Decision Memo

Sheep Fire Reforestation
USDA Forest Service
Front Country Ranger District, San Bernardino National Forest
San Bernardino County, CA
Legal description:
R7W.T3N. SEC 15, 22, 26 and 27, San Bernardino County, California.

Background

In 2009, the Sheep Fire burned through Lone Pine Canyon and was stopped by the Boundary Ridge Project and its spread was limited by the Lone pine fuel reduction project. Many of the stands in Gobblers Knob to the south and Circle Mountain to the north were affected with areas of intense fire. This resulted in the stands having patches of high tree mortality within the fire perimeter. These areas need to be planted to reestablish the stands decimated by the fire. The depleted conditions from the fire were compounded by a bark beetle infestation in the 1970’s on Circle Mountain.

Locations: Planting Units 1, 2, 3 are at the top of Lone Pine Canyon surrounding the Prospect mine. Units 4, 5, 6 and 7 are west of Clyde Ranch towards Gobblers Knob.

Project Area: The Sheep Fire Reforestation Project consists of 7 units totaling approximately 91 acres. Units 1, 2 and 3 are in the xeric area next to the Prospect Mine and located along the saddle at the top of Lone Pine Canyon on the southwestern side of Circle Mountain. Units 4, 5, 6 and 7 are on the northeast side of Gobblers Knob and are in the mesic northeastern side of the mountain. The planting locations have elevation ranging from 6,000 ft to 7,000 ft with the higher elevation on south and west aspects.

Decision

I have decided to implement this project as described below. Design criteria, which are also incorporated as part of this decision, are included in Appendix A. A map of the project area is also included as Appendix B.

The project consists of seed gathering, site preparation, limited hazard tree falling, planting, and release and re-entry for maintenance and follow-up planting. A mixture of 1 to 3 year old stock of ponderosa pine, Jeffery pine, sugar pine and big cone Douglas- fir will be planted in the western and northern sides of the fire. The south and eastern sides will be planted with ponderosa and Jeffery pine. Pinion pine seed will be gathered in the first year (2011) and planted two years later (2013) with two year old pinion pine seedling (if possible). Pinion pine planting will need additional tending for survival. Local volunteers and possibly tribes may used to provide continuing care for the trees and planting in the project. Tree spacing has a general goal of approximately 10 feet by 10 feet to 17 feet by 17 feet spacing, yielding 150-436 trees per acre. The spacing may vary depending upon site specific conditions with up to 20 ft between trees.
Planting (Reforestation)

All proposed units would be hand planted using a mixture (depending on site) of native conifer seedlings (Ponderosa, Jeffrey, and Sugar pine, Pinion and Bigcone Douglas-fir). Seedlings would be planted using hand tools (hoedads, dibbles etc.) at a spacing of approximately 12 – 20 feet apart. Hand scalping individual tree planting sites removes brush in a 2 feet radius around each planting spot. Residue from the scalping will be scattered. Brush would be scattered, as there would be minimal amounts. All seedlings may have shade screening as part of the planting. Planting would occur in the late fall, or early spring when adequate soil moisture is present. A minimum spacing of 10’ x 10’ out to a maximum of 17’ x 17’ will be used for planting to yield an estimated 150-436 trees per acre. The spacing will vary some due to natural features like stumps, brush, and rocks. Region 5 stocking guidelines for mixed conifer in the Reforestation Handboook 4.11b recommends 200 trees per acre (TPA) and has a minimum acceptable level of 150 TPA unless a certified silviculturist determines the area is stocked with a level below 150 TPA. The final trees per acre will include all living trees inclusive of planted trees, natural regeneration, existing conifers and hardwood trees.

Project preparation will consist of the following:
1) Scalping of the planting site clearing and hand clearing selected planting sites.
2) Placement of shade screens may occur during planning to increase survival.
3) Felling of hazard trees in order to facilitate planting may occur as part of site preparation.

Planting locations will be chosen on microsite conditions that favor seedling survival. Scalping of exiting brush will be used in conjunction with planting to lower moisture completion with other plants. Regrowth and expansion of scrub species will cause the need for release and reentry in to site to improve survival and increase vigor of the planted trees.

Reentry and release
1) Replanting of sites if needed after survival inventory to match required stocking levels.
2) Pruning of surviving trees in order to remove developing fire ladders in conjunction with release activities. Pruning will be done up to 10 ft with no more than a 40% crown to stem ratio.
3) Release of surviving trees from competition with brush species to lower water completion and improve vigor. The initial release will occur five years after planting with a 3 ft radius cleared around each surviving tree, followed by a second release ten years after planting with a 10 ft radius. Release will be accomplished by hand tools and chainsaws, and material will be scattered, chipped (if practical due to terrain and access), or piled and burned.

