

Decision Memo
for
VCNP Vegetation Management and Fuel Reduction Proposal

Valles Caldera National Preserve
Sandoval County, New Mexico
August 8, 2003

PROPOSED ACTION:

It is my decision to harvest small diameter trees along the New Mexico Highway 4 corridor and around the Headquarters office compound on approximately 500 acres of Valles Caldera National Preserve lands, in order to create open pine stands that serve as fuel breaks. Wood that is removed may be used for either lumber or firewood, and remaining limbs and tops will be piled and burned. No new roads will be constructed and existing skid trails and landings will be used where possible. Aspen patches will be retained although conifers encroaching on meadow ecosystems will be removed. Trees will be removed from the understory, leaving the larger diameter pines to maintain canopy cover and provide for wildlife habitat.

Location of Proposed Action:

One project area is ½ mile around the Headquarters Office compound, in the southwestern corner of the Valles Caldera National Preserve (VCNP), on the western edge of the Valle Grande. The legal description for the project area is T.19N., R.4E., Section 21, New Mexico Principle Meridian. The other project area is along New Mexico State Highway 4, in the southwestern corner of the VCNP, with a legal description of T19N., R3E., Sections 28, 33, and 34, New Mexico Principle Meridian.

Environmental Protection:

The following measures will be utilized to protect the environment and assure that any potential impacts are minimized:

1. Maintain down logs that are in advanced decomposition stages.
2. Cut and remove by hand, trees that occur on steep slopes (> 30%) or sensitive areas.
3. An archaeologist will be on available to evaluate any new artifacts that might be uncovered.
4. Limit skid trails and landings to less than 15% of the total area.
5. Implement Best Management Practices to protect soils and water resources.
6. Protect steam corridors by limiting equipment crossings and the use of prescribed fire in these areas.

PURPOSE AND NEED:

The vegetation management project is being implemented for the following reasons:

1. Dense conifer stands have created fuel hazards along a heavily traveled road corridor and around the Headquarters area that is frequently used by visitors.
2. Due to past fire exclusion, small conifers are creating fuel ladders that could carry fire from the ground to the crowns of the mature trees.
3. Meadow encroachment by conifers is changing the ecosystem type and reducing the overall forage capability.
4. Thinning and removal of small diameter trees will create a more open stand that is resilient to disturbances, such as fire, insects, and disease.
5. Development of a defensible fuel profile zone provides a safe and effective point from which to fight fire.

REASONS FOR THE DECISION:

The Valles Caldera National Preserve has many acres that are thick with trees and brush. The areas identified for thinning are in locations that have seen numerous fire starts over the past years or are areas that surround visitor facilities. Defensible fuel profile zones, or fuel breaks, have been shown to be effective ways in reducing the devastating effects from wildfire. Tree crowns in these stands are far enough apart that fire is not easily carried between treetops. In addition to fire susceptibility, these stands are starting to decline from mistletoe and spruce budworm attacks. Thinning a stand will make it more resilient to insects and disease by providing more resources such as water and nutrients to the trees. Implementation of this project will improve forest health, create large diameter trees, and protect the stands from catastrophic fires.

REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION:

An environmental analysis was conducted for this proposed action. As a result of that analysis, a determination has been made that the proposal is in a category of actions that are excluded from further documentation in an Environmental Assessment or an Environmental Impact Statement. That category of exclusion is established by the Trust's draft NEPA procedures as published in the *Federal Register* (Vol. 68, No. 28, p.6987), *Treatment of forest structure and fuel conditions for the purpose of reducing the hazard of large, stand-replacing crown fires in areas where such high severity fires are outside a historic range of variability. Projects under this category are limited to an aggregate area in the Preserve of no more than 640 acres in a calendar year, and may involve prescribe fire and/or the removal of live trees, the diameter of which will be:*

- (A) *No larger than nine inches at breast height; or*
- (B) *Determined by publicly available site-specific size class information used to define an appropriate diameter and basal area distribution of trees to be removed.*

The proposal is to implement a forest thinning project that would improve stand conditions by removing small diameter trees.

