

Region II Commission Briefing July 27, 2007

U.S. Forest Service

TMR

The Coconino National Forest has scheduled a third round of public meetings on the Travel Management Rule July 31 to August 4. In this round of public meetings the Forest will be presenting a proposed action including maps and will be taking Public Comment. The Department will be represented at all four meetings. The Kaibab has not scheduled any more public meetings or made any decisions at this point.

Forest Plan Revision

The Kaibab has said they hope to resume collaborative efforts on the Plan Revisions in September. The following are excerpts from the letter we received:

“Nationally, the Forest Service has filed a notice to prepare an environmental impact statement to address the flaws identified by the court in the 2005 Rule process. The Arizona Forests have all continued to work on several tasks associated with Plan revision in a manner consistent with the National Forest Management Act and neutral with respect to the various planning rules that might apply. The Kaibab NF will continue to work on those over the next several months to identify needs for change to the Plan. We intend to do much of this with those of you who would like to help us.

The work many of you helped us with previous to the court ruling is not lost. Nearly all of it will continue to be used in identifying the needs for change. Specifically:

- *Public participatory processes will resume. Although the 2005 Rule was the only one that required collaboration, none of the others prohibited it, and we think it's a good idea.*
- *We will continue to aim for a more strategic, less prescriptive Plan as an end product, with a primary focus upon desired conditions and objectives to make progress toward the desired conditions.*
- *Sustainability analyses are continuing in order to ensure compliance with the requirements of NFMA. We are preparing a rough draft of the ecological sustainability report, incorporating information and public input for the two primary parts of this analysis – ecosystem diversity and species diversity. While we are not sure how species will eventually be addressed in the Plan, the information developed with your help is captured in a database that will serve as an invaluable reference, regardless of which process we use. We have finished a rough draft of our social and economic sustainability report, incorporating information and public input. Once these sustainability analyses have been reviewed internally, we will share them and engage in dialogue with our publics to identify the social and economic needs for change.*

Beginning in late September, we hope to resume public processes to continue this work, aiming toward completion of a comprehensive assessment of the needs to change the Plan this winter. As we move through the summer, we will be sending you specifics about meeting topics, times and places”

Plan revision efforts have been extremely quiet and the Region has not been involved on any of the Forests.

Goshawk Guidelines

The Department has concern about a shift in how the Forest Service implements their own Northern Goshawk Guidelines within the current Forest Plan. One of the primary concerns the Department has with the new interpretation is that forest thinning treatments have the potential to reduce overall tree canopy cover to levels that may not meet the habitat needs for wildlife within those treated areas. The Department has vetted these concerns at several meetings and has been unable to resolve these concerns with the Forest Service. All previous Forest Service planning projects have planned canopy cover reduction levels at the stand level. Under the new interpretation of the goshawk guidelines, the Forest Service is proposing target canopy cover ranges at the group level as opposed to the stand level (where a group is defined as an aggregation of one or more clumps of trees of varying age and size interspersed with openings).

The Management Recommendations for the Northern Goshawk in the Southwestern United States (GTR-RM-217) defines northern goshawk habitat through the structural habitat attributes of 14 of the hawk's prey species. The canopy cover data described for these prey species, and for the northern goshawk, were measured at the stand level – not the tree group level. By changing the canopy cover targets from the stand level to the group level, the Department is concerned that the Forest Service may not be meeting the habitat requirements for those 14 wildlife species, and also may not be meeting the habitat requirements for the northern goshawk per the 1996 Forest Plan Amendment.

Related to the new Forest Service guidance for implementing the northern goshawk guidelines, the Department is also concerned that Forest Service proposed treatment might trend toward even-aged group selection over time. For example, the Forest Service proposed to regenerate groups of VSS1 and 2 while reducing canopy cover for tree groups of other VSS classes. Managing tree groups by VSS class comes across as even-aged tree group management. However, scientific literature describing the historic range of variability in southwestern ponderosa pine does not find that tree groups were even aged. Rather, the literature suggests that tree groups were often comprised of multi-aged trees intermingled intimately in the same area (Long and Smith 2000, Mast et al. 1999, White 1985). Uneven aged tree composition within groups is important for vertical structure and provides forage and breeding habitat for songbirds as well as thermal cover for raptors as well as deer and elk.

