

Decision Memo
Southwest Whetstone Mountains Water Development
U.S. Forest Service
Coronado National Forest
Sierra Vista Ranger District
Pima Co., Arizona

Background

The entire Whetstone Mountain Range is lacking dependable water. For the most part, springs water most of the range, with a small number of dirt tanks and wells providing supplemental water. With drought, came the realization that the springs cannot be depended on yearlong to water wildlife. Although at the watershed scale, livestock use is managed at a sustainable level, the few permanent springs receive concentrated livestock use at times, which has produced some undesirable habitat degradation. One in particular is the area around Simpson Spring. To alleviate the dependency on the springs, the Southwest Whetstone Mountains Water Development was planned for implementation in two phases.

Phase 1 of this project was approved in a Decision Notice signed March 24, 2009 and was funded by the U.S. Forest Service and the State of Arizona's Livestock Crop and Conservation Grant Program (LCCGP). The partnership funded the construction of two large trick tanks on the Coal Mine Allotment. Phase 1 has been completed and the two trick tanks water just over 3,000 acres of wildlife habitat.

Phase 2 of the project will establish five permanent upland waters that will water an additional 3,000 acres and will also include the construction of a 0.75 mile fence around Simpson Spring (see attached map). Simpson Spring, the only permanent water in the southwest Whetstone Mountains, contains many woody species common in riparian zones in the southwest. The area surrounding the spring site is riddled with cow paths, which are causing soil compaction and irregular channelization of water. The stream channel itself has evidence of erosion: large old cut stumps with exposed roots that are half anchored in the eroding slopes above the drainage, and many live woody plants growing on these slopes have visible roots.

With the proposed development of 5 additional water sources and the construction of a fence around the spring, livestock use will be restricted to outside of the riparian area, thereby improving riparian conditions whilst providing additional water sources for wildlife. Also proposed under this project is the planting of pollinator and riparian plant species within the Simpson Spring area as well as some minor watershed restoration work, when and if funds become available.

Decision

It is my decision to implement the Southwest Whetstone Mountains Water Development. Implementation will consist of equipping the Copper Sands Well with a submersible pump, installing 5 miles of surface pipeline, four 3,000 gallon storage tanks, three 5,000 gallon storage

tanks, five troughs, and construction of .75 miles of fence for Simpson Spring. Each trough will have a float cover and wildlife escape ramp.

The Copper Sands Well has been scoped, and the results were very favorable. The well is dependable and can handle the demand of this proposed system. With the use of water storage tanks at each trough, we can isolate troughs from the entire system. This will allow the system to be more resistant to vandalism, and periodic maintenance needs of the well and water line as well as reduce dependence on the main 15,000 gallon storage. With the exception of the installation of the submersible pump at the Copper Sands Well, all other water distribution and storage materials will be delivered via helicopter. Due to the lack of roads within the project area, transportation to the project area will be via horseback and water distribution pipelines will be placed via horse or mule. Native plant restoration and erosion control measures will be implemented when, and if, funds become available.

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environmental assessment (EA). The applicable category of actions is identified in agency procedures as timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction, specified in 36 CFR 220.6 (e)(5). This category of action(s) is applicable because the proposed action will improve wildlife habitat by providing five additional, year-round water sources while at the same time excluding livestock from Simpson Spring.

I find that there are no extraordinary circumstances that would warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS. I took into account resource conditions identified in agency procedures that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances might exist:

Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species –

The proposed action will have no effect on the Mexican spotted owl and its critical habitat, western yellow-billed cuckoo, jaguar and its critical habitat, ocelot, and lesser long-nosed bat. For Mexican spotted owl, the project area does not contain suitable breeding habitat for this species and the proposed action will not affect any of the Primary Constituent Elements of its Critical Habitat. Yellow-billed cuckoos may occur at Simpson Spring. The construction of the fence is not expected to disturb any breeding individuals. The project area does contain habitat that may be used by jaguars and ocelots; however, because the project will only occur during daylight hours these secretive and primarily nocturnal species will not be affected by the noise or ground disturbance.

