



File Code: 1900

Date: July 27, 2018

Dear Friend of the Cibola National Forest,

Because of your interest in the Mount Taylor Ranger District of the Cibola National Forest and Grasslands (Cibola NF&NG) and pursuant to 36 CFR 218, we are asking for your comments on the Puerco Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project. The proposal includes thinning, mastication, riparian, prescribed fire, and range infrastructure improvements. The Puerco Project is a planning effort designed to restore forest resiliency and ecosystem function to ponderosa pine, mixed conifer, pinyon-juniper and grassland vegetation types across the western Zuni Mountains of the Cibola National Forest (NF).

There are also proposed treatments to rehabilitate up to 200 miles of unauthorized roads, restore approximately 19 springs, restore up to 250 acres of riparian areas including associated stream habitats for threatened, endangered, and sensitive aquatic species. To improve availability and distribution of water to benefit both range and wildlife species across the Puerco project, infrastructure improvements such as cleaning, constructing or reconstructing dirt tanks, reconstruct approximately 15 miles of fence, and 1 corral, installing 3 new cattle guards, re-drill 3 existing wells and establish 3 new wells, and installing or extending 2 pipelines.

The proposed analysis area is approximately 81,000 acres and the proposed treatments are shown in the following table.

Vegetation Cover Type	Mechanical Treatment with Prescribed Fire	Mechanical Treatment Only	Prescribed Fire Only
Dry Mixed Conifer	263	300	212
Ponderosa Pine	19,417	2,059	3,494
Ponderosa Pine-Gambel Oak	10,904	1,046	3,083
Pinyon-juniper Woodland	875	17,280	390
Ponderosa Pine/P-J Transition	10,209	1,875	1,319
Grassland/Shrubland	7,670	527	39
Riparian Meadow	21	0	1
Totals:	49,359	23,087	8,538

For location of proposed treatment areas refer to Map 1: *Proposed Analysis and Treatment Areas*.

In addition to the land managed by the Mount Taylor RD, there are numerous private in-holdings, NM State Trust Land, Tribal, and other federal lands adjacent to the project area, as



well as nearby small communities rated as moderate or high risk in the *2011 NM Communities at Risk Assessment Plan* (New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department [NMEMNRD] 2007) and would benefit from the fuels reduction treatments being proposed.

This project is located primarily in McKinley County with the southeastern portion located in Cibola County, south of Interstate 40, southeast of the city of Gallup, New Mexico, with the following legal description: The legal description of the project area includes all or portions of Township 12 North, Range 15 West: Sections 6, 12, 14, 16, 22, and 23; Township 13 North, Range 14 West: Sections 5-7, 18, and 31; Township 13 North, Range 15 West: Sections 1-28, and 34; Township 13 North, Range 16 West: Sections 1-24, 26-34, and 36; Township 13 North, Range 17 West: Sections 1-3, 10-15, 22-24, 26, 34, and 36; Township 14 North, Range 15 West: Sections 4-10, 13-15, and 17-35; Township 14 North, Range 16 West, Sections: 1-3 and 5-36.

BACKGROUND

This project was initiated in 2011, as part of the Zuni Mountain Priority Landscape set forth in the Forest Leadership Team (FLT) priorities as an extension to the Bluewater Landscape Restoration Project. The FLT, Mount Taylor Ranger District, New Mexico Game and Fish Department, the Zuni Mountains Collaborative group and Mount Taylor Landscape Team have recognized the need for landscape scale restoration and building mutually beneficial, cross jurisdictional working relationships.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose and need for the Puerco Landscape Restoration Project was determined by comparing the existing conditions in the project area to the desired conditions in the land and resource management plan (forest plan)¹ related to forest and ecosystem function and resiliency. In addition, relevant research, the best available science and information, and the landscape restoration criteria found in the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 (P.L. 111-11, Title IV Forest Landscape Restoration) were used to develop the purpose and need. These criteria for landscape-scale restoration address community, wildlife habitat, and forest protection while retaining as many large trees as possible.

