USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Santa Fe Mountains Landscape Resiliency Project

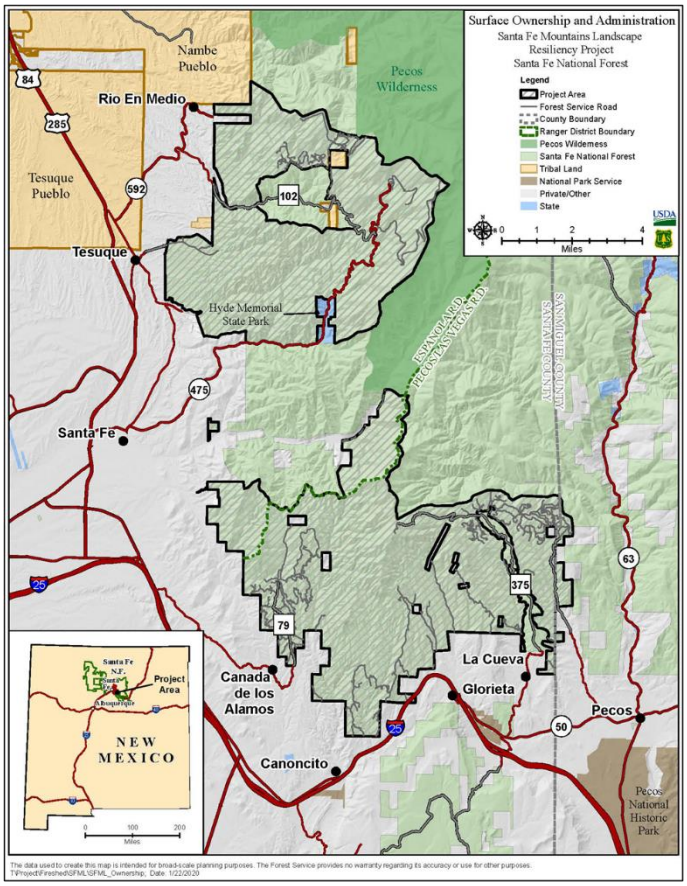
The Santa Fe Mountains Landscape Resiliency Project is being proposed by the Santa Fe National Forest **to restore forest and watershed health**. The Project is located largely within the Greater Santa Fe Fireshed, which is a 107,000-acre landscape along the Santa Fe Mountains in the southern Sangre de Cristo Mountain Range. The Forest Service conducted a thorough environmental assessment with multiple opportunities for public engagement and input into the proposal and alternatives.

The project builds on the successful collaboration between the Santa Fe National Forest, the City of Santa Fe, and many other partners in the Greater Santa Fe Fireshed Coalition to restore fire to its natural role in the Santa Fe Municipal Watershed. Thanks to nearly 20 years of treatment, the Watershed continues to provide almost half of the drinking water for Santa Fe with some of the cleanest, cheapest water in the West.

Project Goals

The project will **improve the health of a priority landscape** and **increase its resiliency to future disturbances** by:

- Restoring frequent-fire forests to their historic natural condition
- Reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire and consequent impacts to ecological, cultural, tribal, recreation and scenic values
- Improving wildlife habitat
- Improving watershed and range conditions



The project will use **prescribed fire** as the main tool to restore resiliency to these frequent-fire forests, with **small-tree thinning** as needed to allow fire to play its natural role in the ecosystem. Proposed activities across the 50,566-acre project area over the next 10-15 years include:

- Noncommercial thinning of up to 18,000 acres, followed by prescribed burning. Thinning will be limited to trees <16" diameter at breast height (DBH) and will include both manual and mechanical treatments.
- Prescribed burning, including pile, broadcast and jackpot burning, on up to 38,000 total acres.
- Restoration of up to 680 acres of riparian habitat for native fish and plants, including conifer and non-native invasive species removal, indirect use of prescribed fire, herbicide application, native tree planting and fencing.
- Closing 1.5 miles of old roads.

The Forest Service would use a "conditions-based" approach, evaluating conditions on the ground to apply the most appropriate treatments and prescriptions for current conditions in specific project areas.

Scientific Support

The project is supported by top researchers and scientists who have spent decades studying the history of wildfire in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. This research has generated unequivocal evidence of frequent fires going back hundreds of

years. Historically, low- to moderate-intensity wildfires burned through the ponderosa pine and dry mixed conifer forests every seven to 15 years. The exclusion of fire from this landscape has created dense, overgrown forests with an unnaturally high build-up of fuel, increasing the risk of high-severity wildfire and insect and disease outbreaks.

Fire is a keystone process in these forests, part of a natural cycle that removes leaf and needle litter and creates space for grasses and other understory plants, providing rich wildlife habitat and improving forest and watershed health**.**

The current best available science has confirmed that fuel reduction treatments can effectively mitigate fire behavior, reducing fire severity and tree mortality. Reducing fuels and breaking fuel continuity helps provide defensible zones where firefighters can safely engage with wildfires to prevent damage to homes and infrastructure. We have already seen the benefits of fuel reduction treatments in the Fireshed. In August 2020, firefighters were able to use an area that had been treated with prescribed fire to contain the Medio Fire, preventing it from entering the Santa Fe Municipal Watershed.

Summary of the Draft Environmental Assessment (EA)

The Santa Fe National Forest conducted an extensive assessment of the potential environmental impacts from the Santa Fe Mountains Landscape Resiliency Project. If no action is taken, the risk of high-severity and high-intensity fire would continue to increase, threatening forests and the ecosystem services they provide, as well as infrastructure in the wildland-urban interface (WUI). In contrast, the analysis suggests that the proposed treatments will:

- Improve the condition of forest vegetation, increasing species and structural diversity and restoring the forest to a more fire-adapted species composition and structure
- Maintain and expand old-growth habitat
- Reduce fuel loads, wildfire behavior and potential damage to important values from high-intensity wildfire
- Increase the forest's resiliency to climate change
- Improve the diversity, health and resilience of wildlife habitat, including habitat for the Mexican spotted owl
- Protect drinking water sources for the City of Santa Fe from high-severity wildfire
- Restore riparian vegetation and enhance watershed condition
- Reduce air quality impacts from high-severity wildfire
- Enhance views in the project area by creating forest openings

In some cases, treatments may generate undesirable short-term effects. For example, treatments may temporarily limit public access for recreation or disturb wildlife. The Forest Service has developed an extensive set of design features, mitigation measures and best management practices to minimize any short-term negative impacts. Over the long-term, the assessment concludes that the project will meet its goal to improve the ecosystem resilience of the landscape to future disturbances.

Opportunities for Engagement

The Santa Fe National Forest welcomes your engagement and comments on the Draft Environmental Assessment. It is anticipated that the document will be released to the public on September 13, 2021, and the official public comment period will run September 27 through October 26. During this time, the Forest Service will hold two virtual public meetings, which will be announced on the project website.

Why This Work Matters

The threats are more than theoretical, and **the time to act is now.** Communities in and around the Santa Fe National Forest have experienced the devastating impacts of high-severity fires and the drastic erosion and flooding that follow, which pose a serious hazard to human health and safety and threaten irreplaceable resources and infrastructure.

Our partners in the Greater Santa Fe Fireshed Coalition understand that **restoring the health and vitality of our forests is critical for the future of our communities**. The Santa Fe Mountains Landscape Resiliency Project will help us sustain the benefits that flow from these mountains – water, wildlife, recreation, traditional uses and special places.