

Draft Decision Notice

Grass Valley Fire Restoration Project

**USDA Forest Service, San Bernardino National Forest
Mountain Top Ranger District
San Bernardino County, California**

Introduction

In May of 2018, an Interdisciplinary Team of Forest Service employees completed the Grass Valley Fire Restoration Environmental Assessment. The environmental assessment was developed in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations.

The following draft decision notice provides information about the project, describes my decision and the rationale for my decision.

The Grass Valley Fire Restoration Environmental Assessment and supporting resource reports are incorporated by reference in this document. The environmental assessment and associated Finding of No significant Impact (FONSI), specialist reports, and this draft decision are all available for download from the San Bernardino National Forest website at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=43428> under the Grass Valley Fire Restoration Project listing.

Project Area and Summary of Treatment Descriptions

The project area is located adjacent to communities of Blue Jay, Deer Lodge Park and North Lake Arrowhead, California occurring between 4,500 and 5,700 feet above sea level. The legal location of the project area is Township 2 North, Range 3 West, Sections 5, 6, 7, 8, 18; and Township 2 North, Range 4 West in portions of Section 13, San Bernardino Meridian, in San Bernardino County, California (Figure 1 Vicinity Map).

A full description of the Proposed Action and project design features can be found in the Grass Valley Environmental Assessment, pages 8 through 45. Monitoring for specific resources can be found on pages 46-47.

To summarize, treatments under the Proposed Action will include fuels reduction and vegetation management activities on approximately 1,043 acres within four treatment levels using various treatment methods.

- Treatment Level 1 (approximately 193 acres) will be the most intensive treatment proposed and will generally be located along Forest Service system roads, and along ownership boundaries, adjacent to private land and homes. The primary objective of this treatment will be to reduce live vegetation and fuels to a level that will most effectively prevent fire spread potential during a wildland fire event. Treatment Level 1 will result in

an open forest structure with no standing dead trees, down logs, or other fuels on the ground.

- Treatment level 1a (approximately 172 acres) is similar to Treatment Level 1, but slightly less intensive. Treatment Level 1a will be conducted along Forest Service managed road corridors where there is habitat for California spotted owls, bald eagles or San Bernardino flying squirrels.
- Treatment Level 3 (approximately 298 acres) is proposed for areas that are within the Wildland-Urban Interface Defense Zone but are outside of all identified spotted owl and bald eagle habitats. The objective is to reduce the potential for stand replacing fires by reducing crown bulk density, and surface and canopy fuels.
- Treatment Level 4 (approximately 350 acres) is specifically designed for habitat diversity with an emphasis on several species known from the project area (spotted owls, bald eagles, and San Bernardino flying squirrels) while treating fuels in order to improve community protection and habitat resiliency during fires.
- Treatment Level 4a (approximately 30 acres) is a slight modification of Treatment Level 4. In general, treatments are avoided in known spotted owl nest stands. However, for this project, there is a need to treat in one nest stand because of the location on the landscape and proximity to private land developments. This nest stand was substantially altered during the 2007 Grass Valley Fire and has not been occupied since.

A variety of treatment methods will be used in all the treatment levels to accomplish the fuels reduction and vegetation management objectives. These treatment methods will vary by site conditions and may include manual labor, mastication, cable-skyline, as well as tractor (ground based).

Other activities also included in the Proposed Action are:

Prescribed Fire/Broadcast Burning

Some of the treatment levels described above will also receive prescribed fire/broadcast burning when all other fuels reduction work is complete. The purpose is to reduce surface fuel loading in both existing and activity generated fuels, as well as restore process level function to the ecosystem. Multiple entries of prescribed fire may be required to accomplish the desired reduction in surface fuel loading to reach the desired condition. Once that desired condition has been met, prescribed fire may then be used as a management tool at intervals that will more closely mimic the pre-European settlement fire regime.

Brush Piles

To provide habitat for rare reptiles and amphibians and for prey species of spotted owls, scattered brush piles will be established to a minimum of two piles per acre in Treatment Level 3 and 4 treatment areas. Where it can be done without compromising the objectives of the shaded fuelbreak, a minimum of two piles per acre will be established in Treatment Level 1 and 1a areas.

