

Decision Memo

Smith Mesa Habitat Improvement Project

USDA Forest Service
Chino Valley Ranger District, Prescott National Forest
Yavapai County, Arizona

Background

The Smith Mesa Habitat Improvement Project, located within T16N, R5W, Sections 18,19,30,31; T16N, R6W, Sections 25,26,35,36; and T15N, R6W, Section 1, would seek to treat approximately 640 total acres in pinyon/juniper woodland in Unit 17B. Although previously treated in the early 1980s, much of this habitat is converting to a dense juniper woodland community that is crowding out the understory, which includes numerous desirable forage species. The proposed project is to remove invading juniper with the use of an Arizona Game and Fish Department (Department) contracted hand-cutting crew. Pretreatment efforts would include mapping the contours of the treatment inside the project area (dictated by the presence of invading juniper or increasing canopy cover in the presence of valuable forage species). Slash would be dropped in place to provide microclimates to facilitate reestablishment of forage species. The proposed project would take place on the Smith Canyon Allotment of the Prescott National Forest (PNF) in the central portion of Unit 17B on Smith Mesa.

Though pinyon/juniper woodlands are considered a climax community in much of the area, there is an increasing canopy cover leading to a decrease in under-story diversity and forage value. In some cases, juniper invasion is occurring in existing interior chaparral and grassland communities. While climax adapted species suffer no shortage of pinyon/juniper woodland habitats, many big game species requiring the diversity supplied by disturbance (retrogression) are facing a decrease in habitat quality and diversity.

