wilderness) and Forest Service (Rincon Mountain Wilderness) lands. The proposed action includes treatments in Wilderness that may require mechanized tools to accomplish work effectively and safely. Strict protocols for determining the appropriate tool use are followed for proposed actions in Wilderness on Forest lands. Saguaro National Park currently has procedures in place for accommodating mechanized tool use in Wilderness.

### **Pusch Wilderness Group**

General information for this group is as follows:

- Size: 60,526 acres, 17 treatment units
- Elevation range: 2,700 – 9,000 feet; average slope: 70 percent
- Land Ownership (acres), Forest Service: 60,374, private: 153
- Ecological types proposed for treatment: Desert-Oak Transition, Mesquite Grassland, Oak-Juniper-Pinyon, Oak-Conifer, Ponderosa Pine, Mixed Conifer
- Use features: trailheads, Sabino Canyon Recreation Area, Tucson WUI borders lowers elevation, Mt. Lemmon WUI borders upper elevations, Molino Basin Campground, Gordon Hiribayshi Campground, vista points (Windy Point, Geology)
- Special management considerations: most units in designated Wilderness, Santa Catalina RNA, Mexican spotted owl and goshawk (upper elevations), Gila chub (Sabino Creek)

The Pusch Ridge Wilderness on the south slope of the Catalinas lies between the City of Tucson and coniferous forest at the top of the mountain. Much of this area burned during the 2003 Aspen Fire. Within the mountaintop are communities of recreation residences. Sonoran Desert at the base of this group is not a fire-adapted system, and management there excludes fire. Therefore, Sonoran Desert is not proposed for treatment under the CR FS project. Efforts to control invasive non-native buffelgrass in these areas are being conducted as other Forest projects. The oak types require fire to maintain historic open spacing and grassy understory, but fuels reduction on the mountain front must proceed in steps. Within the Wilderness at the tops of Lemmon Rock, Marshall Saddle, and Huntsman units, the CR FS proposal includes use of mechanized treatments to prepare a fire control feature for safe wildland fire management along a ridgeline. Buffers (fire control lines created using selective cutting only where necessary) along existing trails are also proposed in the Pusch Group. Strict protocols for determining appropriate tool use are being followed for actions in designated Wilderness on Coronado National Forest lands. Heavily used recreation sites lie within this treatment group.

Questions about this notice and the information it contains may be directed to District Forester, Ms. Rachael Biggs on (520) 749-7717 and [rbiggs@fs.fed.us](mailto:rbiggs@fs.fed.us). Questions about the Forest Service NEPA process may be directed to Ms. Andrea Wargo Campbell, Forest NEPA Coordinator, at (520) 388-8352 and [awcampbell@fs.fed.us](mailto:awcampbell@fs.fed.us).

Sincerely,

*/s/ R. Stan Helin*  
R. STAN HELIN  
District Ranger