



File Code: 1950
Date: April 4, 2017

Designated Opportunity to Comment: South Sacramento Restoration Project

Dear Interested Parties:

The U.S. Forest Service has begun developing the South Sacramento Restoration Project, a landscape-scale restoration project on the Sacramento Ranger District of the Lincoln National Forest. Through this project, we are proposing to restore ecosystem health on approximately 140,000 acres in the southern Sacramento Mountains of New Mexico. See the attached map for the project location. The restoration strategy would include a variety of management tools including but not limited to mechanical methods and prescribed fire to achieve ecosystem health and fuel reduction goals. The project will include additional measures to improve wildlife habitat and watershed health. The project will include adaptive management options that will allow for treatment flexibility based on site-specific conditions, needs, and objectives.

To further meet project goals, the proposed action will include a project-specific amendment to the Lincoln National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) that would authorize the use of forest restoration strategies in places and under conditions that were not foreseen when the current Forest Plan standards and guidelines were established in 1986. The amendment would follow the provisions of the 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219). The attached preliminary proposal provides more details on the proposed project and Forest Plan amendment. Additional details are also available on the project website: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=51146>.

We will soon prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) to document and publicly disclose the environmental effects of implementing these proposed restoration activities on both National Forest System and non-federal lands within the planning area. We would like to receive public input on this project proposal, which will help us fully develop the proposed action and help identify issues and concerns that should be addressed in the analysis. Opportunities to provide comments on this proposal are outlined below.

The project is being developed under the Agriculture Act (Farm Bill) of 2014 authority as amended to the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003, Section 602. The initial project proposal was designed in cooperation with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, New Mexico State Land Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and with the participation of a local collaborative group representing the interests of local residents, conservation groups, other state and federal agencies, elected officials, and other stakeholders. While this project is being developed through a collaborative process, the Forest Supervisor of the Lincoln National Forest will be responsible for making the final decision on the project.

How to Submit Comments

We are seeking public comments from anyone that may be interested in or affected by this proposed project. We are also seeking input on the proposed forest plan amendment and its substantive provisions. The designated 30-day scoping period for this project proposal officially begins the day after the notice of intent is published in the Federal Register, which is expected on April 7, 2017. Specific written comments received for this proposal should be submitted by May 8, 2017. The publication date



of the Federal Register notice is the exclusive means for calculating the designated comment period. Those providing written comments should not rely on dates or timeframes provided by any other source. It is the responsibility of persons providing comments to submit them by the close of the comment period (36 CFR 218.25 (a) (4)).

A public meeting to discuss the South Sacramento Restoration Project will be held on Wednesday, April 26, 2017 from 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm at the Lodge Resort Pavilion, 601 Corona Place, Cloudcroft, NM 88317. Forest Service representatives will present an overview of the project proposal, answer questions, and discuss the planning process. Attendees will have the opportunity to ask questions, share issues and concerns, and provide comments on the proposed action. Please contact Peggy Luensmann (psluensmann@fs.fed.us; or call at 575-434-7200) at least one week in advance of the meeting if you need to request special accommodations, such as sign language interpretation.

Your comments will be most valuable if they are specific to this project area and the proposed activities and/or forest plan amendment. Comments should clearly articulate concerns and contentions related to the project, be within the scope of the proposed action, have a direct relationship to the proposed action, and must include supporting reasons for the responsible official to consider (36 CFR 218.2). More specifically, scoping comments may pertain to the nature and scope of the environmental and social issues associated with the proposed action, and may suggest measures that could be taken to minimize adverse environmental effects, including any reasonable alternatives.

Specific written comments regarding the South Sacramento Restoration Project can be provided using any of the following methods. Electronic comments including attachments may be submitted by email in word (.doc), rich text format (.rtf), text (.txt), or hypertext markup language (.html) and include the project title in the subject line. Specific written comments may also be submitted via mail or fax; hand delivered to this office between the hours of 8:00 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays; or provided during the scheduled public meeting on April 26, 2017.

Email (preferred): comments-southwestern-lincoln@fs.fed.us

Mail: SSRP Comments
c/o Peggy Luensmann
Lincoln National Forest Supervisor's Office
3463 Las Palomas
Alamogordo, NM 88310

Fax: (575) 434-7218

Comments must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic comments. Anyone submitting comments are asked to provide their name and postal mailing address so that they can be added to the project mailing list. Comments submitted anonymously will be considered; however, anonymous comments will not provide the Agency with the ability to provide the respondent with subsequent environmental documents.

