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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Southwestern Region

Cibola National Forest

July 2022

Record of Decision

Cibola National Forest Land Management Plan

Bernalillo, Catron, Cibola, Lincoln, McKinley, Sandoval, Sierra, Socorro, Torrance, and Valencia Counties,
New Mexico



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Cover photo: The western front range of the Sandia Mountains within the Sandia Ranger District, which is located to the east of the City of Albuquerque jurisdictional boundary. Photo shows craggy cliffs atop sparsely vegetated rocky foothills. Credit: William Stone Photography.

Record of Decision for the Cibola National Forest Land Management Plan

Bernalillo, Catron, Cibola, Lincoln, McKinley, Sandoval, Sierra,
Socorro, Torrance, and Valencia Counties,
New Mexico

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Introduction

This record of decision documents my decision and rationale for approving the Cibola National Forest Land Management Plan. The decision implements the Forest Service's 2012 Land Management Planning Rule at 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) part 219 and fosters productive and sustainable use of our National Forest System lands in promoting sound land stewardship in partnership with communities, and it advances other strategic goals of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, including: (1) ensuring U.S. Department of Agriculture Programs are delivered efficiently, effectively, and with integrity and a focus on customer service; (2) facilitating rural prosperity and economic development; and (3) ensuring productive and sustainable use of our National Forest System lands.

The Cibola National Forest (also referred to in this document as "the Cibola") plays a unique role supporting and partnering with communities in central New Mexico, as well as throughout the southwestern United States. The unique relationship of the Cibola to local communities, and how the land management plan is responsive to community needs (described below in the "Forest Setting" and "Need for Change" sections), led to the development of the core management themes around which the plan was developed: (1) respecting cultural and traditional landscapes and uses, (2) valuing unique places and features, (3) managing holistically for watershed and ecosystem health, and (4) managing for sustainable recreation.

The Cibola land management plan not only responds to promoting sound management while meeting local community needs but also responds to U.S. Department of Agriculture strategic goals in the following ways:

1. Customer service is improved by simplifying management of the forest. As a result of public input, we reduced the number of management areas. The public will benefit with a management plan that is easier to read and understand. The revised land management plan is less prone to future conflict over different interpretations of language and overly complex management areas. The revised plan also increases effectiveness by using the most up-to-date information and science to guide management.
2. The Cibola National Forest contributes to rural prosperity, providing economic opportunities for fuelwood, livestock grazing, and abundant recreational opportunities. Many local communities draw from the forest's abundant fuelwood that is used as the primary, and sometimes only, fuel source for cooking and heating in rural homes. Traditional communities and families that live around the Cibola continue to look to the forest resources for economic opportunity and vitality and to sustain the cultural practices that form the backbone of central New Mexico life.
3. The land management plan recognizes active forest management as a primary tool to accomplish productive and sustainable use of the forest. Active forest management, following guidance in the plan, will improve forest health, reduce wildfire risk, and restore and maintain watersheds. The plan incorporates new fire management approaches that will reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire. Water quality and aquatic health are persistent overarching concerns that are addressed through plan guidance.

Forest Setting

The Cibola National Forest is one of five national forests in New Mexico. It includes four mountain ranger districts in central New Mexico extending west to the Mount Taylor Ranger District, south to the Magdalena Ranger District, southeast to the Mountainair Ranger District, and east to the Sandia Ranger District. The land base of these ranger districts covers more than 1.6 million acres. The districts are located within ten counties in New Mexico (Bernalillo, Catron, Cibola, Lincoln, McKinley, Sandoval, Sierra, Socorro, Torrance, and Valencia).

Traditional communities include federally recognized Indian Tribes (hereafter also referred to as “Tribes”), land grants, acequia associations, livestock grazing producers, and other rural historic communities that engage with the Cibola to support their unique history and to continue spiritual, cultural, and subsistence practices for current families and future generations.

The Cibola National Forest shares approximately 102 miles of common boundary with many tribal nations including the Navajo Nation and the Pueblos of Acoma, Isleta, Laguna, Sandia, and Zuni. Many other tribal nations have historic areas now managed by the Cibola.

Many Spanish- and Mexican-era land grants-*mercedes* communities, organized as subdivisions of New Mexico state government, share approximately 72 miles of common boundaries with the Cibola National Forest. These include the land grants of Cañón de Carnué, Casa Colorada, Cebolleta, Chililí, Cubero, Lo de Padilla, Manzano, San Antonio de Las Huertas, San Pedro Tajiue, Tomé, and Torreón. Additional community land grants with an interest in the Cibola are Atrisco and Sevilleta de la Joya. Forest Service staff maintain relationships with these communities with former common lands now administered by Forest Service personnel.

The four ranger districts are distinct because they are spread across central New Mexico as disconnected areas of National Forest System lands. Each ranger district has a distinguishing landscape of isolated mountains (“sky islands”) with high-elevation spruce and fir forests, mid-slope ponderosa pine forests surrounded by pinyon pine and juniper, and lowland desert environments. Although there are similarities in the habitat types, each area has a distinctly different set of communities, local history, and contemporary uses, providing unique resources and opportunities.

The Cibola National Forest spans four major ecological types resulting in diverse elevation, geology, vegetation, and associated terrestrial and aquatic habitats. These landscapes span low-elevation semi-desert grasslands to high-elevation alpine meadows and provide habitat for a variety of different plant and animal species. Riparian systems are limited across the Cibola, and water is a precious resource for wildlife, livestock, and communities.

The Cibola provides habitat for many different species of wildlife, fish, and plants, including (at the time of this decision) nine federally listed threatened or endangered species, of which, the Mexican spotted owl, Zuni bluehead sucker, and the Zuni fleabane are well-documented to reside on the Cibola.

The Cibola National Forest contains significant heritage (historic and prehistoric) and paleontological (fossil) resources that provide a valuable cultural heritage for the future. These resources connect descendant communities to their history and help the public learn about this area’s rich past and allow tourism businesses to thrive, including those related to visiting historic, cultural, and paleontological sites.

Recreation opportunities on the Cibola National Forest greatly contribute to the quality of life enjoyed by visitors. Outstanding opportunities are easily found for hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, winter sports, viewing wildlife, and appreciating scenic landscape vistas and open spaces. Developed recreation sites of the Cibola provide opportunities and activities for visitors to enjoy that are unique within this region (such as ski areas, a tram, and observatories) and outdoor recreation activities that are important to the local tourism economy. Primitive recreation opportunities are provided for by the roughly twenty-five percent of the forest that is designated or recommended wilderness, inventoried roadless areas, or eligible wild and scenic river reaches.

Restoration-related projects and resulting forest products and services contribute to local economies and provide jobs to local communities. Livestock grazing contributes to local economies and provides an important source of food.

Stewardship opportunities, recreation, and youth-related partnerships are among a variety of interests that connect the Cibola National Forest with Tribes, federal and state agencies, soil and water conservation districts, communities, and nongovernmental partners.

The Cibola supports about 1,280 jobs in the area and contributes \$44 million in labor income annually. Most of these contributions are from Forest Service expenditures, recreation services, and livestock grazing. Forest expenditures provide about 366 jobs and \$18.5 million and include such things as purchasing goods and direct employment. Recreation industry contributions include about 382 jobs and \$11.2 million, and grazing operations support an estimated 318 jobs and \$4.4 million annually. Livestock grazing has been an important part of the local economy and part of the cultural fabric of central New Mexico for more than a century, while the recreation industry is a newer, but critical, component of the economy.

Need for Change

The current Cibola land management plan was adopted in 1985 and has been amended 16 times to respond to current and changing conditions. There is a better understanding of ecological conditions and trends than in 1985 when the land management plan was issued, including the recognition that vegetation conditions are divergent from reference conditions. These forest conditions indicate a substantial departure from the natural fire regime and indicate plant and animal species need further consideration in the planning process.

As required by the 2012 Planning Rule, Cibola National Forest staff assessed ecological, economic, and social conditions, trends, and risks to sustainability within the context of the broader landscape. This evaluation began in 2012 and was published in the 2015 Cibola assessment report based on public comment. The need for change statements paint a picture of strategic changes needed to be made to the Cibola land management plan to address issues identified in the assessment and in response to scoping comments made on the notice of intent. The needs for change were used to develop the purpose and need of the draft environmental impact statement. Changes to the draft plan and draft environmental impact statement were further refined by feedback on the preliminary draft plan shared with the Cibola's public and cooperating agencies in 2016, other public feedback opportunities, and cooperating agency comments.

Four broad categories of needs to change the Cibola National Forest's 1985 plan were identified. Each broad category includes several specific needs, which can be found in the land management plan. Following are the broad categories of needs to change:

- **Throughout the plan and across multiple resources.** There are multiple needs to address, either by plan direction or other plan content, including such needs as addressing how forest management in all resource areas should be prioritized, removing redundant components, addressing distinct geographic areas, enhancing the forest's contribution to local economies, and updating current knowledge about climate change and invasive species.
- **Ecosystems and species.** Ecological conditions have changed since the 1985 plan, including the recognition that vegetation conditions are divergent from reference conditions, that forest conditions indicate a substantial departure from the natural fire regime, and that plant and animal species need further consideration in the planning process.
- **Water resources and watersheds.** Water resources are limited across the Cibola, and water is a precious resource for wildlife, livestock, ecosystem and watershed health, and local communities. There is a need for direction on the sustainable management of these important resources.
- **Multiple uses and human influences.** The Cibola contains distinctive landscapes, cultural histories, and socioeconomic characteristics that contribute to the surrounding communities. The 1985 plan neither addresses issues such as recognizing livestock grazing and fuelwood gathering as important uses to be continued on the Cibola nor a sustainable recreation program that will be able to adapt to changes in demand, available resources, and opportunities.

Public comments at all phases highlighted the recurring linkages to ecological, social, and economic conditions, values, and benefits as identified within the needs for change categories. This public input informed the development of four core management themes to summarize and synthesize the needs for change. These core management themes drove the development of the draft land management plan and are discussed in more depth under my "Rationale for the Decision."

- Respecting Cultural and Traditional Landscapes and Uses
- Valuing Unique Places and Features
- Managing Holistically for Watershed and Ecosystem Health
- Managing for Sustainable Recreation

Comments from these needs for change, core themes, and the plan components based on them were analyzed and grouped into issue categories from which we developed alternatives. Issues serve to highlight effects, both anticipated and unanticipated, that may occur from the proposed action or alternatives. Addressing the variety of issues identified during the analysis provides opportunities to reduce adverse effects and compare trade-offs for the decision maker and public to understand. These issue categories were used to develop the draft land management plan and the alternatives to the proposed plan. Public comments on the draft plan and draft environmental impact statement were then used to further refine the preferred alternative. The Cibola land management plan is a shared product resulting from extensive public involvement throughout the plan revision process.

Engagement with State and Local Governments, other Federal Agencies, Federally Recognized Tribes, and the Public

State and Local Governments, other Federal Agencies, and Federally Recognized Tribes

Local Tribes and communities depend on the economic, social, and ecological benefits provided by the Cibola National Forest. The national forest supports jobs and economies, local traditional communities and uses, healthy wildlife populations, and clean air and water, among other benefits. Many of the issues and concerns facing the Cibola require a cohesive management approach across the landscape and across ownership boundaries. Active involvement by the representatives of Tribes, counties, other federal agencies, and local communities has therefore been integral to plan development and will be essential during implementation.

Also integral were the cooperating agencies—various federal, state, local, and tribal governmental entities—lending technical assistance or other resources to the development of the land management plan. Cooperating agencies participated as an extended interdisciplinary team with the Cibola National Forest in land management plan revision tasks and milestones. The role of the cooperating agencies during 2015 and 2016 was to co-convene and co-design the public engagement process, outreach to include diverse stakeholders and interests, provide information to the Cibola per their relevant expertise, review all public comments, and provide recommendations to the Forest Service as part of the extended interdisciplinary team. Comments from cooperating agencies were considered and addressed, where applicable, in the pre-publication draft plan in the fall of 2018.

