

DECISION MEMO
FOR THE
SOUTHERN ROWE MESA RESTORATION PROJECT

U.S. FOREST SERVICE
PECOS/LAS VEGAS RANGER DISTRICT
SANTA FE NATIONAL FOREST
SAN MIGUEL COUNTY, NEW MEXICO

DECISION

I have decided to approve the Southern Rowe Mesa Collaboration and Restoration Project, located on 17,500 acres in the south-central part of Rowe Mesa (see map). The purpose of this project is to promote a mosaic of healthy forest stands and natural grasslands on approximately 17,500 acres on Rowe Mesa on the Pecos/Las Vegas Ranger District of the Santa Fe National Forest, San Miguel County Township (T) 14N, Range (R) 12E, portions of sections 1-12, 15-17, 20-34, 26-29, and 31-26, T12N, R13E, portions of sections 1-3, 10-15, and 24; T12N, R14E, portions of sections 5-8, and 17-20.

This action is within FSH 1909.15, 31.2, category 6 (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. 36 CFR 220.6(e)(6)), and is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement. Selected stands of piñon pine, juniper and ponderosa pine trees have encroached into the understory of woodlands and into meadows. These stands would be reduced by thinning to achieve the objective of improving wildlife habitat. A reduced density of trees will allow the understory cover of grass and forbs to increase for wildlife forage and habitat. Large trees and snags will be retained as nesting habitat for birds and other species. Increased grass cover will also restore soil and hydrologic conditions, improving habitat for soil dwelling wildlife.

Thinning will be followed by prescribed burning, which will also benefit the grass and forb species promote the growth the growth of early successional vegetation, and encourage recovery of shrub species such as Gambel oak, which provide forage and cover for deer and other wildlife. The proposed action does not include the use of herbicides or pesticides or the construction of new roads or permanent infrastructure, and is consistent with departmental procedures and the Santa Fe National Forest Plan.

Phase one cultural resources report was completed and submitted to the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office and meets the requirements of Appendix J of the Region3

Programmatic Agreement. This report specifies the requirements in the protocol and as such the Forest Supervisor can approve cultural resource clearance for the project once those requirements have been met. If the recommendations made in this report are followed the project will clearly state the initiation of work in any subsequent phase of this project will be contingent upon completion of the identification and protection of historic properties and compliance with acceptable provisions of National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) in accordance with Appendix J. Based on these recommendations cultural resources clearance is recommended for Phase I of the Southern Rowe Mesa Restoration Clearance Project.

Categorical Exclusion Compliance:

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:

The action will not cause adverse effects to any of the following extraordinary circumstances:

- Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species – There are no threatened or endangered species, associated habitats, or critical habitats that occur within the project area. [PR#25]
- Flood plains, wetlands or municipal watersheds – There are no floodplains, wetlands or municipal watersheds present in the project area. [PR#31]
- Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas – There are no congresssionally designated areas in the project area. [PR#31]
- Inventoried roadless areas; research natural areas – There are no inventoried roadless areas or research natural areas in the project area. [PR#31]
- American Indian and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites – Tribal consultation letters regarding this project were sent to tribal governments and followup phone calls were made. No responses were received from the tribes. [PR#26 -27]
- Archaeological sites, historic properties or areas – It was determined that No historic properties will be affected by these activities or they will have no adverse effect on cultural resource properties anticipated within the project area, provided that the standard site protection measures listed in Appendix D of the programmatic Agreement are applied. [PR#26-27].

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND SCOPING

This action was originally listed in October 2012 in the Santa Fe National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions and has been listed quarterly since and updated periodically during the analysis. The Southern Rowe Mesa Restoration Project scoping letter was sent to 100 individuals and organizations on April 19, 2012 (that 1. participated in the planning process or 2. requested

to be informed of planning processes related to all subjects, all recreation topics, dispersed recreation, or lands projects.) The 30-day comment period was combined with the scoping comment period and was the legal notice was published in the Albuquerque Journal, the newspaper of record on April 19, 2012.

Public outreach was also conducted through meetings held at: Pecos Municipal Building on January 26, 2012 @ 7:00 PM; Arroyo Hondo Fire Station on February 9, 2012 @ 7:00 PM and Rowe Fire Station on March 2, 2012 @ 4:30 PM. In addition, a field meeting on the Rowe Mesa project site was attended by 23 individuals, many of whom live or are concerned with management on Rowe Mesa.

