

DECISION MEMO

CRYSTAL LAKE FUEL REDUCTION AND FOREST HEALTH PROJECT

**USDA FOREST SERVICE
SAN GABRIEL RIVER RANGER DISTRICT, ANGELES NATIONAL FOREST
LOS ANGELES COUNTY, CALIFORNIA
Township 3N, Range 9W, Sections 20, 21, 28, 29, 32 and 33**

DECISION

It is my decision to approve the Crystal Lake Fuel Reduction and Forest Health Project in the San Gabriel River Ranger District. Proposed activities will consist of mortality removal, thinning, pruning, hand clearing (release), prescribed fire burning, planting, chipping and sign placement on Forest Service lands as defined within the Proposed Action. No new roads will be constructed as a result of this proposed action. Vegetation treatment will occur on approximately 954 acres. Treatments will be limited regarding implementation as defined in this decision. The project will be completed over a period of up to five years.

The purpose of this project is to increase the resistance of the stands to the effects of fire, improve wildlife habitat, improve health and vigor of the natural stands and assure the long term retention of these features on the landscape of the forest.

Background:

The Crystal Lake Forest Health Project consists of approximately 954 acres of native oaks and mixed conifer forests located near Crystal Lake Campground in San Gabriel Canyon of the San Gabriel River Ranger District. The project is located in areas classified as Developed Area Interface by the Angeles National Forest.

The Angeles National Forest Land Management Plan identifies a need to complete 1,000 acres of mortality removal, 600 acres of thinning and 100 acres of reforestation annually in order to move the forest towards the desired condition of community protection and healthier forests. This proposed action supports this resource management Program Emphasis.

The 2002 Curve Fire burned much of the project area leaving a high degree of mortality in the existing pine plantation, natural oak stands and natural conifer stands. Lack of management activity in this area since the fire has led to the invasion of brush species into these tree stands and has created a situation where a future fire could again spread rapidly and at high intensity, damaging the residual stand. By reducing competition and increasing spacing between individual trees or stems per oak tree, soil moisture will be more available and a healthier growing condition for the remaining trees will be created. By pruning lower branches, removing competing brush from within the stands the potential of fire induced mortality is reduced.

The following design features and best management practices will be used for the duration of the project:

Archeology

- The Forest Heritage Resource Program Manager may determine that sensitive areas exist within the project boundary or immediately adjacent to the project area. A representative from the Heritage Resources department will be informed of all activities prior to beginning ground disturbing activities in these sensitive zones. Also, per the *Interim Protocol for Non-intensive Inventory Strategies for Hazardous Fuels and Vegetation Reduction Projects*, there are areas within the project area that may not have been surveyed and will need the Forest Heritage Resource Program Manager's approval before any ground disturbance treatments can occur in these areas. Maps in the project file will show the locations that will need approval from the Heritage Resources Program Manager before any ground disturbance can occur. This map will also identify areas which are to be flagged and avoided during project implementation.

Botany

- Flag and avoid urnflower alumroot (*Heuchera elegans*), Plummer's mariposa lily (*Calochortus plummerae*) and lemon lily (*Lilium parryi*) populations with a 100-foot buffer. Trees will be directionally felled away from the buffer zone.
- Extend protection to any newly discovered populations of Forest Service Sensitive plants found before or during project implementation.
- Livestock will not be used as part of this project.
- Any straw used to control erosion should be certified weed free (rice straw is a good option).
- Use weed-free mulches and seed sources. All activities that require seeding or planting must utilize locally collected native seed sources when possible.
- All Spanish broom (*Spartium junceum*), periwinkle (*Vinca major*), bull thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*) and English ivy (*Hedera helix*) locations will be flagged and avoided up to a 100-foot buffer or treated using Forest Botanist approved methods prior to vegetation treatments. This means that no persons or equipment will be allowed and treatment will not occur within the flagged area.
- Protocol standards will be used in the washing of equipment to prevent the spread of noxious weeds. Documentation forms regarding this activity will be maintain by the project manager and forwarded to the forest Botanist. These protocols are attached to this decision.
- Within 75 feet of perennial streams or seeps/springs and other water bodies (e.g. lakes/ponds), and within 25 feet of intermittent streams, avoid vegetative treatments that disturb the ground surface.
- Slash piles to be burned shall be placed at least 75 feet outside perennial stream channels, springs or standing water and 25 feet outside ephemeral drainages.