Involving cooperating agencies in this planning process provided a forum for maximizing the collective voice and interests of the communities and greater public around the Cibola National Forest. The Cibola benefited from cooperating agencies' knowledge and understanding related to the concerns and needs of local communities in central New Mexico. Both parties also benefited from better communication and representation to the public and their constituents. The Cibola National Forest considered cooperating agencies' and other potentially affected entities' management plans, objectives, and goals in designing the land management plan; this is documented in the final environmental impact statement, appendix A, "Coordination with Other Planning Efforts" section.

Forty-three agencies ultimately signed on as cooperators in 2015; forty-two agencies have remained as cooperators to date. The cooperating agencies for the Cibola National Forest's plan revision process are:

State and Local Governments

- Bernalillo County
- Cañón de Carnué Land Grant
- Chilili Land Grant
- Cibola County
- City of Albuquerque
- City of Gallup
- City of Grants
- Ciudad Soil and Water Conservation District
- Claunch-Pinto Soil and Water Conservation District

- Coronado Soil and Water Conservation District
 - East Torrance Soil and Water Conservation District
 - Edgewood Soil and Water Conservation District
 - Lava Soil and Water Conservation District
 - Lincoln County
 - Magdalena Village
 - Manzano Land Grant
 - McKinley County
 - McKinley Soil and Water Conservation District
 - New Mexico Department of Agriculture
 - New Mexico Environment Department
 - New Mexico Game and Fish
 - New Mexico Land Grant Council
 - New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office
 - Salado Soil and Water Conservation District
 - San Antonio de las Huertas Land Grant
 - Sandoval County
 - Sierra County
 - Sierra Soil and Water Conservation District
 - Socorro County
 - Tajiique Land Grant
 - Torrance County
 - Torreon Land Grant
 - Valencia Soil and Water Conservation District
- Other Federal Agencies**
- Kirtland Air Force Base
 - Bureau of Land Management
 - National Park Service-Salinas Pueblo Missions National Monument
- Federally Recognized Tribes**
- Acoma Pueblo
 - Pueblo de Cochiti
 - Pueblo of Isleta
 - Pueblo of Laguna
 - Pueblo of San Felipe
 - Pueblo of Santa Ana

Public Involvement

Cibola National Forest personnel have engaged the public frequently and innovatively throughout the planning process. This effort has included conventional public meetings, collaborative work sessions, information sharing via social media, and the development of self-convening groups organized around each of the four mountain ranger districts. For further detail and information on the public involvement conducted during the plan revision process, refer to the final environmental impact statement, appendix A, “Public Engagement and Coordination with Other Planning Efforts.”

Executive Order 12898 directs federal agencies to consider environmental justice. The goal of environmental justice is for federal agency decision makers to identify impacts that are disproportionately high and adverse with respect to minority and low-income populations and identify alternatives that will avoid or mitigate those impacts. Socio-demographic analyses showed that there are multiple populations that meet the definitions provided in the executive order. When considered at the county-wide level, Cibola, McKinley, and Valencia counties meet the definition of minority populations, and Catron, Cibola, McKinley, Sierra, Socorro, and Torrance counties meet the definition of low-income. Through individual input and input via the

multiple cooperating agencies and collaboratives, environmental justice communities were well represented throughout the Cibola's planning process. The main areas of concern from these populations, related to land management plan direction, include proposed wilderness and wild and scenic river designations; grazing; the quality and quantity of water for agricultural, municipal, cultural, and personal uses; vegetation management and firewood collection; motorized access; boundary maintenance; partnerships; special uses; and youth opportunities.

Forests in northern New Mexico have been central to the culture and traditions of surrounding communities for centuries. Ensuring that traditional uses of the forest can continue has been a key public concern. We met with land grant communities, acequia associations, and tribal governments, as well as people from communities around the Cibola National Forest, to collaboratively craft language that meets community needs. This effort can be seen in the "Rural Historic Communities" and "Federally Recognized Tribes" subsections of the land management plan, as well as in the "Cultural and Historic Resources," "Sustainable Rangelands and Livestock Grazing," and "Sustainable Forestry and Forest Products" sections.

The public, cooperating agencies, district collaboratives, and Tribes contributed over 3,500 comments on the land management plan and environmental impact statement throughout the plan revision process. Based on these comments, the land management plan and final environmental impact statement have been revised accordingly.

Several key issues, including climate change adaptations and the desire for clean air quality and clean water quality, were important enough that they are addressed in all action alternatives and consequently did not drive the development of alternatives; instead, plan direction has been revised to address these key concerns from public engagement. The following issues are significant planning issues that drove the development of alternatives:

- supporting cultural and traditional landscapes and uses
- restoring resilient ecosystems
- providing for watershed health
- addressing conflicts between recreation and multiple uses
- considering new wilderness and management areas

Decision and Rationale for the Decision

Decision

The Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Cibola National Forest Land Management Plan documents the analysis and conclusions upon which this decision is based. I have reviewed the environmental analysis disclosed in the final environmental impact statement, the planning record, and comments from our state and local government partners, federally recognized Tribes, other federal agencies, and the public. I considered how the land management plan meets the identified need for change and the requirements of 36 CFR 219. Based on this review, I have selected alternative C as described in the final environmental impact statement and the accompanying Cibola National Forest Land Management Plan.

With this decision, I approve the following:

1. Forestwide (chapter 2) and area-specific (chapter 3) plan components including desired conditions, objectives, standards, guidelines, and suitability, which meet the social, economic, and ecological sustainability requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule.
2. Five areas totaling 14,900 acres recommended for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System: four expansion areas to the existing Apache Kid Wilderness on the Magdalena Ranger District and one expansion area to the existing Manzano Wilderness on the Mountainair Ranger District.
3. Identification of seven river segments totaling 24.2 miles eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, across all four mountain districts.
4. Identification of three conservation management areas totaling 36,547 acres on the Mount Taylor and Magdalena Ranger Districts.
5. Identification of six restoration management areas totaling 318,148 acres across all four mountain districts.
6. Plan components for existing designated areas: 138,378 acres in four designated wilderness areas; 239,143 acres in 13 inventoried roadless areas; segments of three national scenic byways; currently, approximately 45 miles of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail; a 20,486-acre military withdrawal area; the 1,030-acre Bernalillo Watershed Research Natural Area; two significant caves; and three other congressionally designated areas consisting of the 31,000-acre Langmuir Research Site and Magdalena Ridge Observatory, and the 9,890-acre T'uf Shur Bien Preservation Trust Area.
7. Identification of 87,739 acres as suitable for timber production (chapter 4).
8. A land management plan monitoring program (chapter 5).

Nature of the Decision

The purpose of the land management plan is to guide future projects, activities, practices, uses, and protection measures to assure sustainable multiple-use management on the four mountain districts of the Cibola National Forest for the next 15 years. The plan is strategic in nature. It does not authorize projects or activities, commit the Forest Service to take action, nor dictate the day-to-day administrative activities needed to carry out the Forest Service's internal operations (such as personnel matters, law enforcement, or organizational changes). The programmatic management direction in the plan will be implemented through the design, execution, and monitoring of site-specific activities.

The decisions for these project-level activities must be consistent with the strategic direction set forth in the plan. The plan establishes components in the form of desired conditions, objectives, standards, guidelines, and suitability to provide for ecological integrity and contribute to social and economic sustainability, including through provision of ecosystem services and multiple uses of the Cibola National Forest. Through development of plan components and unit-level monitoring, best available scientific information was incorporated and created an adaptive management framework for implementation. The architecture and components of the plan are intended to enable us to adapt to new social and economic opportunities that arise as well as new information that comes to us through science and monitoring.

This land management plan replaces all previous land management plan direction for the four mountain districts, including the Cibola's 1985 land and resource management plan and all of its amendments and administrative changes, and it consolidates previous plan and amendment direction in one document.

Rationale for the Decision

When compared to the other alternatives, alternative C, the selected alternative (hereafter referred to as the "preferred alternative"), will most effectively integrate management strategies and guidance that: (1) are responsive to the issues, concerns, and opportunities expressed by state, local and tribal governments, the public, and other federal agencies; (2) meet the purpose of and need for action by addressing the priority needs for change, core management themes, and significant issues that drove plan revision; (3) provide the direction necessary for moving resources toward desired conditions while including measures to protect sensitive ecological and cultural elements of the national forest; (4) manage land uses in ways that are socially and economically sustainable; and (5) establish ambitious, but achievable, objectives for ecosystem restoration and maintenance and recreation opportunities and for management based on expected budget allocations.

The preferred alternative is the result of extensive public involvement beginning in 2012. Through numerous versions of assessment reports, needs for change statements, potential wilderness evaluations, wild and scenic river eligibility evaluations, and preliminary land management plans, the Cibola National Forest has worked closely with our state, local, and tribal government cooperating agencies, other federal agencies, and the public and collaborative groups. Alternative C is the result of that collaboration and includes perspectives and language developed by a broad range of national forest users and interested parties.

The preferred alternative best meets the needs for change and best addresses the issues. The issues, listed in the "Public Involvement" section of this decision, directly resulted in the core management themes around which the land management plan was developed. The plan contains components and guidance that balance the core themes of Respecting Cultural and Traditional Landscapes and Uses, Valuing Unique Places and Features, Managing Holistically for Watershed and Ecosystem Health, and Managing for Sustainable Recreation. The core management themes and plan guidance in the preferred alternative provide a good balance of responding to environmental issues while supporting uses and economic opportunities.

An example of this balance is the distribution of resources under the preferred alternative, which provides for forest restoration and an increased focus on riparian management and stream restoration but also provides for diverse ecosystem services and allows for adaptive management. Unique places in the national forest are recognized for their contributions to watershed function, wildlife habitat, outdoor recreation, grazing, and other multiple uses and economic benefits.

The preferred alternative addresses the need to recognize and enhance the national forest's role in contributing to sustainable local economies, including timber and forest products, livestock grazing, the service-based sectors of recreation and tourism, and other multiple-use activities and products. While the plan cannot commit partners to act, alternative C emphasizes cultivating partnerships to work across boundaries, build consensus, and increase capacity. Alternative C recognizes and values traditional communities and uses, reflecting the Cibola National Forest's contribution to local cultural, social, and economic vitality. The importance of promoting opportunities for traditional communities to engage with the Cibola National Forest, so that

sustained use of the forest for cultural and subsistence needs is supported, is an underlying theme of the preferred alternative. Further, the preferred alternative would contribute about 1,280 jobs and \$44.2 million annually to the local economy.

The broad framework for the interconnected management of resources provides for sustainable uses that support vibrant communities and honor traditional communities and their reliance on the Cibola's resources while also adapting to current demands by providing for forest conditions that protect: (1) communities, infrastructure, and watersheds; (2) air quality; (3) traditional and cultural forest uses; (4) sustainable recreation opportunities; (5) scenery; and (6) forest-based economic activities such as wood products industries and ranching.

Requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule

The land management plan has been prepared in compliance with the Forest Service's 2012 Land Management Planning Rule at 36 CFR part 219. The land management plan meets the specific planning rule requirements at sections 219.8 through 219.12 as follows.

219.8 Sustainability

The land management plan provides for ecological sustainability by:

1. Maintaining and restoring the ecological integrity including structure, function, composition, and connectivity of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems and watersheds in the plan area (chapter 2: "Vegetation," "Water Resources," "Aquatic and Terrestrial Species," and "Fire and Fuels" sections and subsections).
2. Maintaining and restoring air quality (chapter 2: "Air" section).
3. Maintaining and restoring soils and soil productivity including guidance to reduce soil erosion and sedimentation (chapter 2: "Soils" section).
4. Maintaining and restoring water resources and water quality (chapter 2: "Water Resources" section and subsections).
5. Maintaining and restoring the ecological integrity of riparian areas, in part, by establishing riparian management zones around all lakes, streams, and open water wetlands (FW-STD-WRF-1).
6. Ensuring implementation of best management practices for water quality (FW-STD-WTR-1).

