# Proposed Action
# for the
# Rim Lakes Forest Health Project

## Black Mesa Ranger District
## Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests
## Coconino County, Arizona

## Background

An assessment was initiated for the Rim Lakes Ecosystem Management Area (EMA) in 2006 encompassing approximately 33,600 acres on the Black Mesa Ranger District, Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests. The analysis and treatment areas are located in the west and southern portion of the Black Mesa Ranger District in Coconino County. The general boundaries are: the 500KV powerline near the Dude Fire on the west, and along the Mogollon Rim to Forest Lakes on the east.

The EMA encompasses the Rim Lakes Recreation Area (RLRA). This area is a highly desirable recreation destination for the southern Arizona population; for climatic relief, inspiring vistas from the edge of the Mogollon Rim and water based recreation. The RLRA includes the most developed recreation facilities on the Black Mesa Ranger District. The northeastern boundary of the EMA abuts the community of Forest Lakes. A small subdivision, Rancho Allegre, is a private land inholding in the western portion of the EMA.

Current conditions within the EMA consist of high tree densities with an abundance of ladder fuels and high potential for stand replacing crown fire. The majority of the EMA is currently classified as Fire Regime Condition Class (FRCC) 3[1] indicating that the natural disturbances and historic processes have been altered and are at increased risk of unnaturally intense wildland fire behavior and insect epidemics. Approximately 800 acres of the EMA were burned, most of which was moderate or severely burned, in the 2002 Rodeo-Chediski Fire. The EMA supports the most diverse suite of wildlife habitat on the Black Mesa Ranger District. Wildlife habitat and threatened and endangered species and indicator species in the EMA are also at risk due to the unnatural conditions.

The desired future condition is to improve the health and diversity of the forested land by moving the majority of the area to FRCC 1. Returning the area to this historical range would lower the risk of losing key ecosystem components from wildfire. The current imbalanced vegetation condition is displayed by Table 1, which shows the existing Vegetative Structural Stage (VSS)[2] distribution within the ponderosa pine, ponderosa

[1] Fire Condition Classes are used to categorize and describe vegetation composition and structure conditions that currently exist within a fire regime group as it relates to historical ranges, to serve as a generalized wildfire risk rating.

[2] Vegetative Structural Stage (VSS) is a measurement of the stand structure indicated by height, diameter, crown layers, age and stems of trees, shrubs, herbaceous understory, snags and down woody debris.

pine/gambel oak and mixed conifer forest types and that which is desired for the long term sustainability of the ecosystem.

Table 1 – Existing and Desired Conditions for forested vegetation

| AGE CLASS | VSS | Description | EXISTING CONDITION | DESIRED CONDITION[3] |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0 - 20 | 1 | Grass/forb/shrub | 2% | 10% |
| 21 - 55 | 2 | Seedling/sapling | 2% | 10% |
| 56 - 100 | 3 | Young forest | 47% | 20% |
| 101 - 140 | 4 | Mid-aged forest | 42% | 20% |
| 141 - 180 | 5 | Mature forest | 6% | 20% |
| 181 + | 6 | Old forest | 1% | 20% |
| | TOTAL | | 100% | 100% |

The Rim Lakes Forest Health Project is proposed under the authorization of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA). This project qualifies under HFRA as the project objective is to reduce wildfire hazard to watershed, and threatened and endangered (T&E) species by treating hazardous fuels. The project area is adjacent to an at-risk community and adjacent to an evacuation route to an at risk community, The hazardous fuel reduction would provide long term benefits to T&E species and their habitat from catastrophic wildland fire. The project area includes old growth stands and the plan allows for vegetation treatments in old-growth stands.

## Purpose and Need for Action

Based upon the comparison of the existing and desired conditions for the project area there is a need to bring existing ecosystem conditions closer to desired conditions. The current dense nature of the vegetation contributes to an unacceptably high fire hazard. The primary purpose of the proposed vegetation treatments is to reduce hazardous forest fuels, both dead and live, and reduce severity of fires that may occur.

Other benefits include: protection of recreation facilities, protection and enhancement of northern goshawk and Mexican spotted owl habitat, improved riparian, aspen and gambel oak habitat, increased health and vigor of large trees and managed old growth stands and habitat, enhanced and increased numbers of small opening and grasses, herbaceous plants, and shrubs for wildlife habitat improvement, and increased fire fighter and public safety.

The Rim Lakes Forest Health Project is being proposed at this time in response to the need to address conditions on the ground and compliance with the goals and objectives of the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests Plan (Land Management Plan) (USDA Forest

[3] Apache Sitgreaves National Forests Plan as amended June 8, 2006.

Service, 1987 as amended 1996), the National Fire Plan[4], and the 10 year Comprehensive Strategy, Community Fire Plan[5]. The proposed activities and treatments would move the project area toward desired conditions as described in these plans, and as further defined by the interdisciplinary team.

## Proposed Action

The Black Mesa Ranger District, Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests is proposing vegetative treatments (see Appendix for maps of treatments) on approximately 33,600[6] acres of National Forest System Lands. Actions included in this proposal are:

- Thin 23,125 acres by removing trees from below larger healthier trees, this will include mechanical piling and burning and lopping and scattering.
- Enhance 550 acres of meadow and riparian by removing conifers, such as Ponderosa pine, where they have encroached into existing meadows and riparian areas to favor hardwood species.
- Designate 6900 acres for old growth management.
- Construct 4300 acres of fuelbreaks along several roads by reducing live and dead fuels to lessen the extreme fire behavior for fire management operations.
- Burn 32,550 acres as broadcast and maintenance burning as prescribed fire within a pre-determined area with pre-determined burning parameters.
- Maintain 280 miles of road that are used during treatments by blading or resurfacing with gravel, opening roads where needed and then returning to pre-treatment condition.

See Appendix A for maps showing boundaries of the project area and more exact locations of the proposed treatments.

This proposed action includes a non-significant, site-specific Forest Plan amendment for this project only, and would make the following changes to the Forest Plan: 1) some created openings from burning may exceed 4 acres, ranging up to 10 acres in size, and limited to less then 1% of the EMA, 2) even-aged management would be used to reduce dwarf mistletoe infection and fire hazard, resulting in lower canopy cover within VSS 4, 5, and 6 in the Rim Lakes Recreation Area (1025 Acres).

The environmental assessment is scheduled for completion with a decision document signed by September 2008 and will be prepared under the provisions of HFRA. There

[4] The National Fire Plan (NFP) (September 9, 2000) is the USDA response to a request by President Clinton, for Federal land management agencies to develop an interagency approach to respond to severe wild land fires, reduce impacts on rural communities, and ensure sufficient fire fighting capacity in the future. See the NFP internet site for more information: http://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/NFP/index.shtml

[5] A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment describes the 10 year Comprehensive Strategy (May 2002). See http://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/plan/documents/10-YearStrategyFinal_Dec2006.pdf

[6] Treatment areas may receive more than one type of treatment or receive multiple treatments.

will be an HFRA objection process. Implementation may begin immediately following the final decision.

## Decisions to be Made

The Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests' Forest Supervisor will decide whether to implement the proposed action as described above or chose another alternative. If an action alternative is selected it will include:

- The location, design, and scheduling of the proposed thinning; prescribed broadcast, maintenance and pile burning; lopping, or piling slash; and other activities or related actions;
- The estimated products or volumes, if any, made available from the project area at this time;
- Mitigation measures and monitoring requirements.

# APPENDIX A

MAPS