



FACT SHEET



United States Department of Agriculture
Web: <http://www.usda.gov>

United States Department of Interior
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Making a Difference Cibola National Forest - New Mexico

The Tajiue Watershed Restoration Project, located 45 miles southeast of Albuquerque near the Manzano Mountains, proposes to treat approximately 17,000 acres of overgrown pine, mixed conifer and juniper forest to reduce wildfire risks that threaten the historic land grant villages of Abo, Manzano, Punta de Agua, Tajiue and Torreon, as well as the Pueblo of Isleta. Members of these land grants united to form the Las Humanas Cooperative, USDA's principle partner on the project.

There may be opportunity for private landowners to obtain federal grants to treat their in-holdings in order to further reduce the potential for catastrophic fire within this area. Decades of tree growth and fire suppression have created stand conditions that are highly susceptible to catastrophic wildfire. The Tajiue watershed was identified in 1999 as a critical watershed in need of restoration work to protect valuable resources. Dense stands and excessive ladder fuels are also contributing to making this watershed a high risk of loss to catastrophic wildfire. The Tajiue Watershed Restoration project area was identified as a priority watershed on the Forest and the surrounding communities have been identified as communities-at-risk within the National Fire Plan.

There are many values at risk of loss from wildfire due to over-stocked stands and the proximity of private developments that adjoin federal lands creating a wildland urban interface (WUI) zone. These values include riparian vegetation, scenic values, fisheries, water quality, and threatened/sensitive wildlife species habitat. The project area is also the headwaters for the Estancia Basin. Vegetation removal could improve water availability downstream to communities within Tarrant County.

The Tajiue Watershed Restoration project will retain old growth components and create stand conditions that improve tree growth. The focus will be on removal of small diameter trees. A monitoring plan will be developed that includes the use of multiparty monitoring, and the analysis will be NEPA compliant.

Thinning and removal of material will be done through various partners under numerous authorities. Las Humanas has the opportunity to continue to employ community members through thinning projects in Tajiue. The Mountainair Range District is working with P&M Signs to establish biomass areas in the project and could use stewardship authorities for this work.

In order to accomplish much of the work on the Tajiue Watershed Restoration project, the Forest will exercise several new tools and authorities under the President's Healthy Forests Initiative and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003. The District Biologist and District Ranger will complete the required training prior to completion of the analysis for this project for the new Endangered Species Act counterpart regulations in an effort to streamline the analysis process.

The stewardship contracting authorities offer an additional set of tools to enable the Cibola to enter into goods for services agreements with Tajiue partners or other successful business ventures. These authorities allow the Forest Service to offset costs associated with thinning and fuels reduction activities such as fuelbreak construction with the value of any Forest Products removed during the activity. This offset allows the Government to seek services for less cost or to offer more acres for the same cost with less administrative red tape.

The use of stewardship contracts will also allow the agency to complete much of the restoration activities that do not involve the removal of a product, such as erosion control activities, or removal of brush in the understory. These types of activities can be included in a stewardship contract and the value of the product used to offset the cost of the treatment.

The Tajiue Watershed Restoration project may include the use of stewardship contracting as well as several other types of contracts to complete the identified restoration activities.

As comments are received by the Forest, an analysis of comments will occur in order to determine if other alternatives should be considered. The environmental analysis will then be submitted to the public for review. Under HFRA, there is not an appeal process as defined in 36 CFR 215, instead the public will be able to object to the alternative that is likely to be chosen prior to a decision being made (36 CFR 218). Once all objections are evaluated, a recommendation is made and final decision is rendered. A decision is expected in early 2005.

Collaboration with key stakeholders has improved the quality of the proposed action, and the understanding by the public as to why this project is being proposed at this time. Comments and suggestions identified during pre-NEPA meetings with the public have been incorporated into the proposal, thus avoiding future conflicts as the analysis progresses.

The Tajique Watershed Restoration project is the only one that has been proposed under the HFRA to date. This project meets all of the requirements under HFRA in that more than 75 percent of the project area is within a WUI and the remaining area is in fire regime condition class 3. The Cibola National Forest has been working closely with the affected publics in an attempt to resolve their concerns and collaborate on the project design. A multi-party monitoring process will be included in the project and incorporated as activities are completed.

Title I applies to project analysis that is documented in an EA or EIS. Projects must be within a wildland-urban interface (WUI) or in fire regime condition class 2 or 3. Tajique meets this requirement.

Title II, biomass utilization, applies to the Tajique project in that local industry (P&M Signs) has been working with the Forest Products Lab in Madison, Wisconsin, to develop new technologies for developing a plastic/wood product that is strong and durable as a replacement to solid wood products (signs, shingles, siding, decking, etc.). This local industry employs a small number of local people, but has the potential to expand and employ many more. The type of product that is currently needed for this enterprise is juniper, however, as the industry expands to include a co-generation plant and as the technology advances, several other types of tree species will be used in the production process.

Title III, watershed forestry provides federal grant money to non-industrial private forest land owners to address watershed issues on non-federal lands. The Watershed Conservation Districts in the Tajique watershed have been receiving grant money for the past couple of years to assist private land owners in improving rangeland conditions and increase available water. More projects are scheduled for next year as funding becomes available. Private in-holdings within the Tajique project area would be good candidates for forest restoration treatments under Title III.



Portable sawmill on Mountainair Ranger District in action. August 26, 2004.

For more information on the Healthy Forests Restoration Act and the Healthy Forests Initiative, visit www.healthyforests.gov

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