The land management plan provides for social and economic sustainability by:

1. Recognizing and valuing traditional needs and uses by federally recognized Tribes, land grant communities, acequia associations, and other rural historic communities (chapter 2: "Sustainable Rangelands and Livestock Grazing," "Sustainable Forestry and Forest Products," "Federally Recognized Tribes," "Rural Historic Communities," and "Cultural and Historic Resources" sections and subsections).
2. Facilitating opportunities for local employment and economic development associated with restoration, grazing, recreation, mineral development, and other multiple uses and ecosystem services (chapter 2: "Sustainable Rangelands and Livestock Grazing," "Sustainable Forestry and Forest Products," "Traditional Communities and Uses," "Mineral and Geology," "Recreation," and "Special Uses" sections and subsections).

3. Providing surface water and groundwater for many uses throughout the state, including those uses that contribute to economic growth and ecosystem integrity (chapter 2: “Water Resources,” “Aquatic and Terrestrial Species,” and “Traditional Communities and Uses” sections and subsections).
4. Supporting a variety of high-quality developed and dispersed recreation opportunities for a diverse group of forest users and recreation opportunities that are sustainable, responsive to conditions, and which contribute to the economic, cultural, and social vitality and well-being of surrounding communities (chapter 2: “Recreation” and “Special Uses” sections and subsections).
5. Providing safe and reasonable access via sustainably designed, well-marked, and well-maintained roads, bridges, and trails (chapter 2: “Recreation” and “Infrastructure” sections and subsections).
6. Preserving and protecting cultural and historic resources (chapter 2: “Cultural and Historic Resources” section).
7. Sustaining scenic character in ways that contribute to visitors’ sense of place and connection with nature (chapter 2: “Scenic Resources” section).
8. Protecting communities and ecological resources from wildland fire (chapter 2: “Fire and Fuels” section).
9. Advancing partnerships and collaboration to manage forest resources, assist in communicating with and educating the public, and achieve short- and long-term mutually shared goals (as described throughout the land management plan).

219.9 Diversity of Plant and Animal Communities

The land management plan adopts a complementary ecosystem-level (coarse-filter) and species-specific (fine-filter) approach to maintaining the diversity of plant and animal communities and the persistence of native species in the plan area by:

1. Maintaining and restoring ecosystem integrity and diversity as described above, including rare plant and animal communities and diverse native tree species (chapter 2: “Vegetation” and “Aquatic and Terrestrial Species” sections and subsections).
2. Including additional species-specific plan components where ecosystem components do not adequately contribute to the recovery of federally listed threatened and endangered species, conserve proposed and candidate species, and maintain a viable population of each species of conservation concern within the plan area (appendix F of the final environmental impact statement contains a list of species-specific plan components for at-risk species).

219.10 Multiple Use

The land management plan provides for ecosystem services and multiple uses within Forest Service authority and the inherent capability of the plan area, including outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife, and fish, by:

1. Integrating management for multiple uses across resources.
2. Considering multiple uses during the public participation process that identified relevant resources and uses throughout plan development (documentation of the public participation process is included in appendix A of the final environmental impact statement).

3. Maintaining and restoring vegetation conditions, soils, and riparian areas to ensure multiple benefits, including biodiversity, wildlife habitat, and resilience to natural disturbance (chapter 2: “Vegetation,” “Water Resources,” “Soil,” “Aquatic and Terrestrial Species,” and “Fire and Fuels” sections and subsections).
4. Maintaining and restoring watershed conditions for provision of water for beneficial uses through an integrated aquatic and riparian resource management approach (chapter 2: “Water Resources” and “Aquatic and Terrestrial Species” sections and subsections).
5. Recognizing and protecting cultural, historic, and traditional resources and uses and areas of tribal importance and incorporating traditional knowledge into project design and decisions (chapter 2: “Traditional Communities and Uses” and “Cultural and Historic Resources” sections).
6. Providing for a collaborative, respectful, and mutually beneficial relationship between the Cibola National Forest and land grant communities and acequia associations and valuing their unique history and uses of the forest (chapter 2: “Rural Historic Communities” subsection).
7. Providing rangeland for livestock grazing that contributes to agricultural businesses, local employment, and livelihoods as well as generational ties to the land (chapter 2: “Sustainable Rangelands and Livestock Grazing” section).
8. Providing fuelwood and other forest products that contribute to the long-term socioeconomic diversity and stability of local communities (chapter 2: “Sustainable Forestry and Forest Products” section).
9. Providing a variety of sustainable, high-quality, developed and dispersed recreation opportunities and activities that are available to a diverse group of forest users (chapter 2: “Recreation” and “Special Uses” sections and subsections).
10. Providing motorized opportunities and access as well as non-motorized and primitive areas (chapter 2: “Recreation” and “Infrastructure” sections and subsections; and chapter 3: “Recommended Wilderness,” “Designated Wilderness,” “Inventoried Roadless Areas,” and “Scenic Byways” sections and subsections).
11. Protecting congressionally designated wilderness areas and areas recommended for wilderness designation (chapter 3: “Recommended Wilderness” and “Designated Wilderness Areas” sections).
12. Protecting designated wild and scenic rivers and rivers found eligible for wild and scenic river designation (chapter 3: “Eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers” section).
13. Protecting research natural areas (chapter 3: “Bernalillo Watershed Research Natural Area” section).
14. Providing opportunities for the development of mineral resources where appropriate (chapter 2: “Minerals and Geology” section and subsections).

219.11 Timber Requirements Based on National Forest Management Act

The land management plan provides guidance for timber management by:

1. Identifying 87,739 acres in the plan area that are suited for timber production (chapter 4: “Suitability of Lands” section and appendix B of the final environmental impact statement).
2. Prohibiting timber harvest for the purpose of timber production on lands not suited for timber production (FW-STD-VEG-1).
3. Limiting timber harvest to only those lands where soil, slope, or other watershed conditions would not be irreversibly damaged (FW-STD-VEG-2).
4. Limiting timber harvest to only those lands where protection is available for streams, streambanks, shorelines, lakes, wetlands, and other bodies of water (FW-STD-VEG-3).
5. Requiring that timber harvest be carried out in a manner consistent with the protection of soil, watershed, fish, wildlife, recreation, and aesthetic resources (FW-STD-VEG-4).
6. Limiting the size of openings that may be cut during one harvest operation with standards describing particular conditions under which exceptions for larger openings may be allowed (FW-STD-VEG-5).
7. Limiting the quantity of timber that may be sold from the national forest (FW-STD-VEG-5).
8. Generally limiting regeneration harvest of even-aged stands of trees to stands that have reached culmination of mean annual increment (FW-STD-VEG-5).

219.12 Monitoring

The land management plan (chapter 5) provides for monitoring required under the 2012 Planning Rule, with monitoring questions and indicators for each of the following elements:

1. The status of select watershed conditions.
2. The status of select ecological conditions.
3. The status of focal species to assess ecological conditions.
4. The status of select ecological conditions that contribute to the recovery of threatened and endangered species, conserve proposed and candidate species, and maintain a viable population of species of conservation concern.
5. The status of visitor use, visitor satisfaction, and progress toward meeting recreation objectives.
6. Measurable changes on the plan area related to climate change and other stressors.
7. Progress toward meeting desired conditions and objectives.
8. The effects of management systems so that they do not substantially and permanently impair the productivity of the land.

Additionally, the monitoring plan provides for monitoring of social, economic, and cultural sustainability as required by Forest Service policy (FSH 1909.12, 32.13f).

Components of the Decision

Preliminary Administrative Recommendations

Recommended Wilderness

This recommendation is a preliminary administrative recommendation that will receive further review and possible modification by the Chief of the Forest Service, the Secretary of Agriculture, and the President of the United States. The Congress has reserved the authority to make final decisions on wilderness designation. Plan implementation is not dependent upon subsequent action related to recommendations for wilderness designation. Plan direction for recommended wilderness identifies authorized uses and provides direction to allow for some activities needed for the administration of the area and for ecological restoration of at-risk species.

The 2012 Land Management Planning Rule directs the responsible official to “inventory and evaluate lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System” (36 CFR 219.7(2)(v)). There is no obligation to recommend acres for wilderness designation. The information considered in making this preliminary administrative recommendation for each area recommended for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System is available in appendix A of the final environmental impact statement. The inventory, evaluation, and recommendation process followed direction in chapter 70 of Forest Service Handbook 1909.12.

I arrived at my decision on recommended wilderness after extensively engaging with interested stakeholders including local governments, Tribes, and the public and after considering all sides of the issue. There are those who strongly advocate additional recommended wilderness acres because of their values for places on the forest which they consider special, because they believe recommended wilderness management is the best strategy to protect wildlife and aquatic resources, or for other reasons. There are also those that strongly prefer I do not recommend any additional wilderness areas because they believe recommended wilderness management is too restrictive on existing or future human uses, there is already adequate wilderness designated, or for other reasons.

I thoroughly reviewed and considered all aspects of this issue, including all interested stakeholders input and available information. I personally visited many of the areas that stakeholders voiced the most concerns about, both for and against wilderness recommendation. Along with staff, I reviewed the prior history of wilderness review, recommendation, and designation on the Cibola National Forest, including prior efforts such as the RARE II evaluation and wilderness recommendation, the subsequent New Mexico Wilderness Act, and other subsequent legislation regarding the Cibola. With staff, I carefully considered comments on proposed boundaries of the recommended wilderness areas, including issues such as manageability and ability to protect wilderness values and provide for quality wilderness recreation, along with potential impacts on existing uses. Some boundaries were adjusted in response to comments and new information. As a land manager, I carefully considered a range of land management allocations, recreation uses, and boundary adjustments across the alternatives to determine the optimal mix of land and resource uses that would best meet public needs and the intent of Congress. I am mindful that only Congress can designate wilderness areas and my recommendation is ultimately only my most thoughtful recommendation to Congress for what it should consider for designation, and ultimately Congress may decide to designate more or fewer acres than I recommend.

I am recommending five areas totaling 14,900 acres for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. All of these areas are adjacent to existing designated wilderness and have low potential to conflict with other management goals or resource uses. I adjusted the recommended wilderness boundaries and dropped three other areas entirely from the preferred alternative, based on feedback received during the planning process. I responded to those concerns about multiple non-conforming uses and conflicting traditional uses, such as grazing practices, and suggestions to better align the boundaries with on-the-ground natural features that will make for more practical management (see final environmental impact statement, appendix G, Response to Comments). Details regarding each area, such as current uses, ecological descriptions, and other factors that were considered in the evaluation process can be found in the final environmental impact statement, appendix C. I am recommending the following areas:

- Apache Kid Wilderness Expansion 1 Recommended Wilderness Area – 6,796 acres
- Apache Kid Wilderness Expansion 2 Recommended Wilderness Area – 4,711 acres
- Apache Kid Wilderness Expansion 3 Recommended Wilderness Area – 1,476 acres
- Apache Kid Wilderness Expansion 5 Recommended Wilderness Area – 1,553 acres
- Manzano Wilderness Expansion 2 Recommended Wilderness Area – 364 acres

Plan components specifically for recommended wilderness areas can be found in the land management plan, chapter 3, “Recommended Wilderness Areas” section. These components provide for managing the areas recommended for wilderness designation to protect and maintain the ecological and social characteristics that provide the basis for each area’s suitability for wilderness recommendation. These plan components will protect congressional prerogative and future discretion for potential designation.

For those lands that were evaluated but not recommended for wilderness designation, all forestwide guidance and components will apply. Even though these parcels were ultimately not recommended, they will contribute to the Cibola’s accomplishments of its core management themes.

Eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers

In the early 2000s, the Cibola National Forest completed an eligibility study of potential wild and scenic rivers. However, the previous eligibility study was done using a different set of criteria and a different region of comparison than what is being used in the evaluation under the current land management plan revision efforts. Based on lacking documentation from the previous study, Cibola personnel conducted a new eligibility study that replaces the previous study. The methodology for evaluation is described in the final environmental impact statement, appendix D.