- Retain an average of 3 slash piles per acre in a configuration meeting fire hazard objectives to provide habitat for sensitive wildlife species.
- At a minimum retain CWD per LMP Standard S14, and where possible retain all existing CWD and large (>15 in dbh) snag trees where they do not pose a public safety hazard and will still meet hazardous fuel objectives for the project area.
- Where possible retain snag trees in denser clumps to help ensure longer term retention.
- A combination of natural barriers (rocks, logs, etc.), screening, and fencing will be used to prevent/discourage illegal vehicle activity during and after the project treatment. District staff will monitor the area, and if/when problem areas arise, remedial and preventative actions would be taken as appropriate. Coordination with permittees, public education, and signing will be used as appropriate.
- All equipment staging areas will be located away from known areas with invasive species occurrences.
- To reduce the impacts of the project on invasive nonnative plant establishment the following practices are required:
 - All equipment and machinery except, trucks, vans, pickups, and cars used for daily transport of personnel, will be cleaned prior to entering Forest Service land. This includes vehicle wheels, undercarriages, bumpers, chain saws, hand pruners, or any equipment other than personnel transport vehicles. All washing must take place where rinse water is collected and disposed of in either a sanitary sewer, a landfill, or other facility authorized to accept such rinse water.
 - Equipment operators shall notify the Forest Service at least two working days prior to moving each piece of equipment on to National Forest Land, unless otherwise agreed. Notification will include vehicle washing information. Upon request of Forest Service, arrangements will be made for Forest Service to inspect each piece of equipment prior to it being placed in service.
 - If equipment has operated in areas that the Forest Service has identified as containing invasive plant species, all equipment, and tools used at that site must also be washed AFTER work has been completed.
 - Equipment operators shall certify in writing compliance with the terms of this provision prior to each start-up of operations.

Soils and Hydrology

- No take of riparian species, i.e. willow, maple etc.
- In identified RCAs, there will be no treatment within stream inner gorge (from channel bottom to major break in slope).

- Any units that have a high degree of existing soil quality impairment (as identified by hydrologist/soils specialist) will require mitigations so as not to exceed threshold standards for detrimental disturbance.
- Soil and Watershed BMP's will be fully applied for the duration of the project.
- Within 25 feet of perennial or intermittent streams and other water bodies (e.g.lakes, springs) avoid tree thinning methods that disturb the ground surface (USDAFS, c).
- Maintaining 300 foot buffers from perennial streams and springs and 100 foot buffers along intermittent streams where mechanical equipment is not allowed.
- Retain or re-establish ground cover in RCA to 60-70%, consisting of litter, duff, slash, grass, or chips. On average spread chips less than 4" high.
- A combination of natural barriers (rocks, logs, etc.), screening, and fencing will be used as required to prevent/discourage illegal off-road vehicle activity during and after the project treatment. Resource staff and other staff would monitor the area, and if/when problem areas arise, remedial and preventative actions would be taken as appropriate. Coordination with adjacent landowners, public education, and signing would be used as appropriate.
- Slash piles shall be placed and burned at least 75 feet outside perennial or intermittent stream channel or standing water and 25 feet outside ephemeral drainages.
- Any heavy equipment staging areas and access points will be rehabilitated and blocked after project completion. Rehabilitation would include returning the ground to natural contours, implementing decomposition and erosion control measures as needed, and covering bare soil with slash, chips, pine needles, or cut brush as necessary.

Air Quality

- All prescribed fire activity will occur only with approvals from the South Coast Air Quality Management District and under conditions established in approved Prescribed Fire Burn Plan.

Wildlife

- No ground disturbance within 75 feet of perennial streams or seeps/springs and other water bodies (e.g.lakes/ponds), and within 25 feet of intermittent streams.
- Prohibit any off-road use of motorized equipment within 300 foot buffers from perennial streams and springs and 100 foot buffers along intermittent streams.
- Slash piles to be burned shall be placed at least 75 feet outside perennial stream channels, springs or standing water and 25 feet outside ephemeral drainages.
- Retain an average of 3 slash piles per acre in a configuration meeting fire hazard objectives to provide habitat for sensitive wildlife species.
- Prior to pile burning, piles should be shifted to expose the ground area and allow wildlife to escape, e.g., salamanders, lizards or small mammals.
- Ground disturbance will be limited to the minimum necessary. The area disturbance shall be confined to the smallest practical area and all special habitat features of a sensitive species (burrow, snags, drainages, etc.) shall be avoided to the extent feasible. During project implementation, ingress/egress, staging areas, stockpiling, equipment storage, positioning of equipment and any other potential habitat disturbing activities shall be limited to areas of permanent disturbance within the project site to the extent practicable.

