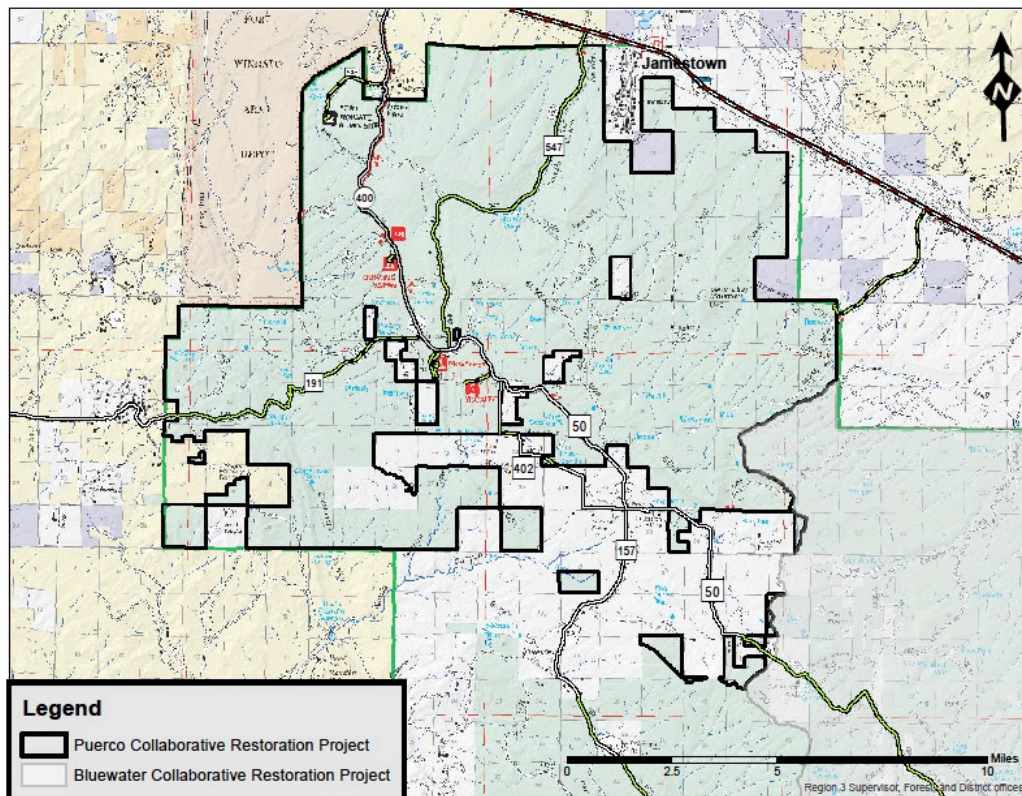




Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact Puerco Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project

Cibola National Forest, Mount Taylor Ranger District

McKinley and Cibola Counties, New Mexico



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Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact

Puerco Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project

USDA Forest Service
Cibola National Forest and National Grasslands
Mount Taylor Ranger District
McKinley and Cibola Counties, New Mexico

Decision Notice

Decision

Based upon my review of the proposal, the analysis and process described in the Environmental Assessment (EA), public comments, and the project record, I have decided to select Alternative B and associated design criteria for the Puerco Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project for implementation.

This decision includes approximately 81,000 acres in the analysis area, and the following actions to improve conditions in the Puerco Landscape Restoration Project:

- Commercially thin trees, including public fuelwood removal, and/or implement prescribed fire on approximately 31,442 acres.
- Implement prescribed fire alone on approximately 8,280 acres.
- Hand thin and lop and scatter slash without prescribed fire to improve soil condition by improving ground cover and woody material on approximately 23,328 acres.
- Hand thin and implement prescribed fire on approximately 3,034 acres.
- Mechanically thin or masticate and implement prescribed fire on approximately 14,894 acres.
- Implement more intensive even-aged treatments on up to 5,900 acres of stands that are moderately to heavily-infected with dwarf mistletoe.
- Mechanically thin and/or implement prescribed fire on up to 3,694 acres of Mexican spotted owl (MSO) protected activity centers (PACs), up to 1,346 acres of MSO recovery habitat, and approximately 3,248 acres (including 1,850 acres of dispersal PFAs) of northern goshawk post-fledging family areas (PFA).
- Rehabilitate up to 200 miles of unauthorized roads.
- Improve road drainage and crossings.
- Restore approximately 19 springs.

- Restore up to 250 acres of riparian areas including associated stream habitats for threatened, endangered, and sensitive aquatic species.
- Improve the function of streams, including gullies.
- Construct protective barriers around springs, aspen, and willows as needed for protection of approximately 300 acres.

Existing infrastructure including but not limited to water developments, fences, corrals and buildings would be inventoried and assessed to determine if their current location and design facilitate movement toward desired conditions. Alternative or additional locations or designs would be recommended where appropriate. Many water developments are not functional and are degrading the riparian ecosystems associated with them. Improved design and alternative water sources are needed to move toward desired conditions that increase water availability to wildlife and allow for better distribution of livestock to reduce overall impacts across the project area. To improve availability and distribution of water to benefit both range and wildlife species across the Puerco project, the following developments and improvements are proposed:

- Clean or reconstruct approximately 15 existing dirt tanks, and construct 2 new dirt tanks.
- Reconstruct approximately 15 miles of fence, and 1 corral.
- Install approximately 3 new cattle guards.
- Re-drill 3 existing wells and establish 3 new wells
- Install or extend 2 pipelines

Vegetation

Proposed treatment types are developed based upon the combination of existing conditions, soil condition and erosion hazard determined from Terrestrial Ecosystem Unit Inventory data. Table 1 displays proposed activities based upon current soil condition and erosion hazard. Where existing vegetation conditions are not highly departed from desired conditions, less intensive treatments such as hand thinning or burn only may be prescribed.

Table 1. Proposed Activities by Soil Condition and Erosion Hazard

Soil Condition	Erosion Hazard	Potential Activities	Acres
Satisfactory	Slight/ Moderate	Mechanical or Hand Thinning, Mastication, Prescribed Burning, Public or Commercial Removal of Wood Products within ¼ mile of Roads	136
Satisfactory	Severe	Hand Thinning or limited Mechanical and Mastication, Prescribed Burning, Commercial Removal within ¼ mile of Roads, with rehabilitation of soils.	670
Impaired	Slight/ Moderate	Mechanical or Hand Thinning, Mastication, Prescribed Burning, Commercial Removal within ¼ mile of Roads	57,670
Impaired	Severe	No Impaired/Severe Soil Types exist within Project Area	0
Unsatisfactory	Slight/ Moderate	No Impaired/Severe Soil Types exist within Project Area	0
Unsatisfactory	Severe	Hand Thin only, Prescribed Burning, No Removal of Wood Products	22,501

The existing condition for ponderosa pine, pine-oak, and mixed conifer forest types is deficient of large and old trees greater across the landscape. The Cibola National Forest Supervisor made the decision in November 2015 that within the Zuni Mountain Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration (CFLR) Project area, which includes the Puerco Project, an old tree retention strategy would be implemented. The strategy states that every effort should be made to conserve old trees to promote a balanced, uneven-aged forest condition that maintains, or contributes to the restoration of pre-settlement old growth conditions characteristic of the forest type. This should be achieved by retaining pre-settlement trees, often the largest and tallest trees on site. All trees greater than 24” diameter at breast height (DBH) will be retained on site regardless of condition or old tree characteristics, unless deemed an imminent hazard¹ to people or property. This strategy describes tree characteristics that are indicative of old trees (≈150 years old) such as bark, branching and form (Final EA - Appendix B).