To be eligible for designation, a river must be free-flowing and possess one or more outstandingly remarkable values. Outstandingly remarkable values are river-dependent natural, cultural, or recreational resources that are unique, rare, or exemplary at a regional or national scale. There are three possible classifications of eligible river segments (wild, scenic, or recreational) based on the level of development and human use in the river and along its corridor. The evaluation followed the applicable Forest Service policy, in particular, Forest Service Handbook 1909.12 section 82.72, which does not require a minimum flow for a segment to be considered an eligible wild and scenic river and requires review of all named stream segments on topographic maps. Consequently, this review considered intermittent and ephemeral stream segments and several of the eligible wild and scenic rivers are intermittent or ephemeral.

The evaluation resulted in seven eligible wild and scenic rivers on the Cibola National Forest for a total of 24.2 miles. The outstandingly remarkable values and preliminary classifications for the seven eligible wild and scenic rivers on the Cibola are as follows:

Mount Taylor Ranger District

- Agua Remora, 1.9 miles: Eligible for fish population outstandingly remarkable values, wild and scenic classification.
- Little Water Canyon, 2.0 miles: Eligible for botanical outstandingly remarkable values, wild and scenic classification.
- Water Canyon 1, 2.2 miles: Eligible for geology and scenery outstandingly remarkable values, wild classification.
- Rinconada, 2.7 miles: Eligible for wildlife population and habitat outstandingly remarkable values, wild and scenic classification.

Magdalena Ranger District

- West Red Canyon, 7.7 miles: Eligible for historic and cultural outstandingly remarkable values, recreational classification.

Mountainair Ranger District

- Tajiue Canyon, 3.9 miles: Eligible for botanical, scenery, and recreation outstandingly remarkable values, recreational classification.

Sandia Ranger District

- Las Huertas Creek, 3.8 miles: Eligible for historic and cultural and scenery outstandingly remarkable values, recreational classification.

Response to Public Comments on the Draft Documents

During the formal comment period on the draft land management plan and draft environmental impact statement in 2019, a total of 1,013 comment letters were received, of which 897 were form letters, 106 were unique letters, and 10 were duplicates. Detailed comment letters were submitted by members of the public, grazing permittees, local, state, and federal governmental agencies, 29 nongovernmental organizations, and two Tribes.

Comments covered every topic in the plan, but several topics stood out based on the number of comments received. One commonly mentioned topic was recommended wilderness designation; there are passionate advocates on both sides of this issue. Another common topic was wild and scenic river eligibility, including arguments for or against various river reaches being recognized as eligible. Another topic regarding multiple resources throughout the plan was that traditional and tribal uses were not considered adequately or would not be protected. Numerous comments were received regarding grazing impacts and traditional grazing. Finally, many comments were received about conflicting recreational uses such as primitive versus motorized recreation, and recreational opportunity spectrum settings.

The Forest Service analyzed and responded to the comments. Each comment was assigned a code related to one or more topic areas, and similarly coded comments were grouped into concern statements. Responses were then prepared for each concern statement based on its merits. Responses to substantive comments are addressed as prescribed in 40 CFR 1503.4 in the following ways:

- Modifying the proposed plan (alternative C) and alternatives.
- Developing or analyzing alternatives not given detailed consideration in the draft environmental impact statement.
- Supplementing, improving, or modifying the analysis that the draft environmental impact statement documented.
- Making factual corrections.
- Explaining why the comments need no further agency response.

Details regarding comments, commenters, and Forest Service responses can be found in the final environmental impact statement, appendix G, Response to Comments. The following section summarizes changes that were made, in part, due to public comment.

Changes Made Between Draft and Final

In response to input received from the public, cooperating agencies, Region 3 Regional Office plan revision team review, and further internal analysis at the Cibola National Forest, the following substantive changes were made between the August 2019 Cibola draft land management plan and associated draft environmental impact statement, and the September 2021 Cibola land management plan and associated final environmental impact statement. Other minor editorial changes, formatting, and typographic corrections were also made.

Major changes to the land management plan:

- Added new climate change information.
- Removed, modified, or added some components based on feedback, components not being applicable, or components being redundant; a complete list is in the project file.
- Modified descriptions of traditional communities and uses based on input from those communities.
- Closed recommended wilderness and conservation management areas to mineral leasing.
- Updated timber suitability calculations.
- Removed hermit thrush as a focal species.
- Re-wrote the “Land Ownership Adjustment and Boundary Management” section and the “Special Uses” section to incorporate additional specialist expertise.
- Added references to figures (maps) throughout the document and added map packet as appendix G.
- Coordinated with the Carson National Forest and Santa Fe National Forest to use consistent language in the revised management plans.

Major changes to the environmental impact statement:

- Added “Response to Comments” in volume 3, appendix G.
- Adjusted boundaries and removed three areas from recommended wilderness in alternative C and resulting cascading changes made throughout analyses sections.
- Adjusted objectives for “Vegetation” and “Fire and Fuels” sections to use consistent language for all alternatives and resulting cascading changes made throughout analyses sections.

- Concentrated proposed vegetation management into the Cibola’s three most prevalent fire-adapted vegetation types.
- Adjusted fuelwood objectives across the range of alternatives to reflect a 20 percent increase for alternative C.
- Changed “proposed action” terminology to “preferred alternative.”
- Cross-checked and edited citations and references.

Alternatives Considered

I considered four alternatives in detail, including the preferred alternative C. Alternatives analyzed in detail are summarized below. Table 1 displays a comparison of key differences between alternatives; a more detailed comparison of these alternatives can be found in the final environmental impact statement, chapter 2.

All action alternatives that I considered have the following elements in common:

- Meet the need for change;
- Adhere to principles of the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act (36 CFR section 219.10 (b)) and other applicable laws, regulations, and policies;
- Contain forestwide plan components, plan components for existing designated areas (wilderness, inventoried roadless areas, research natural area, scenic byways, continental divide national scenic trail, military withdrawal area, significant caves, and other congressionally designated areas), timber suitability determinations, and a monitoring plan;
- Provide sustained multiple uses, products, and services in an environmentally acceptable manner;
- Have mechanical thinning and prescribed fire objectives;
- Contain a common list of species of conservation concern;
- Contain common eligible wild and scenic river reaches and plan components developed to maintain their outstandingly remarkable values;
- Contain recommended wilderness;
- Recognize and support traditional communities and uses of federally recognized Tribes and rural historic communities.

Alternatives Analyzed in Detail

Alternative A – No Action

Under the no-action alternative, the 1985 land management plan, as amended, would continue to guide management of the Cibola National Forest. Alternative A emphasizes timber management over restoration and emphasizes fire suppression across the landscape. Protection for riparian areas is emphasized. Plan direction does not address managing for traditional communities and uses, ecosystem and watershed restoration, and sustainable recreation. The Cibola would also remain divided into the current 18 management areas that cover the entire national forest including the Cibola grasslands units.

Alternative B – Management Areas Focus

Alternative B responds to public comments that forest management should emphasize areas across the Cibola that need plan direction unique from forestwide direction for watersheds, cultural resources, recreation, and vegetation resources. The forestwide plan direction outside the ten proposed management areas is the same as the preferred alternative C, with plan direction for each of these management areas.

Alternative C – Preferred Alternative and Accelerated Restoration

Alternative C is the preferred alternative outlined in the land management plan, which focuses on healthy ecological function that supports multiple uses through an accelerated restoration focus. The interdisciplinary team developed this alternative iteratively with the public to address the needs for change and issues identified in chapter 1 of the plan. Alternative C is designed to address needs for restored forested and non-forested vegetation, terrestrial and aquatic wildlife habitat, improved riparian management zones, watershed health, improved rangeland forage and infrastructure, sustainable recreation, and recommended wilderness areas.

Alternative D – Backcountry Uses

Alternative D responds to public comments that forest management should emphasize natural processes and include more recommended wilderness areas. This alternative has an emphasis on natural processes with a reliance on managed wildfire to move vegetation toward desired conditions. It also emphasizes backcountry and primitive recreation by decreasing the intensity of restoration treatments. The intent is to provide more solitude, remoteness, and primitive recreation with more emphasis on dispersed recreation than managed recreation. It includes the most acreage of recommended wilderness among the action alternatives.

Table 1. Comparison of alternatives

| Key Elements | Alt. A No Action | Alt. B Management Areas | Alt. C (Preferred) Accelerated Restoration | Alt. D Backcountry Uses |
|--|--------------------------|-------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| Jobs (estimated) | 1,279 | 1,280 | 1,280 | 1,274 |
| Total income (estimated) | \$44.3 million | \$44.2 million | \$44.2 million | \$44.1 million |
| Timber suitability (acres) | 88,403 | 84,025 | 87,739 | 82,389 |
| PTSQ objective (annual average) | 5.46 MMBF (1.35 MMCF) | 5.29 MMBF (1.30 MMCF) | 5.28 MMBF (1.30 MMCF) | 5.28 MMBF (1.30 MMCF) |
| PWSQ objective (annual average) | 1.75 MMCF | 1.70 MMCF | 1.70 MMCF | 1.70 MMCF |
| Fuelwood cords (annual average) | 9,000 to 11,000 | 9,000 to 11,000 | 11,000 to 13,000 | 9,000 to 11,000 |
| Mechanical treatment (annual acres) | 750 to 3,500 | 750 to 3,500 | 750 to 3,500 | 750 to 3,500 |
| Prescribed burning (annual acres) | 8,900 to 13,000 | 8,900 to 13,000 | 8,900 to 13,000 | 8,900 to 13,000 |
| Livestock grazing (AUMs) | 33,309 | 33,996 | 33,396 | 33,309 |

| Key Elements | Alt. A No Action | Alt. B Management Areas | Alt. C (Preferred) Accelerated Restoration | Alt. D Backcountry Uses |
|--|---------------------|-------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| Eligible Wild and Scenic River (miles) | 24.2 | 24.2 | 24.2 | 24.2 |
| Recommended Wilderness, Total Acres | 0 | 55,779 | 14,900 | 203,117 |
| Mount Taylor | 0 | 0 | 0 | 27,348 |
| Magdalena | 0 | 53,235 | 14,536 | 166,025 |
| Mountainair | 0 | 2,544 | 364 | 9,463 |
| Sandia | 0 | 0 | 0 | 281 |
| Management Areas, Total Acres | 910 | 98,620 | 354,695 | 0 |
| Site-specific management areas | 910 | 98,620 | 0 | 0 |
| Restoration areas | 0 | 0 | 318,148 | 0 |
| Conservation areas | 0 | 0 | 36,547 | 0 |

PTSQ = projected timber sale quantity, PWSQ = projected wood sale quantity, MMBF = million board feet, MMCF = million cubic feet, AUMs = animal unit months.

Alternatives Considered but Not Analyzed in Detail

Federal agencies are required by the National Environmental Policy Act to rigorously explore and objectively evaluate all reasonable alternatives and to briefly discuss the reasons for eliminating any alternatives that were not developed in detail (40 CFR 1502.14). Public comments received in response to the proposed action provided suggestions for alternative methods of achieving the purpose and need. Some of these may have been outside the scope of what can be included in the Cibola land management plan or duplicative of the alternatives considered in detail. Four alternatives were considered but not analyzed in detail; descriptions of these alternatives and reasons for their elimination are summarized in chapter 2 of the final environmental impact statement:

- Alternative to Maintain and Restore Roadless Values and Wilderness Character of Chapter 70 Inventoried Areas not Recommended for Wilderness
- Alternative that Would Recommend the Citizen’s Conservation Proposal in its Entirety
- Alternative that Would Recommend the Backcountry Wildlife Conservation Area in its Entirety
- Alternative for Communal Grazing Areas
- Alternatives that Would Limit or Restrict Grazing
- Alternative to Maximize Carbon Sequestration

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

The environmentally preferable alternative is that which causes the least harm to the biological and physical environment and best protects and preserves historic, cultural, and natural resources. Alternative C is the environmentally preferable alternative. When compared to the other alternatives, it best contributes to ecological, social, and economic sustainability. Under alternative C, all practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm have been adopted as part of the alternative's desired conditions, standards, guidelines, and management strategies. Through the monitoring plan, the effectiveness of minimizing environmental impacts will be reviewed periodically as required by the 2012 Planning Rule.

