



File Code: 1950-1/5140

Date: Nov. 26, 2008

Dear Friends and Neighbors of the Coronado National Forest:

I am writing today to inform you about a vegetation management project proposed for implementation on the Douglas Ranger District in Cochise County, Arizona and Hidalgo County, New Mexico. The District proposes to apply mechanical thinning on approximately 26,000 acres of dense chaparral¹ in the Dragoon, Chiricahua, and Peloncillo Mountains. Areas that will be excluded from treatment include the Pole Bridge Research Natural Area, the 87,700-acre Chiricahua Wilderness, and any other area where sensitive natural or cultural resources are present. The purpose of the project is to improve wildlife habitat and reduce the likelihood of catastrophic wildfire by sculpting oak savannahs from dense stands of chaparral.

Background

Over the past decade, wildfires in the southwest have been more catastrophic than ever before. This increase in intensity and size is due to a number of variables, but most likely the biggest culprit is the over-abundance of woody biomass that has accumulated due to wildfire suppression efforts in the past. This exclusion of fire, along with historic over-grazing and fuelwood cutting, have allowed shrubby species to build up and dominate many areas that once were oak-savannah vegetation types, greatly increasing the fire danger. Due to this increase in shrubs, wildlife habitat has degraded to the point that many areas are unable to support populations of deer, turkeys, and other animals that rely on eyesight as protection from predators. The ability to flee has been reduced, and trails that once existed and were used by the wildlife are nearly absent. Also, the herbaceous plants that these animals and others (such as Mearns' quail) rely on for a food source are absent.

With this increase in shrubs, the canopy cover also increases. This has led to a decrease in herbaceous cover, an increase in bare soil and erosion and a decrease in ecological state. When catastrophic fires occur in such areas of chaparral vegetation, the resulting heat can cause the soil to become hydrophobic, which when coupled with very little or no ground cover, can lead to severe erosion and downstream flooding.

Chaparral is not only undesirable from the perspective of traditional resource management. The Douglas Ranger District is in close proximity to the international border with Mexico, and illegal immigration and smuggling are ongoing issues. The effectiveness of both Border Patrol and Forest Service law enforcement officers is limited by dense brush stands. Also, grazing permittees and ranchers in the vicinity have difficulty herding and managing livestock in these areas.

¹ A typical chaparral plant community consists of densely-growing evergreen brush and other drought-resistant shrubs. It often grows so densely that it is all but impenetrable to large animals and humans. This, and its generally arid condition, makes it notoriously prone to wildfires.



Areas identified for treatment are in an undesirable ecological state (dense chaparral), which requires a disturbance to transition to a more desirable state (oak-savannah grassland). Applying mechanical vegetation treatments in the area will improve Forest and watershed health, reduce the likelihood of catastrophic wildfire, allow fire to play a more natural role in the ecosystem, restore grasslands, improve wildlife habitat and grazing conditions, and allow for better recreational access.

Proposed Action

The Douglas Ranger District is proposing to improve wildlife habitat by mechanically thinning manzanita and other small brush. Thinning would also redistribute and reduce fuel loads, increase defensible space, increase litter and soil cover, decrease canopy cover, increase herbaceous productivity and produce a more oak-savannah-like vegetation community. While manzanita is the target species, small diameter (less than 8-inch diameter at breast height [DBH]) oaks and junipers may also be removed. Mature trees would be avoided to sculpt an oak-savannah landscape from current dense stands of brush. Mastication of manzanita would occur in selected locations across the Douglas Ranger District (see attached maps), and total area treated would be approximately 26,000 acres (Chiricahua Mountains, 18,500 acres; Peloncillo Mountains, 5,500 acres; and Dragoon Mountains, 2,000 acres).

Treatment would be accomplished using a mechanical mastication attachment (similar to a Fecon Bull-hog) attached to a skid-steer loader or other small machine. The areas to be treated would be confined to areas of favorable slope (less than 20 percent), and excessively rocky terrain would be excluded. Because this machine is selective, mature trees can be avoided (unlike chaining). The equipment is fairly lightweight, minimizing soil disturbance and compaction compared to other methods (root plowing, crushing, etc.). No seeding of native grass species after this type of treatment should be needed, as there is enough seed in the soil to propagate the treated areas.