Department personnel from Regions I and II, Research Branch, Nongame Branch and Habitat Branch attended a workshop on the new interpretation in Flagstaff including a field trip to stands marked under the new interpretation. All the Department personnel who attended the workshop were concerned that the degree of openness permitted under the new interpretation because of its potential to negatively impact forest wildlife including goshawk squirrel, bear, turkey, and dense forest songbirds.

The Forests have decided that they do not need to do any NEPA on these changes because they believe it is simply clarification of existing guidance. The Department is of the opinion that the Forests should have gone through the NEPA process, or at minimum consulted with the state and federal fish and wildlife agencies. Consultation, or a forum for discussion, is necessary between the Forests and the Department to resolve these concerns.

Regional Wood Supply Analysis

The Department is participating in the Wood Supply Working Group, which just recently held its second (of 7) meetings. The WSWG is comprised of natural resource agencies and wood utilization private industries; the group is facilitated through a Forest ERA (NAU – Tom Sisk's Lab) grant; and the grant is funded by the Forest Service. The group is tasked with estimating the amount of small-diameter ponderosa pine wood that would be available from forest restoration projects, for the purpose of establishing a small-diameter wood industry. As per the Governor's Forest Health Strategy, and other regional economic assessments, landscape-scale restoration of fire-adapted ecosystems is unaffordable under current contracting processes. The only way to see landscape scale treatments be implemented would be to allow small diameter wood industries to pay for the restoration treatments. Wood industries, however, are only willing to pay for these treatments if they know the wood supply will be adequate to cover the costs and generate profit.

The Department supports this effort, as long as the analysis is driven by goals of forest restoration, wildlife habitat, and restoration of fire-adapted ecosystems (as opposed to designing treatments that maximize industry gain and encourage long-term extraction of trees beyond the goals of forest restoration). The analysis uses a GIS approach, and the Department has worked successfully to ensure that threatened and endangered species habitat, riparian habitat, and wildlife movement corridors are considered during the analysis. A product from this WSWG is expected in fall 2007.

Kaibab National Forest

Westside Habitat Improvement/Slide Fire:

On July 5, 2007 at 2:30 pm lightning ignited a fire within the Westside project area. This fire burned about 6,000 acres and burned sections of the treatment area defined as pinyon/juniper push areas, pinyon juniper woodlands, upland areas, and valley bottoms. The fire burned in a mosaic pattern and a majority of the fire was low to moderate intensity. A significant portion of the fire burned over the acreage burned in the 1996

Bridger fire. A Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) team was formed and several rehabilitation treatments for the areas that burned at a moderate to high intensity are planned for implementation. As stated in the draft BAER report, the goal for the treatments is for the control of cheatgrass not for erosion control.

During the time of the fire, it was recognized by the media radio and press releases that this area is in quality mule deer habitat. Region II had the opportunity to comment on the initial report and suggested to the team that they incorporate shrub seed into the treatments to aid in the return of winter browse species; and that they consider increasing the amount of early successional native grasses as opposed to planting sterile rye. There is evidence in the literature that if successfully germinated, sterile rye grasses can impede the establishment of native vegetation.

At the present time, the fire has not slowed plans for implementation on the Westside. There may be slight modifications in timing of seeding and herbicide treatments however; the Department still plans on seeding 500 acres of desirable browse species in the fall of 2007. The Region has been working with Truax Drills, Inc. who has been developing an interseeding tool that will seed shrubs into existing vegetation. Jim will be coming out to do a site visit on the 30th of July to the Westside treatment area to hone in on specifications for the tool as well as look at current conditions within the fire footprint and beyond.

Currently, pinyon and juniper habitat treatments are expected to resume on the Westside next week. Forest closures due to dry conditions as well as the wildfire halted implementation for several weeks. The contractor continues to do an excellent job removing juniper from historic push treatments. This type of treatment will continue throughout the summer.

Coconino National Forest

Senate Bill 1441 Progress on Anderson Mesa Grassland Restoration

Both the grassland restoration and the lake fencing are on going since the last commission briefing. Approximately an additional 1500 acres of grassland restoration and 200 acres of seeding have been completed. This brings us up to approximately 2600 total acres of grassland restoration and 530 acres of seeding. Diablo trust is currently talking with additional contractors and considering hiring more crews to speed up the work.