This proposed project is subject to the objection process described in 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and C. Individuals and entities who submit specific written comments during a designated comment period will be eligible to file an objection as defined in 36 CFR 218.25(a)(3). Comments sent after this designated comment period has closed will still be fully considered and incorporated in the EIS; however, anyone submitting late comments will not have standing to object to the final EIS and draft record of decision

unless they submit additional comments during another designated comment period provided later in the planning process. At least one additional designated comment period will be offered when the draft EIS for this project is prepared.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including name and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Additionally, pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27(d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that, under the FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and where the request is denied; the agency will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address within seven days.

If you have any questions or would like additional information on the South Sacramento Restoration Project, contact Peggy Luensmann at: psluensmann@fs.fed.us or 575-434-7200.

Thank you for your interest in the Lincoln National Forest.

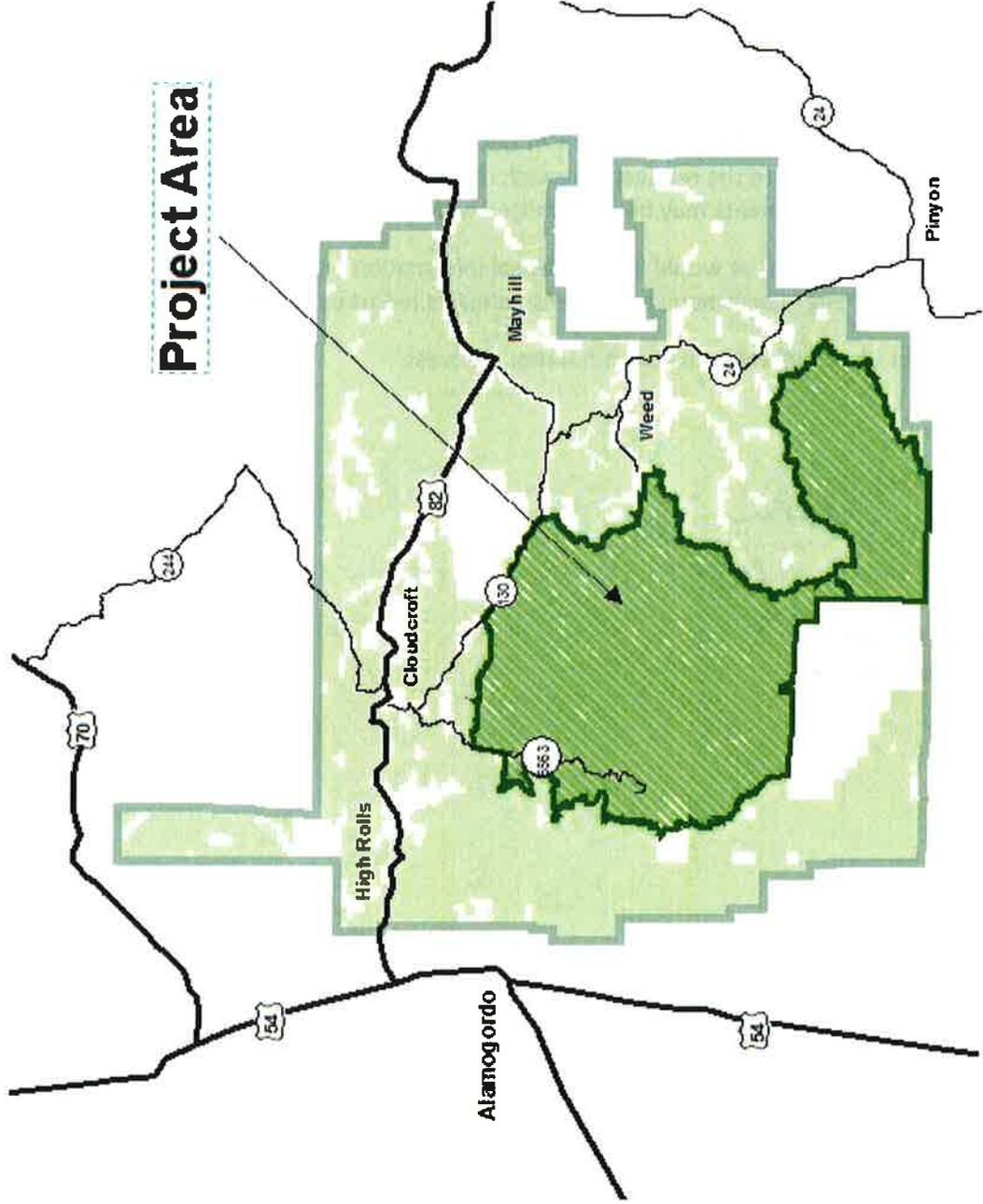
Sincerely,



for

TRAVIS G. MOSELEY
Forest Supervisor

South Sacramento Restoration Project Map



Southern Sacramento Restoration Project – Preliminary Proposal

Purpose and Need for Action

The landscape within the South Sacramento Restoration Project planning area has been greatly altered from historic conditions. Overall forest health in the area has declined due to insects, disease, and other factors leading to high tree mortality and increased risk for high-severity wildland fire across the landscape. Wildlife habitat and watershed conditions have also declined as a result.