Reforestation and Planting of Native Species

Reforestation will be conducted using locally-collected seed for native conifer species. Conifer trees will be genetically suited to the project area with seeds being from the same seed zone and elevational gradients. The objective of reforestation is to create new stands of conifers in areas that were previously-forested, but were affected by the Grass Valley fire of 2007.

Other native plant species may be planted or seeded within the project area as necessary to restore ecological conditions that have been altered as a result of the wildland fire. Examples of this could include spreading native grass seeds or planting shrubs or other perennials to help with soil stability and species diversity.

Non Native Plant Treatments

Manually treating non-native plants will include those areas identified already and will include new occurrences that are found in the future.

Repair of Damaged Infrastructure

Within the project area, there is damaged infrastructure, such as trails, roads, low water crossings, and some road drainage features, that has resulted from changed hydrologic cycle and human uses. The repair of damages include (but are not limited to) repair and replacement of culverts, improvement of the drainage system associated with roads, road resurfacing, including cut and fill, as well as blocking of unauthorized use routes and rehabilitation of these areas. Blocking of unauthorized routes may include use of boulders, fencing, or otherwise making a barrier to vehicles.

Danger Tree Removal

Throughout the entire analysis area, danger (synonymous with “hazard”) trees of all sizes will be removed. This includes areas that are within the treatment levels, as well as the entire analysis area. Designation of danger trees will be follow Region 5 Report RO number12-01 “Hazard Tree Guidelines for Forest Service Facilities and Roads in the Pacific Southwest Region.”