GFFP

The Department continues to participate in the Greater Flagstaff Forests Partnership (GFFP) on two primary projects: 1. Completion of the Jack Smith/Schultz Fuels Reduction Project NEPA planning, and 2. Ensuring that the Forest's and GFFP's commitment to assisting with Research Branch's wildlife research in the wildland-urban interface of GFFP projects is honored. While the scope and future activities of GFFP are still uncertain at this time, the Department will continue to follow GFFP activities and gauge the benefit of our continued participation.

BLM Arizona Strip District:

Upper Lang's Run Integrated Vegetation Management:

The Department commented on a draft EA for a 9,000-acre watershed vegetation project near Mount Trumbull. The Strip District is beginning to look at planning at a watershed level, which will increase acreages associated with treatments. While the Department is in full support of this type of planning, it has become increasingly important to be involved with all stages of the project. We have been working well with the District on this project; however, we have some concerns that not all the appropriate tools are being addressed as possibilities to meet vegetation objectives. For example, many of the conditions in the project area are that of an overstory of pinyon and juniper with little to no understory. At this point the BLM plans to thin some of the overstory, but has not fully explored methods to do so, as well as how to incorporate appropriate seeding techniques. The Department has plans for several field trips to this project area and is confident at this point that our issues will be heard and at least partially incorporated into project planning.

OTHER

Colorado Plateau Native Plant Initiative (CPNPI) and the Northern Arizona Native Seed Association (NANSA)

During the week of June 11th, Regional staff attended the Colorado Plateau Native Plant Initiative Meeting in Moab, Utah.

For several years, state, federal, and non-profit groups in Utah have been engaged with the development of native plant materials on the northern part of the Colorado Plateau. Region II has worked with members of these groups over the last 2 years in gaining skills in how to use these native plant materials on the landscape, specifically related to the Westside Project on the North Kaibab Ranger District. With increasing habitat degradation due to fire, drought, and excessive grazing, important AZ wildlife habitat continues to be at risk. To date, the limiting factor for habitat restoration is adequate native plant materials.

Until recently, the scale of Utah's native plant program did not include the southern part of the Colorado Plateau or any of AZ to speak of. This status is changing and the main reason for this meeting was to work toward joining the existing groups into one Colorado Plateau Native Plant Initiative, and the expansion of efforts Colorado Plateau wide. At this time, AZ groups and agencies are welcomed, invited, and encouraged to participate. The group is not asking for money at this time but more importantly ideas and needs for the program. Because this group is just starting, there is an opportunity to be in an active, leadership role from the states perspective. The UTDWR has had a successful habitat

restoration program for years, and should the Dept. head in this direction, the Region recommends that we utilize their experience.

Notes from the 1st Colorado Plateau Native Plant Initiative are available upon request. Opportunities to learn and participate more in the program will become available in September at a Restoration Workshop in Grand Junction, CO and in early November at The Ninth Biennial Conference of Research on the Colorado Plateau, Flagstaff, AZ.

At a more local level, the Northern Arizona Native Plant Association (NANSA) had an additional meeting in July. This group continues to work as a sub-group of the CPNPI. This group hopes to raise awareness within the local area for the need for native seed, work on developing a market for local seed, and continue to work on small native seeding projects. Although this group has only recently formed, there is now the potential for a coordinator, which will expedite the ability to gather interest and apply for grant money.

Coconino County

We are actively engaged in the Coconino County Parks and Recreation effort to sell a conservation easement on Pumphouse Greenway to NRCS through the Farm Bill's Wetland Reserve Program. The Department is currently working with Coconino County and NRCS to develop a conservation plan for the easement that will restore and enhance the wetlands of Pumphouse Greenway, reduce wildlife disturbances and control human/domestic dog access within the wetland, and provide substantially more Watchable Wildlife developments for the area. Planning is almost complete, and the easement purchase is scheduled to occur in November 2007. The Department recently participated in a public meeting on the Pumphouse WRP, where we presented information on wildlife habitat in the wetlands as well as Watchable Wildlife opportunities.

Naval Observatory INRMP

We attended a meeting and reviewed a draft plan for the management of natural resources on the Naval Observatory.

