September 2005

Forest Plan Amendment No. 10:

Attached are replacement pages for the Gila National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, 1986. The pages represent the 2005 decision amending the Gila National Forest Plan riparian standard and guidelines and activity schedules in order to be in alignment with current agency policy and budgets. This amendment also meets the 2003 Stipulation and Settlement agreement requiring the agency to amend the Forest Plan riparian standard and guidelines.

Existing pages	Replacement Pages
30	blank page, 30
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RESOURCE	ACTIVITY	STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES
	C02, C06	Retain three slash piles per acre in designated areas adjacent to waters for small game and/or turkey nesting cover.
	C02	Maintain a rotation of mature and over mature mast producing stands in accessible and potentially accessible P-J zones. Maintain escape cover and mast production regimes at no greater than one-half mile intervals.
	C02	Wildlife coordination and improvement efforts will include emphasis on riparian and aquatic area management.
	C02	Manage riparian areas in accordance with legal requirements regarding floodplains, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, and cultural and other resources.
	C02	Manage riparian areas to protect the productivity and diversity of riparian-dependent resources by requiring actions within or affecting riparian areas to protect and where applicable, improve dependent resources. Emphasize protection of soil, water, vegetation and wildlife and fish resources prior to implementing projects.
	C02	Give preferential consideration to resources dependent on riparian areas over other resources. Other resource uses and activities may occur to the extent that they support or do not adversely affect riparian-depended resources.
	C02, C04, C05, F01, F02, F05	Complete classifications and inventories of riparian ecosystems.
		Develop action plans that identify strategies for achieving satisfactory riparian conditions.
		Create an activity schedule in Forest Plan appendix (See Appendix C).
		Improve riparian ecosystems in unsatisfactory condition to satisfactory condition.
		A method for evaluating riparian condition known as the proper functioning condition (PFC) method will be added to the existing methods described in the Forest Plan. Proper functioning condition inventory methods are summarized in the list of definitions; see page 320a of the Forest Plan.
		Maintain riparian ecosystems currently in satisfactory condition.
		Develop action plans on a site-specific basis that identify strategies for achieving satisfactory riparian conditions.
		Evaluate riparian conditions using appropriate quantitative and/or qualitative methods.

Definitions

Aquatic Ecosystem	The stream channel, lake or estuary bed, water, biotic communities, and the habitat features that occur therein (FSM 2526.05)
PFC Method – Satisfactory Riparian (Lotic) Conditions (Prichard and others 1993).	Lotic riparian-wetland areas are functioning properly when adequate vegetation, land form, or large woody debris is present to: • Dissipate stream energy associated with high waterflows, thereby reducing erosion and improving water quality; • Filter sediment, capture bedload, and aid floodplain development; • Improve flood-water retention and ground-water recharge; • Develop root masses that stabilize streambanks against cutting action; • Develop diverse ponding and channel characteristics to provide the habitat and the water depth, duration, and temperature necessary for fish production, waterfowl breeding, and other uses; • Support greater biodiversity; and • Provide the listed benefits applicable to a particular area.
PFC Method – Satisfactory Wetland (Lentic) Conditions (Prichard and others, 1994)	Lentic riparian-wetland areas are functioning properly when adequate vegetation, landform, or debris is present to: • Dissipate energies associated with wind action, wave action, and overland flow from adjacent sites, thereby reducing erosion and improving water quality; • Filter sediment and aid floodplain development; • Improve flood-water retention and ground-water recharge; • Develop root masses that stabilize islands and shoreline features against cutting action; • Restrict water percolation; • Develop diverse ponding characteristics to provide the habitat and the water depth, duration, and temperature necessary for fish production, waterbird breeding, and other uses; • Support greater biodiversity; and • Provide the listed benefits applicable to a particular area.
PFC Method – Unsatisfactory Riparian Conditions (USDI BLM, 1998 and 1999)	Riparian conditions are considered unsatisfactory if a riparian-wetland is not in proper functioning condition (see definitions for satisfactory riparian or wetland), and is placed into one of three other categories: 1. Functional At Risk – Riparian-wetland areas that are in functional condition, but have an existing soil, water , or vegetation attribute which makes them susceptible to degradation. 2. Nonfunctional – Riparian-wetland areas that clearly are not providing adequate vegetation, landform, or large woody debris to dissipate stream energy associated with high flows, and thus are not reducing erosion, improving water quality, etc. 3. Unknown – Riparian-wetland areas for which there is a lack of sufficient information on which to make any form of determination.