The purpose of the Puerco Project is to reestablish and restore forest structure and pattern, forest health, and vegetation composition and diversity in forest ecosystems to conditions within the natural range of variability, thus moving the project area toward the desired conditions. The outcome of improving structure and function is increased ecosystem resiliency. Resiliency allows for the ability of an ecological system to absorb disturbances, such as fire, insects and disease, and climate change, while retaining the same basic structure and ways of functioning and the capacity to adapt to stress and change (FSM 2020.5). This project is needed to:

- Increase forest, shrubland and grassland resiliency, sustainability
- Reduce the risk of uncharacteristic fire effects
- Improve wildlife and aquatic species habitat
- Improve the condition and function of watersheds

¹ The Cibola NF&NG is in the midst of revising its Forest Plan, this project will apply the 1985 Cibola Forest Plan (as amended), and the Forest is expecting to have a final revised plan in 2020 after the signed Record of Decision. This project will incorporate the Revised Forest Plan guidance upon plan implementation.

- Improve the condition and function of riparian areas, wet meadows, streams, and springs
- Preserve cultural resources

For these reasons, there is a need to implement restorative treatments to achieve goals, objectives, and desired vegetation, soil, and riparian conditions as described in Cibola National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (1996).

ANALYSIS UNDER THE NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (NEPA)

The level of documentation and analysis for this project, an Environmental Assessment (EA), is based on the initial analysis and comments received from the public in response to the proposed action.

The Environmental Assessment (EA) is available online at:

<http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=50987>. If you need a hard copy of the EA or for additional information about this proposal, please contact Alvin Whitehair at 505-287-8833 or Shawn Martin at 505-346-3856. Thank you for your interest in the Mount Taylor Ranger District and Cibola NF&NG.

In accordance with 36 CFR 218, individuals or organizations wishing to be eligible to file an objection must provide the following information:

- 1) Your name and address.
- 2) Title of the Proposed Action.
- 3) Specific comments on the proposed action and/or EA, along with supporting reasons that the Responsible Official should consider in reaching a decision.
- 4) Your signature or other means of identification verification. For organizations, a signature or other means of identification verification must be provided for the individual authorized to represent your organization.

Comments must be postmarked or received within 30 days beginning the day after publication of this notice in the Albuquerque Journal. Oral or hand-delivered comments must be received within our normal business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Specific written comments must be submitted via mail, fax, or in person to: Mount Taylor District Ranger Alvin Whitehair, Attn: Puerco Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project, 1800 Lobo Canyon Road, Grants, NM 87010, 505-287-4924 (FAX). Comments may be mailed electronically in a common digital format to comments-southwestern-cibola-mount-taylor@fs.fed.us.

Only those who submit timely and specific written comments regarding the proposed project or activity during a public comment period established by the responsible official are eligible to file an objection §218.24(b)(6). For issues to be raised in objections, they must be based on previously submitted specific written comments regarding the proposed project or activity and attributed to the objector. The publication date of the legal notice in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the time to submit written comments on a proposed project or activity. The time period for the opportunity to comment on a proposed project or activity to be documented with an environmental assessment shall not be extended. It is the responsibility of all individuals and organizations to ensure that their comments are received in a timely manner.

The next step in the process will be to release the final EA and draft Decision Notice/Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for public review. At that time, we will offer a 45-day objection period. The new regulations allow anyone who submitted timely, specific written comments about the proposed project during any designated opportunity for public comment, to file an objection to the draft decision (36 CFR 218.5). Specific directions on how to file an objection will be provided along with the EA and objection period notification.

Objections will be subject to review by a "reviewing officer." Since Steve Hattenbach, the Cibola NF & NG Forest Supervisor, will be the responsible official for the Puerco Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project, the reviewing officer will be Regional Forester Cal Joyner. The objection process may include an opportunity for the objector to meet with the reviewing officer and the responsible official, with the objective of resolving the concerns expressed in the objection. As the responsible official, the Forest Supervisor cannot sign the final decision until the reviewing officer has responded in writing to all pending objections. The decision must be consistent with any instructions issued by the reviewing officer. There will be NO opportunity for additional administrative review or appeal of the final decision.=

Sincerely,



ALVIN WHITEHAIR
District Ranger