Vicinity Map Grass Valley Fuel Reduction

San Bernardino National Forest

Mountaintop Ranger District

2018

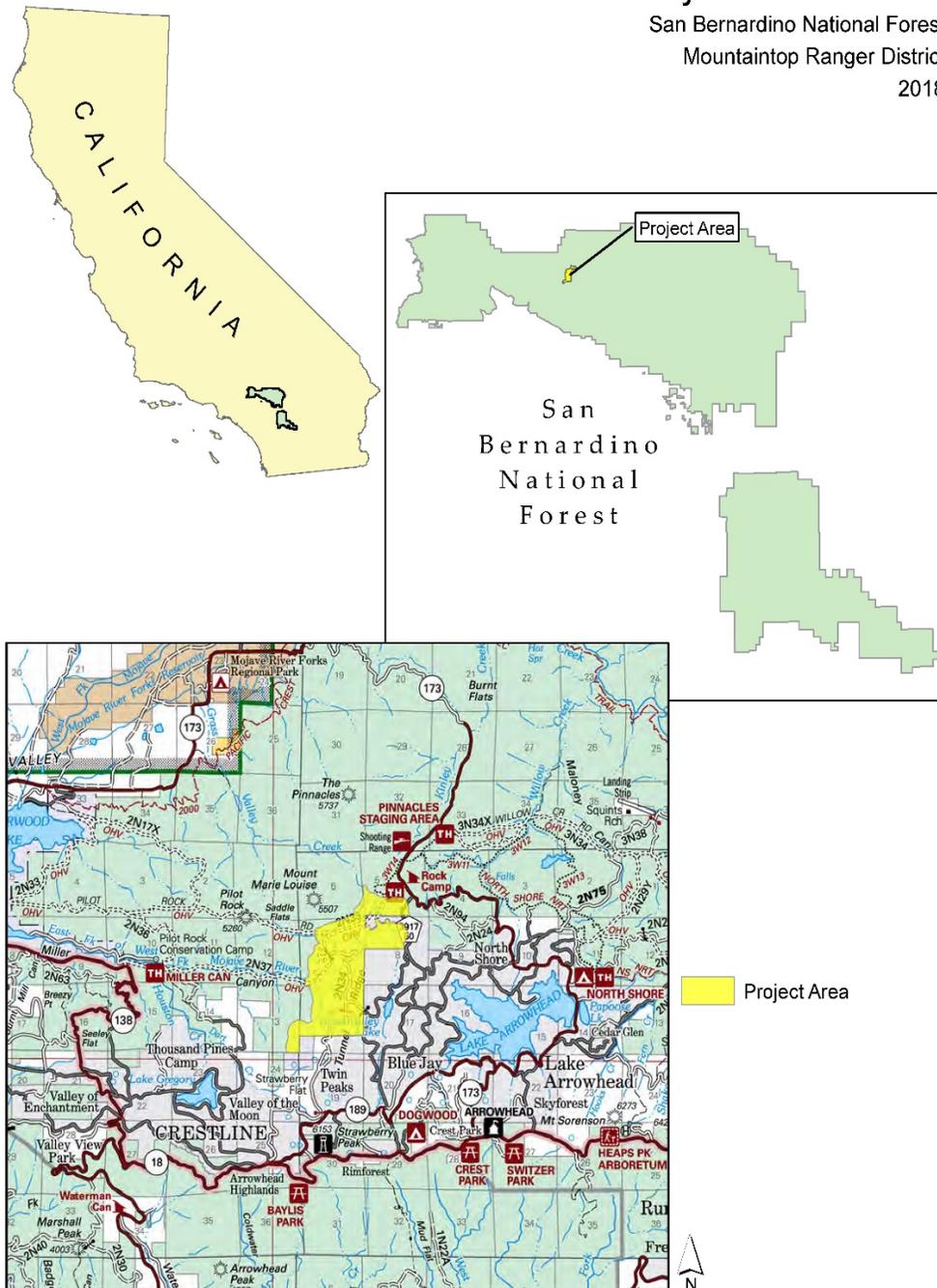


Figure 1. Vicinity map

Other Alternatives Considered

As described in the environmental assessment, I considered the Proposed Action and the effects of taking no action, based on the purpose and need for the project and the current condition of the analysis area. Public comment letters received from the draft environmental assessment did not lead to analysis of another action alternative, or the need to modify the proposed action.

Public Involvement

Collaboration

An open house meeting was held at the Mountain Communities Senior Community Center, located at 675 Grandview Drive, Twin Peaks, CA 92391 from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. on May 2, 2015. The public scoping letter, as well as, a news release, dated April 6, 2015 announced this meeting. Sixteen individuals attended the open house. Based on public scoping responses and internal discussions with the interdisciplinary team, it was decided to eliminate the proposed use of herbicides and instead treat non-native plants by manual methods only.

A Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) was developed in 2017 by the Mountain Rim Fire Safe Council for the San Bernardino Mountain Rim Communities. It was collaboratively developed involving interested parties and federal land management agencies that manage lands in the San Bernardino Mountains. Prior to this document, the Arrowhead Communities Fire Safe Council created a CWPP for the greater Lake Arrowhead region of the San Bernardino National Forest within the County of San Bernardino also using a similar collaborative process. Both CWPP's considered the communities of Blue Jay and Lake Arrowhead, among several other communities and their surrounding areas, at a very high risk for continued ignitions from wildfire.

Scoping and 218 Legal Notice and Comment Period

Public comments were solicited for the Grass Valley Project during the scoping period from March 31 through May 15, 2015; and posted legal notices in the *San Bernardino Sun* on Wednesday, April 1, 2015. A scoping letter was also mailed to residents within close adjacency to the project area, as well as other interested parties. Eleven individuals and groups submitted responses.

To initiate the government to government consultation, on April 5, 2016 a letter was mailed to the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, Honorable Lynn Valbuena, Chairperson. An email notification was sent on the same date to Daniel McCarthy, Cultural Resources Director. There was no reply from the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians.

The draft environmental assessment was made available in a legal notice and comment period which began on March 28, 2018 and ended on April 30, 2018. Seven letters were submitted by various organizations and individuals. The interdisciplinary team conducted an analysis of the comments and prepared responses to each (located in the project file). I have reviewed the comments, response to comments and the requirements concerning the project. Based on a review of the comments, I concluded that there were no new substantive issues raised that might necessitate modifying the existing proposed action or adding another alternative.

Decision

I have read the Grass Valley Fire Restoration Environmental Assessment and associated Finding of No Significant Impact, reviewed the analysis in the project file, including documents incorporated by reference, and fully understand the environmental effects disclosed therein. I have also considered the comments submitted during the public scoping and the 36 Code of Federal Regulations 218 Legal Notice and Comment period for this project. Comments on this environmental assessment and the Forest response to these comments are available in the project file.

It is my decision to select the proposed action alternative, in its entirety, which is fully described in the environmental assessment on pages 9 through 20.

My decision includes the project design features necessary to protect resources within the Grass Valley Fire Restoration project area. The design features are described in detail on pages 20 through 46 of the environmental assessment.