Riparian Area	Geographically delineable areas with distinctive resource values and characteristics that are comprised of the aquatic and riparian ecosystems (FSM 2526.05)
Riparian Ecosystem	Transition between the aquatic ecosystem and the adjacent terrestrial ecosystem; identified by soil characteristics or distinctive vegetation communities that require few or unbound water (FSM 2526.05).
Wetland	Those areas that are inundated by surface or ground water with a frequency sufficient to support, and under normal circumstances do or would support a prevalence of vegetation or aquatic life that requires saturated or seasonally saturated soil conditions for growth and reproduction. Generally include swamps, marshes, bogs, and similar areas such as sloughs, potholes, wet meadows, river overflows, mud flats, and natural ponds (FSM 2527.05).

Riparian Activity Schedule

Activity	**Schedule**
Complete classification and inventories of all known riparian ecosystems that are associated with perennial streams.	2010
Initiate classification and inventories on the remaining riparian areas such as springs, seeps, intermittent, and ephemeral drainages on a project-by-project basis.	2004
Manage for upward trends in all riparian ecosystems assessed as unsatisfactory.	2030

Decision Notice
and
Finding of No Significant Impact

Forest Plan Amendment
for
Riparian Standards and Guidelines
USDA Forest Service
Gila National Forest

Catron, Grant, Hidalgo, and Sierra Counties, New Mexico

Decision and Reasons for the Decision

Background

The Gila National Forest received instructions from the 10th Circuit Court to amend the Gila National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) (CIV 01-0314 WJ/RLP-ACE) on December 5, 2003. This court settlement came in response to a lawsuit filed by Forest Guardians in November, 2001. The settlement agreement required the Gila National Forest to amend the Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) (1986) with respect to scheduled accomplishments of riparian inventories, classifications, and completion of action plans to improve riparian areas in unsatisfactory condition and to achieve satisfactory riparian condition. Factors to be considered in amending the Forest Plan include inventory needs, Forest priorities, and the annual budget process.

There is a need to address Forest Plan riparian standards and guidelines that contain outdated schedules for riparian inventory and monitoring activity. Additionally, there is a need to incorporate current scientific methodologies for inventorying and monitoring activities, and clarify definitions for riparian and wetland areas. This action is needed, because at the time the Forest Plan was developed in 1986, the intent was to revise the Forest Plan at the end of the first decade. Revision did not occur as planned and is currently scheduled to begin in October 2007. Many of the riparian standards and guidelines are no longer in alignment with current Forest priorities or budget allocations, and in some cases the projected activities are past due.

This action to amend the Forest Plan is needed to modify riparian standards and guideline, adjust projected activity schedules, incorporate current scientific methodologies, and clarify definitions for riparian ecosystems. Factors taken into account include inventory needs, Forest priorities, and the annual budget process. This action responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the Gila Forest Plan, and helps move riparian habitats towards desired conditions described in that plan (USDA 1986).

The amendment was determined to be "non-significant", consistent with 36 CFR 219.10(f) and Forest Service Manual 1922.51 and 1909.12.5.32. The amendment would not change existing land and resource management practices, Forest Plan goals, objectives, or outputs. Furthermore, the scope of

this amendment is limited to selected standards and guidelines regarding scheduled activities, methodologies, and definitions for riparian inventory and monitoring.

The environmental assessment (EA) documents the analysis of two alternatives to meet this need.

Decision

Based upon my review of all alternatives, I have decided to implement Alternative A which amends the Forest Plan to meet the previously described purpose and need. The proposed amendment is fully described in detail in the EA (pages 3-8).

When compared to the other alternatives this alternative will improve Forest Plan consistency with inventory and evaluation methodologies for riparian and wetland areas and update activity schedules to be in alignment with current agency policy and budgets. This alternative meets the 2003 Stipulation and Settlement agreement which required the agency to amend the Forest Plan riparian standards and guidelines. This alternative complies with the National Forest Management Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and the 2005 National Forest System Land and Resource Planning Rule (36 CFR 219.14.2).

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered the No Action alternative. A comparison of these alternatives can be found in the EA on pages 3 – 8.

Alternative A – Proposed Action

The Forest Plan will be amended to update riparian standards and guidelines, activity schedules, definitions, and methodologies for inventory, monitoring and classification of riparian areas. Activity schedules, definitions and methodologies will be formatted in an appendix to the Forest Plan. This amendment considers Forest priorities and budget allocations

The original intent of the Forest Plan riparian standards and guides remains the same. Direction to inventory, classify, and improve unsatisfactory riparian conditions and manage for upward trend to achieve the desired goal of satisfactory conditions would be retained.

Alternative B - No Action

Riparian standards and guidelines, associated activities and methodologies as described in the Forest Plan would remain in effect and the proposed amendment would not be incorporated into the Forest Plan. This alternative would not meet the Forests legal obligation to align riparian standards and guidelines with current activity schedules, work priorities, or annual budget process.

Public Involvement

As described in the background, the need for this action arose in December, 2003. A proposal to amend standards and guidelines was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions on October 2004. The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping which began September 14, 2004. In addition, as part of the public involvement process, the agency met with the County Commissioners in Catron, Grant, and Sierra counties, as well as Catron County and Arizona-New Mexico Coalition of Counties representatives, and members of the Upper Gila Watershed Association.