The purpose of the project is to restore overall forest health, watershed health, and wildlife habitat in the planning area. There is a need to increase forest resiliency to insects, disease, and stand-replacing fires by shifting forest structure, composition, and diversity toward the natural range of conditions that were historically typical for mixed-conifer, ponderosa pine, pinyon-juniper, and other habitat types within the Sacramento Mountains in southeast New Mexico.

Additionally, there is a need to reduce high-severity fire risks and post-fire flooding potential to protect life, property, and natural resources by reducing crown fire hazard potential. There are also needs to reduce the likelihood of human-caused ignitions and to increase the ability of fire suppression crews to manage future wildfires.

In Mexican spotted owl habitat, there is a need to protect existing and promote development of future habitat suitable for nesting, roosting, foraging, and dispersal to further recovery of the species. Additionally, there is a need to increase our understanding of the short- and long-term effects of land management on existing and future suitable habitat.

Where watershed function is impaired, there is a need to improve soil condition and productivity; hydrologic function of springs and seeps; and quality of perennial and intermittent waters and riparian areas.

Proposed Action

In response to the purpose and need, the Lincoln National Forest proposes to conduct forest restoration activities on approximately 140,000 acres of National Forest System lands in the southern Sacramento Mountains (approximately 10 to 15 years to meet initial project objectives with additional maintenance treatments over the long term). Restoration activities would occur in all ecosystems in the area, including mixed-conifer, ponderosa pine, pinyon-juniper, riparian areas, meadows, and aspen habitat types. Restoration activities would focus on thinning and burning treatments to improve forest health and resiliency by reducing stand density, continuity, and homogeneity (sameness of forest structure and species composition), and increase heterogeneity (diverse forest structure and species composition) at a landscape scale, midscale and fine scale.

The South Sacramento Restoration Project includes areas of the Lincoln National Forest, Sacramento Ranger District that either have not been previously treated, or that were previously treated but require additional treatments to support forest restoration and other habitat management goals at all scales. To meet project needs, the Forest Service is proposing to conduct hand and mechanical thinning and prescribed fire treatments to achieve forest and wildlife habitat restoration objectives as described below. Treatments would be aligned with old growth development and large tree retention objectives, which are ecosystem components that are generally lacking in the planning area.

The following types of treatment activities may be considered for this project:

Hand Treatments – Hand treatments refer to the use hand tools such as chainsaws, brush cutters, and other methods that do not require the use of heavy machinery, vehicles, or similar equipment. The use of manual methods can be extremely time consuming and would most likely be used on slopes that are inaccessible by heavy equipment; in areas adjacent to open roads; or in areas where use of mechanical methods would cause significant, unavoidable harm to resources.

Mechanical Treatments – Mechanical treatments refer to a variety of possible tools used to meet objectives. These include equipment and vehicles designed to cut trees and lop slash including on all terrain; yard material to landings; pile slash; chip or masticate wood; and transport material. Merchantable wood products would be removed from sites where feasible, based on road access, slope, terrain, and economic factors. Non-merchantable wood and thinning slash may be removed or treated on site depending on site-specific objectives.

Some snags and downed woody debris would be retained as needed to improve soil condition and nutrient cycling and to meet watershed condition and wildlife habitat objectives outlined in the Lincoln National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). New snags may be created to improve wildlife habitat conditions and forest health in areas where existing snags are limited.

Prescribed Fire – Broadcast and pile burning are types of prescribed fire that may be used in this project. In most cases, pile burning would occur following mechanical treatments to remove activity slash created during mechanical treatment activities. Bulldozers or similar heavy equipment are most commonly used to pile slash. Slash may be hand piled in areas with limited amounts of downed woody debris, where highly-erodible soils occur, or on steep slopes and other areas that are not accessible to heavy equipment.

Broadcast burning would be most often used after initial thinning and pile burning treatments on a regular maintenance schedule (typically every 2 to 15 years depending on the plant association). However, broadcast burning may also be used as an initial treatment where treatment objectives do not require mechanical thinning prior to burning (such as maintaining open meadows or in stands to stimulate understory growth) and where the use of broadcast burning would be expected to meet restoration objectives with minimal risk to property or resources of concern. Both manual and aerial ignition methods may be used. If prescribed burning is unable to occur due to environmental or personnel constraints, then additional hand or mechanical methods would occur to maintain restoration objectives.