Conservation measures and Best Management Practices would avoid or minimize impacts to individuals should the species occur in either project area during the project implementation. Disturbance from implementation including helicopter noise and personnel would be no more than three days and likely result in habitat avoidance. All work would be completed during daylight hours to avoid impacts to nocturnal species. The proposed action may impact individuals of the Forest Sensitive species; however, these impacts will not result in a trend toward federal listing or loss of species viability. Implementation of the proposed action would have no impact on Management Indicator Species or species covered under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds – The proposed project area does not fall within a municipal watershed. Portions of the project may fall within floodplains and wetlands, however, effects would be negligible so long as implementation is done according to Forest Service standards using best management practices.

Vegetation resources – The proposed action is not anticipated to negatively impact the vegetation resources within the project area. Due to the remoteness of the project area and the lack of roads, delivery of the materials for the project will be via helicopter and installation of the proposed infrastructure will be done via horseback. Therefore, damage to vegetation resources will be minimal. Furthermore, the installation of the Simpson Spring exclosure fence will enhance the riparian vegetation resources adjacent to the spring while the installation of five permanent water sources will help to distribute livestock use across the landscape.

Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, national recreation areas, research natural areas, or inventoried roadless areas – The proposed project area is not located in a wilderness, wilderness study area, national recreation area, or research natural area. A portion of the project area falls within an inventoried roadless area, however, the proposed action will not affect the quality of the inventoried roadless area due to the fact that all materials will be delivered via helicopter and personnel will access the project area via horseback.

American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites – There are no known extraordinary circumstances that may result in adverse effect on American Indian religious and cultural sites. Cultural resources clearance is recommended in Heritage Resources Report No. 2016-05-053.

Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas – Cultural resources surveys were completed and documented in Report No. 2016-05-053. The report determines that no historic properties would be affected by the proposed action. In Section IV-E of the Forest Service Region 3 Programmatic Agreement with the Arizona State Historic Preservation Officer and other parties, the Forest Service and SHPO have agreed that when a project results in a determination of “no historic properties affected...the undertaking may proceed following the approval of the report by the Forest Archaeologist or other authorized FS professional cultural resource specialist and approval of the undertaking by the Forest Supervisor.” For these reasons, no further consultation under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act is required.

In addition to the above mentioned resources, this proposed action was reviewed and determined that it is consistent with the Forest Plan and federal, state, and local laws and regulations by specialists in the fields of Lands/Special Uses, Minerals/Geology, Visual Quality, and the Forest NEPA Coordinator.

Public Involvement

This action was originally listed as a proposal on the Coronado National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions on 3/15/2016.

This action is not subject to legal notice and opportunity to comment per 36 CFR 218.23(a).

Throughout the development of the proposed action, this project has been shared with a variety of agencies, organizations, and the public, to include: Arizona Game and Fish Department, Sky

Island Alliance, affected grazing permittees on the Sierra Vista Ranger District, and Arizona State Land Department.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

National Forest Management Act

This decision is consistent with the Coronado National Forest Land Management Plan. As required by the National Forest Management Act, the proposed action was reviewed for consistency with the Coronado's Forest Plan (1986, as amended). Management direction for the project area (Management Area 4) is to maintain and improve current habitat for federally listed plant and animal species and work toward delisting (p. 62; U.S. Forest Service 1986).

Endangered Species Act

The District Biologist has determined that the proposed action will have no effect on the Mexican spotted owl and its critical habitat, western yellow-billed cuckoo, jaguar and its critical habitat, ocelot, and lesser long-nosed bat. For Mexican spotted owl, the project area does not contain suitable breeding habitat for this species and the proposed action will not affect any of the Primary Constituent Elements of its Critical Habitat. Yellow-billed cuckoos may occur at Simpson Spring. The construction of the fence is not expected to disturb any breeding individuals. The project area does contain habitat that may be used by jaguars and ocelots; however, because the project will only occur during daylight hours these secretive and primarily nocturnal species will not be affected by the noise or ground disturbance.

National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA)

The Forest Archaeologist has determined that no historic properties will be affected by the proposed action and that consultation with Native American Tribes is not required.

Administrative Review (Appeal) Opportunities

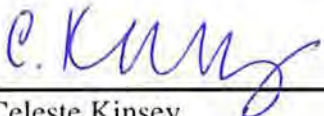
This decision is not appealable per 36 CFR 218.20.

