

Proposed Action - Ida Grassland Maintenance Project

Kaibab National Forest, Williams Ranger District
July 2008

Introduction

The Ida Grassland Maintenance Project is proposed for an area on the north end of the Williams Ranger District, north and south of Highway 180 about 13 miles southeast of Valle, Arizona (see attached map). This area encompasses Ebert Mountain, Butcherknife Hill, Red Hill, Hobble Mountains, and Potato Hill and is located in Arizona Game and Fish Department Game Management Unit 7W. Under the proposed action, small-diameter junipers and pines that are encroaching into existing grasslands would be thinned using an agra-axe (skid steer loader with hydraulic clipping shears mounted on front).

Grasslands on the Williams District provide habitat for various wildlife species such as pronghorn antelope, Gunnison's prairie dog, badger, 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.

Kaibab National Forest resource specialists used various sources of information including historic vegetation maps, soils data, and aerial photos to identify historic grasslands on the South Zone (Williams and Tusayan Ranger Districts) of the Kaibab National Forest (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/kai/projects/plans.shtml>). One of the areas of historic grasslands identified and determined to be a priority area for grassland maintenance treatment was the Ida grassland area. This area was considered a priority area for vegetation treatment by Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD) and Kaibab National Forest personnel because of its importance for pronghorn antelope.

The Williams and Tusayan Districts of the Kaibab National Forest have worked closely with AGFD to implement several similar agra-axe projects during the past 10 years. These past projects have been considered successful by AGFD and Kaibab National Forest personnel in improving habitat for pronghorn and other grassland-associated wildlife species and reducing the rate of loss of grassland habitat.

Desired and Existing Conditions

Desired conditions include a distribution of grassland habitats across the landscape reflective of the pre-settlement distribution of grasslands. Evidence indicates, however, that existing conditions are characterized by a reduced total area and distribution of grasslands on the Williams District of the Kaibab National Forest as a result of increased density of junipers and pines during the past century.

Purpose and Need

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.

Proposed Action

To help restore the historic structure and composition of the Ida grassland area, the Williams Ranger District proposes to thin young junipers and pines growing within existing grassland habitat (see attached pictures). Proposed treatment areas cover a total area of about 12,640 acres (see attached map). Agra-axes would be used to thin small-diameter (less than 12 inches diameter at breast height [dbh]) junipers and pines within these areas. Most of the trees that would be cut are junipers, although some small-diameter pinyon pines also would be cut. Most of the junipers are oneseed juniper (*Juniperus monosperma*), although alligator juniper (*Juniperus deppeana*) and Utah juniper (*Juniperus osteosperma*) also occur in the project area. An agra-axe is a skid steer loader mounted with hydraulic clipping shears on front (see attached pictures). Agra-axes would have either rubber tires or rubber tracks.

Cut trees would 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 located near roads would be available to be collected with a personal fuelwood permit according to Kaibab National Forest travel and fuelwood collection regulations and policy.

All conifer thinning under the proposed action would be noncommercial treatments. Thinning level would depend on tree density. In grassland areas where conifers are scattered and not dense, nearly all conifers less than 12 inches dbh would be cut. In areas where conifer density is greater, fewer trees would be cut (e.g., 25-75% of small-diameter conifers may be cut in denser areas). Thinning with the agra-axe would primarily be conducted in areas where conifer density is relatively low to avoid creating excessive slash. Excessive slash would add an undesirable amount of fuels and may create sufficient visual obstructions for pronghorn antelope to reduce the effectiveness of the treatment in improving pronghorn habitat.

The proposed action also authorizes the use of chainsaw hand-crews in addition to the agra-axe. A chainsaw hand-crew may be used in combination with the agra-axe to thin conifers in certain areas where conifer density is relatively high. The proposed action also authorizes hand-piling and burning of slash in any areas where slash is considered excessive, but there would be few of these areas because areas where conifer density is high would generally be avoided.