Alternative C helps advance desired conditions for the Cibola National Forest by:

- establishing vegetation management to promote ecosystem resiliency,
- restoring landscapes to a more natural condition,
- reducing the risk of high-severity fires on the landscape,
- promoting habitat connectivity and restoration across the forest,
- continuing to provide and promote socioeconomic development,
- maintaining cultural and historic uses of the national forest, and
- providing for future outdoor recreational activities and uses by diverse populations.

Best Available Scientific Information

The 2012 Planning Rule (section 219.6(a)(3) and 219.14(a)(4)) requires the responsible official to document how the best available scientific information was used to inform the assessment, the plan decision, and the monitoring program. Such documentation must identify what information was determined to be the best available scientific information, explain the basis for that determination, and explain how the information was applied to the issues considered.

The land management plan, plan components, monitoring program, and plan recommendations were developed and informed by the best available scientific information. The Cibola's Assessment Report of Ecological, Social, and Economic Conditions, Trends, and Risks to Sustainability includes an analysis and summary of the best available scientific information and provides the foundation from which plan direction was developed. In developing the land management plan and related environmental analyses, specialists used many resources such as peer-reviewed and technical literature, databases and data management systems, modeling tools and approaches, geographic information systems, information obtained through participation and attendance at scientific conferences, local information workshops and collaborations, and information received during public participation periods for related planning activities. State and local governments, other federal agencies, federally recognized Tribes, and other interested parties all contributed science that was considered and incorporated as appropriate. Appendix B of the final environmental impact statement also describes how analyses used best available science.

The best available scientific information includes those publications listed in the references sections of the assessment and final environmental impact statement, as well as other sources used in developing supporting documents and specialist reports, which are included in the project record.

Based on my review of the final environmental impact statement, the information presented above, and the planning record, I find that the most accurate and reliable scientific information available that is relevant to the issues considered in this land management plan has been used to inform the planning process and has been applied to the issues considered in the revision, as required by 36 CFR 219.3.

Findings Required by Other Laws

The Forest Service manages the Cibola National Forest in conformance with many laws and regulations. I have considered the statutes specific to individual resources as described in the final environmental impact statement, and I find that this decision meets our obligations to the current statutory duties of the Forest Service. Following are summaries of how the revised land management plan addresses prominent relevant laws and regulations; there are many others that are not listed here.

American Indian Religious Freedom Act

Federal agencies must make a good faith effort to understand how tribal religious practices may come into conflict with other national forest uses and consider any adverse impacts on these practices in their decision making. The four mountain districts of the Cibola are within the territory of the Navajo Nation, the Pueblo of Zuni, the Pueblo of Isleta, the Pueblo of Sandia, the Pueblo of Laguna, and the Pueblo of Acoma, and is close to numerous other pueblos and tribal communities.

No effects on tribal social, economic, or subsistence rights are anticipated as a result of the land management plan revision. Regardless of which alternative is chosen, the Forest Service is required to consult with federally recognized Tribes when management activities may impact treaty rights and/or cultural sites and cultural use. Tribal consultation for plan revision began in 2012 with the initiation of the plan revision process, through the signing date of this decision, and will continue into implementation at the project level. Desired conditions, standards, guidelines, and management approaches for areas of tribal importance are found in the “Traditional Communities and Uses” section of the land management plan.

In summary, healthy, sustainable, and harvestable populations of culturally significant flora and fauna are available to Native Americans, and tribal members’ access to the Cibola National Forest is recognized and accommodated. Opportunities exist to practice traditional, cultural, and religious activities, such as plant gathering and ceremonial activities, which are essential to sustaining their way of life, cultural integrity, social cohesion, and economic well-being. Therefore, I find the land management plan is compliant with the American Indian Religious Freedom Act.

Archaeological Resources Protection Act

This act provides protection to archaeological resources found on public lands and tribal lands of the United States. The legislation provides civil and criminal penalties for those who remove or damage archaeological resources in violation of the prohibitions contained in the act. The act prohibits the removal of archaeological resources on public lands or tribal lands without first obtaining a permit from the affected federal land manager or Tribe and requires federal agencies to develop plans to survey lands under their management to determine the nature and extent of archaeological and cultural resources.

The land management plan is strategic and programmatic in nature, providing guidance and direction to future site-specific projects and activities; it does not authorize any site-specific projects. Projects undertaken in response to direction in the revised plan will fully comply with the laws and regulations that ensure protection of heritage resources. The revised plan contains direction for heritage resource management. Because the revised plan does not authorize ground-disturbing activities, consultation with the New Mexico Historic Preservation Office under the National Historic Preservation Act is not required per the 2003 Programmatic Agreement between the Forest Service's Southwestern Region and the State Historic Preservation Officers of Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Compliance with section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and 36 CFR 800 regulations requires assessments to document the presence of historic properties within the area of potential effect for any future site-specific activities and also to meet the intent of this act. The Cibola National Forest will also continue to consult with Tribes during site-specific management activities that may impact cultural sites and cultural use. The plan components in the land management plan include provisions that take into consideration tribal rights and interests and cultural resources. Therefore, I find the land management plan is compliant with the Archaeological Resources Protection Act.

Clean Air Act

In accordance with the Clean Air Act of 1990 and the Organic Administration Act of 1897, the Forest Service has the responsibility to protect the air, land, and water resources from the impacts of air pollutants produced within the boundaries of National Forest System lands and to work with states to protect air resources from degradation associated with the impacts of air pollution emitted outside of National Forest System lands. The final environmental impact statement chapter 3, "Air Resources" section addresses and discloses potential impacts from program activities that are approved by the land management plan, including the use of prescribed fire.

The land management plan chapter 2, "Air" section includes desired conditions and strategies for maintaining air quality and monitoring questions for gathering information. Chapter 2, "Fire and Fuels" section contains guidance for how prescribed fire and natural fire will reduce high-severity wildfire. Compliance determinations and more detailed air quality impact analyses will be made at subsequent levels of planning and analysis, where emissions can be more accurately quantified, reasonably forecasted, and local impacts can be assessed. Smoke emissions will be approved under state permitting processes at the time of prescribed fire planning. Therefore, I find the land management plan to be in compliance with the Clean Air Act.

Clean Water Act

The Clean Water Act (33 U. S. C. section 1251 et seq.) establishes the basic structure for regulating discharges of pollutants into the waters of the United States and regulating quality standards for surface waters.

Implementing this land management plan is expected to maintain and improve water quality and satisfy all state water quality requirements. This finding is based on direction contained in the land management plan, application of “best management practices” specifically designed to protect water quality, and the discussions of water quality and beneficial uses addressed in chapter 3 of the final environmental impact statement. Management direction protecting water quality can be found in many locations throughout the land management plan, including the chapter 2, “Water Resources” and “Soil” sections. Additionally, future project-level analysis required for land management plan implementation will be required to demonstrate compliance with the Clean Water Act. I find that the land management plan is compliant with this act.

Endangered Species Act

The purpose of the Endangered Species Act is to provide for the conservation of endangered species by conserving the ecosystems upon which these species depend. Section 7(a)(1) of the act requires federal agencies to carry out programs for the conservation of listed species. In addition, the Endangered Species Act requires federal agencies to ensure that any agency action does not jeopardize the continued existence of the species (Endangered Species Act, section 7(a)(2)). The act also requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Forest Service to base their biological opinion and subsequent agency action, respectively, on the use of the best scientific and commercially available information 916 U.S.C. 1536(a)(2)).

In accordance with section 7(c) of the Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service identified the listed and proposed threatened, endangered, or candidate species that may be present on the Cibola National Forest. The Forest Service prepared a biological assessment to assess the effects of implementing the land management plan on federally listed threatened, endangered, or proposed species or designated critical habitat known or likely to occur on the Cibola. Following section 7 consultation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued a biological opinion on May 13, 2021.

Consultation determinations were that the preferred alternative may affect, and is likely to adversely affect three listed species (the Mexican spotted owl, southwestern willow flycatcher, and Zuni bluehead sucker); and may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect four listed species (the western yellow-billed cuckoo, Chiricahua leopard frog, Alamosa springsnail, and Zuni fleabane); and is not likely to jeopardize the experimental, nonessential populations of the Mexican gray wolf or the northern Aplomado falcon. There was a finding of “no jeopardy” made for all species and critical habitats, and no “take” was assigned because of the programmatic nature of the land management plan.

Several conservation recommendations were provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the biological opinion; recommendations include continuation of surveys of the three adversely affected species and conducting actions that protect or improve their habitats.

The land management plan includes desired conditions, standards, guidelines, and objectives and provides broad management direction that meets our responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act section 7(a)(1). These plan components comply with the requirements of the Endangered Species Act and the associated recovery plan for each federally listed species. For these reasons, I find this land management plan to be in compliance with the requirements of the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

Environmental Justice

Executive Order 12898 (Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations) requires that all federal actions consider potentially disproportionate effects on minority and low-income communities. Environmental justice populations are present in the areas surrounding the Cibola National Forest. Within the analysis area, Valencia and McKinley Counties have minorities exceeding 50 percent of the population. No county qualifies as having Hispanic populations that are meaningfully greater than the general population. Cibola County qualifies as an environmental justice community as it has a meaningfully greater percentage of Native American population than the state percentage. Six of the ten Cibola footprint counties exceed the state's poverty rate and are considered to be low-income communities that qualify as environmental justice communities.

All alternatives considered in the final environmental impact statement would contribute to social and economic sustainability by providing benefits to environmental justice communities, improving the quality of life, and providing opportunities for income and jobs. The Cibola National Forest would continue to provide for traditional, cultural, and spiritual values that are of particular interest to Native American Tribes. No populations in the plan area would experience disproportionate adverse human health impacts or environmental effects due to management actions proposed under any of the alternatives considered. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is in compliance with this executive order.

Federal Land Policy and Management Act

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act allows for the granting of easements across National Forest System lands. The land management plan is strategic and programmatic in nature. It provides guidance and direction to future site-specific projects and activities. The land management plan does not create, authorize, or execute any site-specific activity, although it does provide for the consideration of granting easements and rights-of-way. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is consistent with this act.

Invasive Species

Executive Order 13751, which amends Executive Order 13112, directs federal agencies to prevent the introduction of invasive species, to detect and respond rapidly to and control populations of such species in a cost-effective and environmentally sound manner, to monitor invasive species populations accurately and reliably, to provide for restoration of native species and habitat conditions in ecosystems that have been invaded, to conduct research on invasive species and develop technologies to prevent introduction, to provide for environmentally sound control of invasive species, and to promote public education on invasive species and the means to address them. These actions are subject to the availability of appropriations to support this work. Forest Service Manual 2900, Invasive Species Management, sets forth agency policy, responsibilities, and direction for the prevention, detection, control, and restoration of effects from aquatic and terrestrial invasive species (vertebrates, invertebrates, plants, and pathogens).

The land management plan is strategic and programmatic in nature, providing program-level guidance and direction for future site-specific projects and activities. The land management plan does not create, authorize, or execute any ground-disturbing activity, although it does provide for the consideration of certain types of activities that may have the potential to affect the dispersal of invasive species. The land management plan includes forestwide desired conditions, objectives, and management approaches that stress the use of best management practices to limit the

introduction of new species and limit the spread of existing populations due to management activities. Additionally, other direction provides protection of watershed, soil, riparian, and aquatic conditions in ways that will reduce management-related disturbances that might introduce new populations or increase existing ones. Land management plan monitoring also includes indicators associated with invasive species and the effectiveness of treatments. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is compliant with this executive order.