Five responses (letters, emails, and phone calls) were received during the public comment period. The comments are presented here with a summary of the original comments followed by the Forest Service response. The original comment letters can be found in the project record.

1. Nina Wells – New Mexico Environment Department, Phone call

Comment: Applaud you guys for the restoration work we're doing on S. Rowe Mesa. No arroyos mentioned, but if there are some treat them with special care. She also said she is going to send an email or fax something over to the office.

Response: Thank you for supporting the project. Arroyos will be analyzed as part of the watershed and soils and any BMPs will be applied if necessary.

Nina Wells – New Mexico Environment Department, Email

Comment: Enclosed you will find our comments to the "Southern Rowe Mesa Restoration Project," scoping letter review. The scoping letter states that approximately 17,500 acres on Rowe Mesa on the Pecos/Las Vegas Ranger District of the Santa Fe National Forest will treat the woodland component on the watershed to more easily withstand a wildfire and to benefit the ecosystem.

Response: Thank you for providing comments on the Southern Rowe Mesa Restoration Project.

Comment: This is also listed as a CFRP funded project with many diverse partners. This is an action item in the Upper Pecos Watershed Association's draft Watershed Based Plan. The NMED Surface Water Quality Bureau is aware of how the existing conditions could adversely affect surface water in the receiving streams were a wildfire to occur and the resultant damage caused by erosion. Please provide special care to springs/seeps that may be in the area and arroyos, so that further erosion or degradation does not occur, especially in road usage during wood harvesting events. Please keep a "spill kit" available for fuels or other materials that may be kept or stored on-site.

Response: Mitigation measures and BMPs will be part of the project implementation and effects to seeps/springs will be analyzed as part of the soil and watershed report. A spill kit is part of the implementation design and will be available if needed. It is good to know that NMED Surface Water Quality Bureau is aware of the potential effects and damage caused by erosion if a

wildfire were to occur.

2. Roger S. Peterson, New Mexico Natural History Institute, Letter

Comment: Figure 1 (Before) shows better wildlife habitat than figure 2 (After), or at least some of the land should be left with young thickets. There's not much for deer in Figure 2: no cover, no shrubs to eat. A principal goal of forest and woodland improvement should be to promote shrubs, especially young oak, and to create a mosaic of thickets separated by relatively fireproof "park lands" as shown in Figure 2. Cattle and elk like the parklands, but the elk also need some dense cover.

Response: The project will be implemented in a mosaic pattern to leave enough understory cover for wildlife. The project area does not contain much of a shrub component and prescribed fire should help promote that component.

Comment: Elk and deer and piñon nuts are more valuable products of Rowe Mesa than are cattle, especially from the viewpoint of the owners (taxpayers), who lose money on cattle—your costs exceed \$1.35 per AUM. One or two good nut trees on an acre produce more economic value than does 1/50 of an AUM.

Response: Santa Fe National Forest provides forest system lands for multiple-use and grazing has been a use on the mesa for over 100 years. This project is not based on economic value.

Comment: So, thinning and prescribed burning are good where needed for fire protection and especially where junipers have invaded grassland. But they should be applied unevenly and in a way that protects shrubs and wildlife cover. The New Mexico Natural History Institute is a small group of scientists devoted to protection of New Mexico's biological communities.

Response: The proposed project would include treatment of acres where junipers have invaded grasslands in a mosaic pattern and fire protection is an added benefit for those residents on that live on Rowe Mesa. We will bear in mind your suggestions when we are developing the prescriptions for the site.

3. Norman B. Nelson, New Mexico State Historic Preservation Officer, Letter

Comment: We look forward to project specific consultation with the restoration project.

Response: Thank you for your response and will submit our report for approval.

4. Sandy Anderson, Email

Comment: Thanks for the opportunity to comment on this project. My main concern is that the prescribed burns be scheduled in a manner that the wildlife and residents up here on Rowe Mesa are able to tolerate the SMOKE and that we know where to check in to know when these burns are scheduled to happen.

Response: Prescribed burns are implemented when there is a window of opportunity, usually in the spring or the fall timeframe. An air quality permit is required from New Mexico Air Quality Bureau that coordinates other all prescribed burns with air quality standards in the state. Residents will be notified prior to prescribe burning in the area through letters, notices, phone calls, etc. Information is also made available through a news release and information can be found on our website.

