2-3-2 Landscape Area
Valle Seco Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project Proposal

USDA Forest Service
Pagosa Ranger District, San Juan National Forest
Archuleta County, Colorado

Township 34 North, Range 1 West, Section 31 and 32;
Township 33 North, Range 1 West, Sections 3-6, 8, 9, and 17-20

Background

The project area is located south of Pagosa Springs Colorado in the Valle Seco area. The forest in the project area consists of ponderosa pine, Gambel oak and associated shrubs, pinyon-juniper, and sage meadows. The shrubs range in height from 3 ft. to over 10 ft. The Valle Seco Road (NFSR 653) provides access to the large private land inholding in the Valle Seco area, as well as private land to the south, and surrounding National Forest System lands. The Valle Seco B Road (NFSR 653B) provides access to NFS lands and is a logical fire break against fire moving north toward private land in the Lower Blanco area with many houses. Approximately half of the project area has been mapped as being in Fire Regime Condition Class (FRCC) 2, which shows a moderate degree of departure from historical natural fire. The remaining area is in FRCC 3, which indicates a high degree of departure from historical natural fire regimes.

This project is one part of a larger landscape-scale community-based collaborative initiative, referred to as the 2-3-2 Collaborative (2 Watersheds, 3 Rivers, 2 States). The 2-3-2 landscape is in the southeastern portion of the Pagosa Ranger District and includes the Rio Blanco and Navajo River Watersheds. These watersheds are at the headwaters of the area that provides water to the city of Albuquerque, New Mexico. The 2-3-2 initiative brings together representatives of the San Juan National Forest, the Carson National Forest, the Nature Conservancy, Colorado State Forest Service, the Rio Grande Water Fund, Chama Peak Land Alliance, the San Juan Headwaters Forest Health Partnership, and a number of FireWise community groups to discuss cross-boundary priority projects with the larger 2-3-2 landscape area. The Valle Seco Hazardous Fuels Reduction project has been determined to be a priority landscape project by this group.

Purpose and Need

The purpose and need of this project is to: 1) create fuel breaks adjacent to Forest Service System roads to facilitate safer management of natural wildfire ignitions; 2) create conditions that will help facilitate prescribed burning across the landscape; 3) reduce the risk of high severity wildfire in forest vegetation across the landscape; and 4) create conditions that will facilitate protection of private residences and structures in the Wildland Urban Interface in and adjacent to the project area.

Specific benefits of the proposed treatments include:

- Reduction of ladder fuels and canopy continuity, thus reducing the future prevalence of crown fire initiation and spread throughout the landscape.
- An overall decrease in the potential for, and impacts of, high severity wildfire.
- Lower fuel loadings and overall potential fire intensities, especially along potential fire breaks such as National Forest System roads, leading to an increase in the ability of firefighters to safely manage fire across the project landscape and increased public safety.
- Decreased competition between shrubs and trees as a result of thinning, mowing and potential managed fires, resulting in overall enhanced resistance of residual trees to drought and bark beetles.

- Improved forage and habitat conditions for wildlife in winter concentration areas and severe winter range habitat for mule deer and elk.

Proposed Action

In order to address the purpose and need for action, the proposed Valle Seco Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project would conduct fuels reduction activities on up to 2,800 acres in the Valle Seco area. Treatments would occur in two (2) different units and along the Valle Seco Road (NFSR 653) and the Valle Seco B Road (NFSR 653B). One of the treatment units (1,686 acres) is north of the large private land inholding. The other (1,085 acres) is south of the large private land inholding. Treatments would be accomplished by mechanically mowing and shredding shrubs and small diameter trees, and/or felling of trees by hand or with machinery. Areas where Gambel oak is masticated may require more than one entry. The resulting material may be left on site, removed as fuelwood, post and poles, biomass, or saw logs. Snags and large trees older than approximately 140 years of age will not be cut in any treatment units unless required for safety purposes. Gambel oak greater than 6 inches diameter at root collar (DRC) will be protected and retained as much as possible.

No new roads would be constructed for this project, but some short sections of temporary roads may be constructed to facilitate product removal. Any temporary roads would be rehabbed and decommissioned no later than three years after the date the project is completed. Operations would be expected to occur from late spring through fall.

Maximum stump heights would be 8 inches. Chips resulting from mastication would be scattered such that 80% do not exceed a depth of four inches. Treatments would occur only on slopes up to approximately 35%. Access routes would be approved by a FS representative ahead of time and then water barred, scarified, partially covered with slash, and/or seeded as needed after completion of the project.

The project would also incorporate the design criteria listed below.

Project Design Criteria

Vegetation, Noxious Weeds, and Reseeding

- All off-road equipment will be cleaned of soil, seeds, vegetative matter, or other debris that could contain or hold noxious weed seeds before entering the Project Area, or before moving equipment from weed infested units to non-weed infested units.

Watershed and Soils

- All riparian zones and wetlands will be avoided by equipment except at equipment crossings designated by the Forest Service.
- Equipment will not be allowed to operate off of graveled or paved roads when soils are saturated such that ruts 4 inches deep and at least 10 feet long are created.
- Equipment will not be allowed to operate on sustained slopes greater than 35 percent.

Cultural Resources

- In the event that unidentified archaeological resources are discovered in the course of the project, a San Juan National Forest Archaeologist shall be notified immediately. Work must be stopped until the resources have been evaluated in terms of National Register of Historic Places eligibility criteria (36 CFR 60.4).

Wildlife

- Project activities and mechanical operations will be limited between December 1 through April 30, to minimize adverse disturbance impacts to elk and mule deer in winter concentration and severe winter range. Project activities proposed during this period will be discussed with a wildlife biologist prior to their occurrence.
- A wildlife biologist shall be notified immediately if raptor nests are discovered. If raptor nests are discovered, measures will be applied to minimize disturbance impacts to breeding raptors.

Attachment 1 - Project Area Map