

**BRIEFING PAPER**

LOCATION: Southwestern Region
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ISSUE: Strategy to complete NEPA for the White Mountain Stewardship Contract.

DISCUSSION:

The intent of the White Mountain Stewardship Contract is to thin at least 150,000 acres of wildland-urban interface (WUI) within 10 years. The Apache-Sitgreaves (A-S) Forests had 83,000 acres of projects that were through NEPA but burned in the Rodeo-Chediski Fire. We currently have 31,000 acres left that have been through NEPA and will cover about 2 years of contract acres. That leaves 120,000 acres that require NEPA coverage.

One alternative was to prepare 1 large EIS to cover the entire 120,000 acres of projects (spanning closer to 250,000 acres of analysis area). This alternative was rejected because it would be difficult to make such a large EIS site-specific and such an EIS would probably not have a 10 year "shelf life". The new CE and streamlined fuels EA tools offer the perfect solution.

The strategy is to use the CE authorities for smaller, more isolated projects that are 1000 acres or less. Many of our projects will have 10,000-25,000 acres analysis areas and the streamlined fuels EA template will be used. We will analyze effects at two levels: project level and landscape level across the entire forest. The thinning projects are fairly uniform, so it will be easier to generalize some effects. Since the fuels EA allows us to reference other documents and summarize impacts, we plan to prepare white papers on landscape level topics such as the broad scale cumulative effects of thinning 150,000 acres, the effects of thinning on threatened, endangered and management indicator species habitats, the benefits our experience has shown to thinning pine forests to reduce fire hazard and social and economic effects of the project. The EAs will contain site specific cumulative and project effects and reference other NEPA documents and white papers and scientific reports; making the NEPA documents brief.

The new direction in the Healthy Forest Restoration Act will be beneficial because it will limit the range of alternatives and further focus the NEPA to fuels treatments to reduce the hazard to communities. The first step in the process was the completion of the Community Fire Plans across the A-S Forests, following HFRA



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guidance, which defines the WUI boundaries through a collaborative process. All the counties, tribes and communities worked together to prioritize and coordinate the WUI project needs across ownership lines.

There are several community groups already in place that will aid us in collaboration at both scales. The Natural Resources Working Group represents a cross-section of concerned citizens and agencies that have been assisting the forest in planning and monitoring the Blue Ridge Demonstration Thinning Projects for several years. They are excited about extending their scope to a larger scale. In addition, we are forming a multi-party monitoring board to help determine the kinds of environmental, social and economic monitoring that should be conducted, and at what scale the monitoring should take place. They will coordinate all the monitoring for the 10-year contract and keep it from being fragmented, duplicated or inefficient the way that some site-specific monitoring is.

We will also conduct consultation with US Fish and Wildlife Service and State Historic Preservation Office and Tribes at two levels (programmatic landscape and project levels), to be consistent with the analysis areas. Many issues can be efficiently discussed at the landscape level, looking at the big picture while streamlining the individual project consultation.

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