5. Ben Chavarria – Santa Clara Pueblo, Letter

Comment: The Santa Clara Pueblo is in favor and supports the proposed project Southern Rowe Mesa Restoration Project, we are aware that this project falls in locations important to various pueblos and Native American groups and is important to the Santa Clara Pueblo, recommend that any disturbance to Ancestral Puebloan sites, artifacts, remains, or culturally sensitive areas be made known to the Santa Clara Pueblo Office of Rights Protection immediately. We would also like a more detailed map of the project area and detailed information of the cultural clearance performed for the project. The contact person for this project is Mr. Ben Chavarria, Land and Cultural Resources, Santa Clara Pueblo Office of Rights Protection. Please contact him if you do have any questions or concerns he can be reached by phone at (505) 753-7326 ext. 1306 or Attn: Ben Chavarria, P.O.Box 580, Espanola, N.M. 87532.

Response: We are currently collaborating with Mr. Ben Chavarria and the Santa Clara Pueblo regarding this project and sensitive sites on Rowe Mesa. Any information requested by the pueblo requests will be provided.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

The project is located in Management Area G. It is consistent with both the general Forest Plan standards and guidelines and those specific to Management Area G. Emphasis in this area is on key wildlife habitat protection, habitat improvement, and forage and firewood production. Recreational opportunities are dispersed and consist of firewood and piñon nut gathering, hunting, and recreational driving.

MITIGATION MEASURES

WILDLIFE

- Conduct surveys, whenever possible, in locations where new treatments will be occurring to determine if species have recently occupied the area.
- Develop and implement management practices to ensure that species do not become threatened or endangered because of Forest Service actions.
- Maintain viable populations of all native and desired nonnative wildlife, fish and plant species in habitats distributed throughout their geographic range on National Forest System lands.

- Develop and implement management objectives for populations and/or habitat of sensitive species.
- The project will adhere to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act Executive Order that requires Federal agencies to incorporate migratory bird conservation measures into their agency activities.

HERITAGE RESOURCES

- All cultural resource sites will be avoided by thinning using mechanized heavy equipment, forest product collection (personal and commercial), and lop and scatter burning. Areas in the vicinity of sites may also be closed to lop and scatter burning, and personal use forest product collection if these activities could cause incidental damage to the sites. All areas in the vicinity of in-use historic structures or facilities or in close proximity to sites with flammables will be closed to lop and scatter burning personal use forest product collection, and moss rock collection. Thinned materials in the vicinity of these sites will be removed through commercial forest product collection and the mechanical chipping/mastication of slash.
- Thinning and hand tools will be permitted in all cultural resources sites, provided that trees are directionally felled away from standing or other sensitive features, and that all thinned material is removed from the boundary of the site. Thinned material may be retained on larger sites with discontinuous distributions of features and artifacts (such as large historic sites) if it can be used in soil retention or other erosion prevention measures and if the material is located away from all features and artifacts where its intentional or accidental ignition and burning could damage or destroy such features and artifacts.
- Broadcast burning will be permitted within sites which contain no combustible surface remains or other remains which could be damaged by forest, and which contain only light fuels. All other sites will be avoided by broadcast burning. All in-use historic buildings will be avoided by prescribed burning. Typically, sites which may be burned over include Native American artifact scatters, historic artifact scatters, and non-combustible simple features, both Native Americans prehistoric and historic and non-Native American historic. Prior to any burning, all sites with a burned area will be evaluated on a site-by-site basis. Those sites which cannot be burned over without an adverse effect, either due to the condition of the site remains, the specifications of the burn prescription, or the fuel loading at the site, will be avoided so that the burn may be conducted with either no effect or no adverse effect to cultural resource sites.
- Cultural resource sites which are features that are part of an in-use road or trail, such as culverts, bridges, and retaining walls, will be maintained or reconstructed in a manner consistent with their historic integrity during road reconstruction, maintenance and closure and trail reconstruction activities. All other cultural resource sites will be avoided by road reconstruction, maintenance and closure, and trail reconstruction activities.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW (APPEAL) OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is subject to appeal. A written appeal, including attachments, must be postmarked or received within 45 days after the date this notice is published in the *Albuquerque Journal*.



The appeal shall be sent to the Santa Fe National Forest, ATTN: Appeals Deciding Officer, 11 Forest Lane, Santa Fe, NM 87508. Appeals may be faxed to (505) 438-5390. Hand-delivered appeals must be received within normal business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Appeals may also be mailed electronically in a common digital format to appeals-southwestern-santafe@fs.fed.us. Only those individuals or organizations who submitted comments or otherwise expressed an interest during the notice and comment period may appeal. Appeals must meet content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

If no appeal is received, implementation of this decision may occur on, but not before, five business days from the close of the appeal filing period. If an appeal is received, implementation may not occur for 15 business days following the date of appeal disposition. (36 CFR 215.9)

CONTACT

For further information on the technical aspects of this project, please contact Michael Luján, 1926 N. 7th Street, NM 87701, (505) 425-3534.