Mechanically thinned areas that have reasonable access may be made available for public fuelwood harvesting, under District permits, to help remove the woody material off site. No new road construction would be required for access to treatment locations. Mechanical thinning could occur year-round, and fuelwood gathering would be allowed when sufficient material is available. Public access to fuelwood would be on existing roads only.

Preliminary Identification of Issues and Alternatives

At present, two alternatives for this project have been defined: (1) implement the proposed action as described; and (2) take no action. The following are potential issues that will be addressed during the NEPA review.

Soils, Water Resources, and Air Quality

Ground disturbance associated with the proposed action may result in short-term effects on soil conditions and water resources. The NEPA review would focus on the sources of potential impacts to soils, water resources, and air quality and methods for minimizing impacts.

Plants and Animals

Long-term effects on the ecosystem are expected to be positive because the project is a broad-scale effort to restore the ecosystem to a more natural state. During the NEPA review, the short-term effects of mechanical vegetation treatments would be evaluated. Emphasis would be placed

on avoidance and/or mitigation of impacts to species which are federally listed under the Endangered Species Act as threatened and endangered as well as species proposed for Federal listing; and designated critical habitat. Effects on state-listed wildlife species of concern and Forest Service management indicator and sensitive species would also be addressed. The NEPA review would include an evaluation of issues using narratives and tables that describe the effects of each alternative. The evaluation would be derived from various wildlife specialists' reports, a Biological Assessment and Evaluation, and consultation with Federal and State wildlife resource agencies, as required.

Heritage Resources

During our NEPA review, consultation with tribes having traditional ties to the mountains and with others who also have historic associations will be ongoing in order to define potential impacts, if any, and develop mitigation, if necessary.

Mechanical treatment has the potential to adversely affect archaeological and historic sites that contain pressure-sensitive resources. Pre-project implementation surveys of the project area for such resources will be conducted to afford them protection in areas where mechanical treatments are planned.

Scenic Resources and Recreation

The Douglas Ranger District is valued by visitors for its scenic beauty, wide variety of plant and animal species and wide range of recreational opportunities.

Vegetation treatments could result in short-term adverse impacts to scenic quality and recreational use. However, if this project is not undertaken, the probability of the occurrence of catastrophic wildfire would continue to be high, along with the associated potential for significant deterioration of the scenic qualities and recreational settings of the area. The proposed action has the potential to benefit both scenic and recreational resources in the long term by promoting a healthier ecosystem, and by converting dense brush stands into more aesthetically pleasing oak savannahs.

The NEPA review will describe the scenic quality and recreational resources of the project area and identify the potential for effects to both. Mitigation measures will be developed, as necessary, to minimize impacts.

Opportunity to Comment

The Forest Service values public input as part of its NEPA review process. You are encouraged to submit comments regarding the scope of the NEPA analysis of this project, including those related to alternatives and issues to be addressed². To receive full consideration and to best assist the Forest Service in this review, your comments should be submitted within 30 days from your receipt of this notice, or before January 2, 2009.

² Comments and personally identifying information associated with them, such as names and addresses, become part of the administrative record of this NEPA review. As such, they may be made available to a third-party upon request under the authority of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). If you do not wish for your personal information to be released in response to a FOIA request, you may choose not to include it with your comments. Alternatively, you may request an exemption from FOIA with your comment submittal. Should you choose the latter, you would be informed by the Forest Service as to whether or not your request qualifies for an exemption. If it does not, you would be afforded the opportunity to resubmit your comments without personal information or to withhold them altogether.

Written comments may be sent by U.S. mail to William Edwards, District Ranger, Douglas Ranger District, 1192 W. Saddleview Rd, Douglas, AZ 85607; by facsimile to "ATTN: Douglas Ranger District Habitat Improvement" at (520) 364-6667; and by electronic mail (email) to comments-southwestern-coronado@fs.fed.us with "Douglas Ranger District Habitat Improvement " in the subject line.