Table 2. Acres of Proposed Mechanical Treatments and Prescribed Fire by Cover Type

Vegetation Cover Type	Mechanical Treatment with Prescribed Fire	Mechanical Treatment Only	Prescribed Fire Only
Dry Mixed Conifer	263	300	212
Ponderosa Pine	19,423	2,068	3,481
Ponderosa Pine-Gambel Oak	10,908	1,073	3,045
Pinyon-juniper Woodland	875	17,444	225
Ponderosa Pine/P-J Transition	10,209	1,930	1,285
Grassland/Shrubland	7,671	534	33
Riparian Meadow	21	1	0
Totals:	49,370	23,350	8,281

Plan Amendments

To meet the project’s purpose and need, the current 1985 Cibola National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Cibola Forest Plan) (as amended) would need to be amended to provide for areas of grass, forbs, and shrubs interspersed with tree groups and allow for treatments to move tree group patterns, interspaces, and stand density toward the natural range of variability. Amending the Cibola Forest Plan would allow for treatments that improve Mexican spotted owl nesting and roosting habitat as defined in the Revised 2012 Mexican spotted owl recovery plan. Amendment(s) to the Cibola Forest Plan would provide consistency in meeting desired conditions for ponderosa pine, ponderosa pine – Gambel oak and mixed conifer forest types across the Puerco Project area (Appendix A).

In 2012 the Mexican Spotted Owl Recovery Plan, First Revision was published (USFWS 2012). There is a need for the project activities to be in alignment with the management direction provided in the revised recovery plan. A project-specific plan amendment is needed because the

¹ A hazard tree is defined as a tree that has both: a structural defect that increases the chance of a tree or its parts to fail, and a target (people, buildings, cars, etc.) would be hit when the tree fails. USDA Forest Service, Southwestern Region. 2015. Tree Risk Detection and Management in the Southwestern Region.

1985 Cibola Forest Plan includes direction from the former (1995) recovery plan. In order to be consistent with the current recovery plan, the proposed plan amendment would:

- Update definitions and direction for protected (protected activity centers (PACs)), recovery habitat, and other forest and woodland types.
- Update language and direction related to prescribed cutting and fire treatments in PACs.
- Add forest structure guidelines for recovery habitat.
- Add direction for riparian forest habitats.
- Update survey information.
- Remove the direction for treating habitat in incremental percentages.

There is a need for the project activities to be in alignment with the best available science for northern goshawk management, particularly with regard to interspaces. Recent science (Reynolds et al. 2013) has shown that frequent-fire forests were historically characterized by the presence of interspaces of variable sizes and shapes. Interspaces are areas between tree groups which are generally composed of grass-forb-shrub vegetation and may contain scattered individual trees. The Cibola Forest Plan provides guidelines to manage for uneven-aged stand conditions, but does not provide guidelines for the management of interspaces at the fine-scale. In order to meet restoration objectives there is a need for a project-specific plan amendment to address the management of habitat for northern goshawk, particularly regarding interspaces.

The Cibola Forest Plan provides direction for frequent-fire forest types on three levels: management scale, outside goshawk post-fledgling areas, and within goshawk post-fledgling areas. Therefore a project-specific plan amendment would need to address the direction provided on all three levels (EA - Appendix A). The plan amendment would:

- Replace Forest Plan standards and guidelines for ponderosa pine and dry mixed-conifer (including northern goshawk direction) with desired conditions and guidelines.
- Add a desired condition for the percentage of interspaces within uneven-aged stands to facilitate restoration.
- Add the desired interspace distance between tree groups.
- Add a description of how canopy cover would be measured across the landscape.

Vegetation Treatments

Mixed Conifer

Dry mixed-conifer forests would be managed for shade-intolerant trees such as ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, Southwestern white pine, quaking aspen, and other hardwoods at densities that would have been maintained under an uninterrupted frequent low-severity (Fire Regime 1) and infrequent mixed-severity (Fire Regime 3) schedule. Groups of reserve trees would be created in irregularly shaped groups that are variably spaced, with group sizes generally ranging from a few

trees up to about an acre in size. Interspaces would be created where natural openings have become ingrown or from overstocked mid-aged trees.

Trees within groups may be of similar or variable ages and groups would be composed of one or more species of the best available dominant or codominant trees. Crowns of trees within the mid-aged to old groups (approximately 80 years old and greater) would be interlocking or nearly interlocking. Treated stands would be managed for an uneven-aged forest structure with an approximate balance of age classes ranging from young to old. Where established seedlings and saplings are lacking, temporary openings would be created to encourage natural regeneration. Overall the proposed treatments would include:

- Creation of tree groups that are typically less than 1 acre in size, but most commonly range from 0.1 - 0.5 acres with 2-50 trees per group.
- Tree density may range from 20-100 trees per acre and 30-120 ft² of basal area per acre. Some natural openings may contain individual trees or snags.
- Creation of temporary openings on approximately 10-20% of the area, for regeneration purposes, up to two acres in size with a maximum width of 200 feet. Three to five seed trees would be retained where openings exceed 1 acre in size.
- Retention of snags (2/acre), large downed logs (3/acre), and woody debris levels (5-7 tons/acre)
- Interspaces surrounding tree groups are variably-shaped and comprised of a grass/forb/shrub mix. The size and arrangement of grass-forb-shrub interspaces would reflect local site conditions and may be as wide as 1-2 mature tree heights from the nearest drip lines of adjacent tree groups.
- Openness typically ranges from 10 percent in more productive sites to 50 percent in the less productive sites.
- Managing for old age trees such that as much old forest structure as possible is sustained over time across the landscape. All trees 24" diameter at breast height (DBH) and greater, regardless of health or condition.
- In order to offset potential effects to stocking of larger trees from dwarf mistletoe sanitation, retention of all trees 18-inch DBH and greater that have no significant sign of insect or disease damage would be retained. Insect or disease damage that is likely to cause mortality within 10 years is considered significant.
- Only approximately 98 acres (13%) of the mixed-conifer forest type is proposed for product removal. In acres with no product removal, emphasis will be placed on thinning smaller diameter trees (less than 18-inch DBH) and limiting the creation and build-up of excess slash that would result in hazardous fuels and increased fire intensity.

On a minimum of 25% of the 775 acres of mixed conifer (approximately 194 acres), manage for Recovery Nest-Roost minimum desired conditions of:

- 30% of basal area in trees 12-18" DBH

- 30% of basal area in trees 18”+ DBH
- 120 square feet of basal area per acre
- Twelve 18”+ trees per acre.

The acres managed for Recovery Nest-Roost will meet the LRMP Forest Wide Standards and Guidelines, page 66, Table “The Minimum Criteria for the Structural Attribute Used to Determine Old Growth”. Where these attributes are not currently present, those stands most closely resembling recovery nest-roost conditions will be managed to maintain and achieve them in the shortest possible amount of time.

Ponderosa Pine

Ponderosa pine forests would be managed for ponderosa pine, with incidental Douglas-fir, Southwestern white pine, quaking aspen, and other hardwoods. Within the ponderosa pine forest type the desired condition would be to provide goshawk habitat that is consistent with the northern goshawk guidelines (USDA, 1992, p. 71-5; Reynolds et al, 2013).