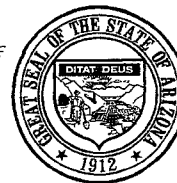


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Gene Waldrip
District Ranger, Peaks Ranger District
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Flagstaff, AZ 86004

RE: Comments on the Jack Smith/Schultz Fuel Reduction and Forest Health Project Proposed Action

5 June 2007

Dear Mr. Waldrip,

The Arizona Game and Fish Department (Department) has reviewed the Jack Smith/Schultz Project: Proposed Action (PA) by the Coconino National Forest Peaks Rangers District (FS). The Department appreciates the extensive opportunities for collaborative participation with the FS Inter-disciplinary Team (IDT) and the Greater Flagstaff Forest Partnership (GFFP) during development of the Proposed Action.

The Department would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the progress the FS has made over the last several GFFP-collaborative fuels reduction project in their approach toward forest restoration and wildlife habitat. We have seen a positive evolution in FS-GFFP proposed actions that will result in more heterogeneous forest stand structure that provides higher quality wildlife habitat for multiple species. In particular, the Department would like to thank the IDT for their willingness to craft language within the PA that explicitly defines the terms they used to describe spatial heterogeneity (e.g., tree groups and stand openings). Clumpy/groupy stand structure tends to offer better vertical diversity, thermal and hiding cover, as well as better foraging opportunity for wildlife than does a more evenly-aged, evenly-spaced forested stand. The stand structure described in the PA will provide wildlife habitat that more closely resembles the historic range of variability than would a homogeneous stand structure, and the Department acknowledges the IDT's efforts to achieve these conditions within the PA.

Moreover, the Department appreciates the IDT's efforts to ensure that there is a diversity of group sizes within the stands of the project area, and that the amount of forested area in canopy cover is well-represented within the range of canopy covers proposed. For example, in the Schultz Pass WUI West Zone, the FS proposed a minimum of 25% of groups will retain canopy cover greater than 50%, 50% of groups will be retained with canopy cover between 40 and 50%, and no more than 25% of groups will retain canopy cover between 30 and 40%. This type of planning helps to ensure that some groups will be large in size with higher canopy cover, which is an important forest characteristic upon which many wildlife species depend, particularly passerines, turkeys, raptors, mule deer, and black bear.

However, the Department reserves some concern about the proposed shift in how the FS plans to reduce overall tree canopy cover within treated areas. The Department has vetted these concerns during several IDT and GFFP meetings and has been unable to resolve these concerns with the FS. All previous FS-GFFP planning projects have planned canopy cover reduction levels at the stand level. In this PA, the FS is proposing target

canopy cover ranges at the group level as opposed to the stand level (where a group is defined as an aggregation of one or more clumps of trees of varying age and size interspersed with openings). The Department finds that this change has the potential to significantly reduce the amount of forest cover within treated areas. For example, the PA proposes to reduce the forested area in certain zones to between 30-50%. Canopy cover within that forested area will be reduced to 30-60%. Under this proposal, overall canopy cover in this management zone could be reduced to as little as 10% canopy cover if measured across the stand. Without considering the average canopy cover across stands, the Department has some concerns that the FS may not meet the canopy cover requirements for wildlife in the project area.

It is our understanding that the decision to reduce canopy cover at the group level is based on Region 3 guidance, per a new interpretation of the northern goshawk guidelines within the 1996 Forest Plan Amendment (#11). However, the Department has received no formal documentation of the new interpretation.

The Management Recommendations for the Northern Goshawk in the Southwestern United States (GTR-RM-217) defines northern goshawk habitat through the structural habitat attributes of 14 of the hawk's prey species. The canopy cover data described for these prey species, and for the northern goshawk, were measured at the stand level – not the tree group level. By changing the canopy cover targets from the stand level to the group level, the Department is concerned that the FS may not be meeting the habitat requirements for those 14 wildlife species, and also may not be meeting the habitat requirements for the northern goshawk per the 1996 Forest Plan Amendment.

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The Department requests the FS consider our concerns regarding overall canopy cover across stands as well as across the treated areas, and recommend the FS carefully evaluate potential impacts this canopy cover reduction might have on wildlife habitat during the Effects Analysis. The Department also requests any formal documentation that may be available describing the new Region 3 guidance for interpreting the northern goshawk guidelines, as well as an opportunity to formally comment on that new interpretation.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Jack Smith/Schultz PA. We acknowledge the IDT efforts to carefully describe resultant forest structure post-treatment, and we look forward to continued cooperation on implementation of this important forest restoration and community protection project. If you have any questions or require additional information, please contact Sarah Lantz, Urban Wildlife Planner at 928-607-0650, slantz@azgfd.gov.

Sincerely,

Sarah Lantz