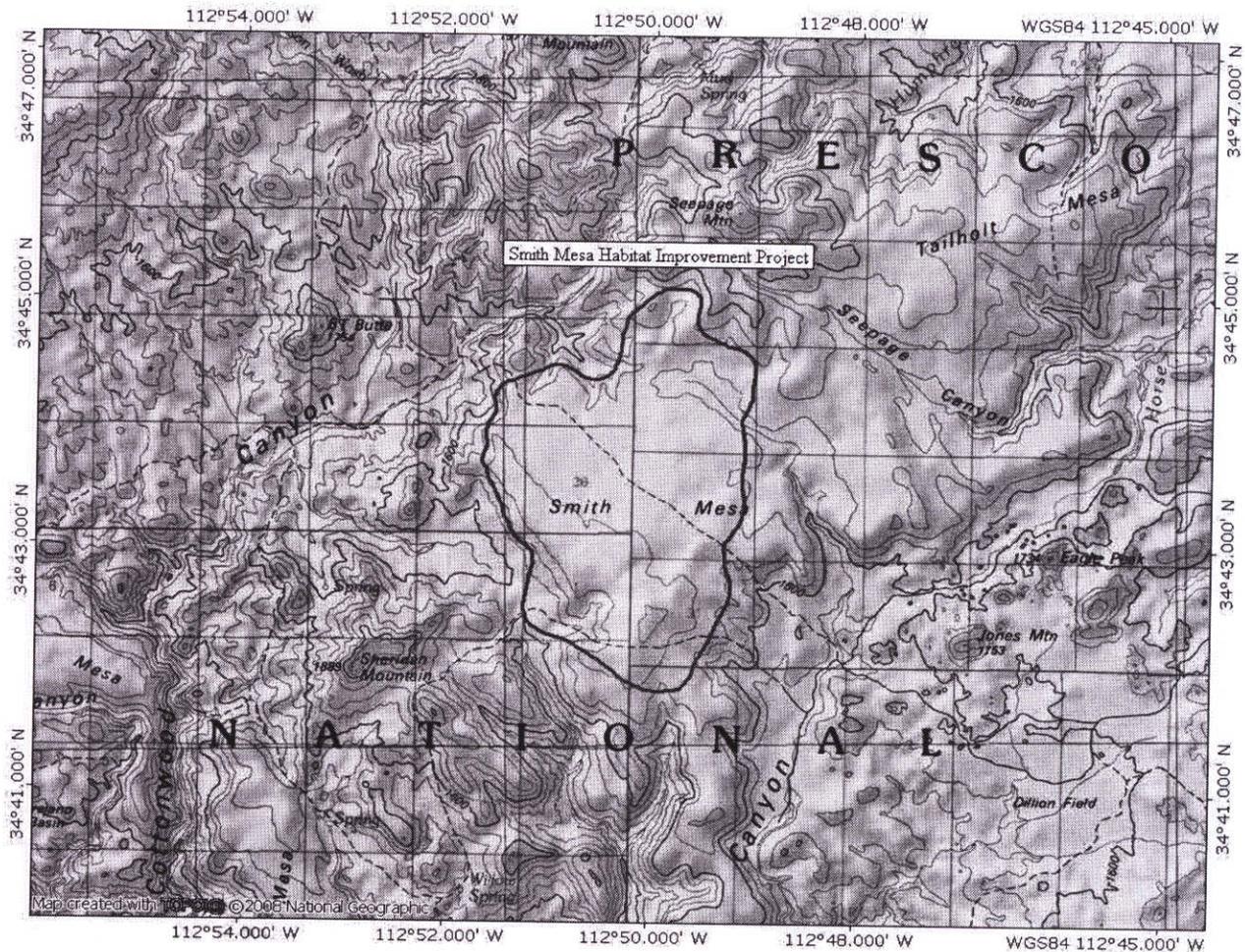
Decision

I have decided to implement The Smith Mesa Habitat Improvement Project consistent with the following silvicultural treatments: Across all treatment areas, retain an even mixture of small, medium, and large trees.

1. Grasslands: retain 1-3 junipers/acre, comprised of a mix of tree sizes, with preference to healthy, tree-form junipers.
2. Slash will be scattered to avoid deep layering of branches.

Focus tree retention on leaving the healthiest trees with higher crown ratios rather than simply by spacing. Do not implement any treatment in a 300-foot buffer along creeks.

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment because it is consistent with 36 CFR 220.6(e)(6).



The categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no potential effects on extraordinary circumstances which may significantly affect the environment. I considered potential for significant effects on any threatened, endangered, or sensitive species that may occur in the project area; potential for significant effects on floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds; Congressionally designated areas; inventoried roadless areas; research natural areas, American Indian religious or cultural sites; and archeological or historic properties or areas.

Effects on any threatened, endangered, or sensitive species were analyzed in the Wildlife, Fish and Rare plant report (May 2010). There are no floodplains, wetlands, nor municipal watersheds within the project area; nor are there any Congressionally designated areas nor research natural areas. Potential for significant effects on any cultural, religious, or historical sites or artifacts were analyzed in the Heritage Report dated (June 2010). No significant effects were noted. No work will be completed in the Inventoried Roadless Area so no potential exists for significant effects.

Public Involvement

In early 2005, the Department and Gail Steiger (Manager of the Spider Ranch including the Smith Canyon Grazing Allotment) began discussions related to habitat degradation and how to

improve it. Their immediate concern was the poor condition/distribution of waters within the allotment, adversely affecting both wildlife and livestock operations. They also realized the need to manage ever increasing juniper encroachment. Funds received through the Department's Big Game Donation Fund, the Habitat Partnership Committee process, and money contributed by the Spider Ranch resulted in eight earthen stock tanks receiving maintenance during the summer of 2007. These tanks now provide a series of dependable water sources within the Smith Canyon Allotment. Habitat Improvement is a priority for the Spider Ranch and they seek to provide a sustainable existence for people, livestock, and wildlife.

On June 16, 2009, the Department, PNF personnel, and Gail Steiger visited the area to discuss the vegetation treatment project.

This proposal was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions in January 2010.

Findings Required by Other Laws

This decision is consistent with the Prescott National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan as required by the National Forest Management Act.

Implementation Date

This project will be implemented on or after July 1, 2010

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is not subject to administrative appeal.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this decision contact Sheila Sandusky, Acting District Ranger, Chino Valley Ranger District, Hwy 89, Chino Valley, Arizona 86323, 928-777-2230.



Sheila Sandusky

Acting Chino Valley District Ranger

6/11/2010

Date

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