Decision Memo

Vallecito Reforestation
2015-2017

USDA Forest Service
Columbine Ranger District, San Juan National Forest
La Plata County, Colorado

Township 37 N., Range 6 W., Sections 31 and 32.
Township 36 N., Range 7 W., Sections 1, 12 and 13.
Township 36 N., Range 6 W., Sections 5, 7, 8, 9, 16, 18, 19 and 20.
N.M.P.M.

Location/Background

The Vallecito Reforestation Project is located on the Columbine Ranger District, San Juan National Forest in La Plata County, Colorado. The planting units are located around Vallecito Reservoir, approximately 20 miles northeast of Durango, CO (see map).

The Missionary Ridge Fire occurred in the summer of 2002. The Fire was determined to be human-caused, was exacerbated by a record drought year, and ultimately burned almost 73,000 acres. Post-fire assessments estimated that about 31% burned at high severity, 30% at moderate severity, and 39% at low severity or unburned.

The planting areas are within Forest Plan management area 3-Natural Landscapes with Limited Management, and management area 4-High-Use Recreation Emphasis.

Purpose and Need

The purpose and need for this project is to restore burned ponderosa in some previously-forested areas that are not regenerating. Reforesting this project area will provide aesthetic benefits to areas readily visible from the Vallecito community, will re-establish native forest, and will provide replacement wildlife habitat.

Proposed Action

The Forest Service proposes planting approximately 780 acres in the vicinity of Vallecito Reservoir within the Missionary Ridge Fire burn area. The proposal is to plant about 350 ponderosa pine and Douglas fir trees per acre. A small amount of limber pine could be planted in areas where the ground surface is exceptionally rocky.
Vallecito Reforestation DM

Tree seedlings would be planted by a 10 - 20 person crew on foot using hand tools. Planting would occur in the spring after snow melt and would likely require two weeks per season to complete. Due to the short season when planting is effective, it is likely that three seasons of planting may be necessary to complete the entire 780 acres proposed. Consequently this activity could occur from 2015 through the spring of 2017.

Pickup trucks, All Terrain Vehicles, Utility Task Vehicles, and/or horses could be used to deliver seedling trees to the planting units. If necessary, late spring snow plowing may occur in order to allow access during the timeframe that planting needs to occur. Any roads blocked by trees or debris would be cleared by hand, chainsaws, or winches.

Open roads, Forest Service closed roads, and private roads are proposed to be used for access to the planting units. Several planting units are proposed to be accessed through private property. The project area would be accessed from County Road 501, FS Road 603 (East Vallecito), FS Road 852 (East Creek), and private roads including Ho Hum Drive and Lake Vista Estates.

Decision and Rationale

I have decided to implement the Vallecito Reforestation Project, as described above, in order to help restore ecosystem function after a man-caused fire. Additionally, the following Mitigation Measures will be implemented:

- Signs will be posted during implementation for safety and for travel management purposes.
- ATV tracks, ML1, and non-system routes will be blocked to prevent public motorized travel at the conclusion of the project each season.
- “Trails” cut through the downed logs will be blocked at the conclusion of the project each season.
- Noxious weeds will be treated as necessary.
- Where necessary, seed with native grass and forb species.
- If an active osprey nest occurs in the project area, the District Biologist will be notified.
- Follow all applicable management measures and design criteria from the Region 2 Watershed Conservation Practices Handbook (FSH 2509.25).
- Planting activities will be restricted during and directly after large precipitation events or when soils are saturated to the point where tire ruts or hoof prints greater than 2” deep are occurring.
- Vehicles will be prohibited in the water influence zone (WIZ) around stream courses.
- Vehicles will be limited to sustained slopes less than 35%.
- Avoid wetlands and wet meadows during reforestation activities whenever possible.
- Avoid driving up or down drainage bottoms when accessing planting units. Do not cross stream courses with vehicles where banks exceed a 30% slope. Limit stream crossings to the minimum number necessary and cross perpendicular to the direction of flow.
- Where soil and topographic conditions permit, seedlings should be planted up to, but not within the water influence zone (WIZ) in ephemeral and intermittent drainages. Seedlings should not interfere with the propagation of any existing riparian vegetation.
- Seedlings should be planted in existing fire hand-lines and dozer-lines. Spacing should be scattered and dispersed in a way that limits the potential for a running crown fire.
This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment because it falls within FSH 1909.15 category 32.2 (5): “Regeneration of an area to native tree species, including site preparation that do not involve the use of herbicides or result in vegetation type conversion.” [36 CFR 220.6(e)(5)].

The categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action potentially having effects that may significantly affect the environment. I considered the following resource conditions:

(a) **Threatened, endangered, or proposed, species or their critical habitat or Forest Service sensitive species**: Wildlife, fish, and plant evaluations were performed to determine the effects to threatened, endangered, proposed, and sensitive species and their habitats; there will be no effects to threatened, endangered, or proposed species because none of them have habitat in the project area.

There is no habitat for any Sensitive fish species in the project area; therefore they will not be impacted.

Four Sensitive animal species have habitat in the project area (bald eagle, Lewis’s woodpecker, hoary bat, and olive-sided flycatcher), but because the scale of impacts will be so low and habitat will not be lost, it was determined that there will be no impact to these species.

One Sensitive plant species (yellow lady’s slipper) has habitat, but has not been found in the project area. Because of the possibility of trampling of this species, it was determined that the project may adversely impact individuals of this species, but is not likely to result in a loss of viability on the planning area, nor cause a trend to federal listing or a loss of species viability range wide.

(b) **Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds**: The project area is not located within any, floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds.

(c) **Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas**: The project area is not located within any wilderness, wilderness study area, or NRAs.

(d) **Inventoried roadless areas**: Approximately 460 acres of planting units fall within non-upper tier Colorado Roadless Area. There are no activities prohibited under the Colorado Roadless Rule proposed. Impacts to roadless characteristics are as follows:

1. **High quality soil, air and water**: The soil and watershed condition is already disturbed by the fire and resulting erosion. Re-vegetation that has occurred subsequent to the fire will not be disturbed by project activities except for some possible ATV use. Design Criteria will improve soil conditions by requirements for treatment of weeds and seeding of native grasses on ATV routes.

2. **Public Drinking Water**: The planting units are directly adjacent to Vallecito Reservoir, which provides a sediment trap for the Pine River and downstream communities’ water intakes. The project will not affect any drinking water intakes.

3. **Diversity of Plant and Animal Communities**: Diversity of communities in the immediate vicinity will be increased through the establishment of a seedling age class of trees.
4. **Habitat for special status species dependent on large, undisturbed areas of land.** The project is located immediately adjacent to a highly-used and highly-disturbed landscape around Vallecito Reservoir. Biological Assessments determined there will be no affect to any TES species.

5. **Primitive and Semi-Primitive Recreation.** Project will not affect recreation because the planting units are in areas not readily used by the public. There could be short-term disturbance, but no long-term impacts to incidental recreation.

6. **Reference Landscapes.** The project is not in a reference landscape.

7. **High Scenic Quality.** The project is in a fire scar, so the project will improve scenic quality in the landscape.

8. **Traditional Cultural Properties and sacred sites.** There are no such resources within the project area.

9. **Other Unique characteristics.** No other local unique characteristics have been identified.

(e) **Research Natural Areas:** The project area does not fall within a Research Natural Area.

(f) **American Indian and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites:** A cultural records search was conducted for the project location. No known cultural or religious sites exist within the project area.

(g) **Archeological sites, or historic properties or areas:** A records and search and representative field surveys were conducted for the project location. No sites were located within the project boundary; therefore there will be no adverse effect on cultural resources.

**Public Involvement**

A proposal was listed on the on-line Schedule of Proposed Actions beginning in June 2014. Scoping letters were sent to landowners adjacent to the project area and access roads; seven written responses were received. Additionally, direct contact was made with several adjacent landowners regarding use of private roads to access planting units. All comments were supportive of the project.

**Findings Required by Other Laws**

The Forest Plan provides the framework for the action proposed here, and we are undertaking the action as one step in implementing the Forest Plan, as required by the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 (RPA, P.L. 93-378) and the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA, P.L. 94-588).

This project is consistent with the guidance in the Forest Plan. This decision also is consistent with requirements for the Endangered Species Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and the Clean Water Act.
Implementation Date

This project may be implemented on or after the date of this Decision Memo. It is expected to take place during 2015-2017.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is not subject to administrative appeal or objection processes pursuant to the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 and the Agricultural Act of 2014.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this decision, contact Gretchen Fitzgerald, Forester, Columbine Ranger District, POB 439, Bayfield, CO 81122, 970-884-1435.

MATT JANOWIAK
Columbine District Ranger

Date

11/21/14