Migratory Bird Treaty Act

Executive Order 13186, Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds, was issued in furtherance of the purposes of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Acts, the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). This order requires including the effects of federal actions on migratory birds as a part of the environmental analysis process. On December 8, 2008, the Forest Service signed a memorandum of understanding with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to complement the executive order, and the Forest Service agreed to incorporate migratory bird habitat and population objectives and recommendations into the agency planning process, in cooperation with other governments, state and federal agencies, and non-federal partners, and strive to protect, restore, enhance, and manage the habitat of migratory birds and prevent the further loss or degradation of remaining habitats on National Forest System lands. The Council for the Conservation of Migratory Birds was established in 2009 by the Secretary of the Interior to oversee Executive Order 13186. More than 20 federal agencies, including the Forest Service, currently participate in and have representation on the Council for the Conservation of Migratory Birds.

The land management plan includes forestwide direction related to key stressors for migratory birds and their habitats, including direction to maintain or improve forest resilience, composition, and structure. Future site-specific activities or projects with the potential to impact migratory bird habitat will be analyzed with site-specific analysis under the NEPA process and will comply with land management plan direction. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is compliant with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and Executive Order 13186.

Multiple-Use Sustained Yield Act

The Forest Service manages National Forest System lands to sustain the multiple use of its renewable resources in perpetuity while maintaining the long-term health and productivity of the land. Resources are managed through a combination of approaches and concepts for the benefit of human communities and natural resources. As demonstrated in the final environmental impact statement and as required by the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960 (16 U.S.C. 528–531), the land management plan guides sustainable and integrated management of forest resources in the context of the broader landscape, giving due consideration to the relative values of the various resources in particular areas. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is compliant with the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act.

National Environmental Policy Act

The National Environmental Policy Act requires that federal agencies prepare detailed statements on proposed actions that may significantly affect the quality of the human environment. The act's requirement is designed to serve two major functions: to provide decision makers with a detailed accounting of the likely environmental effects of proposed actions prior to adoption and to inform the public of, and allow comment on, such efforts.

The environmental analysis and public involvement process outlined in the final environmental impact statement complies with the major elements of the requirements set forth by the Council on Environmental Quality for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (40 CFR 1500-1508) (1986). These requirements include: (1) considering a range of reasonable alternatives, (2) disclosing cumulative effects, (3) using best available scientific information, (4) considering long-term and short-term effects, and (5) disclosing unavoidable adverse effects.

The Cibola National Forest has developed, gathered, and reviewed an extensive amount of information regarding the potential effects of each of the alternatives considered in the final environmental impact statement. This information expands and refines the data, analyses, and public input described in the environmental analysis documents associated with the draft plan and draft environmental impact statement. My decision also considers the large amount of public input, including public meetings, comments received via the project website, and comments received during the 90-day comment period for the draft environmental impact statement.

All substantive comments, written and oral, made regarding the draft environmental impact statement have been summarized and responded to in appendix G of the final environmental impact statement. During this effort, public involvement has led to changes in the analysis and the alternatives. I find that the environmental analysis, and public involvement process that the final environmental impact statement is based on, complies with each of the major elements of the requirements set forth by the Council on Environmental Quality regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (40 CFR 1500-1508)(1986). My conclusion is supported by the following findings:

- The final environmental impact statement considered a broad range of reasonable alternatives. The four alternatives considered in detail, and the four alternatives considered but not analyzed in detail in the final environmental impact statement, cover a broad range of possible management allocations based on revision topics identified through public involvement and scoping.
- The final environmental impact statement reflects a comprehensive consideration of effects in evaluating impacts of the alternatives in the entire plan area, including federal, state, tribal, and private lands. Impacts evaluated include long- and short-term impacts, beneficial and adverse impacts, and cumulative impacts of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions.
- The final environmental impact statement uses the best available scientific information to support the conclusions made.

National Forest Management Act

The National Forest Management Act requires the development, maintenance, amendment, and revision of land management plans for each unit of the National Forest System. These land management plans help create a dynamic management system so an interdisciplinary approach to achieve integrated consideration of physical, biological, economic, and other sciences will be applied to all future actions on the unit. Under this act, the Forest Service is to ensure coordination of the multiple uses and sustained yield of products and services of the National Forest System.

The National Forest Management Act requires the Secretary of Agriculture to promulgate regulations for developing and maintaining land management plans. On April 9, 2012, the Department of Agriculture issued a Final Planning Rule for National Forest System land management planning (36 CFR part 219; refer to the Federal Register volume 77 number 68, pages 21162–21276).

As discussed in detail in the “Requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule” section of this decision, my review indicates that the plan and its preparation meet requirements for revising plans under the provisions of the 2012 Planning Rule and is compliant with the National Forest Management Act. My review included the planning process, the final environmental impact statement, the planning record, and the information provided in this record of decision.

National Historic Preservation Act

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires each federal agency to take into account the effects of its actions on historic properties, prior to approving expenditure of federal funds on an undertaking or prior to issuing any license. Section 110 of the act outlines the federal agency responsibility to establish and maintain a preservation program for the identification, evaluation, and nomination to the National Register of Historic Places and protection of historic properties.

The land management plan is a programmatic-level planning effort that will not directly authorize any ground-disturbing activities or projects. The land management plan includes desired conditions, goals, objectives, standards, guidelines, management strategies, and monitoring requirements for managing and protecting cultural resources listed or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Site-specific projects that are undertaken as a result of the direction in the land management plan will comply with laws and regulations that ensure protection of heritage resources. Significant cultural resources will be identified, protected, and monitored in compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act. Any consultation that will occur for proposed activities will be coordinated with the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Officer. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is in compliance with this act.

National Trails System Act

The National Trails System Act of 1968 (Public Law 90-543), as amended, calls for establishing trails for people of all ages, interests, skills, and physical abilities. The act establishes four classes of trails, including national scenic trails. The act promotes enjoyment and appreciation of those trails, while encouraging greater access to trails. The Cibola National Forest has one designated national scenic trail: the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail.

As required by the act, the 2009 Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan provides management direction within the corridor of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail. The intent of the 2009 comprehensive plan is to provide a uniform program for the trail that reflects the purposes of the National Scenic Trail System and allows for the use and protection of the natural and cultural resources within the trail corridor.

Consistent with the act and the 2009 comprehensive plan, the land management plan provides specific components that protect the nature and purpose of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail while enhancing user experience and access. Therefore, I find that the land management plan complies with the National Trails System Act.

Roadless Area Conservation Rule

Management direction for inventoried roadless areas is compliant with the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (36 CFR 294 subpart B, published at 66 Federal Register 3244–3273). The 2001 Roadless Conservation Rule includes a prohibition on road construction and road reconstruction in inventoried roadless areas and prohibitions on timber cutting, sale, or removal except in certain circumstances. The land management plan is a programmatic-level planning effort and does not directly authorize any road construction, reconstruction, or timber removal. Chapter 3 in the plan also includes specific guidance for management within designated roadless areas. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is compliant with the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule.

Travel Management Rule

The final rule for Travel Management; Designated Routes and Areas for Motor Vehicle Use (commonly referred to as the 2005 Travel Management Rule) implements provisions of Executive Orders 11644 and 11989 to address the use of off-road motor vehicles on federal lands. Regulations implementing this rule are found at 36 CFR part 212. The executive order’s “minimization criteria” specify:

In designating National Forest System trails and areas on National Forest System lands, the responsible official shall consider effects on the following with the objective of minimizing:

1. Damage to soil, watershed, vegetation, and other forest resources;
2. Harassment of wildlife and significant disruption of wildlife habitats;
3. Conflicts between motor vehicle use and existing or proposed recreation uses of National Forest System lands or neighboring federal lands;
4. Conflicts among different classes of motor vehicle uses of National Forest System lands or neighboring federal lands;
5. Compatibility of motor vehicle use with existing conditions in populated areas, taking into account sound, emissions, and other factors.(36 CFR 212.55(b), specific criteria for designation of trails and areas).

Prior to this plan revision, the Cibola National Forest designated specific roads, areas, and trails for the use of motor vehicles (which includes off-road vehicles) that are displayed on the motorized vehicle use maps required by 36 CFR 212 subpart B. This programmatic plan decision does not authorize additional motor vehicle use or prohibit existing motor vehicle uses, therefore those maps remain unchanged.

Travel management planning for the Cibola has been completed for all four mountain districts following the requirements of the 2005 rule. The land management plan revision and this decision do not change any existing travel management decisions, and plan components are consistent with the previous travel management decisions. Therefore, I find that this land management plan is in compliance with the Travel Management Rule.

Wetlands and Floodplains

Executive orders 11990 (Protection of Wetlands) and 11988 (Floodplain Management) require federal agencies to avoid, to the extent possible, short- and long-term effects resulting from the modification or destruction of wetlands and the occupancy and modification of floodplains. Forestwide standards and guidelines are provided for soil, water, wetlands, and riparian areas to minimize effects to wetlands and floodplains. They incorporate the best management practices of the Forest Service Soil and Water Conservation Handbook. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is compliant with these executive orders.

Wild and Scenic Rivers Act

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (Public Law 90-542, section(b), October 2, 1968, 82 Statute 906, as amended); (16 U.S.C. section 127-1288) describes consideration of potential additions during planning in section 5 (d)(1): “The Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Agriculture shall make specific studies and investigations to determine which additional wild, scenic and recreational river areas within the United States shall be evaluated in planning reports by all federal agencies as potential alternative uses of the water and related land resources involved.” The act establishes a National Wild and Scenic Rivers System with three classifications of rivers: wild, scenic, and recreational. The purpose of the act is to protect the designated rivers “for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations” and to preserve the rivers’ free-flowing condition, water quality, and outstandingly remarkable values.

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act requires an evaluation of eligible wild, scenic, or recreational rivers in land management planning. The evaluation followed the applicable Forest Service policy, in particular Forest Service Handbook 1909.12 section 82. This was completed, and the seven river segments totaling 24.2 miles identified through the eligible wild and scenic river study process were analyzed in the final environmental impact statement. Management direction in chapter 3 of the land management plan provides protection of free-flowing conditions and the outstandingly remarkable values identified for the eligible segments of rivers on the Cibola National Forest. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is compliant with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Wilderness Act

The Wilderness Act of 1964 established a National Wilderness Preservation System to be administered in such a manner as to leave these areas unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness. It provides the statutory definition of wilderness, how areas are assessed for addition to the wilderness preservation system, and management requirements for congressionally designated wilderness.

Evaluation of existing wilderness and areas recommended for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System is included in the environmental impact statement, appendix C. Chapter 3 of the land management plan provides direction through plan components that preserve the wilderness character of recommended and designated wilderness. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is compliant with this act.

Administrative Review

This decision to approve the land management plan for the Cibola National Forest was subject to the objection process identified in 36 CFR part 219 subpart B (219.50 to 219.62). A 60-day objection filing period on the draft record of decision, final land management plan, and final environmental impact statement ran concurrently with an objection filing period for the Regional Forester’s species of conservation concern. The objection period was initiated on September 2, 2021, when a notice of the opportunity to object was published in the newspaper of record. The Forest Service received six eligible objections. Interested persons and objectors attended a series of meetings that were held remotely from March 15–17, 2022, in conjunction with the Carson National Forest and Santa Fe National Forest. On May 24, 2022, the Regional Forester for the Southwest Region issued a written response to the objection issues. The written response set forth the reasons for the response and is the final decision by the U.S. Department of Agriculture on the objections.

The Regional Forester found that the final environmental impact statement, land management plan, draft record of decision, and associated planning record sufficiently addressed most issues raised through objection. She also found the land management plan revision documents are in compliance with current law, regulation, and policy. As part of the written response, the Regional Forester provided me with instruction for those issues that required additional clarification or modifications. In addition, the Regional Forester provided several non-binding recommendations for improving the land management plan and analyses.