Ponderosa pine forests would be managed for uneven-aged stand conditions to include irregularly shaped tree groups, interspaces and regeneration openings. A mosaic of stand densities, age classes, and canopy gaps would be created across the landscape. Where established seedlings and saplings are lacking, temporary openings would be created to encourage natural regeneration. Ground cover consists primarily of perennial grasses, forbs and shrubs capable of carrying surface fire, with basal vegetation values ranging between about 5 and 20% depending on the TEUI map unit (USDA Forest Service 1985, 2006). Overall the proposed treatments would include:

- Creation of tree groups typically less than 1 acre in size, but most commonly range from 0.1 - 0.5 acres. Tree density within treated areas would generally range from 22 to 89 ft² of basal area per acre (Reynolds et al. 2013).
- Creation of groups at the mid- to old-age stages consisting of 2 to approximately 40 trees per group, retaining all trees 24” diameter at breast height (DBH) and greater, regardless of health or condition.
- Creation of temporary openings, for regeneration purposes, up to four acres with a maximum width of 200 feet exist on approximately 10-20% of the area. Three to five seed trees per acre would be maintained in created openings larger 1 acre.
- Retention of snags (2/acre), large downed logs (3/acre), and woody debris levels (5-7 tons/acre)
- Maintaining a range of Vegetation Structural Stages (“VSS”, or growth stages of living trees) - treatments would strive to achieve, over time, a VSS distribution of 10% VSS 1 (grasses, forbs, and shrubs); 10% VSS 2 (seedlings and saplings; 1”-4.9” DBH); 20% VSS 3 (young forest; 5”-11.9” DBH); 20% VSS 4 (mid-aged forest; 12”-17.9” DBH); 20% VSS 5 (mature forest; 18”-23.9” DBH); and 20% VSS 6 (old forest; 24”+ DBH) across the landscape.
- Goshawk nest areas would consist of, or be managed to attain, a minimum 30-40 TPA in a size class distribution of VSS 5 (18-23.9” DBH) and/or 6 (24”+ DBH).

- On 20% of the desired 24,971 acres of ponderosa pine acres (approximately 4,994 acres) the desired condition will be to develop and maintain old growth conditions as defined in the LRMP Forest Wide Standards and Guidelines, page 66, Table “The Minimum Criteria for the Structural Attribute Used to Determine Old Growth” These areas would be designated during the environmental analysis process.

Forest conditions in goshawk post-fledging family areas (PFAs) are similar to general forest conditions except these forests contain 10 to 20 percent higher basal area in mid- to old-age tree groups than in goshawk foraging areas and the general forest. Goshawk nest areas have forest conditions that are multi-aged but are dominated by large trees with relatively denser canopies than other areas in the ponderosa pine type.

There are approximately 5,900 acres of the ponderosa pine type that are moderately to heavily-infected with dwarf mistletoe, where greater than 20% of the host trees or 25% of the area is infected. If management goals are to retain the host species (ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir) on the site, even-aged prescriptions are recommended (Conklin & Fairweather 2010). During project layout, if field validation shows that mistletoe infection levels are so severe that an uneven-aged prescription would not move stands toward conditions, then an intermediate thinning would be prescribed and regeneration would not an objective until maturity or beyond.

Even-aged prescriptions (intermediate thinning) would generally focus on retaining the best dominant and codominant trees with the least amount of mistletoe. Improved growth and vigor of the best trees is a primary objective. Intermediate thinning would hasten the development of larger trees—including larger infected trees often now deficient on the landscape (Conklin & Fairweather 2010). Eventually, some proportion of these stands could be regenerated and replaced and then, over time, converted to an uneven-age condition.

Ponderosa Pine – Gambel Oak

This forest type would be treated similar to ponderosa pine, but additional emphasis placed on retaining and promoting the growth of additional large hardwoods (>5” diameter at root collar (drc)), greater emphasis on retention of ponderosa pine greater than 18” DBH, and retention large snags (>18” DBH) and downed logs (>18” DBH). Strive to retain (do not cut) all trees >61 cm (> 24 in) dbh, the average diameter of nest trees, unless overriding management situations require their removal to protect human safety and/or property (e.g., the removal of hazard trees along roads, in campgrounds, and along power lines), or in situations where leaving large trees precludes reducing threats to owl habitat (e.g., creating a fuel break). To the extent practical, fuel breaks should be designed to avoid the removal of larger trees (trees over 18 in [46 cm] dbh) (USDI 2012).

Manage for at least 10% of total stand basal area (ft²) consisting of Gambel oak 5” DRC or greater, or 20 ft² of basal area per acre of Gambel oak. Because it takes many years for trees to reach large size, the USFWS recommends that trees ≥46- cm (18 inches) dbh not be removed in stands designated as recovery nest/roost habitat unless there are compelling safety reasons to do so or if it can be demonstrated that removal of those trees will not be detrimental to owl habitat (USDI 2012).

There are approximately 2,165 acres of the ponderosa pine type that are moderately to heavily-infected with dwarf mistletoe, where greater than 20% of the host trees or 25% of the area is infected. If management goals are to retain the host species (ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir) on

the site, even-aged prescriptions are recommended (Conklin & Fairweather 2010). During project layout, if field validation shows that mistletoe infection levels are so severe that an uneven-aged prescription would not move stands toward conditions, then an intermediate thinning would be prescribed and regeneration would not an objective until maturity or beyond.

On a minimum of 10% of the 15,025 acres of desired pine-oak type (approximately 1,503 acres), manage for MSO Recovery Nest-Roost minimum desired conditions of:

- 30% of basal area in trees 12-18" DBH
- 30% of basal area in trees 18"+ DBH
- 110 square feet of basal area per acre
- Twelve 18"+ trees per acre.

Mixed Ponderosa Pine & Pinyon-Juniper Transition Treatments

These transition zones include a variable tree component that may range from sparse to relatively dense and may include any of the pinyon and juniper species, ponderosa pine and oak. It is desired to maintain uneven-aged conditions and sustain a mosaic of vegetation densities (overstory and understory), age classes, and species composition well distributed across the landscape. Overstory vegetation in trees ranges from about 15-50%, and ground cover consists of shrubs, perennial grasses, and forbs with basal vegetation values ranging between about 5 and 20% depending on the TEUI unit (USDA Forest Service 1985). Trees occur in even-aged patches ranging from young to old, where patch size of these woodlands ranges from 10s to 100s of acres (Muldavin et al. 2003). Retention of ponderosa pine will focus on the most vigorous and healthy dominant and co-dominant trees in irregularly sized-groups and stringers, while removing mid-story ladder fuels. Where pinyon-juniper dominates, focus will be on thinning from below and restoring historic openings between tree groups.

Ponderosa Pine dominated: Tree density within ponderosa pine dominated areas generally ranges from 22 to 89 square foot basal area per acre (Reynolds et al. 2013). Size of tree groups typically is less than 1 acre, but averages 0.25 acres. Groups at the mid- to old-age stages consist of 2 to approximately 40 trees per group. Pinyon pine and juniper species would be maintained as a minor component of the mid-story, focusing on retention of the largest and oldest trees. All trees 24" DBH and greater, regardless of health or condition, will be retained.

There are approximately 600 acres of the mixed ponderosa pine & pinyon-juniper transition type that are moderately to heavily-infected with dwarf mistletoe, where greater than 20% of the host trees or 25% of the area is infected. If management goals are to retain the host species (ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir) on the site, even-aged prescriptions are recommended (Conklin & Fairweather 2010). During project layout, if field validation shows that mistletoe infection levels are so severe that an uneven-aged prescription would not move stands toward conditions, then an intermediate thinning would be prescribed and regeneration would not an objective until maturity or beyond.