One area where a chainsaw hand-crew and piling and burning of excess slash would occur is a strip along the east side of County Road 144, just east of Ebert Mountain (identified as "connector treatment area" on attached map). This area has a relatively high density of junipers and pinyon pines but is included in the Proposed Action because it would serve to connect treatment areas to the north and south of Highway 180, which could be beneficial in facilitating movement of pronghorn antelope. Slash would be hand-piled following treatment, and excess slash not removed by personal fuelwood collection would be pile burned. This connector treatment area would be about 75-125 feet wide and approximately 15 acres.

The proposed action also authorizes the same kind of treatments (thinning of small-diameter conifers by agra-axe and/or chainsaws and pile-burning of excess slash) within the project area boundaries as follow-up treatments to maintain the structure and composition of the grassland areas.

Summary of Proposed Action

What: Thinning of small-diameter (<12 inches dbh) junipers and pines from a total area of approximately 12,640 acres using an agra-axe. In a few areas where conifer density is greater, a chainsaw hand-crew may be used to supplement thinning by agra-axe. Slash would be left in place on the ground except for a few areas where excess slash would be hand-piled and burned.

Why: To maintain and restore the structure and composition of existing grasslands to improve habitat quality for pronghorn antelope and other grassland-associated wildlife species. Evidence indicates that grasslands have been lost on the Williams District of the Kaibab National Forest during the past century as a result of increased density of junipers and pines in historic grasslands.

Where: An area on the north part of the Williams District of the Kaibab National Forest about 13 miles southeast of Valle, Arizona off of Highway 180 (see attached map).

When: Project implementation is expected to begin by fall of 2008. Project completion would depend on availability of funding and other factors, but the project is expected to be completed within 5 years.

Other Considerations

Kaibab Forest Plan Consistency: The Proposed Action responds to goals and objectives outlined in the 1987 Kaibab Forest Plan (Forest Plan) and all subsequent amendments (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/kai/plan-revision/forestplan.shtml>). The Proposed Action would be consistent with all applicable management direction from the Forest Plan. Most of the proposed project area is located in Ecosystem Management Area (EMA) 3, with a small portion on the southern end of the project area located in EMA 2. Forest Plan management direction for EMA 3 can be found on pages 53 to 54 of the Forest Plan. Management direction for EMA 2 can be found on pages 38 to 48 of the Forest Plan. Regionally consistent standards and guidelines (pages 22 to 34 of the Forest Plan) apply to EMA 2 but not EMA 3.

Heritage Resources: No areas would be treated until heritage clearance has been approved in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. 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. No concerns, questions, or comments about the project were received by the Forest.

Soil and Watershed Resources: No roads would be created or improved under the proposed action. There are no perennial natural water bodies within the proposed project area, only ephemeral stream channels and man-made water developments (earthen-dam stock tanks and trick tanks). Agra-axes would only be used when soils are dry to minimize soil impacts. Potential effects of the proposed action on soil and watershed resources would be evaluated and documented in a soil and watershed resources report prior to a final decision. All applicable Best Management Practices from the *Soil and Water Conservation Practices Handbook* (Forest Service Handbook [FSH] 2509.22) would be followed.

Rare Plants and Noxious Weeds: Potential effects of the proposed action on rare plants (plants listed under the Endangered Species Act and Forest Service Sensitive plants) would be evaluated and documented in a plant biological evaluation prior to a final decision. Applicable direction in the *Final Environmental Impact Statement for Integrated Treatment of Noxious or Invasive Weeds* (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/kai/management/efoia/documents/ea.shtml>) would be followed to minimize the risk of new weed infestations.

Wildlife Resources: The primary objective of the proposed action is to improve habitat for grassland-associated wildlife species. Potential effects of the proposed action on wildlife species listed under the Endangered Species Act, wildlife species classified as Sensitive by the Forest Service, Management Indicator Species, and migratory birds would be evaluated and documented in a wildlife report and biological evaluation prior to a final decision.

Visual Resources: Treatments would be consistent with applicable scenery management objectives from the Kaibab Forest Plan. Scenery management objectives for most of the project area allow for modification of the characteristic landscape, although visually sensitive roadside zones occur along Highway 180.

