

Carlsbad Current Argus.

Project to improve 90,000 acres of forest moves forward

Laura Rabon, September 10, 2020

Lincoln National Forest

Last week the Smokey Bear District Ranger signed a final Decision Notice that will allow habitat improvement to almost 20 percent of the Smokey Bear Ranger District or approximately 90,750 acres of forest. This is one of the largest projects to be developed by the Lincoln National Forest. The planning and environmental assessment took 1.5 years and focuses on the northern section of the Smokey Bear Ranger District near Carrizozo, White Oaks and Ancho, New Mexico.

"This is a really exciting project for the District because the project tiers to the collaborative watershed restoration study of the North Sacramento Mountains that was completed and signed in 2018," said District Ranger Jodie Canfield.

"The Smokey Bear North project is designed to help achieve the goals set forth in that strategy. Now that we have this signed decision, we can focus on getting work done on the land and not get bogged down in the planning phase."

The over abundance of Piñon and Juniper

Long standing residents of the area report a time when they would walk through the trees and have picnics in the meadows. Now many of those open spaces are being overgrown with piñon/juniper trees. Overtime the number of piñon/juniper trees per acre has increased. These dense tree forests stifle the growth of other important plants like grasses and wildflowers.

"This increase can result in numerous negative factors if left untreated, like higher occurrence of insect infestation and disease, and a decline in forage available to both wildlife and livestock," said Forest Management Specialist Jessie Willett. "Lastly, the risk for uncharacteristic, severe wildfire across the landscape has increased, which is obviously something we want to try to prevent."

Most of the piñon/juniper woodlands are found in regions subject to temperature extremes and limited moisture availability like the mountainous areas of southcentral New Mexico. Piñon/juniper woodlands generally occur at 4,500 to 7,500 feet in elevation, transitioning from grasslands or shrublands at lower elevations, and to ponderosa pine at higher elevations. Juniper can spread quickly, aided by animals like rabbits and birds which help spread their seeds. These hearty trees consume a lot of water, are prone to re-sprout even after being cut down, and they burn at hotter temperatures compared to other tree types.

Healthy forest, healthy habitat

Primary habitat restoration activities will focus on thinning the piñon/juniper while retaining a variety of tree ages (young, medium and old trees). Projects will pay special attention to retaining healthy old growth trees and creating a varied landscape with open spaces, edge habitat, and hiding cover. This helps to create conditions that increases grass and wildflower production, species diversity, tree health, and improves resilience to drought, insects, and disease.

Open spaces, edge habitat and hiding cover are sub-ecosystems that play a vital role in the larger ecosystem. Open spaces provide forage and food for wildlife, while hiding cover (aka clumps of vegetation) provide shelter and nesting grounds for a host of animals including turkey, elk, deer, migratory birds, lizards and frogs. Edge habitat is the interface between the forest and meadow and allows animals easy access to forage without being fully exposed to predators.

Forest Service staff plan to use a variety of tools including prescribed fire, mechanical thinning and hand thinning, among others, to improve the health of the forest. Thinning actions will be designed to achieve desired conditions that are unique to different habitat types. Accordingly, mixed conifer, ponderosa pine, piñon/juniper woodland, piñon/juniper grassland, shrubland, and grassland habitats will be treated differently to improve the health of that habitat type within an implementation unit. The decision allows for use of certain herbicides, painted on cut alligator juniper stumps, to suppress this re-sprouting response and prolong the effectiveness of the thinning treatment. However, herbicides will not be used in a buffer zone around the town White Oaks, NM after some members of the community expressed concern.

“There isn’t a one-size-fits-all approach. Each area will be carefully assessed to determine which tools should be used based on habitat type, slope, fuel loading, and anticipated effectiveness,” said Canfield.

In addition to thinning and prescribed fire, other activities to improve the forest will be conducted including:

Watershed restoration practices, such as addressing erosion (aka headcuts) in arroyos and improving habitat near streams.

Repairing existing roads and the reclamation of illegal roads and trails.

Range or wildlife improvements that help better distribute wildlife and livestock including construction of wildlife-friendly fences and water features.

The closure of Abandoned Mine Lands to protect the public, while still preserving the unique wildlife habitat, usually for bats.

Source: <https://www.currentargus.com/story/opinion/columnists/2020/09/10/project-improve-90-000-acres-forest-moves-forward/3463326001/>