P-J Woodland Dominated: In areas dominated by P-J Woodland, trees occur as individuals or in smaller groups ranging from young to old. Typically groups are even-aged in structure with all ages represented across the landscape for an overall uneven-aged grouped appearance. Patch sizes of woodlands range from individual trees and clumps that are less than one-tenth acre, to

tree groups of approximately an acre, and occasionally from 1 to 10's of acres. Retention of ponderosa pine would focus on the oldest, most vigorous and healthy dominant and co-dominant trees in irregularly sized-groups and stringers

- On 20% of the desired 13,403 acres of Ponderosa Pine / P-J Mix (approximately 2,681 acres) the desired condition will be to develop and maintain old growth conditions as defined in the ALRMP Forest Wide Standards and Guidelines, page 66, Table “The Minimum Criteria for the Structural Attribute Used to Determine Old Growth” These areas would be designated during the environmental analysis process.

Pinyon – Juniper Woodland

The pinyon-juniper (P-J) vegetation community in the Puerco Project is primarily composed of P-J Woodland, with a small amount of P-J Grass. These are dominated by one or more species of pinyon pine and/or juniper and can occur with a grass/forb dominated understory (P-J grassland), or a discontinuous understory of some grasses and/or shrubs (P-J Woodland). Two-needle pinyon pine and One-seed juniper are common. Rocky Mountain and alligator junipers are well-represented, with a lesser abundance of oaks. Species composition and stand structure vary by location primarily due to precipitation, elevation, temperature, and soil type.

On 20% of 18,545 P-J acres (approximately 3,709 acres) the desired condition will be to develop and maintain old growth conditions as defined in the Cibola Forest Plan forest wide Standards and Guidelines “The Minimum Criteria for the Structural Attribute Used to Determine Old Growth” (USDA, pg 66, 1985). These areas would be designated during the environmental analysis process.

P-J Woodland - trees occur as individuals or in smaller groups ranging from young to old. Typically groups are even-aged in structure with all ages represented across the landscape for an overall uneven-aged grouped appearance. The patch size of woodlands ranges from 1 to 10s of acres.

P-J Grass (Savanna) - is generally uneven aged and open in appearance. Trees occur as individuals, but occasionally in smaller groups, and range from young to old. Patch sizes of woodlands range from individual trees and clumps that are less than one-tenth acre, to tree groups of approximately an acre (Muldavin et al. 2003).

Grasslands/Shrublands

Approximately 8,237 acres of grassland and shrubland types, based on TEUI, would be moved toward the following desired conditions:

Sagebrush Shrubland – Historically dominated by big sagebrush and primarily occurs adjacent to Great Basin grassland and pinyon juniper woodlands. While big sagebrush is the dominant species, other shrubs and grasses and forbs are present. Historically, tree canopy cover exceeded 10%, with the exception of early, post-fire plant communities (USDA 2015). The historic average fire return interval was 35–200 years from mixed-severity fire. Sagebrush shrubland is highly departed for vegetation structure, species composition, and patch size (too small), ecological need for change may hinge on restoring the historic mixed-severity fire regime.

Colorado Plateau/Great Basin Grassland - In general, found at lower elevations with vegetation coverage consisting of mostly grasses and interspersed shrubs. May have had over 10% shrub cover historically, but had less than 10% tree cover. The historic average fire return interval was 0–35 years from stand-replacing fire; however, most recent fires have been non-lethal. Departure is moderate with moderate–high risk from vegetation structure, high risk from altered fire regime, and high risk from decreased patch size, future management should strive to restore vegetation structure to reference conditions. In turn, this may simultaneously (either passively or actively) return fire regime and patch size to reference conditions (USDA 2015).

Montane/Subalpine Grassland - Occurs at elevations ranging from 8,000-11,000 feet, and often harbors several plant associations with varying dominant grasses and herbaceous species. Trees may occur along the periphery of the meadows, and some shrubs may also be present. These meadows are seasonally wet, which is closely tied to snowmelt. They typically do not experience flooding events. Historically, tree and shrub canopy cover were each less than 10% and stand-replacing fires occurred every 0–35 years. The most substantial risks are from a lack of frequent stand-replacing fire and patch size (currently highly departed; too small). May be considered especially sensitive to climate change, as it occurs at the highest elevations and is therefore incapable of uphill migration as a climate change response. Future management should use stand-replacing fire to reduce tree encroachment, increase patch size, and potentially restore species composition.

Areas Over 40% Slope

Dispersed throughout the project area is approximately 1,106 acres over 40% slope. These areas would not be treated mechanically, but could be treated by hand or prescribe burned as allowed by the Cibola LRMP. Tree densities would be reduced by thinning and disposing of designated trees on site through prescribed burning or exclusively by prescribed burning.

Slash Disposal

Activity fuel such as bole wood, tops and branches, hand piles, and mastication grindings would be treated as needed to meet fuels reduction and scenic quality objectives through prescribed burning and/or pile burning when conditions allow for safe and effective burning. All prescribed burning would comply with Cibola and McKinley County air quality regulations and will be approved through appropriate permitting processes.

Transportation and Wood Hauling

No new roads or temporary roads would be constructed for this project. All wood products generated from this project would be removed under permit using National Forest System (NFS) roads or trails or unauthorized roads and trails (see Figures 5A & 5B in Appendix C of the Final EA). Road decommissioning would be coordinated with the implementation phase approach.

Design Features Associated with this Decision

In addition to the applicable standards from the 1985 Cibola Forest Plan (as amended), the management requirements described below are part of my decision, and will be implemented to lessen adverse effects of the Selected Alternative.

Vegetation Restoration

- Retention of pinyon pine, juniper, and non-commercial woodland species would focus on larger and older trees so that there is more of an even distribution of young, mid-aged, and old trees represented across the landscape. Most woodland trees greater than 12-inch DRC (diameter at root collar) would be retained to achieve the desired condition of having all ages represented across the landscape for an overall uneven-aged, grouped appearance.
- Retain mature (flattened crowns, red/yellow plated bark on more the half the length of the bole, little taper) ponderosa pine, regardless of size, and all timber species larger than 24" DBH.
- Ips Beetles – Minimize creation of activity slash before July or unless the potential for Ips beetle infestation is determined to be low. Avoid creating activity slash in the same area multiple years. Remove as much woody material 3-inches or more in diameter from the site as possible. Promptly treat slash through lop/scatter, chipping/mastication, hand pile burning or prescribed burning.
- Do not allow concentrations of chipped/masticated material to accumulate over 4 inches in depth over large areas, or lie immediately adjacent to live standing trees. Distribute chipped/masticated materials in open areas or on slopes where they would dry quickly. Don't consider burning of woody material to be an effective treatment for Ips unless accomplished before beetles emerge from the woody material. Avoid mechanical damage to residual trees and their root systems to reduce risk of attracting bark beetles. Monitor slash during and after treatment for Ips beetle infestation. If found, contact Forest Silviculturist or Forest Health Protection Entomologist.

Scenic and Recreation Resources

- Project activities should avoid even spacing of retained trees, and instead leave a diversity of tree species, sizes, and ages, avoid damage to vegetation that will remain, and naturalize disturbed areas.
- Prescribed slash treatment in the immediate foreground (up to 300 feet) of concern level 1 and 2 travelways and recreation sites (areas with the most public concern for scenery) should be completed as soon as conditions permit.
- Mark trees that are to be removed on the backs of trunks, away from the primary viewing point (i.e. from roads and trails).
- In the immediate foreground along concern level 1 and 2 travelways and recreation sites, stumps should be treated to reduce their visibility by methods such as cutting as low as possible (no more than 6 inches above ground on uphill and downhill side) and angling large stump faces away from viewing locations unless doing so would pose a safety hazard.
- Effects from prescribed fire should be considered during project planning and implementation. For example: (1) blackened and scorched vegetation may be visible in project areas in the short term following treatments, but desired conditions for scenery and visual resources should be met in the long term, and (2) efforts should be made to minimize high-intensity fire in riparian areas along system trails and scenic vistas.
- Log decks should be removed and rehabilitated, and skid trails should be naturalized.