Range Resources: The proposed project area overlaps four livestock allotments: Smoot Lake Allotment (cattle), Dog Knobs Allotment (cattle), Moritz Lake Allotment (cattle), and Squaw Mountain Allotment (sheep). The proposed action would be consistent with management direction for range resources found in the Forest Plan.

Decision to be Made and Timing of Decision

The District Ranger for the Williams Ranger District of the Kaibab National Forest is the Responsible Official for this project. Unless extraordinary circumstances are identified, the Responsible Official anticipates excluding this project from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) under 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*) of FSH 1909.15, 31.2 *Categories of Actions for Which a Project or Case File and Decision Memo Are Required*.

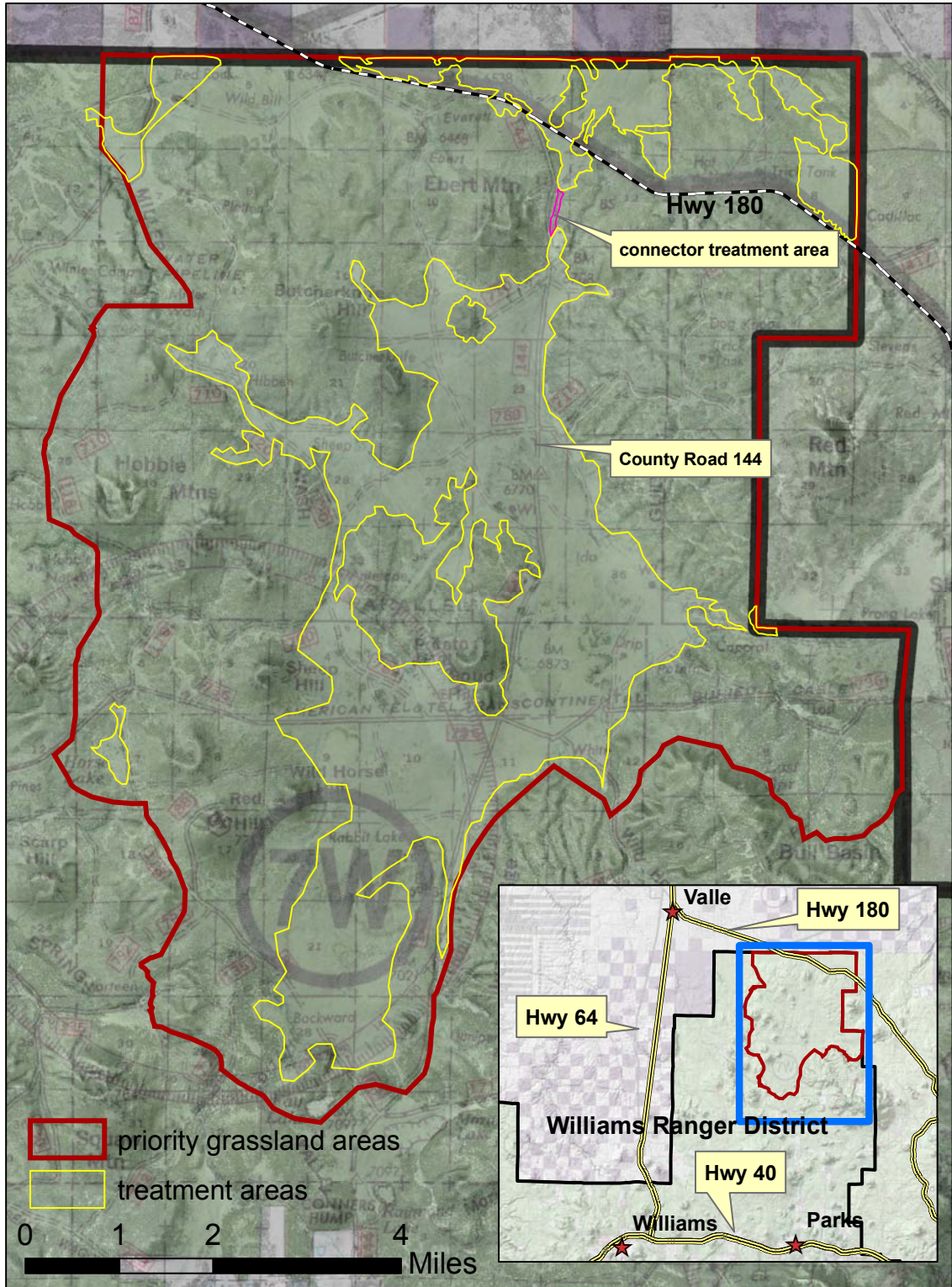
Opportunity to Comment