Implementation Date

Implementation of this project may take place immediately upon issuance of this decision.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Steve Bluemer, District Range and Watershed Staff, Sierra Vista Ranger District, 4070 S. Avenida Saracino, Hereford, AZ 85615; (520) 803-2831



Celeste Kinsey
Sierra Vista District Ranger

9/30/16

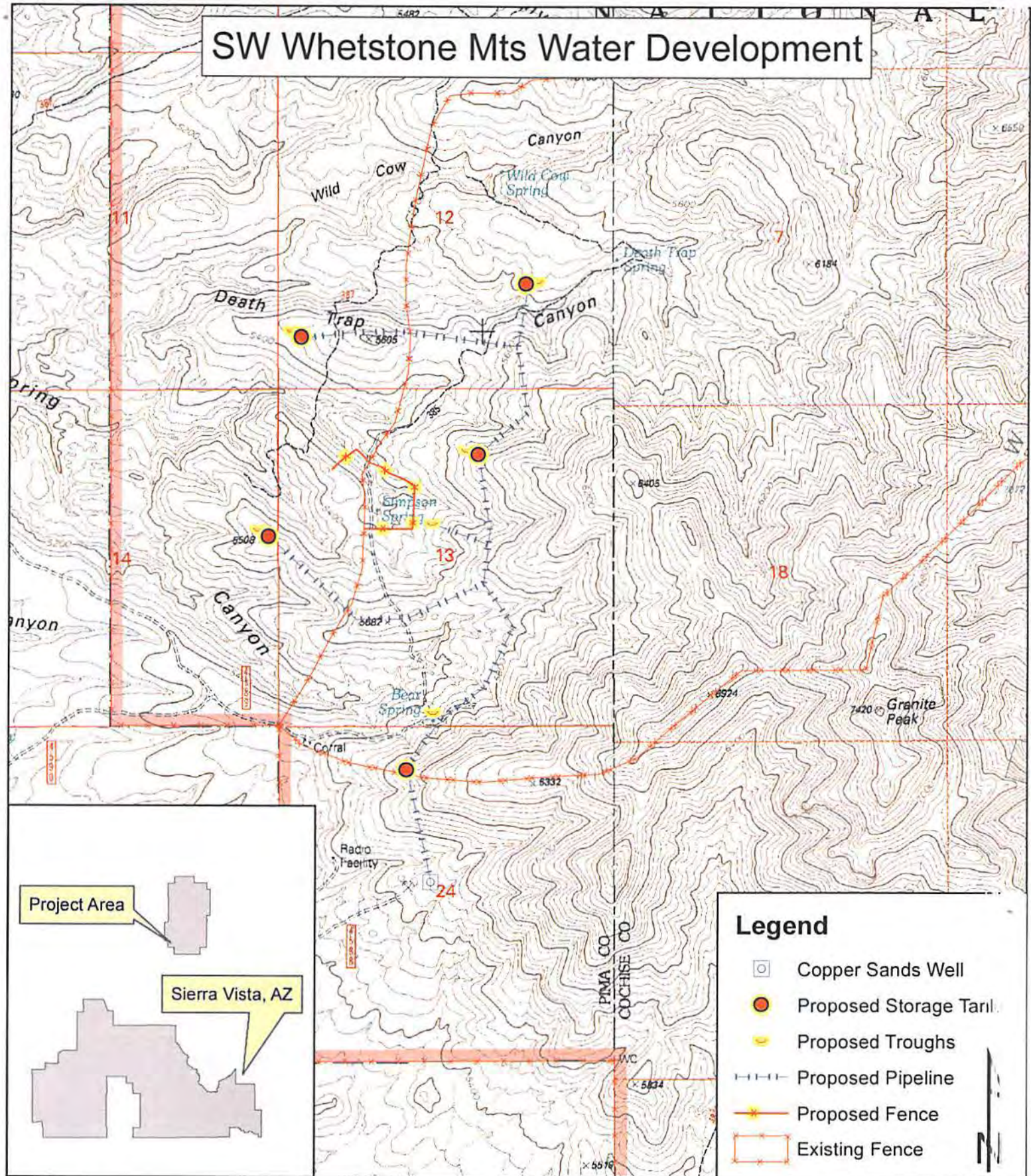
Date

Attachments:

- 1 – Map of project area.
- 2 – Archaeological inventory and clearance.
- 3 – Biological assessment and evaluation.

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SW Whetstone Mts Water Development



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