



Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact Vosberg 2013 Juniper Treatment U.S. Forest Service, Tonto National Forest Pleasant Valley Ranger District, Gila County, AZ

Introduction

Vegetation consists of piñon juniper with open stands of oaks on flatter areas and denser stands of oaks on north facing slopes and in drainages. The understory consists of perennial grasses. Juniper trees have encroached into the area to the point that canopy cover exceeds 50 percent. Increases in juniper density and size has the effect of reducing understory plant cover and productivity, with desirable forage grasses often being most severely reduced.

The purpose of this project is to remove encroaching junipers with a dozer to reduce canopy cover and increase herbaceous cover to improve watershed conditions and improve forage production for livestock. This action responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the Tonto National Forest Plan (Forest Plan) and helps move the project area towards desired conditions described in that plan.

An environmental assessment (EA) was prepared to evaluate the proposal. Two alternatives were analyzed in detail by an interdisciplinary team: Alternative 1 – No Action - Juniper treatments identified in the allotment management plan (AMP) as “Wood Products Projects” will continue to go untreated due to access issues. Junipers will continue to encroach, canopy cover will continue to increase, and herbaceous cover will continue to decrease. Alternative 2 – Treatment, proposes to push juniper trees with a dozer on approximately 561 acres of the Vosberg Grazing Allotment.

Further description of alternatives can be found in chapter 2 of the EA. A copy of the final EA is available for public review at Pleasant Valley Ranger District, 154 S. Ranger Station Road, Young, AZ 85554 or online at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/tonto/> under the “Forest Projects” link.

Decision

This Decision Notice documents my decision and reasons for this decision. The Vosberg 2013 Juniper Treatment project purpose and need for action provides the focus and scope for the proposed action and alternatives. Given the purpose and need, I have reviewed the alternatives and carefully considered the public comments received on the draft EA. Public feedback, the analysis disclosed in the EA, information contained in the Project record and management direction and policy considerations contributed collectively to determining the selected alternative.

Based upon my review of the Vosberg 2013 Juniper Treatment EA, I have decided to implement alternative 2, as described in the final EA.

Changes to the Final EA

- The Department of Environmental Quality commented during review of the draft EA that upon further research, we believe that the proposed activity of pushing junipers using a

small bulldozer to uproot juniper trees should be categorized as “non-point source” according to *40 CFR § 122.27(b)*. As such, the proposed activity would not be subject to Arizona’s Clean Water Act AZPDES permit requirements.

- Comments were received from K. Menasco which clarified grammatical errors and indicated some missing information in the chart on page 13 of the EA.

Planned Activities for Selected Alternative

The following activities are summarized descriptions. Complete descriptions can be found in chapter 2 of the EA.

Treatment will be implemented within the project area as archeological clearance is completed. Approximately 131 acres of the area have been cleared.

Monitoring of Resources

The U.S.F.S. would monitor implementation of the selected alternative. Other resource specialists would be involved in monitoring of specific measures relating to their particular resource area. Monitoring items are listed below.

- U.S.F.S. archeology staff will monitor known heritage sites eligible or potentially eligible to the National Register of Historic Places before, during, an after project implementation.
- The U.S.F.S. project manager will monitor revegetation of disturbed areas to determine need for additional measures and noxious weed control.

Public Involvement

This action was originally listed as a proposal on the Tonto National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) in April 2012 and updated periodically during the analysis. The public was given opportunity to review and comment on the proposal by letter and public notice. The letter was sent to 25 people and organizations on April 2, 2013. A legal notice was published in the Payson RoundUp on the same date. The EA lists agencies and people consulted on page 27.

During the 30-day public comment period, 2 comment letters were received from the public. Both were supportive of the project.

The Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) commented that “upon further review the proposed activity would not be subject to the *Arizona Clean Water Act* permit requirements”.

K. Menasco provided four comments:

1. Treatment with herbicides would be effective.

Response – Herbicide treatment was not considered for this project because the Tonto National Forest Noxious Weed and Invasive Species Treatment EA had not been completed before this analysis was conducted. We will consider this alternative in future juniper treatment projects.