- To reduce the potential for unauthorized OHV use impacts such as crushing of plants and animals and accidental fire starts, limit entry points and provide barriers to illegal OHV use when accessing treatment areas off of Highway 39 and Forest Service road 3N09.
- Where feasible, leave dense roadside stands of vegetation (approx. 20-30 ft wide) to provide screening/hiding/thermal cover for wildlife species within treated areas.
- Any heavy equipment staging areas and access points will be rehabilitated and blocked after project completion. Rehabilitation would include returning the ground to natural contours, implementing decomposition and erosion control measures as needed, and covering bare soil with slash, chips, pine needles, or cut brush as necessary.
- At a minimum retain CWD per LMP Standard S14, and where possible retain all existing CWD and large (>15 in dbh) snag trees where they do not pose a public safety hazard and will still meet hazardous fuel objectives for the project area.
- Where possible retain snag trees in denser clumps to help ensure longer term retention.
- Prescribed fire in timber stands should be planned to achieve lower intensity burning to avoid crown fires and protect live cavity trees both conifers and hardwoods.
- Prescribed burning in timber stands should incorporate measures to protect large live "legacy" trees to help provide for future snag trees. Practices such as fuel pull back from base of trees, pre-burn wrapping of existing fire scar cavities, and aggressive mop-up following ignition are recommended where feasible.
- Out-year implementation projects should be re-surveyed for presence of threatened, endangered or sensitive wildlife species prior to implementation and appropriate protective measures taken to avoid or minimize adverse impacts on these species.
- To the extent feasible, rock outcrops should be excluded from hand treatments and mechanical equipment.
- For riparian areas, the Riparian Conservation Area (RCA) guidelines from the 2005 Forest Plan will be used (Appendix E). All treatments will be consistent with the FSH 2509.22- Soil and Water Conservation Practices Handbook and Best Management Practices. This will ensure that ground disturbing activities will not contribute additional sediment to any streams or lakes. Where prescribed burns are planned, no direct burning will occur in the RCA. Fire may enter those areas by "backing" downslope, burning the understory at low intensity. However, no effort will be made to apply fire directly to those areas or start a hot fire upwind that would intentionally move into the riparian buffer zones. To the extent possible, low creeping fires would be used near riparian areas, minimizing the burning/thinning of cottonwoods, alders, willows and other riparian overstory.
- Construction of firebreaks within riparian habitat will be avoided except where handlines must cross riparian zones. Those short lines will be constructed and maintained with handcrews using hand tools and chainsaws. The width will be kept to a minimum and the length of handlines in riparian will also be kept to a minimum.
- To the extent feasible, fuel reductions implemented in riparian areas will focus on the removal of non-native vegetation to achieve fuel hazard reduction objectives.
- All trash generated from this project will be collected and properly disposed of a daily basis. Upon completion of the project, all unused material and equipment shall be removed from the site.

- Trash and food shall be stored in closed containers and removed daily to reduce attractiveness to opportunistic predators such as coyotes, domestic and feral dogs and cats, opossums, skunks and raccoons. Littering of trash and food waste is prohibited.
- All equipment must contain appropriate spill containment kits to respond to leaks and spills.
- Conduct added field sampling for the appropriate FS Sensitive plant/wildlife species during the year of implementation to help determine actual presence or absence in the project area and provide protection as needed.
- Where feasible, burning and removal of trees and other vegetation will be conducted outside of the general nesting season for migratory birds (April 1st – September 1st). The Forest Biologist will be notified if treatment occurs between April 1st and September 1st.

REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

An environmental analysis was conducted for this action. As a result of the analysis, a determination has been made that the action is in a category of action that is excluded from documentation in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or Environmental Assessment (EA):

FSH 1909.15, Chapter 30, Category 31.2, item 6

“Timber stand and/or wildlife improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction.”

The environmental analysis conducted for the proposed action determined that there were no extraordinary circumstances or conditions that would result in significant adverse effects. Extraordinary circumstances include, but are not limited to, the following resource conditions:

1. Threatened or Endangered Species or designated critical habitat

It is my determination that the activities associated with the Crystal Lake Forest Health Project will not affect any threatened, endangered, proposed, or candidate species or its critical habitat. Presence/absence surveys for listed plant species were conducted on June 22 and 23, 2009 and July 12 and 13, 2009. No listed species were identified during the surveys. Three presence/absence surveys for listed wildlife species were conducted. These surveys were conducted in September 2008, May 2009 and August 2009. No listed species were identified during the field surveys.