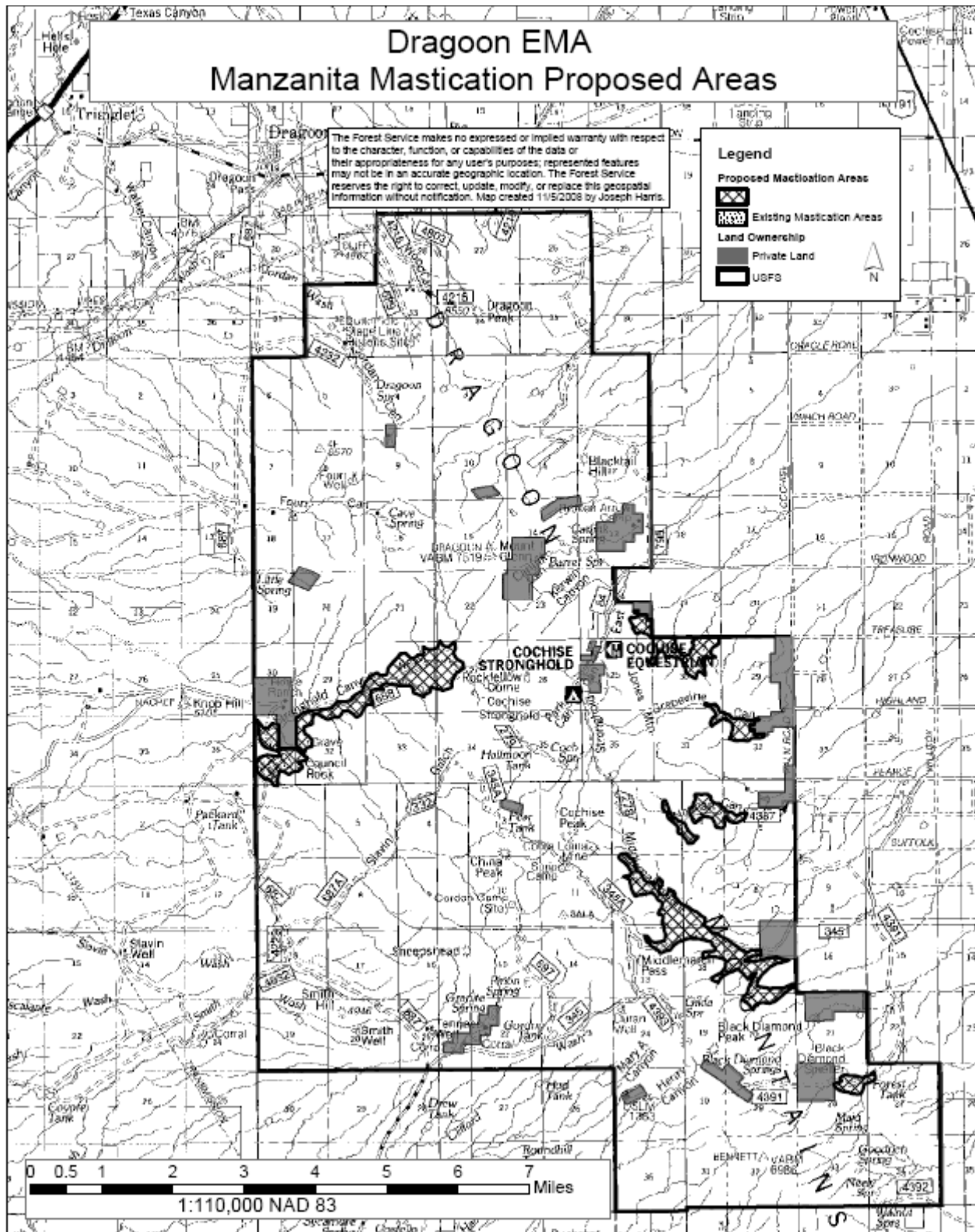
To provide telephone or in-person comments and for further information on the project, please contact Mr. Joseph Harris, District Range and Watershed Staff at (520) 364-6800.

Thank you for your interest and participation in the activities of the Douglas Ranger District.

