

Decision Memo

Ida Grassland Maintenance Project

Kaibab National Forest, Williams Ranger District
Coconino County, Arizona

Background

Grasslands on the Williams District provide habitat for various wildlife species such as pronghorn antelope, Gunnison's prairie dog, badger, spotted ground squirrel, northern harrier, barn owl, and vesper sparrow. Many of the grassland areas on the Williams District have declined during the past century due to increased density of conifers (primarily junipers and pines). Encroachment of junipers and pines into historic grasslands is at least partially due to reduced wildfire frequency caused by livestock grazing and fire suppression.

The purpose and need for this proposed action is to restore the structure and composition of the Ida grassland area to conditions more similar to historic structure and composition. Maintenance and restoration of grassland habitat would improve habitat quality for pronghorn antelope and other wildlife and plant species associated with grasslands.

The Ida Grassland Maintenance Project area is located on the north end of the Williams Ranger District, north and south of Highway 180 about 13 miles southeast of Valle, Arizona (see map). The project area is 12,640 acres and encompasses Ebert Mountain, Butcherknife Hill, Red Hill, Hobble Mountains, and Potato Hill. The project area is located in Arizona Game and Fish Department Game Management Unit 7W. The legal description is T25N, R4E, Sections 1-3, 10-15, 20-28, 34-36; T24N, R4E, Sections 1-4, 9-12, 15-16, 21-22, 27-28.

Decision

I have decided to implement the Ida Grassland Maintenance Project as described below and in the Proposed Action posted on the Kaibab National Forest website on July 24, 2008 (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/kai/projects/>).

The project consists of thinning small-diameter (less than 12 inches diameter at breast height) junipers and pines that are encroaching into existing grasslands using an agra-axe and chainsaws. An agra-axe is a skid steer loader with hydraulic clipping shears mounted on front. Agra axes used for this project will have either rubber tires or rubber tracks. Throughout most of the project area, cut trees will be left in place on the ground. Cut juniper and pine trees resulting from agra-axe treatments provide favorable microsites for the growth of desirable herbaceous plants because the dead trees provide shade which helps to retain soil moisture, and the dead trees help protect plants growing beneath them from grazing by cattle and elk. Cut trees will be available to be collected with a personal fuelwood permit according to Kaibab National Forest travel and fuelwood collection

regulations and policy. Because of visual concerns, activity slash will be pulled back at least 100 feet from Highway 180 and County Road 144. Any concentrations of slash within 100-500 feet of these roads not removed by fuelwood harvesting within 3 years after treatment will be either driven over and crushed by agra-axes or piled and burned. No roads will be created, reopened, or modified for this project.

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or an Environmental Assessment (EA) because the proposed action is one of the categories established by the Secretary of Agriculture at 7 CFR part 1b.3, and there are no extraordinary circumstances. The proposed action falls within category 6 (*Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction*), which is one of the categories for which a project file or case file and Decision Memo are required (FSH 1909.15, 31.2(6)).

A team of natural resource specialists from the Kaibab National Forest has analyzed the effects of this project. No significant effects (individual or cumulative effects) on the human environment were identified during this environmental effects analysis. I considered the following resource conditions in concluding that there were no extraordinary circumstances associated with this project.

(1) Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species;

The wildlife biologist for the South Zone of the Kaibab NF analyzed effects to animal species listed under the Endangered Species Act and identified for Coconino County by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (includes species classified as proposed or candidate and species for which a conservation agreement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been completed). The wildlife biologist also analyzed effects to Forest Service Sensitive animal species, Kaibab National Forest Management Indicator Species, and migratory birds. These effects analyses are documented in the *Wildlife Report and Biological Evaluation*, which is contained in the project record. Effects to plant species listed under the Endangered Species Act and as Sensitive by the Forest Service were analyzed in the *Biological Assessment and Evaluation: Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive Plants*, which also is located in the project record.

No significant effects to any animal or plant species were identified in these effects analyses. *No Effect* determinations were made for all animal and plant species listed under the Endangered Species Act, and determinations for Forest Service Sensitive animal and plant species were either *No Impact* or *May Impact Individuals or Habitat, but Will Not Likely Contribute to a Trend Towards Federal Listing or Loss of Viability to the Population or Species*.

