

Lower Rio Cebolla Occupied Habitat Improvement Project

Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is to improve the quality of occupied New Mexico meadow jumping mouse habitat in the Lower Rio Cebolla. This protection is needed because the New Mexico meadow jumping mouse (*Zapus hudsonius luteus*) was listed as an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act, which means Federal agencies must ensure that any action they fund, authorize, or carry out is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any listed species. Actions also cannot result in the destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat of these species. In the listing notice dated June 10, 2014, the US Fish and Wildlife Service found that livestock grazing has the potential to jeopardize the species.

Location

This project is located on the Lower Rio Cebolla, in the wet meadow near the bottomless-arch crossing on Forest Road 376 (T19N, R2E, Sec 29) (Figure 1). The project area is within the San Diego Allotment. The allotment is composed of 101,817 acres with 74,114 acres of National Forest System land open to grazing.

Existing Condition

The New Mexico meadow jumping mouse has exceptionally specialized habitat requirements to support its life-history needs and maintain adequate population sizes. Habitat requirements are characterized by tall (24 inches), dense riparian herbaceous vegetation (plants with no woody tissue) primarily composed of sedges and forbs (broad-leafed herbaceous plants). This suitable habitat is found only when wetland vegetation associated with perennial flowing water achieves its full growth potential. This vegetation is important for the New Mexico meadow jumping mouse because it provides vital food sources (insects and seeds), as well as the structural material for building nests that are used for shelter from predators.

The vegetation in the project area does not meet the specialized habitat requirements just described. Because the project area is not fenced, permitted livestock grazing occurs. Dispersed camping, another activity which has the potential to cause bare ground and remove vegetation, is not prohibited in the project area.