- **Forest Service Sensitive Species**

Three sensitive plant species were identified within the project area; *Heuchera elegans*, Urn-flowered alumroot, *Lilium parryi*, Lemon lily and *Calochortus plummerae*, Plummer’s Mariposa Lily. The determination from the project botanist is that implementing the Crystal Lake Health Forest Project may affect *Calochortus plummerae*, but will not result in a loss of viability or a trend toward federal listing for this species, based on design feature protections and the geophytic nature of the species. An additional determination was made that *Heuchera elegans* and *Lilium parryi*, will not be affected by the project based on the fact that design features have been included in the proposed action to eliminate the impacts to these species. Additional design features

have been added to the Proposed Action as a result of recommendation from the project botanist. These design requirements are noted later in the decision.

Suitable habitat or the physical presence of 13 Forest Service sensitive wildlife species was noted during surveys of the project area. The species are noted in the Biological Assessment/Evaluation of the Crystal Lake Forest Health Project. It is the determination of the project's wildlife biologist that this project will not threaten viability nor lead to a trend towards federal ESA listing of any of Forest Service Sensitive species.

2. Flood Plains, Wetlands, or Municipal Watersheds

There are no floodplains, wetlands or municipal watersheds within the project area. The Land Management Plan Riparian Conservation Standards will be applied during implementation of the project where applicable.

3. Congressionally Designated Areas, such as Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas, or National Recreation Areas

There are no congressionally designated areas within the project area (ANF, 1987).

4. Inventoried Roadless Areas

The project is not located within an inventoried roadless area (Forest Service, 2000).

5. Research Natural Areas

There are no research natural areas within the project area (ANF, 1987).

6. American Indians and Alaska Native Religious or Cultural sites

Evidence of Native American archaeological sites does exist within the treatment area. These areas will be identified to the project manager who will implement measures for the appropriate protection.

7. Archaeological Sites or Historic Properties or Areas

The Forest Heritage Resources Program Manager completed the assessment for the project and determined with mitigation measures (noted later in this decision), implementation of the project could occur without additional consultation under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

Based on the above, I find that there are no extraordinary circumstances or conditions that might cause the action to have significant effects.

SCOPING & PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

An Interdisciplinary Team was assembled to evaluate the proposed action. This team consisted of District Assistant Resource Officer, Esmeralda Bracamonte; District Resource Officer (retired), Karen Fortus; Forest Archeologist, Keli Brasket; District Biologist, Leslie Welch; Wildlife Biologist, Maeton Freel; Soil Scientist, Nikos Hunner; Fire Management Specialist, David Kerr; Botanist, Wendy Boes and Forest Botanist, Janet Nickerman. The group did not identify any adverse issues during the scoping period.

The proposed action has been available for public review and comment on the Angeles National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions since April 2, 2009. Scoping letters were mailed to the forest's list of interested parties on April 20, 2009. One comment was received from the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works (LADWP). The comment regarded the possible disturbance of a rain gauge located at Crystal Lake. Coordination between Forest Service staff and the LADPW will assure that the proposed action does not affect the LADWP equipment.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

This proposed action is consistent with management direction (Angeles National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan), as required by the National Forest Management Act (FSM 1926.41, and FSH 1909.12); National Environmental Policy Act; Endangered Species Act; National Historic Preservation Act; Clean Water Act; Clean Air Act; and all other applicable Acts.

This action will not require a Civil Rights Impact Statement because it will not have a significant impact on the social environment.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

Implementation of this project may take place immediately.

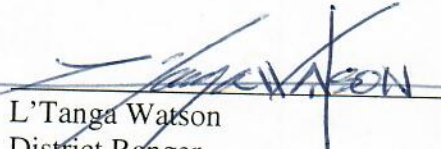
ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This action is not subject to notice, comment and appeal under the requirements of 36_CFR 215.

CONTACT PERSON

For further information about this decision, contact Esmeralda Bracamonte, Assistant Resource Officer, San Gabriel River Ranger District, Angeles National Forest, 110 N. Wabash, Glendora CA 91741, or by telephone (626) 335-1251.

APPROVED


L'Tanga Watson
District Ranger
San Gabriel River Ranger District

DATE

3-17-2010