Modifications Made in Response to Objections and Instructions

As instructed by the Regional Forester, modifications to the final environmental impact statement, land management plan, and planning record have been completed as indicated below. Some instructions required additional clarification or explanation. Other instructions required modifications to plan components. All modifications are responsive to issues identified in previous comment periods and during objections. Below, I discuss only (a) substantial modifications to the plan or analysis and (b) changes made in response to objection issues of interest to multiple parties. A complete list of changes made in response to instructions—including clarifying language, fixing mistakes, or making minor changes to wording—can be found in appendix A of this document (table 2). Changes to the land management plan were made in the document itself, as it will be the guiding management framework for the Cibola National Forest. Because changes to the environmental impact statement are minor, those changes are documented in an errata available on the Cibola’s planning website: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/cibola/landmanagement/planning>.

Land Grant Communities and Acequia Associations

The Regional Forester instructed me to clarify how the land management plan recognizes land grant communities and acequia associations. Additional discussion of plan sections addressing the needs, uses, and unique histories of land grant communities and acequia associations has been added to the “Rationale for the Decision” and “Requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule” sections of this decision (above).

Land grant communities have been closely involved in every part of the Cibola land management plan revision process, and the final plan is a result of that collaboration. Six land grant communities and the New Mexico Land Grant Council participated as cooperating agencies. In the plan's "Rural Historic Communities" section, land grant communities and acequia associations are recognized as political subdivisions of the State of New Mexico. Plan components in this section value their unique history and uses of National Forest System lands; management approaches describe a collaborative, respectful, and mutually beneficial relationship between land grant communities and acequia associations and the Cibola National Forest. Traditional uses of National Forest System lands are described in the "Traditional Communities and Uses" section of the plan; however, management direction relating to land grants and acequias is found throughout the plan, including in the "Sustainable Rangelands and Livestock Grazing," "Watersheds," "Fire and Fuels," and "Sustainable Forestry and Forest Products" sections, among others. An underlying theme throughout the plan is the importance of promoting opportunities for traditional communities—including land grants and acequias—to be engaged with the Cibola so that sustained use of the national forest for cultural and subsistence needs are supported. Direction related to traditional communities and uses requires the national forest to provide sustainable grazing, fuelwood, water for irrigation (acequias), and other forest products, and to make those resources available to rural historic communities and tribes for cultural and traditional needs, subsistence practices, and economic support.

Part of my decision is rooted in consistency between the revised plans for the Cibola National Forest, the Carson National Forest, and the Santa Fe National Forest. The Regional Forester directed the three national forests to be consistent in developing these plan components, in recognition of the importance of consistent management to the region's traditional communities—including federally recognized Tribes, land grant communities, acequia associations, grazing stakeholders, and other rural historic communities. Through this consistency effort, all three land management plans recognize historic and contemporary cultural resources, uses, and practices important to these tribes and communities, which pre-date the establishment of the Forest Service.

In addition, several changes were made to the plan and the environmental impact statement in response to objection from the New Mexico Land Grant Council. In the plan, I modified FW-DC-RHC-1 to better reflect the desire for the plan to contribute to maintaining the culture of northern New Mexico historic communities. I removed an unclear reference to compatibility of grazing with "social resources" in FW-DC-GR-4 and added "in active allotments" to FW-DC-GR-6. In the final environmental impact statement volume 3, I more fully responded to the New Mexico Land Grant Council's 2019 comment requesting an objective that at least 70 percent of the workforce for forest and watershed restoration projects come from adjacent local forest-dependent communities; I clarified the role of the plan in hiring decisions and highlighted relevant plan components and management approaches.

Climate Change

As instructed by the Regional Forester, in the final environmental impact statement volume 1, chapter 2, I added a discussion of objectors' proposed alternative to manage for maximum carbon sequestration. This alternative was considered but not analyzed in detail; each alternative considered manages for overall ecosystem function and resiliency that implies inherent levels of carbon sequestration, which makes a separate carbon sequestration alternative redundant. Further, maximizing carbon sequestration in the forest was not a specific goal or purpose of the land management plan and therefore did not drive the development of alternatives.

In addition, objectors requested a detailed comparison of the effects of each alternative on carbon sequestration. The Regional Forester recommended I determine whether such a comparison would be meaningful and provide additional rationale for my decision.

Carbon sequestration is an important ecosystem service; forest health, fire, and forest management practices may change the amount and trend of sequestered carbon in the forest. Each of the four alternatives considered shared major management objectives that would affect carbon sequestration, including identical objectives for mechanical fuel treatments and prescribed fire. Carbon sequestration effects were qualitatively analyzed in the “Vegetation” section of the plan, and carbon dioxide emissions were analyzed quantitatively in the “Air” section; carbon sequestration was found to vary by vegetation type, but not by alternative. Given the similarities between each alternative, a more detailed comparison of carbon sequestration impacts between alternatives would not have been meaningful to my decision. Each alternative, including the preferred alternative, aims to strike a balance between reducing the risk of uncharacteristic catastrophic wildfire and maintaining historical levels of carbon stocks while maximizing resistance and resilience to climate change.

Sustainable Rangelands and Livestock Grazing

In response to objections, in the final environmental impact statement volume 1, chapter 2, I added a discussion of objectors’ proposed alternatives that would (1) reduce or prohibit livestock grazing in riparian restoration areas and (2) authorize the permanent retirement of grazing allotments voluntarily waived by permittees. These alternatives were considered but not analyzed in detail.

Under all alternatives, the rangelands management and livestock grazing program has multiple mechanisms to evaluate, review, and change management as needed to effectively protect resources and respond to changing conditions under adaptive management strategies. Permitted and authorized grazing is subject to project-level environmental analysis, which includes consideration of impacts to watersheds and riparian habitat. In addition, under current law, regulation, and policy, there is no provision to authorize the permanent retirement of grazing allotments that are voluntarily waived by the permittee, as the authority to permanently retire an allotment from grazing is retained by the Forest Service and is not held by the permittee. Under each alternative, the Cibola National Forest has a range of options for management of vacant and understocked allotments, which could include decreasing grazing numbers.

In addition, as instructed by the Regional Forester, I updated the discussion of grazing and ecosystem services in the “Sustainable Rangelands and Livestock Grazing” section of the plan and added supporting references. This change clarifies that rangelands and other areas available for livestock grazing are what provides the “natural capital” to support “provisioning” ecosystem services such as livestock grazing and production.

At-Risk Species

In response to objections, I made several changes to at-risk species components in the land management plan and determinations in the final environmental impact statement.

First, the Regional Forester instructed the Cibola to ensure that the environmental impact statement makes explicit the tie between plan components, projected changes in the environment, stressors the plan components create or manage, and outcomes for threatened, endangered, and sensitive species. Further, the Regional Forester instructed the Cibola to demonstrate use of the best available science in the at-risk species analysis.

In the final environmental impact statement, we identified key ecological conditions, key threats, and the effects of both ecosystem-level and species-specific plan components on threatened, endangered, and sensitive species and their habitats. These analyses were conducted for all action alternatives and for each alternative (for example, see final EIS volume 1, chapter 3, pages 334–379). In turn, these analyses informed determinations of whether plan components under each alternative would contribute to the recovery of threatened and endangered species and maintain the viability of species of conservation concern, as required by the Endangered Species Act and the 2012 Planning Rule. In addition, crosswalks for terrestrial wildlife species and at-risk fish and plant species (final EIS volume 2, appendix F) were developed to illustrate how plan components meet species-specific habitat needs, grouped by the key ecological conditions or habitat elements that species share in common. Upon review, I have determined that the environmental impact statement and additional analyses explicitly connect plan components to outcomes for at-risk species.

The analyses in the environmental impact statement drew from the Terrestrial, Aquatic, and Botanical Specialist Report and Biological Evaluation Report (biological evaluation), a draft of which was available to the public during the 2019 draft environmental impact statement comment period. The biological evaluation, like the environmental impact statement, analyzed the ties between plan components and outcomes for threatened, endangered, and sensitive species, as rooted in the best available scientific information. To ensure the inclusion of the complete environmental analysis—along with the entirety of the best available science used in making determinations in the environmental impact statement—I have more explicitly incorporated the biological evaluation by reference in chapter 3 of the environmental impact statement (see Errata 1 for the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Cibola National Forest Land Management Plan).

Second, the Regional Forester instructed the Cibola to clarify the determinations for whether plan components comply with distinct legal requirements for at-risk species. The 2012 Planning Rule requires a determination of whether plan components “provide the ecological conditions necessary to contribute to the recovery” of endangered or threatened species and “maintain or restore the ecological conditions necessary to maintain persistence” of species of conservation concern within the plan area. In response to this instruction, determinations in the environmental impact statement have been corrected to identify compliance with the relevant legal requirements. No additional analysis was required, as the analysis in the biological evaluation and the environmental impact statement, as discussed above, was sufficient to inform these determinations.

Similarly, minor changes were made in the land management plan to ensure that plan direction meets the requirements of the Endangered Species Act and the 2012 Planning Rule. Several plan components in the “Aquatic Species and Habitats,” “Terrestrial Species and Habitats,” and “At-Risk Species” sections described actions “to maintain the persistence or contribute to the recovery of” at-risk species. This language made the plan’s intent ambiguous, as these components refer to two separate legal frameworks: the 2012 Planning Rule requires land management plans to provide ecological conditions to maintain the persistence of species of conservation concern; the Endangered Species Act requires that the Forest Service provide the ecological conditions necessary to contribute to the recovery of federally listed threatened and endangered species. To clarify the intent of these components, language in the plan was changed and now reads “to contribute to the recovery of federally listed species and the persistence of species of conservation concern.” A change to this effect was made to the following plan components: FW-DC-AQSP-5, FW-DC-TRSP-12, FW-GDL-TRSP-2, FW-GDL-ARS-1, FW-GDL-ARS-2, and FW-GDL-ARS-3.

Third, the Regional Forester instructed the Cibola to examine at-risk species guidelines in conjunction with the Carson National Forest and Santa Fe National Forest to determine if and where consistency across the three land management plans was necessary. These plan components were made consistent, except where each national forest had specific reasons to use unique language. The Cibola determined that only one change was necessary: in FW-GDL-ARS-2, “activities or actions to be carried out by the Cibola National Forest personnel” was changed to “activities or actions to be carried out by the Cibola National Forest” to be inclusive of actions or activities authorized by the national forest but carried out by others (such as partners or contractors).

Finally, in response to objections concerning threats to Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep (a species of conservation concern), the Regional Forester instructed the Cibola to conduct a more complete analysis of the threats to bighorn sheep to determine if: (1) the ecological conditions necessary to maintain a viable population are at risk and (2) additional plan components are warranted to ensure persistence of the species within the plan area. We reviewed the intent of the instruction and available data. There are no known commercial sheep or goat operators within or adjacent to the planning area. Therefore, there is no basis for analysis of this issue as a factor in the planning area or from sources outside the planning area. Cibola personnel limit this threat by restricting goat and sheep use in areas that overlap with bighorn sheep habitat in the Manzano Mountains Wilderness and Mountainair Ranger District where bighorn sheep currently occur. Spatial and temporal separation is accomplished through the permitting process and balancing multiple-use demands (final EIS volume 1, chapter 3, page 320). However, stray animals that may wander onto National Forest System land could still pose a threat. The following plan components were added to minimize the spread of disease from domestic sheep and goats within Forest Service authority and to maintain adequate forage: (FW-STD-GR 1) Livestock management must be compatible with capacity and address ecological concerns (for example, forage, invasive plants, at-risk species, soils, riparian health, water quality) that are departed from desired conditions, as determine by temporally and spatially appropriate data; (FW-STD-GR-4) Grazing of domestic sheep or goats shall not be authorized in areas occupied by bighorn sheep to prevent the transfer of disease from domestic sheep to bighorn sheep (final EIS volume 1, chapter 3, page 351).

Recreation and Scenery

As instructed by the Regional Forester, I clarified the Cibola National Forest’s compliance with the National Trails System Act and the 2009 Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan (see the “Findings Required by Other Laws” section of this decision above). I added updated references for the current Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan and Forest Service Manual 2300 series.