- National Forest System trails should not be used for vegetation project activities such as for landings and as skid trails. Impacts to system trails should be avoided and mitigated upon project completion if unavoidable. If trails are impacted, crossings are only at perpendicular angles and crossings are rehabilitated after project completion, using barriers or other rehabilitation measures to discourage future use.
 - ♦ Avoid using trails as treatment unit boundaries especially for mechanical treatments for Concern Level 1 trails.
- Provide public notice and information about treatment locations, timing and the type of treatment occurring prior to and during vegetation and fire treatments.
- Treatments extend up to the edges of the trail concern level 1 and 2 trails and recreation sites, and do not leave a screen of trees. Groups of trees complying with the prescribed treatment are left that visually connect with the treatment unit's edge, to avoid an abrupt and noticeable change.
- Where meadows are not being restored, “feather” treatment edges along the trail from more to fewer trees as treatments move away from the trail. Edges of treatment units will be shaped as described below to avoid abrupt changes between treated and untreated areas. Edges will be natural-appearing, feathered, and will blend with general surroundings. Feathering refers to softening treatment edges by thinning in the following manner:
 - ♦ Where the treatment unit is adjacent to denser forest (treated or untreated), the percent of thinning within the transition zone is progressively reduced toward the denser edges of the unit. Similarly, where the treatment unit interfaces with an opening (including savannah and grassland treatments, and natural openings) the transition zone is progressively increased toward the open edges of the unit.
 - ♦ Treatment extends up to the edges and does not leave a screen of trees. Groups of trees complying with the prescribed treatment are left that visually connect with the unit's edge, to avoid an abrupt and noticeable change.
- Healthy large trees should comprise the majority of the immediate foreground along designated travelways unless doing so would not achieve project goals; some younger and mid-aged trees are retained to serve as replacement trees and as additional screening.
- Depth of masticated material not to exceed 4” along Concern Level 1 travelways and recreation sites
- Landings shall not be located within 600-foot-wide corridor (300-foot on either side of developed recreation sites or Concern Level 1 travelways.
- Mark trees that are to be removed on the backs of trunks, away from the primary viewing point (i.e. from Level 1 travelways and trails).
- Minimize and avoid the placement of log decks, temporary roads, and skid trails within and adjacent to sensitive viewsheds, Concern Level 1 travelways, developed recreation sites, and private homes/communities.

- Reseed and mulch decks as soon as possible to speed recovery, with high priority along Concern Level 1 travelways, trails, and developed recreation sites.
- Skid trail crossings may cross designated trails, but will be kept to a minimum. Any crossings will be perpendicular to the designated system trail.
- If trails are used as skid trails, trail clean up and rehabilitation will be included in the contract. This should include restoring the trail to its original trail width.
- Changes to trail alignment and surfacing will be minimized; the trail will not be straightened nor its surface changed with an alternate material unless such actions are approved by the District Recreation Staff and are needed to enhance the trail and protect resources.
- Cull logs will not be abandoned on landings, and should be used for rehabilitating skid trails, closing user created roads or decommissioning roads.
- Cull logs may also be suitable to use as down woody material, but should be scattered away from the landings.
- Stump heights should be cut as low as possible within the foreground (300 feet from centerline of roads, trails, or edge of recreation sites) of Concern Level 1 roads and trails, with the cut angled away from the viewer in these areas.
- Locate slash piles and landings 300' feet from edge of high sensitivity roads and trails where possible. Where slash occurs within the 300' immediate foreground of Concern Level 1 roads and trails, treat slash as soon as possible, within one year, to bring the scenery back to prescribed levels after project implementation.
- Generally restore control lines to a near undisturbed condition in the foregrounds (within 300 feet) of sensitive roads, trails, and developed recreation sites.
- To hasten recovery and help eliminate unauthorized motorized and non-motorized use of control lines in these areas, use measures such as recontouring, pulling slash and rocks across the line, and disguising entrances.
- Where trails are used, rehabilitate trails to original width, condition, and designated class level.
- If spring restoration or aspen fencing is visible from any Concern Level 1 roads, developed recreation sites and trails, work with Landscape Architect during project implementation to determine fencing materials to mitigate potential impacts to scenery and minimize visual impacts. Work with Landscape Architect during project implementation to ensure stability of scenic quality.

Watershed Resources

- Soil disturbance would be reduced or prevented in some areas through design features and best management practices (BMPs) as described in Appendix D of this document.
- A riparian management zone will be established for riparian areas, including all lake, perennial and intermittent streams, springs, and open water wetlands. This zone is at least 100 feet from the edges of all perennial streams and lakes unless site-specific conditions determine other effective widths.

Fire/Fuels

- Best Management Practices (BMPs) for smoke management and compliance with The New Mexico smoke Management Program would be followed along with the Clean Air Act requirements that would be state regulated.
- Local area fire weather forecasts will be monitored daily before and during the implementation of any prescribed burn. Spot weather forecasts will be obtained daily for the operational periods of the burn. On-site weather readings will be monitored during operational periods as directed by the burn boss using a belt weather kit. The weather data that is recorded from the belt weather kit will be the primary weather readings that will be the determination factor for the go-no-go and for the prescription parameters.
- The Burn Boss will ensure that the project complies with all local, county, state, and federal air quality regulations. The project will be registered with the New Mexico Smoke Management program at least 2 weeks prior to implementation. Notification will be given 24 - 48 hours prior to ignition and a copy of the spot weather forecast will be provided to the Mt Taylor Ranger District. A copy of our smoke monitoring report will also be provided. Coordination between the Albuquerque zone dispatch center and neighboring agencies will be established. Burn will be terminated if the National Weather Service issues an air stagnation alert.
- Smoke conditions must be monitored carefully to assess potential impacts to highway traffic and populated areas. Monitoring should be visual and also may include instrument monitoring. Adequate ventilation or winds that carry smoke away from traffic or populated areas may be required to minimize impacts. The Burn Boss will determine if conditions are favorable at time of ignition.

Heritage Resources

- All eligible and unevaluated sites should be flagged for avoidance prior to the implementation of mechanical treatments. Mechanical treatments will not be allowed within eligible and unevaluated site boundaries. Mechanical equipment may pull material off the site (not drag) but may not cross the site unless crossings have been previously established and flagged by a qualified cultural resources specialist. Any mechanical treatment activities within site boundaries should be monitored by a qualified cultural resources specialist.
- Hand thinning treatments can be allowed within site boundaries provided:
 - ♦ Cutting is accomplished using hand tools only
 - ♦ Large diameter trees are felled away from all features
 - ♦ Materials removed from the site are removed by hand
 - ♦ No dragging of logs, trees, or thinned material across or within site boundaries.
 - ♦ No use of vehicles or other mechanized equipment within site boundaries.
 - ♦ No staging of equipment within site boundaries.
 - ♦ No slash piles within site boundaries.

