

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

GOVERNMENT SPRINGS PRESCRIBE BURN

NM-060-2001-0075

Location:

Township 9 South, Range 14 East
Section 16 and 21

Fort Stanton Area of Critical Environmental Concern

Lincoln County, New Mexico

March 5, 2001

Bureau of Land Management
Roswell Field Office
Roswell, New Mexico

I. INTRODUCTION

A. General Information

Fort Stanton was declared an area of critical environmental concern (ACEC) during the completion of the Roswell Resource Management Plan (RMP) dated October 1997. Fort Stanton is situated in the foothills of the Sierra Blanca and Capitan Mountains. The ACEC boundary encompasses a total of 27,708 acres. At this time, an ACEC plan is being developed in cooperation with Lincoln county and those publics interested in the future of Fort Stanton. The management goal is to protect the biological, archeological and scenic qualities of Fort Stanton, while providing for quality recreation opportunity.

The primary emphasis of the old Fort Stanton Habitat Management Plan (HMP) was riparian management along the Rio Bonito and Salado Creek. Riparian areas are more productive in both plant and animal species diversity and biomass per unit area than the more drier upland areas. Due to this fact, the riparian areas will always be a management priority and receive implementation that will continue to improve or enhance the overall watershed and associated functions and wildlife species that are dependent upon them during their life cycle.

Past projects within the area include the construction of a riparian enclosure to control livestock grazing, cottonwood and willow plantings, net-wiring the bases of cottonwoods and a prescribed fire in 1996. Since that last fire most of the saltcedars have been cut and scattered. The proposed action will remove most of the high fuel loading in the area.

B. Need for the Proposed Action

Junipers, saltcedar, russian olive and noxious weeds have invaded riparian habitats throughout the Southwestern United States, and Fort Stanton is no different. This action will supplement past burning and hand cutting activities and will improve the riparian habitat along the Rio Bonito. Slash needs to be removed so the hazardous threat of flooding created by the dead and down trees piling up and washing out areas that are not prone to flooding. The area also needs to be cleared of the fine fuels so that noxious weeds can be found and chemically treated.

C. Conformance with Land Use Plans

The proposed action and alternatives are consistent with the Roswell Resource Management Plan dated October 1997.

II. PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

A. Proposed Action

The proposed action is to burn approximately 40 acres of riparian and adjacent upland habitat consisting of saltcedar slash, willow, cottonwoods and juniper along the Rio Bonito in the Government Springs area to improve the health of the riparian area and to remove vegetation to where access to treat noxious weeds would be made. The primary target area of the burn is the riparian habitat and adjacent upland benches located approximately 100 yards from the actual stream. Fire activities will remain in the bottom

canyon area. The project area is bound by highway 380 on the south and western edges of the burn area. Rock bluffs with small drainages exist on the north side of the river and can be used as natural barriers. The small canyon headers will need to be black lined to prevent escapement. See Burn Plan for specific fire objectives, tactics fire behavior, and constraints.

B. Alternative 1 Mechanical Removal

Under this alternative the downed slash would have to be cleared by either hand or mechanically removed by grubbing or chaining and dragging it out. The slash would still need to be chipped or piled and burned. An extreme amount of time, labor and expense would be utilized to accomplish this effort.

Alternative No Action

Under this alternative the riparian habitat and adjacent upland benches would not be burned or cleared of dead decadent vegetation. Slash would remain, junipers and invading species would continue to be a problem and access to treat noxious weeds would be restricted.

III. Affected Environment

The affected environment is generally discussed in the Fort Stanton Habitat Management Plan approved February, 1990, and in the ACEC portion of the Roswell RMP. Only those resources actually impacted by the proposed action will be addressed in this document. Because of the scope and location of the proposed action, the following critical elements of the human environment are not affected: Solid or Hazardous Wastes, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, Prime or Unique Farm Lands, Cultural, Native American Religious Concerns, Wild and Scenic Rivers, Wilderness, Threatened or Endangered Species.

Soils, vegetation, floodplains/riparian zones, water quality, air quality, visual resource management, and noxious weeds will be impacted by the proposed action.

IV. Environmental Impacts

Proposed Action

The fire will expose the soil to erosion for about a month until the site revegetates, after which the erosion rates will return to pre-burn levels and will improve in the long term.

The proposed action will remove approximately 80 percent of the total vegetation, but most vegetation will reestablish within one growing season due to the subsurface water that is available in riparian areas. Positive impacts from the proposed action include the stimulation and reproduction of plants within the floodplain and adjacent uplands. Live juniper and saltcedar densities will decrease, allowing native riparian plants species to

regenerate. Concentration of slash would be removed and the threat of slash piling up during spring run-off and flooding would be minimized.

There will be a short term negative impact to the floodplain by removing litter and exposing it to erosion in the event of a flood. The long term effect would be positive by improving the overall condition of the riparian area and adjacent uplands by removing exotic and noxious weeds species, while promoting native species with increased vigor.

Water quality may be negatively impacted if it floods before the area revegetates. Long term benefits include improved water quantity (base flows) and quality.

There will be a short term (one day) negative impact to the air quality of the area, after which air quality will return to preburn levels. Prevailing winds are from the southwest. It is not anticipated that the air quality of Capitan, Sierra Blanca Airport and the White Mountain Wilderness will be affected.

Visual Resources will have minor short and long term impacts. The initial blackening of the area will recover within a short time period, since grasses and other fine fuels respond vary rapidly. Standing junipers and other large trees that are killed will be visible for several years unless downed.

Alternative 1 Mechanical Removal

Impacts to soil, existing vegetation, water quality, air quality, and visual resources would not be effected by the clearing of vegetation by hand. However the overall health of the area would not be improved by just removing the slash. Fine fuels need to be burned periodically and this removal of grasses would allow for the inventory and treatment of noxious weeds. Significant impacts to soils, vegetation would result with the use of dozers or heavy machinery if allowed in the floodplain. Under this action fine fuels would remain and noxious weeds would not be treated successfully.

Cumulative Impacts

No negative long term impacts are expected. However, the cumulative benefits of improving this riparian area and adjacent uplands include vegetation diversity, increased stream productivity, decreased erosion, increased infiltration rates and increased water quality.

Residual Impacts

Vegetation will be impacted but will reestablish within a short time period from the proposed action and alternatives.

Mitigating Measures

_____ The impact on the environment from the proposed action and alternatives are anticipated to be insignificant. No mitigation measures will be required.

V. Other Persons or Agencies Contacted

- A. Clark Taylor - RFO Range Management Specialist
- C. Jim Desmond - RFO Fire Management Officer
- D. NMDGF - Game Commission
- E. Sikes Act - Citizens Review Committee

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT/RATIONALE

Finding of No Significant Impacts: Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts contained in the attached environmental assessment, I have determined the proposed action will not have significant impacts on the human environment and that the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required.

Rationale for Recommendations: The proposed action would not result in any undue or unnecessary environmental degradation. The proposed action is in compliance with the Roswell Resource Management Plan and Record of Decision (October, 1997).

T. R. Kreager
Assistant Field Office Manager - Resources

Date

DECISION RECORD

Decision: It is my decision to authorize the prescribed burn as proposed in the Government Springs area Fort Stanton.

T. R. Kreager
Assistant Field Office Manager - Resources

Date