Objectors took issue with language in Continental Divide National Scenic Trail plan components defining the trail foreground as “up to” 0.5 mile on each side of the trail. In response, it was clarified in a footnote and in the plan glossary that “foreground,” as defined in the Scenery Management System, is a distance zone of 0 to 0.5 mile from the observer. Plan components use “up to 0.5 mile” to reflect the possibility that, although the foreground is generally 0.5 mile on either side of the trail, in some cases topography (such as cliffs) could reduce the visible distance for a trail user to something less than 0.5 mile.

Effective Date

The Cibola National Forest Land Management Plan becomes effective 30 days after the publication of the notice of plan approval in the Federal Register (36 CFR 219.17(a)).

Plan Implementation

Existing Authorizations

The revised land management plan provides a framework to guide resource management options. It is a strategic, programmatic document and does not make project-level decisions or irreversible or ir retrievable commitments of resources. Those kinds of commitments would be made after more detailed, site-specific proposals are initiated and further public comment opportunities occur as part of the site-specific environmental analysis process. However, there are authorizations and activities that are existing and on-going across the Cibola National Forest. Previously approved and ongoing projects and activities are not required to meet the direction of the revised plan and will remain consistent with the direction in the 1985 plan, as amended.

Project Consistency

As required by the National Forest Management Act of 1976 and the 2012 Planning Rule, subject to valid existing rights, all projects and activities authorized by the Forest Service after approval of this land management plan must be consistent with the applicable plan components (16 U.S.C. 1604(i)) as described at 36 CFR 219.5. All project or activity approval documents made after the effective date of the plan will describe how the project or activity is consistent with the applicable plan components, as described in chapter 1 of the plan. When a proposed project or activity would not be consistent with the applicable plan components, the responsible official shall take one of the following steps, subject to valid existing rights:

1. Modify the proposed project or activity to make it consistent with the applicable plan components.
2. Reject the proposal or terminate the project or activity.
3. Amend the plan so that the project or activity will be consistent with the plan as amended.
4. Amend the plan contemporaneously with the approval of the project or activity so that the project or activity will be consistent with the plan as amended. This amendment may be limited to apply only to the project or activity.

Resource plans developed by the Cibola, such as travel management plans, which apply to the resources or land areas within the planning area must be consistent with the plan components. Resource plans developed prior to this plan decision will be evaluated for consistency with the plan and updated if necessary.

Authorizations for occupancy and use made before this plan approval may proceed unchanged until time of reauthorization. At time of reauthorization, all permits, contracts, and other authorizing instruments must be made consistent with the plan, subject to existing valid rights, as provided at 36 CFR section 219.15(d).

Maintaining the Plan

A land management plan is an integral part of an adaptive management cycle, including assessment, plan revision or amendment, and monitoring. This adaptive management cycle enables the Cibola National Forest to identify and respond to changing conditions, changing public desires, and new information, such as that obtained through research and scientific findings. The land management plan monitoring program is an integral part of this adaptive management cycle, consisting of monitoring questions and indicators, and can be found in chapter 5 of the plan.

A land management plan may be amended at any time based on a preliminary identification of the need to change the plan. The preliminary identification of the need to change the plan may be based on a new assessment, land management plan monitoring, or other documentation of new information, changed conditions, or changed circumstances. The amendment and administrative change processes are described at 36 CFR 219.17(b)(2) of the 2012 Planning Rule.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this decision contact the Cibola Forest Planner, Cibola National Forest Supervisor's Office, 2113 Osuna Road NE, Albuquerque, NM 87113, phone 505-346-3900.

Signature and Date



STEVEN HATTENBACH

Forest Supervisor

Cibola National Forest and National Grasslands



DATE

Appendix A: Changes Made in Response to Objections

The following table documents changes that were made in response to instructions outlined in the Regional Forester’s response to objections. The table indicates whether changes were made to the land management plan, the final environmental impact statement (EIS), or the final record of decision (ROD). The following additional acronyms are used in this table: CDNST = Continental Divide National Scenic Trail; ESA = Endangered Species Act; ROS = Recreation Opportunity Spectrum; SCC = Species of Conservation Concern. Where the language of plan components was changed, those changes were made across all documents.

Table 2. Changes made in response to instructions outlined in the Regional Forester’s response to objections

| Instruction | Plan Change | EIS Change | ROD Change | Project Record Change | Page Number | Description of Change |
|---|-------------|------------|------------|-----------------------|---|--|
| Explicitly recognize objector’s request for an alternative to permanently retire voluntarily waived grazing allotments. | no | yes | yes | no | EIS volume 1, page 26; EIS volume 3, page 59; ROD page 33 | Added “Alternatives that Would Limit or Restrict Grazing” as an alternative considered but not analyzed in detail; more fully responded to Concern Statement 247 in EIS. Added additional discussion in ROD. |
| Include a statement explaining how the carbon sequestration alternative was considered in the planning record. | no | yes | yes | no | EIS volume 1, page 26; ROD page 33 | Added “Alternative to Maximize Carbon Sequestration” as an alternative considered but not analyzed in detail in EIS. Added additional discussion in ROD. |
| Update the discussion on ecosystem services in the final plan. | yes | yes | no | no | Plan page 88; EIS volume 1, page 114 | Updated discussion of ecosystem services in the introduction to the “Sustainable Rangelands and Livestock Grazing” section in EIS and added additional references to both the EIS and plan. |
| Rewrite DA-GDL-CDNST-2 to clarify when foreground distance may be less than 0.5 miles. | yes | no | no | no | Plan pages 151, 202 | Added footnote to DA-DC-CDNST-2 defining “foreground”; updated Scenery Management System definition in glossary to include distance zones. |

| Instruction | Plan Change | EIS Change | ROD Change | Project Record Change | Page Number | Description of Change |
|--|-------------|------------|------------|-----------------------|--|--|
| Describe in the ROD consistency with the National Trail System Act, the relationship of the act with the 2009 CDNST Comprehensive Plan, and the influence the comprehensive plan had on the designated area and plan components. | no | no | yes | no | ROD page 28 | Described compliance with National Trails System Act and 2009 CDNST Comprehensive Plan under "Findings Required by Other Laws." |
| Add description of methodology and analysis process for CDNST to the EIS. | no | yes | no | no | EIS volume 1, page 221 | Added suggested description to EIS. |
| Ensure that the EIS makes explicit the tie between plan components, the projected changes in the environment, the stressors plan components make or manage, and the outcomes for threatened, endangered, and sensitive species; demonstrate the use of best available scientific information in the EIS. | no | yes | yes | no | EIS volume 1, page 287; ROD page 34 | Discussed ties between plan components and at-risk species determinations in ROD; explicitly incorporated by reference Biological Evaluation into EIS. |
| State determinations using the specific language in law / regulation / policy regarding the requirements for the different at-risk species. | no | yes | no | no | EIS volume 1, pages 325–375 | Corrected determinations in EIS to identify compliance with relevant legal requirements. |
| Demonstrate consistency among Forests concerning Guidelines that regulate the inclusion of ESA recovery plans. Reword Guidelines to explicitly link the category of at-risk species (such as SCC vs. ESA) to the requirements of 36 CFR 219.9. | yes | yes | no | no | Plan pages 73, 75, 76, 81; EIS volume 1, pages 327, 337, 344, 353; EIS volume 2, pages 292, 298, 303, 322, 324, 332; EIS volume 3, page 72 | Updated the following plan components to clarify compliance with 36 CFR 219.9 and the Endangered Species Act: FW-DC-AQSP-5, FW-DC-TRSP-12, FW-GDL-TRSP-2, FW-GDL-ARS-1, FW-GDL-ARS-2, FW-GDL-ARS-3. Removed "personnel" from FW-GDL-ARS-2. |

| Instruction | Plan Change | EIS Change | ROD Change | Project Record Change | Page Number | Description of Change |
|--|-------------|------------|------------|-----------------------|--|--|
| Include notes from the Mexican Spotted Owl Leadership Forum Workshop and the joint stipulation agreement in the planning record. | no | no | no | yes | Not applicable | Added 2020 Mexican Spotted Owl Leadership Forum Workshop Notes and 2020 Joint Stipulation to Dismiss to the planning record. |
| Conduct a more complete analysis of threats to bighorn sheep to determine if the ecological conditions necessary to maintain a viable population are at risk and if additional plan components are warranted to ensure persistence of the species within the plan area. | no | yes | yes | no | EIS volume 1, pages 303, 320 | Addressed threats to bighorn sheep within and adjacent to the planning area in the ROD and in the EIS. |
| Clarify in the ROD how the plan recognizes land grants and acequias and is responsive to input received in the objection process. Modify plan language to better reflect the desire for the plan to contribute to maintaining the culture of northern New Mexico historic communities. | yes | yes | yes | no | Plan page 100; EIS volume 3, page 53; ROD pages 7, 10–12, 31 | Further discussed how the plan addresses the needs and uses of land grant communities and acequia associations. Modified language in FW-DC-RHC-1. |
| Correct and add CDNST references: fully cite 2009 CDNST Comprehensive Plan and 1982 ROS Book; update Forest Service Manual 2300 titles. | yes | yes | no | no | Plan pages 189, 231, 239; EIS volume 1, page 435 | Added 2009 CDNST Comprehensive Plan to plan appendix D and references list; removed 1985 CDNST Comprehensive Plan reference from plan appendix D; added most current Forest Service Manual chapter titles to appendix D; added ROS Book citation to EIS. |
| Add a response to New Mexico Land Grant Council's comment requesting a local workforce objective. | no | yes | no | no | EIS volume 3, page 74 | Added complete response to 2019 draft EIS comment. |

In addition to the instructions addressed above, changes were made in response to the following suggestions from the Regional Forester:

- Plan, pages 89, 180; EIS volume 1, page 347; EIS volume 2, pages 310, 319, 334: Removed reference to grazing compatibility with “social resources” in FW-DC-GR-4.
- Plan, page 119: Added clarification on administrative changes to recreation opportunity spectrum maps in the introduction to “General Recreation” section.
- Plan, page 179: Edited second monitoring question in table 34 to correspond with the correct desired condition. Monitoring question now reads: “Is plant community composition similar to site potential for its Terrestrial Ecological Unit Inventory map unit component?”
- Plan, page 202: Added definition of “refugia” to glossary.
- EIS volume 1, page 117: Corrected error in table 25 that listed average Animal Unit Months in Alternative A as 140,000. Changed to correct number (33,309).
- EIS volume 1, pages 40, 43: Corrected references to Cibola Climate Change Vulnerability Analysis Synthesis.
- EIS volume 1, pages 60–61, 438: Updated Proper Functioning Condition references to most recent editions.
- EIS volume 3, page 78: Provided more complete response to Concern Statement 35 (grazing and at-risk species).
- ROD, page 33: Added discussion of meaningfulness of a detailed comparison of the effects of each alternative on carbon sequestration.

The following changes were made for clarification or to fix an error in the record:

- Plan, page 23: Clarified relationship between seral state proportions and desired conditions for vegetation communities under “Range of Values.”
- Plan, pages 28, 181; EIS volume 2, pages 284, 300: Corrected reference to Seral State Proportions Supplement for the Southwest Region in FW-DC-VEG-1.
- Plan, page 31: Changed “cooler temperatures” to “lower temperatures” in FW-MGAP-VEG-1.
- Plan, page 37; EIS volume 1, page 346; EIS volume 2, pages 286, 300: Moved parenthetical in FW-DC-MCW-10 to clarify meaning of “some areas.”
- Plan, page 89; EIS volume 1, page 347; EIS volume 2, pages 310, 319: Added “in active allotments” to FW-DC-GR-6 to clarify application of this desired condition to grazing.
- EIS volume 1, page 41: Changed “improved” to “increased” in describing carbon stocks on the Cibola.
- EIS volume 2, pages 283, 300: Updated FW-DC-CC-1 to match plan language.
- ROD page 29: removed erroneous reference to over-snow vehicle use map.