Hazard Tree Falling

Prior to planting, some units may require felling of standing dead trees that pose a hazard to crews that will be working in the area. Hazard trees will be cut with chainsaws. Dropped hazard trees will be left on the ground for coarse woody debris habitat.
Hazard trees will be identified in the layout of the planting units. No salvage logging is planned due to lack of volume material, high cost of extraction and lack of road access. Further complicating any salvage operation is the lack of any major market for timber in the local area. The area also does not lend itself for fuel wood gathering due to limited access and steepness of the ground. Only hazard trees which would prevent planting or reentry activates will be felled as needed.

Debris disposal

Reentry activities may require disposal of wood material. The preferred method will be lop and scatter. Piling and burning may also be used if needed due to excessive ground accumulation of material from pruning and brush reduction within the planted stands. A burn plan will be developed before any planed burn occurs. Chipping may also be used in areas which are accessible by existing roads.

Rationale for Categorical Exclusion

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment because there will be no significant effects to the environment and the action being taken is minimal in nature. An environmental analysis was completed for this proposed action. As a result of the analysis, a determination has been made that the action is in a category of actions that are excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement.

The category for exclusion was determined pursuant to FSH 1909.15, Chapter 30, Section 31.2 Categories of action for which a project or case file and Decision memo are required. Specifically 36 CFR 220.6(e)(5) Regeneration of an area to native tree species, including site preparation that does not involve the use of herbicides or resulting vegetation type conversion, and 36 CFR 220.6(e)(11) Post fire rehabilitation activities, not to exceed 4,200 acres (such as tree planting, fence replacement, habitat restoration, heritage site restoration, repair of roads, and trails, and repair of damage to minor facilities, such as campgrounds), to repair or improve lands unlikely to recover to a management approved condition from wildfire damage, or to repair or replace minor facilities damaged by fire.

The categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because the proposal will not have a significant effect on the environment and there are no extraordinary circumstances or conditions associated with the project. Extraordinary circumstances would include but are not limited to significant effects on the following:

a. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species. No federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat are present for plant or wildlife species. A wildlife Biological Evaluation for the project area was completed (BE/Wildlife Report/MIS Evaluation, Sheep Fire Reforestation Project, February 2011). Species protection measures and survey/monitoring requirements are specified in design
criteria for this project. For Forest Service sensitive species, it was determined that the project may affect, but is not likely to trend toward a Federal listing or loss of viability. The Biological Evaluation can be located in the project file at the Front Country Ranger District Office.

b. Floodplains, Wetlands, or Municipal Watersheds. There are no floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds within the project area.

c. Congressionally Designated areas, such as Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas, or National Recreation Areas. There are no congressionally designated areas in the project area.

d. Inventoried Roadless Areas. There are no inventoried roadless areas within the project area.

e. Research Natural Areas. There are no research natural areas within the project area.

f. American Indians and Alaska Native Religious or Cultural Sites. No sites of these types were found in the archeological survey mentioned below. Tribal consultation was conducted with the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians and comments from the tribe were addressed and incorporated into the project as appropriate. If cultural materials are uncovered during project activities, work be stopped immediately in that area until an archaeologist can evaluate the findings and provide additional protection measures or mitigate the impacts.

g. Archaeological Sites or Historic Properties or Areas. Archeological surveys were completed for these locations by the District Archeologist, and the Forest Archeologist issued a clearance memo for this project. These documents are located in the project record. Cultural sites that were found will be flagged for avoidance within the project area.

Public Involvement

A proposal for the Sheep Fire Reforestation project was listed in the San Bernardino Schedule of Proposed Actions for the 1st quarter of 2011. The project leader conducted internal scoping with San Bernardino National Forest resource specialists and district staff. A scoping letter was also sent to interested and affected parties on January 21, 2011. The letter was also published electronically in The Wild Fire Safety Counsel web site http://www.wrightwoodfsc.com, and the Wrightwood Forum http://www.wrightwoodcalif.com/forum/index.php?topic=14613_msg248920#msg248920 at the request of the District. The project also received coverage by the Mountain View newspaper in Wrightwood, California and in the Mountain Register of Wrightwood. The District received 6 phone calls in response and all of them were favorable to the project with inquiries on how people can become involved in the planting as volunteers. No significant issues were identified for this proposal.

Findings Required by Other Laws

This decision is consistent with the San Bernardino National Forest Land Management Plan (2006) as required by the National Forest Management Act. This proposal is also in conformance
with the Endangered Species Act, the National Forest Management Act, and the State Historic Preservation Act. The National Forest Management Act of 1976 (Pub’s. 94-588; 90 Stat. 2949; 16 U.S.C. 1600) requires that all forested lands be maintained in appropriate forest cover with tree species, stocking, growth rates, and stand conditions designed to achieve multiple resource benefits in accordance with land management plans.

Implementation Date

This project may be implemented immediately following the signing of this Decision Memo.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is not subject to administrative appeal per 36 CFR 215.

Contact Person
For additional information concerning this decision, contact Roger Williams, Front Country District Forester, 1209 Lytle Creek Rd, Lytle Creek, CA 92358 or by phone at 909-382-2850.

RICHARD THORNBURGH
Front Country Deputy District Ranger

February 23, 2011

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