Watersheds – Improve water quality and watershed condition. Treatments may include but is not limited to installing structures to control erosion; reseeding or replanting native vegetation where natural regeneration is not sufficient to stabilize soils; and treating headcuts in arroyos. Construction or replacement of upland water sources to improve livestock and wildlife distribution away from drainages.

Infrastructure improvements may be necessary to complete proposed treatments. Open system roads (maintenance level 2 through 5) would continue to be maintained as needed. Maintenance level 1 roads (closed roads) may be temporarily opened and maintained where needed for project access. Temporary roads and landings may be constructed where needed for these purposes. Road maintenance includes but is not limited to smoothing out road surfaces, improving drainage, and stabilizing stream crossings. Maintenance level 1 roads would be closed after treatments are completed. Temporary roads would be rehabilitated. Open system roads would remain open to public access after completion of the project per the Lincoln motor vehicle use map. Sections of open roads currently along canyon bottoms may be

relocated as opportunities arise to mitigate resource damage. However, there would be no overall changes in access, number or mileage of system roads, or road maintenance level where relocation would occur. No new permanent roads would be constructed. Decisions about changing public access are not included in this project. Non-system routes may be rehabilitated, especially where significant resource damage such as soil erosion is occurring, or where road densities exceed recommended levels as described in the Lincoln National Forest travel analysis report.

Mexican Spotted Owl Habitat – Restoration activities, including hand or mechanical thinning and prescribed fire treatments are proposed in Mexican spotted owl protected activity centers and recovery habitats. The overall goal is to improve the quantity, quality, and distribution of owl habitat. Treatments would be designed in coordination with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and align with the 2012 Mexican spotted owl recovery plan. These restoration activities are expected to improve habitat resiliency by reducing the risk of stand-replacing fires and reducing the occurrence and extent of insect and disease outbreaks within owl habitat. Treatments are also expected to promote the development of future habitat in forest stands that are not currently suitable for nesting and roosting or only provide marginal habitat. Pre- and post-treatment monitoring would occur so the impacts of treatments can be understood.

Adaptive Management Strategy

The adaptive management strategy consists of three principle components: 1) the ability to select management tools or strategies best suited to site-specific and mid-scale management; 2) the ability to learn from treatment and resource monitoring so the most effective treatment methods are used to achieve management goals in new areas; and 3) the ability to incorporate new technologies or tools that may become available.

All proposed hand or mechanical thinning and prescribed fire treatments may be used indefinitely after the initial treatments to maintain or further reduce tree densities and fuel loads if site-specific objectives cannot be fully achieved by the initial treatment.

The proposed action will include a wide range of resource protection measure and mitigations that will be designed to avoid or minimize adverse impacts to the natural and human environment that could result from implementing the project. The resource protection measures will be based on Forest Plan direction and policy, best available science, and site-specific evaluations.

Forest Plan Amendment

To further meet project goals, the proposed action would include a project-specific amendment to the Forest Plan that would authorize the use of forest restoration strategies in places and under conditions that were not foreseen when the current Forest Plan standards and guidelines were established in 1986. The amendment is expected to include, but may not be limited to, changes in standards and guidelines relating to:

- Using harvest strategies on steep slopes where such activities are not currently authorized;
- Using a broader range of treatment options within Mexican spotted owl habitat than is currently authorized; and
- Removing timing restrictions in some Mexican spotted owl protected activity centers so disturbance in occupied habitat can be limited to one year.

While the amendment changes are still being developed, the proposed amendment may include changes to standards and guidelines pertaining to the following substantive requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule. The significance of impacts that would result from adopting the amendment will be determined through the project analysis:

- **Sustainability** – may include changes intended to maintain or restore the ecological integrity of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems and watersheds (36 CFR 219.8);
- **Diversity of Plant and Animal Communities** – may include changes intended to provide the ecological conditions to both maintain diversity of plant and animal communities as well as for individual species (36 CFR 219.9);
- **Multiple Use** – may include changes providing for ecosystem services and multiple uses (36 CFR 219.10); and/or
- **Timber Requirements Based on the National Forest Management Act** – may include changes regarding timber management within Forest Service authority and the inherent capability of the plan area (36 CFR 219.11).

A project-specific plan amendment is a one-time variance in Forest Plan direction. Forest Plan standards and guidelines revert back to the original language for all other ongoing or future projects that may be authorized on the Lincoln National Forest unless additional amendments are made for those other projects. The amendment will be fully developed based on circumstances, issues, and concerns identified during the project scoping period. If adopted, this would be the eighteenth amendment to the Forest Plan since its inception in 1986.