Using the comments from the public, other agencies the interdisciplinary team determined there were no issues regarding the effects of the proposed action.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I based my finding on the following:

My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action.

There will be no significant effects on public health and safety, because the amendment is limited in scope to modification of riparian standards and guidelines that are strategic and not site specific (see EA page 13).

There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area, because the amendment is limited in scope to modification of riparian standards and guidelines that are strategic and not site specific (see EA page 13).

The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. Because there is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the project (see EA page 2).

We have considerable experience with the types of activities to be implemented. The effects analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk (see EA page 13).

The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because the amendment is limited in scope to the modification of riparian standards and guidelines that are strategic and not site specific (see EA page 13).

The cumulative impacts are not significant (see EA page 13).

The action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, because the amendment is limited in scope to modification of riparian standards and guidelines that are strategic and not site specific (see EA page 13).

The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species act of 1973, because the amendment is limited in scope to modification of riparian standards and guidelines that are strategic and not site specific (see EA page 13).

The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA (see EA page 13). The action is consistent with the Gila Land and Resource Management Plan (See EA page 2).

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This decision to implement the Alternative A and amend the Forest Plan riparian standards and guidelines is consistent with the intent of the Forest Plan's long term goals and objectives listed on page 12. Alternative A meets the meets the Forest's legal obligation to align riparian standards and guidelines with current activity schedules, work priorities, and annual budget process as previously described. The amendment was designed in conformance with land and resource management plan standards and guidelines in accordance with the National Forest Management Act of 1976; 16 USC 1604 (i) and 36 CFR 219.10 (e). Additionally, the management practices and activities of Alternative A are consistent with the Clean Water Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and the Endangered Species Act. The desired goal to manage for an upward trend and satisfactory conditions in riparian areas remains the same (Forest Plan, page 30).

The following are the standards and guidelines, activity schedules, and definitions that will be inserted as an amendment in the Forest Plan:

Standards and Guidelines

The following standards and guidelines will replace existing standards and guidelines and be inserted into the Forest Plan:

Complete classifications and inventories of riparian ecosystems.

Develop action plans that identify strategies for achieving satisfactory riparian conditions.

Improve riparian ecosystems in unsatisfactory condition to satisfactory condition.

Maintain riparian ecosystems currently in satisfactory condition.

Develop action plans on a site-specific basis that identify strategies for achieving satisfactory riparian conditions.

Evaluate riparian conditions using appropriate quantitative and/or qualitative methods.

Activity Schedule

The following activity schedule for riparian inventories and classifications will be inserted as an appendix to the Forest Plan.

Activity	Schedule
Complete classification and inventories of all known riparian ecosystems that are associated with perennial streams.	2010
Initiate classification and inventories on the remaining riparian areas such as springs, seeps, intermittent, and ephemeral drainages on a project-by-project basis.	2005
Manage for upward trends in all riparian ecosystems assessed as unsatisfactory.	2030

Definitions

The following definitions will be added as an appendix to the Forest Plan.

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- Improve flood-water retention and ground-water recharge;
- Develop root masses that stabilize islands and shoreline features against cutting action;
- Restrict water percolation;
- Develop diverse ponding characteristics to provide the habitat and the water depth, duration, and temperature necessary for fish production, waterbird breeding, and other uses;
- Support greater biodiversity; and
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Implementation Date

If no appeals are filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of the decision may occur on, but not before, 7 calendar days from the close of the appeal filing period. When appeals are filed, implementation may occur on, but not before, the 15th business day following the date of the last appeal disposition.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to administrative review (appeal) pursuant to 36 CFR Part 217.

The appeal must be filed (regular mail, fax, email, hand-delivery, or express delivery) with the Reviewing Officer. Written appeals must be submitted to: Regional Forester, Reviewing Officer, 333 Broadway SE, Albuquerque, NM, 87102.

The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered appeals are: 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic appeals must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc) to appeals-southwestern-regional-office@fs.fed.us. In cases where no identifiable name is attached to an electronic message, a verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature is one way to provide verification.

Appeals, including attachments, must be filed within 45 days from the publication date of this notice in the Silver City Daily Press, the newspaper of record. Attachments received after the 45 day appeal period will not be considered. The publication date in the Silver City Daily Press, the newspaper of record, is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Individuals or organizations who participated in the decision making process specified at 217.5 may appeal this decision. The notice of appeal must meet the appeal content requirements at 36 CFR 217.9.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Cecilia McNicoll, Forest Planner, Gila National Forest, 3005 East Camino del Bosque, Silver City, New Mexico, 88061, phone (505) 388-8261, and email cmcnicoll@fs.fed.us.

Patricia L. Mc

9/30/2005

MARCIA R. ANDRE
Forest Supervisor
Gila National Forest

Date

for