Reasons for the Decision

When compared to no action, the proposed action alternative will fully meet the need to maintain vegetation communities that are both fire resistant as well as fire resilient by restoring a more resilient natural environment more capable of withstanding human uses and other pressures. The proposed action will also decreased unauthorized uses of motorized and non-motorized activities that damage natural resources, increase erosion, and slow natural post-fire recovery processes; and upgrade to trail standards and maintain the Tunnel II non-motorized trail.

Response to the Purpose and Need

1. Activities under the Proposed Action will provide for community protection, firefighter safety, and restoration of the burned landscape within four treatment levels as describe in the environmental assessment, pages 8-10. After treatment, the number of trees per acre will decrease to achieve fuels and vegetation objectives. The number of trees will again increase as trees are planted (artificial regeneration) or naturally seed Trees will only be planted in areas where there is currently a lack of sufficient seed source. The objective of restoring a forested condition would be achieved over time and maintained to meet the desired condition by treatment level. In addition, there would be an increase to the distribution of tree classes, with more age and size classes represented over the long term (EA, pages 65-66).
2. Proposed activities will manually treat non-native plants that displace native plant communities as they are more adept and frequently outcompete native plants. Treatments of non-native invasive plants will help to increase species composition of native plants over the long term. (EA, pages 65-66).
3. Proposed activities will repair damaged infrastructure, such as trails, roads, low water crossings, and some road drainage features that has resulted from changed hydrologic cycle and human uses. Road maintenance will hydrologically disconnect roads from streams by improving the road surface, increasing the number of cross drains, and reshaping the road prism to reduce sediment from entering the East Fork of West Fork

Mojave River from Forest Road 2N37 and Grass Valley Creek from Forest Road 2N33 (EA, pages 61-64).

4. Proposed activities include removing danger trees of all sizes in the entire project area that are located in striking distance and proximity to a developed area, road, trail, or area where human use is authorized and prevalent.

In contrast, if the Forest did not implement the project, project objectives will not be achieved, nor will it meet the purpose and need for the project or respond to the underlying resource needs that are identified (EA pages 8, 48-66).

Administrative Review and Objection Rights

This decision is subject to administrative review (objection) pursuant to 36 CFR Part 218, subparts A and C.

Objections will only be accepted from those who have previously submitted specific written comments regarding the project either during scoping or other designated opportunity for public comment in accordance with §218.5(a). Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted timely, specific written comments regarding the proposed project unless based on new information arising after the designated comment opportunities.

A written objection must be submitted to the reviewing officer within 30 calendar days following publication of the legal notice in the newspaper of record, *Mountain News*. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an objection. Those wishing to object should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. The regulations prohibit extending the time to file an objection.

The objection must contain the minimum content requirements specified in §218.8(d), as identified in the legal notice of the objection period. Incorporation of documents by reference is permitted only as provided in §218.8(b). Incomplete responses make review of an objection difficult and are conditions under which the reviewing officer may set aside an objection pursuant to 36 CFR 218.10. All objections are available for public inspection during and after the objection process.

Objections, including attachments, must be filed via mail, express delivery, messenger service or fax to:

Jody Noiron, Reviewing Officer
USDA Forest Service
San Bernardino National Forest Service
602 S Tippecanoe Ave
San Bernardino CA 92408
Phone: (909) 382-2600
Fax: (909) 383-5770

Office hours for those submitting hand-delivered objections are: 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays at the address above. Electronic objections must be submitted by visiting the project page <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=43428> and click on Comment/Object on Project on the right. Include “Grass Valley Fire Restoration Project” typed in

the subject line. Electronic objections must be submitted in MicroSoft Word (.doc or .docx), rich text format (.rtf), portable document format (.pdf) or other format that can be read with optical character recognition software. It is the responsibility of Objectors to ensure their objection is received in a timely manner (36 CFR 218.9).

Implementation

If no objections are filed within the 30-day time period, implementation of the decision may occur on, but not before, the 5th business day following the end of the objection filing period.

For further information concerning the Grass Valley Fire Restoration Project, contact Thad Chavez, Mountain Top Ranger District, San Bernardino National Forest, P.O. Box 290, Fawnskin, CA 92333, (909) 382-2772 during normal business hours.

Approved by:

Marc Stamer
District Ranger
San Bernardino National Forest, Mountain Top Ranger District

Date

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