Comments should be submitted to Linda Martin, NEPA Coordinator, Williams Ranger District, 742 S Clover Road, Williams, AZ 86046; (928) 635-5614; or by fax at (928) 635-5680. Comments also may be submitted by email in Word (.doc), rich text format (.rtf), and hypertext markup language (.html) to: comments-southwestern-kaibab-williams@fs.fed.us. If you email your comments, please type "Ida Grassland Maintenance Project" in the subject line. Comments also may be hand delivered weekdays between 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. at the above stated address in Williams.

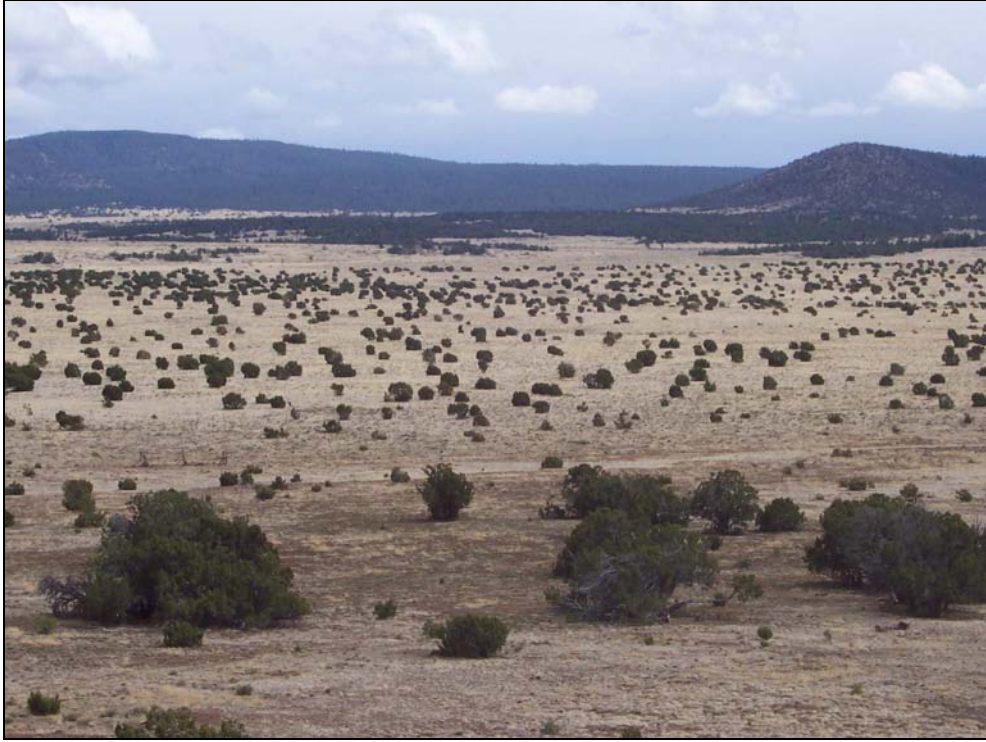
Contact Person

If you have questions or would like additional information on this proposal, contact Jeff Waters, Wildlife Biologist for the Williams and Tusayan Ranger Districts of the Kaibab National Forest at (928) 635-5627, FAX (928) 635-5680, or by email jwaters@fs.fed.us.

Project Area Map



Examples of proposed treatment area



Agra-axe - skid steer loader with rubber tracks



Agra-axe clipping oneseed juniper