FINDINGS OF NO EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES:

An Interdisciplinary Team was formed from resource specialists working for the Valles Caldera National Preserve. That team consisted of an archaeologist, soil scientist, and wildlife biologist. These resource specialists did not identify any significant issues during project development, and all concerns were addressed by inclusion as part of the standard management requirements.

It was also determined through the environmental analysis that there were no extraordinary circumstances or conditions, as listed in the Federal Register (Vol. 57, Num. 182, pg 43208, section 30.3 (2)) related to this proposal that might cause the action to have significant effects. Specifically, this determination is based upon the absence, among others, of adverse effects on the following:

1. *Steep slopes or highly erosive soils.*

This project does not have steep slopes nor is it on highly erosive soils. The slopes are relatively flat (< 10% gradient) and the soils are stable and covered by considerable organic material. Removal of trees on slopes greater than 30% will be accomplished by hand.

2. *Threatened or endangered species or their critical habitat.*

There are no threatened, endangered, or proposed plant or animal species identified in the project area. A Biological Assessment was prepared for both terrestrial and aquatic species (available in the project file). The project area has not been identified as critical habitat for threatened and endangered species.

3. *Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds.*

There are no flood plains or wetlands in the project area. This area is not within a municipal watershed.

4. *Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas.*

This project is not within a wilderness area or National Recreation Area.

5. *Inventoried roadless areas.*

This project is not within an inventoried roadless area.

6. *Research Natural Areas.*

This project is not within a Research Natural Area.

7. *Native American religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas.*

A heritage resource survey was completed for the southwestern portion, along New Mexico State Road 4 in June 2003. Six (6) heritage resource sites have been previously recorded within the project area and an additional 37 sites and 27 isolated occurrences were located and recorded. A final report has been prepared on the effects of the project. The New Mexico State Historian Preservation Officer (NMSHPO) has reviewed and concurred with the report with condition as stipulated.

The VCNP has also consulted with local Native American communities regarding this proposal. No significant cultural or traditional concerns were expressed by these groups. No other cultural resource issues have been identified in the project area, and conclusions from the archaeological report are available in the project file.

A heritage resource survey has been completed for the Headquarters area of the project area but the report has not been finalized. No activities associated with this project will begin within the Headquarters area until the heritage resource report is completed and submitted to the New Mexico State Historian Officer and concurrence has been given on the consultation and clearance.

SCOPING AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT:

Project development included discussions between resource specialists working for the Valles Caldera National Preserve. This Interdisciplinary Team visited the project area and resource issues were discussed and recommendations proposed, which have been included in the project design.

In addition to internal discussions, the proposed action was posted on the VCNP website on April 29, 2002. A scoping letter was mailed on May 10, 2002, to more than 500 potentially interested and affected persons. This mail list included State and County agencies, Tribal governments, recreational groups, environmental groups and individuals. Twenty-four responses were received from various persons regarding the proposal. After reviewing each of those comments letters, it was determined that there were no significant issues that needed to be addressed.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS:

All management practices and activities of the proposed action are consistent with the management direction as identified by the Council on Environmental Quality and in accordance with the Code of Federal Regulations (7CFR1b.2). This project is also consistent with the National Environmental Policy Act (1969), the Endangered Species Act (1973), the Federal Clean Water Act (1972), and the Clean Air Act (1977).

IMPLEMENTATION DATE:

Thinning activities will begin this summer and may take up to three years to complete.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITY:

This project is not subject to appeal pursuant to Public Law 106-248, Section 108(f)(6).

CONTACT PERSON:

For more information, contact: Dennis Trujillo, Preserve Manager
Valles Caldera National Preserve
2201 Trinity Drive, Suite C

Los Alamos, NM 87544
(505) 661-3333

SIGNATURE AND DATE:

Approved by: _____/s/_____
DENNIS TRUJILLO
Preserve Manager, Responsible Official

_August 8, 2003_____
Date