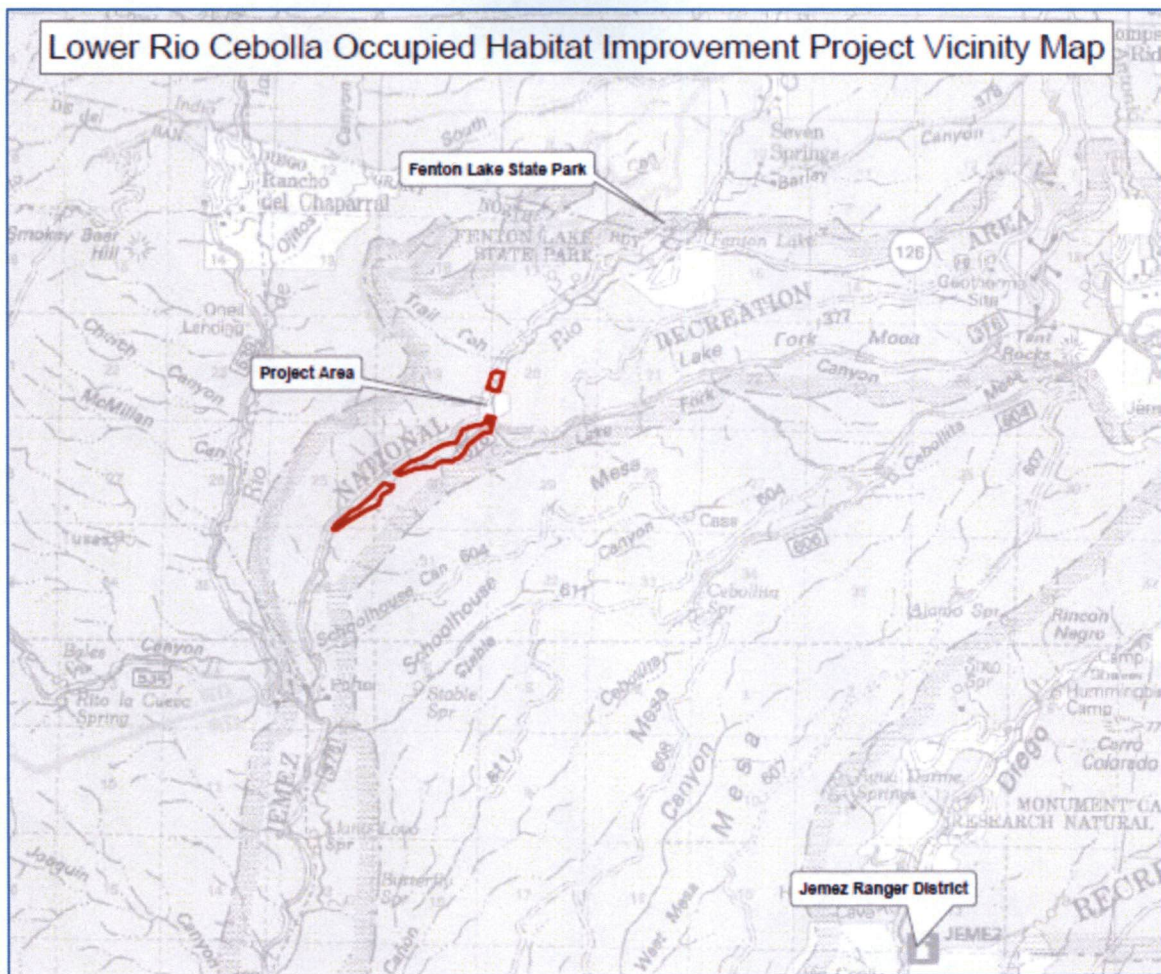


Figure 1. Lower Rio Cebolla Occupied Habitat Improvement Project Vicinity Map

Desired Condition

The following desired conditions are taken from the Santa Fe National Forest Plan (1987, as amended):

- Identify, protect and enhance habitat that contains threatened, endangered, and sensitive species of plants and animals to contribute toward the goal of species recovery. (replacement page 19)
- Manage habitat to maintain viable populations of wildlife and fish species and improve habitat for selected species. Coordinate habitat management with other resource activities. (replacement page 19)

In addition, the Endangered Species Act requires Federal agencies to ensure that any action they fund, authorize, or carry out is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any endangered species or threatened species or result in the destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat of such species. Continuing to allow grazing or dispersed camping in the mouse's occupied habitat would not meet the intent of the Endangered Species Act.

Proposed Action

To improve the New Mexico meadow jumping mouse's occupied habitat, the Jemez Ranger District proposes to:

1. Construct four exclosures of different sizes that would enclose approximately 120 acres on the perimeter of occupied New Mexico meadow jumping mouse habitat in the project area (Figure 1). An exclosure is a structure that would keep livestock out of the wet meadow, which would promote riparian vegetation growth by removing grazing. The exclosures would be built of 5-foot pipe fence with cables. These fences would prevent livestock grazing but allow other wildlife access to the riparian area. Fences would be built as soon as possible.
2. Prepare a closure order to keep recreationists from dispersed camping in the occupied habitat. The closure order would be prepared as soon as possible.
3. Monitor the exclosures to determine if they are effective at keeping grazing and dispersed camping from occurring in the occupied habitat.

Management Direction

The Santa Fe National Forest Plan includes both forest-wide prescriptions and standards and guidelines for management areas. The Lower Rio Cebolla Habitat Protection Project lies within Management Area X. This project is consistent with the Santa Fe National Forest Plan.

- MANAGEMENT AREA X - JEMEZ NATIONAL RECREATION AREA - Jemez National Recreation Area was developed to "conserve, protect, and restore the ecological, cultural, religious, and wildlife resource values for which the JNRA was designated", as required by the JNRA Act.

The most relevant provisions in the JNRA Act are as follows:

- Particular emphasis is placed on the conservation and protections of wildlife resources, including species listed as sensitive by the Forest Service; and compliance with all applicable Federal and State Laws relating to wildlife including the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

Categorical Exclusion

We anticipate this project will be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or an environmental impact statement under the following category:

(6) Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction. (36 CFR 220.6(e)(6))

This category is appropriate because the proposed action is to improve New Mexico meadow jumping mouse habitat by allowing its habitat, the riparian vegetation, to reach its full growth. Preliminary analysis indicates that there are no extraordinary circumstances that would result in significant effects.



Figure 2. Map of Proposed Exclosures in the Lower Rio Cebolla Occupied Habitat Improvement Project Area.