Esther Nelson, Acting District Ranger

21 February 2013

Steve Romero
District Ranger
Enclosures

Date

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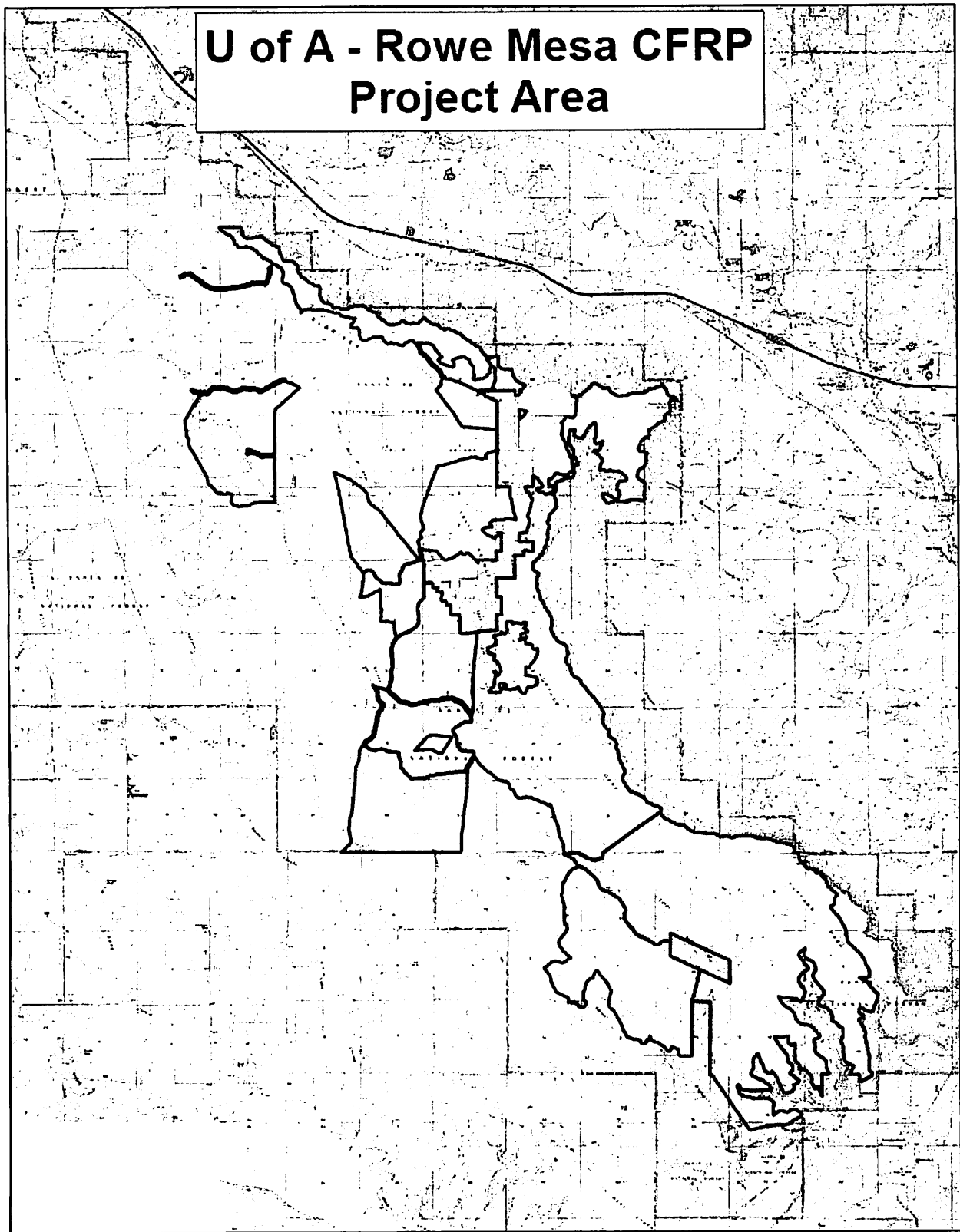


Figure 1. Southern Rowe Mesa Restoration Project Area Map