- If areas that have been thinned are going to be opened up to fuelwood collection, sites must be designated for avoidance prior to allowing collection in the area. Material thinned from the sites must be removed by hand from site boundaries prior to fuelwood collection. Logs, trees or thinned material should not be dragged across or within site boundaries. Vehicles or other mechanized equipment are not allowed within site boundaries during either hand thinning or fuelwood collection.
- To ensure the protection of fire sensitive sites, various combinations of the following protection measures may be used to protect sites for projects listed in Section III of Appendix J of the First Amended Region 3 Programmatic Agreement. The protection measures do not require additional consultation with the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office (NMSHPO).
- Protect fire-sensitive sites, by excluding the following activities from sites:
 - ♦ Hand line
 - ♦ Black line
 - ♦ Wet line
 - ♦ Foam retardant
- Sites that lie adjacent proposed roadways will be flagged for avoidance prior to project implementation.
- Standard protection measures have been developed to protect sites for projects listed in Section III.1 Appendix E of the First Amended Region 3 Programmatic Agreement. The protection measures do not require additional consultation with NMSHPO.
 - ♦ No earth-disturbing decommissioning and closure activities within the boundaries of eligible or unevaluated sites
 - ♦ No use or staging of heavy mechanized equipment within site boundaries
 - ♦ Allow road decommissioning activities within the boundaries of eligible or unevaluated sites if the Forest and the SHPO agree that the activities will have no effect or no adverse effect on the identified historic properties.

Wildlife

- The implementation of any of the proposed thinning activities within Mexican spotted owl Protected activity centers (PAC) would occur from September 1st - February 28th.
- This project would be implemented in phases for the treatments types mentioned in Chapter 1 Proposed Action, so that fuel reduction activities and wood product removal would occur while providing mitigation for unintentional disturbance to migratory birds. The recommended Migratory Bird timing restriction for no management activity is from April 1st-July 31st. This timing restriction does not apply to vegetation treatments under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.
- The implementation of any of the proposed thinning activities within northern goshawk PFA's and Nest Areas would occur from October 1st - February 28th.

- A dispersal PFA will be designated based on Forest Plan direction (pg. 71-7). No timing restrictions would apply in this area; however, the desired condition for PFAs would be created within the dispersal area.
- High intensity crown fires are not acceptable in the post-fledging family area or nest areas. Low intensity ground fires are allowed at any time in all forested cover types. Avoid burning the entire home range of a goshawk pair in a single year. For fires planned in the occupied nest area, a fire management plan should be prepared. The fire management plan should minimize the risk of goshawk abandonment while low intensity ground fire burns in the nesting area. Prescribed fire within nesting areas should be planned to move with prevailing winds away from the nest tree to minimize smoke and risk of crown fire developing and driving the adults off or consuming the nest tree.
- In forested habitats, retain at least 2 snags per acre greater than 18 inches DBH and 30 feet tall, 3 downed logs per acre that are over 12 inches in diameter and 8 feet long, and 5-7 tons of woody debris per acre 3 inches or larger, except within fuel breaks and adjacent to control lines where retention would compromise fire fighter safety. Snags and logs that do not compromise fire fighter safety are to be left. Lighting techniques that allow for the retention of large logs and snags should be used.
- Large, downed woody materials (12-inch diameter midpoint and greater) and snags would be retained within riparian areas.
- Skid trails, landings and other intensely disturbed areas would be seeded with an approved native grass/forb/shrub seed mix.

Range Management

- Reconstruct burned fences.
- Treatment of invasive species should be designed to effectively control or eliminate them; multiple treatments may be needed.
- New livestock watering facilities shall be designed to allow wildlife access and escape.

Transportation

- Applicable soils and watershed best management practices (BMPs) will be used in the course of any project-related road work.
- All project-related traffic control (for example, signs warning road users of commercial vehicle traffic) will be conducted in accordance with the current versions of Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) and Forest Service Engineering Manual 7100-15 (EM 7100-15): Sign and Poster Guidelines for the Forest Service.
- When road surface is wet, cease commercial activities that would cause excessive damage to the road surface.

Monitoring

1. Monitor potential sources of introduction of invasive species into the project area; included are rehabilitation of trails, roads, etc. through grass establishment or other means.

2. Smoke conditions must be monitored carefully to assess potential impacts to highway traffic and populated areas. Monitoring should be visual and also may include instrument monitoring. Adequate ventilation or winds that carry smoke away from traffic or populated areas may be required to minimize impacts. The Burn Boss will determine if conditions are favorable at time of ignition.
3. Precautions should be taken to ensure that the archaeological sites which may be fire sensitive are monitored before the onset of the proposed prescribe burns. Several of the possibly fire sensitive sites are located in areas with high fuel loads. In order to ensure that these sites are not subjected to damage from higher temperatures and prolonged exposure to heat, it is recommended that all possibly fire sensitive sites are monitored by a professional archaeologist prior to fire treatment plans. Depending upon the estimated fuel load and previous fire exposure, fuel loads and types that would adversely impact cultural material should be removed from sites prior to prescribed burns. It is essential that this effort is coordinated with the district or forest archaeologist. An archaeological monitor may be necessary to ensure that removal of fuels does not result in damage to sites.
4. Monitoring areas are reflective of the areas important to the livestock operation and reflective of the livestock management effects in pastures and, therefore, are important to assess when determining the return of livestock. Forage availability assessment on a pasture-by-pasture basis can provide reliable and valuable data. Important indicators to address when assessing forage availability include ground cover, species composition and forage production (R-3 Supplement, Consideration for Re-stocking and Management of Grazing Allotments Post Wildfire and Other Disturbances, 2015).
5. For a quick assessment of an allotment/pasture for grazing after prescribe burn or disturbance includes but not limited to: 1) seed heads or flowers present, 2) multiple leaves or branches present, and/or a root system that does not allow plants to easily pulled from ground (R-3 Supplement, Consideration for Re-stocking and Management of Grazing Allotments Post Wildfire and Other Disturbances, 2015).

Units of Measure/Indicators of Effects

- ♦ Percent ground cover – Percentage of ground surface covered by vegetation
- ♦ Lbs. of forage per acres – The amount of forage currently produced.

Alternatives Considered

Two alternatives were analyzed in detail; the No Action (Alternative A) and the Proposed Action (Alternative B). The proposed action was developed to maximize attainment of the purpose and need. Alternative A provides a baseline for comparison to the Proposed Action.

A total of 10 comments were received on the Puerco Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project Draft EA. From the public comments received, the Forest Service did not identify any issues that would drive the analysis of any alternatives other than the Proposed Action and No Action Alternatives.

Alternative A – No Action

This alternative is the No Action Alternative, and is described in detail on page 28 of the Final EA. None of the proposed management activities would be implemented under this alternative. This alternative would not be consistent with the Cibola Forest Plan over the long term as it would not meet the goals and objectives or provide the desired conditions described in the Cibola Forest Plan.

Alternative B – Proposed Action

This alternative is the Proposed Action, the Selected Alternative, and is described on pages 28-40 of the Final EA, as well as pages 4-13 of this document.

Decision Rationale

My decision to implement Alternative B with discussed changes is based on its effectiveness in moving the existing conditions in the project area towards the desired conditions outlined in the Cibola Forest Plan. The proposed treatments are needed to create vegetation structure and arrangement that would increase resiliency and reduce the potential for uncharacteristic wildfires that could threaten local communities, wildlife habitat, and other natural and cultural resources in the area.