(2) Flood Plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds;

There are no flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds within the project area. The effects of the Ida project on soils, vegetation, water quality, and noxious weeds were

analyzed in the watershed specialist report, which is located in the project record. No adverse effects of the project on soil and watershed condition were identified in this analysis.

(3) Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas;

There are no designated wilderness areas, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas within the Ida project area.

(4) Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas;

There are no inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas in the project area.

(5) Research natural areas;

There are no research natural areas in the project area.

(6) American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites;

The Kaibab National Forest sent a consultation letter to Indian tribes in northern Arizona describing the Ida Grassland Maintenance Project on May 27, 2008. No concerns, questions, or comments about the project were received by the Forest.

(7) Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas.

Extensive heritage surveys were conducted throughout the project area during the summer of 2008. The archaeologist for the South Zone of the Kaibab National Forest has concluded that there would be no adverse effects to cultural resources as a result of the Ida Grassland Maintenance Project.

Public Involvement and Scoping

This project was first listed in the Kaibab National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) in April 2008 (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/kai/projects/>). On July 24, 2008 a cover letter and detailed description of the proposed action were mailed to various persons and organizations from a Williams Ranger District NEPA mailing list. The cover letter and description of the proposed action also were posted to the Kaibab National Forest website on July 24, 2008. A legal notice of the proposed action and opportunity to comment was published in *The Arizona Daily Sun* on July 28, 2008.

On May 27, 2008 the Kaibab National Forest Supervisor initiated government to government consultation for the Ida Grassland Maintenance Project by sending a consultation letter and an updated copy of the SOPA to the Havasupai Tribe, the Hopi Tribe, the Hualapai Tribe, the Kaibab Band of Paiute Indians, the Navajo Nation, the Yavapai-Prescott Indian Tribe and the Pueblo of Zuni. On May 27, 2008 the Forest initiated public scoping of tribal communities by sending a copy of the letter and SOPA to the Bodaway/Gap, Cameron, Coalmine, Coppermine, Lechee, Leupp and To'Nanees'Dizi Chapters of the Western Navajo Agency. The consultation letter described the proposed project activities and stated that any cultural resources will be avoided by ground disturbing activities. No concerns, questions, or comments about the project were received by the Forest.

We received a total of five comments from the public on the Ida Grassland Maintenance Project, including a comment letter from the Arizona Antelope Foundation. Each of the five comments was completely supportive. Each indicated that the project would improve habitat for pronghorn antelope, and two of the comment letters indicated that the project also would result in increased forage production which would benefit additional wildlife species.

Findings Required by Other Laws

This decision is consistent with the 1987 Kaibab National Forest Land Management Plan (as amended), as required by the National Forest Management Act. The project is consistent with Forest Plan standards and guidelines, including those for Ecosystem Management Area 3, in which the project area is located (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/kai/plan-revision/forestplan.shtml>). The Scenery Integrity Objective of the project area is currently Level 2 (High) along the Highway 180 and County Road 144 road corridors and Level 3 (Moderate) elsewhere in the project area. The Ida project would result in a temporary drop in Scenery Integrity Objective from Level 2 to Level 3 along the Highway 180 and County Road 144 corridors, but after 3 years a Level 2 designation would be restored because any concentrations of activity slash left remaining would be driven over and crushed by agra-axes or piled and burned.

This decision is consistent with the Endangered Species Act and its implementing regulations (see Resource Condition [1] above). The decision also is in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, which requires federal agencies to consider the effects of a project on any district, site, building, structure, or object that is included in, or eligible for inclusion, in the National Register (see Resource Condition [7] above).

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is not subject to a higher level of administrative review or appeal because only supportive comments have been received on the project (36 CFR 215.12(e)(1)).

Implementation

This project will be implemented on or after October 6, 2008.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Jeff Waters at the Williams Ranger District, 928-635-5627.

/s/Martie Schramm

Martie Schramm

District Ranger, Williams Ranger District

September 24, 2008

Date