2. Possible soil erosion will be mitigated through the use of Best Management Practices.
Response - Implementation will include BMPs.
3. Information provided in the Specialist report was not transferred to the table on page 13 of the Draft EA. Blank spaces exist in the table.

Response – Thank you for bringing that to my attention. The table has been completed with the information from the Wildlife section.

4. Draft included mention of several juniper treatment types in the wildlife section that were not included in the proposed action.

Response – Revisited with Biologist and annotated those paragraphs to reflect the proposed action. What had been included in the Wildlife effects report were proposed activities from the 1994 Allotment Management Plan.

Contacts were made using the approved mailing list during scoping. No further comments or issues were received during the 30-day comment period.

Decision Rationale

I have decided to implement alternative 2, because it best meets the purpose and need for this action as determined from management direction and conditions on the ground, and because it responds well to key issues and public comments.

Reason(s) for Not Selecting Other Alternatives

I did not select alternative 1 because it would not improve rangeland health or improve habitat and forage for wildlife and livestock.

Finding of No Significant Impact

I have determined through the EA that this is not a major federal action that will significantly affect the quality of the human environment; therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement is not needed. There were no significant, adverse, or controversial impacts to the human environment identified in this review. This determination is also based on the following findings and criteria listed below.

Context

The significance of effects of my decision has been analyzed in several contexts. My decision is consistent with the requirements of the Forest Plan and contributes to meeting the goals of the Forest Plan. The analysis considers and discloses cumulative effects on the resources within the project area and associated resource areas. In addition, direct and indirect effects of the project area have been considered in this determination.

Intensity

The intensity of effects was considered in terms of the following:

1. **Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse.** Consideration of the intensity of environmental effects is not biased by beneficial effects of the action. The EA considers and discloses both beneficial and adverse effects.
2. **The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.** There will be no significant effects on public health and safety.
3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area, such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas. There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area, because archeological sites have been mitigated on 131 of the acres so far and the remainder will be identified and mitigated before implementation begins on them. There are no park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas within or adjacent to the project area.
4. **The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.** The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. There is no known credible scientific controversy over the impacts of the proposed action.
5. **The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.** The Agency has considerable experience with actions similar to the one proposed. The analysis shows the effects are not uncertain and do not involve unique or unknown risk
6. **The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.** The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because this is not the first project of this type to be completed over many years in the area. The results of previous projects have been successful in restoring rangeland health.
7. **If the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant, but cumulatively significant, impacts.** The cumulative impacts are not significant. The effects of the action are limited to the local area and there are no other effects that would be additive to the effects of the proposed action.
8. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed , or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.** The action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, because the action will also not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources due to the mitigations occurring within the implementation of this project.
9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the *Endangered Species Act of 1973*. The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the *Endangered Species act of 1973*. There are no identified endangered or threatened species or its habitat within the project area.
10. Whether the action threatens to violate Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA. The action is consistent with the Tonto National



Forest Land Management Plan. Planned activities are consistent with management area direction, comply with Forest Plan standards, and contribute to Forest Plan goals and objectives.

My decision is also based upon consideration of the best available science. I have reviewed the project records, which shows thorough review of relevant scientific information, consideration of responsible opposing views, and acknowledgement of incomplete or unavailable scientific information, scientific uncertainty, and risk.

Implementation

Implementation of the selected alternative will occur under the authority of this Decision Notice, subject to the appropriate appeal and implementation procedures cited below.

Since only supportive comments were received by the close of the official comment period, this decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to *36 CFR 215, 12*. Implementation may begin immediately.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: District Ranger Don Luhrsen, Pleasant Valley Ranger District, P.O. Box 450, Young, AZ 85554; by phone: 928-462-4300, or by email at comments-southwestern-tonto-pleasant-valley@fs.fed.us.

DONAL L. LUHRSEN
District Ranger

May 9, 2013

Date

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