I have considered the best available science in making this decision. The project record demonstrates a thorough review of relevant scientific information, consideration of responsible opposing views, and the acknowledgment of incomplete or unavailable information, scientific uncertainty, and risk. I considered the need to take action and the issues identified during scoping in making my decision. I weighed the effects of proposed silvicultural treatments, prescribed burning, watershed restoration, and infrastructure improvements on the vegetation, soil and water, air, wildlife, and recreational use of the area, and the key issues associated with the project, against taking no action.

I am not willing to accept the potential effects on wildlife, Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), Mexican spotted owl and Northern goshawk habitat associated with the no action alternative.

Public Involvement

On March 14, 2017, a scoping letter with links to a detailed Proposed Action was mailed to approximately 145 different agencies, businesses, individuals, tribes, and organizations interested in or determined to be potentially impacted by the proposed project. Comments were requested by April 14, 2017, but comments received after that date were accepted and considered. In addition, the proposal was posted on the Cibola NF&G website on March 10th and was published in the Schedule of Proposed Actions on April 1, 2017. See Project Record for a list of comments received. Comments received during scoping were used to develop a list of issues and these issues helped guide the development of alternatives.

On April 4, 2017 the proposed action for Puerco Project was presented at the Zuni Mountains Collaborative Meeting held in Gallup, NM. Formed in 2005, the purpose of the Zuni Mountains Collaborative is to provide recommendations for actions concerning the use and management of lands and waters within the Zuni Mountain Landscape in west-central New Mexico. On April 5, 2017 the proposed action was also presented at a public meeting held in Grants, NM. A field tour

of the Puerco Project area was conducted on June 6, 2017 visiting numerous sites across the project area to view existing conditions and discuss needs for change and proposed treatments.

A meeting with Zuni Mountains Collaborative Group was held on July 17, 2018 in Grants, NM, where the modified proposed action and timeline for the Puerco project was shared with participants. A sign-up sheet was made available for attendees who wanted to be included on the project mailing list.

The 30-day Notice and Comment Period began on July 31, 2018 after publication of the legal notice in the Albuquerque Journal. Letters announcing the availability of the EA were sent to those on the project's mailing list and to those who had attended public meetings or otherwise expressed interest in the project. The Forest Service received ten responses during the 30-day Notice and Comment Period.

Tribal Consultation

The Cibola National Forest consults with seven American Indian Tribes and 13 Chapters of the Navajo Nation regarding proposed projects and management activities on the Mt. Taylor Ranger District. These include: the Hopi Tribe, the Navajo Nation, and the Pueblos of Acoma, Laguna, Zuni, Jemez, and Santa Ana and the following Navajo chapters: Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Crownpoint, Mariano Lake, Ojo Encino, Ramah, Smith Lake, Thoreau, To'hajiilee, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake. In 2016, the Forest began consulting with the Baahaali and Churchrock Chapters.

Consultation pursuant to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act was initiated in 2013. The Puerco Landscape Restoration project was highlighted in the Forest's annual project consultation letter sent to the Tribes and Chapters in 2013, and again in 2014 and 2015. Project consultation meetings were initiated in the summer of 2013 and have continued into 2018. The Cibola National Forest has received additional comments during project consultation and other meetings.

The Forest Stewards Guild hosted meetings with the Cibola National Forest and the Pueblos of Acoma, Zuni, and Laguna, as well as the Ramah and Baahaali Chapters in 2016 to discuss new and expanded opportunities for collaboration in the Zuni Mountains. The Puerco project was discussed as a part of those meetings. In June 2017, the Forest Stewards Guild assisted the Cibola National Forest in organizing a fieldtrip to the Puerco project area to look at existing conditions, and discuss desired conditions and proposed treatments. Correspondence related to the fieldtrip was sent to the neighboring Tribes and the two Chapters that share a common boundary and/or have expressed an active interest in restoration work in the Zuni Mountains. A representative from the Pueblo of Zuni participated in the field trip.

The Puerco project was added to the SOPA (Schedule of Proposed Actions) in January 2017. A scoping letter (letter dated 3/14/2017) was sent to all the Tribes and Chapters. That letter contained an invitation to a public meeting which was held on 4/5/2017. One tribal representative, from the Pueblo of Laguna, attended the public meeting. The Forest received written comments from one Tribe in response to scoping. In a letter dated 3/27/2017, the Hopi Tribe's Cultural Preservation Office expressed its interest in continued consultation on the project, as well as a copy of the cultural resource survey report(s) and any proposed treatment plan, *if* the project will adversely affect prehistoric cultural sites. The letter states that the Tribe

supports the identification and avoidance of prehistoric sites. A consultation meeting was held with the Hopi Tribe in early July 2017. The Tribe made a request that the Forest invest some effort into identifying traditionally-used plants within the Puerco project area. Desert Tobacco (*Nicotiana obtusifolia*) was specifically mentioned, and a comment made that it responds well to prescribed burning.

A field-based consultation meeting was held with the Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Department and the Baahaali Chapter in November 2017. One objective of the fieldtrip was to determine an appropriate course of action to ensure that cultural items potentially affiliated with the Navajo remain undisturbed during project implementation. Another objective was to look at the treatments proposed in and around the Hogback. The project area was expanded westward to include the Hogback and extend all the way to the Forest's common boundary with the Baahaali Chapter and the Pueblo of Zuni, based upon input received from the Chapter at a meeting in 2016. During the field consultation, the Navajo Nation provided input on the proposal to treat two-culturally significant landscape features using prescribed fire, as well recommendations for avoiding impact to the identified cultural items. This input has been incorporated into the proposed action.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After thorough consideration of the EA, Appendices, the Cibola Forest Plan, specialist reports, and comments received, I have determined that implementation of the Selected Alternative is not a major federal action, individually or cumulatively, and will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. In a local context, the short and long term effects of the site-specific actions of the Selected Alternative (Alternative B) are not significant. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not needed. This determination was based on the following factors:

1. Both beneficial and adverse effects have been considered and this action will not have a significant effect on the quality of the environment (EA, Chapter 3).
2. The Selected Alternative will not adversely affect public health or safety. Project design features and mitigation measures will protect not only natural resources, but also public health and safety (Final EA, pages 52 - 60).
3. The prescribed actions will not adversely affect any unique characteristics of the geographical area. Approximately 2 miles of the Agua Remora drainage has been designated as an Eligible Wild and Scenic River during the Cibola National Forest's 2001 Wild and Scenic River eligibility study process. The eligible stretch of Agua Remora will be managed to protect or enhance existing outstanding remarkable values and classifications until designated or released from consideration.

Floodplains associated with the major streams in the project would not be adversely affected (Final EA – Appendix D). Heritage resources would be protected (Final EA, page 57-58 and 221-226). Wetlands in the project area would be associated with water resource features including floodplains along major streams. Project activities would not significantly affect wetlands (EA, page 109-120) by using BMPs as described.