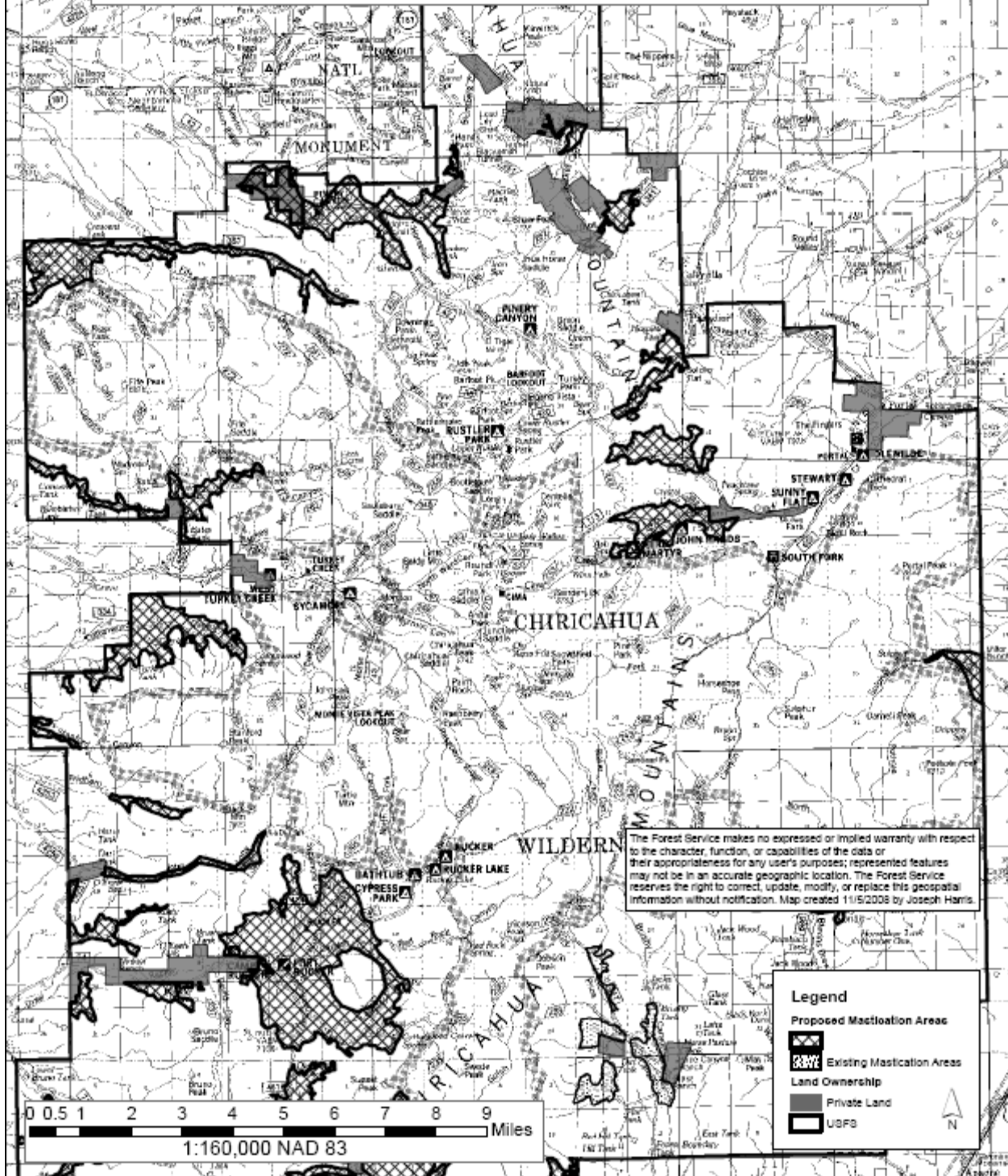
Sincerely,

s/s William A. Edwards
WILLIAM A EDWARDS
District Ranger

Enclosures: Maps of Project Area



Northern Chiricahua EMA Manzanita Mastication Proposed Areas

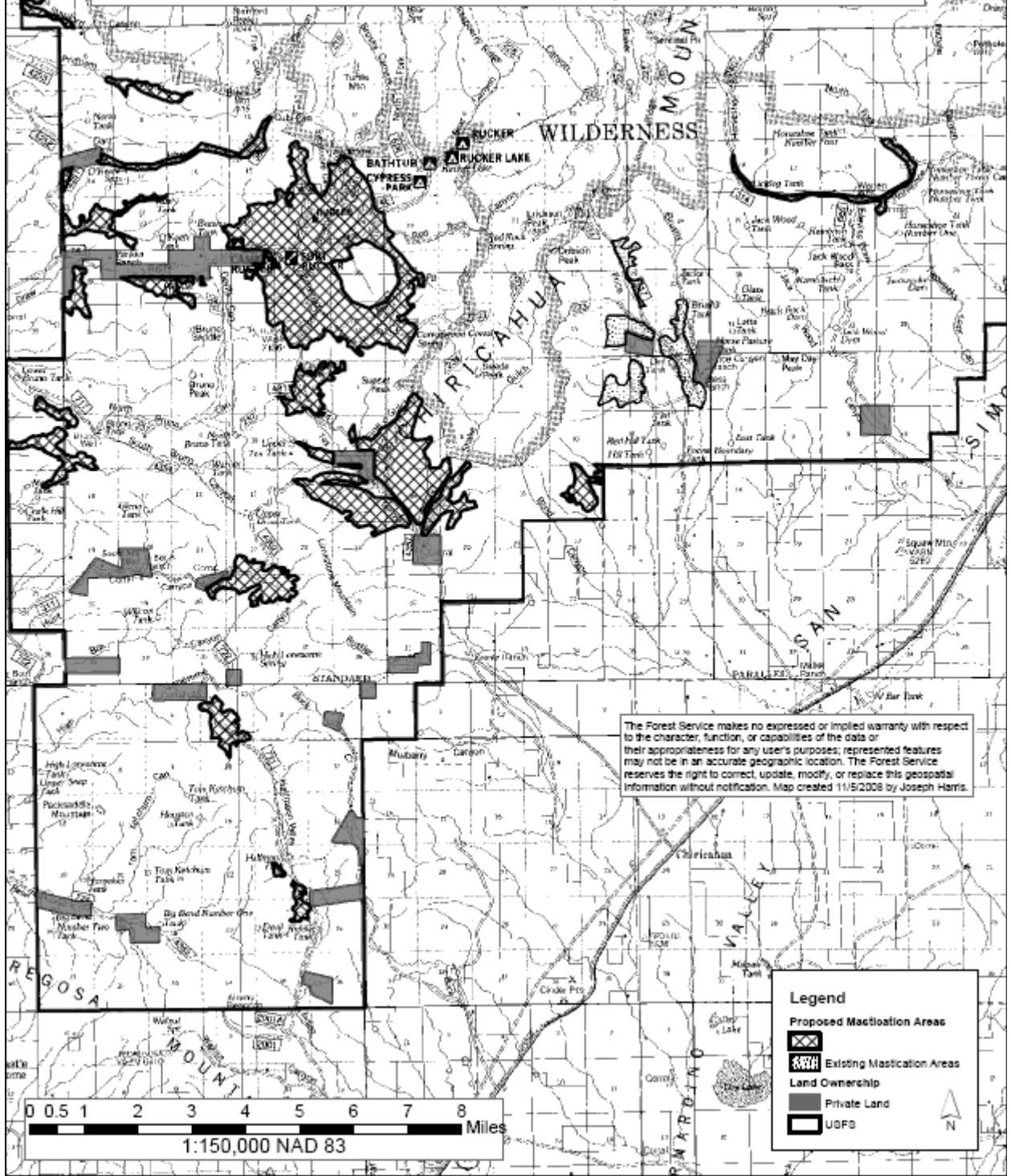


The Forest Service makes no expressed or implied warranty with respect to the character, function, or capabilities of the data or their appropriateness for any user's purposes; represented features may not be in an accurate geographic location. The Forest Service reserves the right to correct, update, modify, or replace this geospatial information without notification. Map created 11/5/2008 by Joseph Harris.

Legend

-  Proposed Mastication Areas
-  Existing Mastication Areas
- Land Ownership**
-  Private Land
-  USFS

Southern Chiricahua EMA Manzanita Mastication Proposed Areas



Peloncillo EMA Manzanita Mastication Proposed Areas

The Forest Service makes no expressed or implied warranty with respect to the character, function, or capabilities of the data or their appropriateness for any user's purposes; represented features may not be in an accurate geographic location. The Forest Service reserves the right to correct, update, modify, or replace this geospatial information without notification. Map created 11/5/2008 by Joseph Harris.

Legend

-  Proposed Mastication Areas
-  Existing Mastication Areas
- Land Ownership**
-  Private Land
-  USFS