4. I do not expect the effects of the proposed actions on the quality of the human environment to be highly controversial in a scientific context. Pages 24-27 of the Final EA summarizes the public contacts made in the course of the environmental analysis, and documents the issues identified from these contacts.
5. The Selected Alternative does not involve highly uncertain, unique, or unknown environmental risks. The Mount Taylor Ranger District has successfully carried out all prescribed activities in similar situations in the past.
6. This decision does not set precedent for future action with significant effects or represent a decision in principle about a future consideration.
7. These actions do not individually, nor with other activities taken cumulatively within the affected area, reach a level of significance (EA, Chapter 3). Where appropriate, design features are proposed which are known to keep effects to vegetation, soils, wildlife, and other resources below a threshold level of significance (EA Chapter 2, pages 52 through 60). Cumulative effects of the actions in the Selected Alternative and other foreseeable actions have been evaluated for each resource area throughout the Final EA.
8. No known sites listed or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places will be affected by the proposed activities. If heritage resource sites are discovered during actual operations, activities will be stopped until the sites can be protected or evaluated for significance. The prescribed activities will not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources.
9. The Selected Alternative would have beneficial effects to multiple federally listed Threatened and Endangered species and designated Critical Habitat including the Zuni fleabane, Zuni bluehead sucker, Mexican spotted owl, and Mexican wolf. The action is expected to result in take of the Mexican spotted owl, but it is not expected to have significant adverse effects to the population within the Cibola National Forest or within the range of the species. The Forest Service determined that certain sensitive species may be impacted, but not significantly on a population level, and implementation of the project is not likely to result in a trend toward federal listing or loss of viability (Final EA pages 120-199).
10. None of the prescribed actions threaten or lead to violations of federal, state, or local environmental laws, or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. This will be ensured by carrying out the selected actions in a way that is consistent with the standards and guidelines, management requirements and mitigation measures established in the Forest Plan. For water quality management, state-approved Best Management Practices will be used for this project. The project will be monitored to ensure BMPs are implemented and appropriate corrective measures will take place, if implementing the BMPs on a specific site results in effects significantly higher than anticipated, because of unforeseen site factors or events. This project will fully comply with state approved BMPs and the Clean Water Act.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This decision and its actions are consistent with the Cibola Forest Plan forest-wide standards and guidelines (USDA, 1985, p. 56-80) and the standards and guidelines for Management Area 8 - Ponderosa Pine Suitable Timberlands, Management Area 10 - Mixed Conifer Suitable

Timberlands, and Management Area 13 - No Capacity Rangelands, which include Amendment #7, Regional Mexican spotted owl and Northern goshawk direction (USDA, 1985, p. 117-126, 133-140, and 158-162).

The decision is consistent with other applicable laws and regulations including the National Environmental Protection Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Endangered Species Act. The measures included in the proposal to protect soil and water resources ensure compliance with the Clean Water Act.

This analysis considered the New Mexico Forest Restoration Principles (TNC et al, 2006). See pages 58-64 of the Final EA for a discussion as to how these principles were addressed.

Administrative Review or Objection Opportunities

This proposed project and Cibola Forest Plan amendments are subject to the objection process pursuant to 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and B, as the Forest Plan amendments will be approved in a decision document approving a project and the amendments apply only to the project. Objections to the Puerco Project or to the Cibola Forest Plan amendments were only accepted from those who have previously submitted timely comments regarding these planning efforts during any designated opportunity for public comment, unless based on information not available during an earlier designated opportunity for public comment (i.e., new information).

On November 5, 2018, the final EA, draft decision notice (DN), and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the Puerco Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project was released to the public and a legal notice was posted in the Albuquerque Journal starting the 45-day objection filing period.

On December 3, 2018, the Responsible Official provided notice in the Albuquerque Journal that the Objection Process initiated on November 5th was being cancelled, and that any objections filed on or after November 6th in response to the previous legal notice would be set aside from review per 36 CFR 218.10 (a)(9).

On December 20, 2019, the final updated EA, draft DN, and FONSI for the Puerco Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project was released to the public and a legal notice was posted in the Albuquerque Journal starting the 45-day objection filing period. One objection was timely received on February 3, 2020 and considered pursuant to the regulations at 36 CFR 218.

An objection resolution meeting was held on Tuesday, March 17, 2020 to discuss the concerns presented in the objection letter. The addition of the language to offset potential effects to stocking of larger trees from dwarf mistletoe sanitation was included on page 7 of this Decision Notice. The addition of the language in regard of retention of pinyon pine, juniper, and non-commercial woodland species was included on page 13 of this Decision Notice. The instruction to correct a sentence referencing Hibbert (1983) in the final EA has been corrected.

Implementation Date

Project implementation may occur immediately.

Contact

For further information concerning this decision contact Forest Supervisor Steve Hattenbach at the Cibola National Forest and National Grasslands Office, 2113 Osuna Road, Albuquerque, NM 87113, or phone (505) 346-3900.

Responsible Official:

<u><i>Steve Hattenbach</i></u>	<u>4/6/2020</u>
Steve Hattenbach	Date:
Forest Supervisor	
Cibola National Forest and National Grasslands	

**Table 3
Proposed Vegetation Treatment Methods**

Product/ Non- Product Removal Area	Treatment Type	Cutting Methods How will excess trees be cut or otherwise handled?	Tree Removal Will cut trees be removed from the areas?	Slash Treatment What happens to tree tops and other material that remains on the site after cutting?
Product Removal Area: Public and/or Commercial Removal of forest products	1 – Satisfactory soils with Slight/Moderate Erosion Hazard Rating on less than 40% slope: within 0.25 mile along national forest system (NFS) roads, NFS trails, or unauthorized roads. Approx. acres = 89.	Mechanical mastication Chainsaws – contract or Forest Service Mechanized feller, public	None where mastication occurs. Commercial fuelwood, service contracts and/or timber sale contracts. Where good access exists, material removed under permits for personal use firewood	Masticated material would be spread on site to a depth of 0"-4", other cut material lopped and scattered to a depth of 18" max. Hand piles may be created where needed and piles will not exceed 10'x10' Broadcast burning and/or pile burning when management prescription conditions are met.
Product Removal Area: Commercial removal only	2 - Impaired soils with Slight/Moderate Erosion Hazard Rating and satisfactory soils with Severe Erosion Hazard Rating on less than 40% slope: within 0.25 mile along NFS roads, NFS trails, or unauthorized roads. Approx. acres = 36,899	Mechanical mastication Chainsaws – contract or Forest Service Mechanized feller	None where mastication occurs Commercial fuelwood, service contracts and/or timber sale contracts.	Masticated material would be spread on site to a depth of 0"-4", other cut material lopped and scattered to a depth of 18" max. Hand piles may be created where needed and piles will not exceed 10'x10' Broadcast burning and/or pile burning when management prescription conditions are met.

Non-Product Removal Area	3 – Satisfactory and Impaired soils inside & outside 0.25 mile along NFS roads, NFS trails, or unauthorized roads. Approx. acres 9,346.	Mechanical mastication, Chainsaws – contract or Forest Service Mechanized feller and/or prescribe burned only	None	Masticated material would be spread on site to a depth of 0”-4”, other cut material will be lopped and scattered to a depth of 18” max. Hand piles may be created where needed and piles will not exceed 10’x10’. Broadcast burning and/or pile burning when management prescription conditions are met.
Non-Product Removal Area	4 – Areas with poor access and Unsatisfactory Soil Condition on less than 40% slopes outside Chinle Soil Formation. Approx. acres 8,280.	None - these areas would be prescribe burned only	None	Broadcast burning when management prescription conditions are met.
Non-Product Removal Area	5 – Areas with poor access regardless of Soil Condition or Erosion Hazard Rating. Approx. acres 3,034.	Chainsaws – contract or Forest Service and/or Prescribe burned only	None	Cut material will be lopped and scattered to a depth of 18” max. Hand piles may be created where needed and piles will not exceed 10’x10’. Broadcast burning and/or pile burning when management prescription conditions are met.
Non-Product Removal Area	6 – Chinle Formation and areas with Poor Access. Approx. acres 23,328.	Chainsaws – contract or Forest Service	None	Cut material will be lopped and scattered to a depth of 18” max. Hand piles may be created where needed and piles will not exceed 10’x10’.

