
File Code: 1950
Date: March 3, 2022

Dear Forest Friends and Neighbors,

The Sierra National Forest team would like your comments on our proposed Creek Fire Ecological Restoration Project. We are proposing management actions to respond to conditions created by the Creek Fire.

Project objectives include improving wildlife and aquatic species habitat, reestablishing forested conditions, reducing hazardous fuels, improving community, public, employee and contractor safety, and controlling non-native invasive plants. The proposed activities address restoration needs and public safety and include but are not limited to: commercial harvest of live trees or fire-damaged or fire-killed trees, hazard tree felling or removal, vegetation thinning, prescribed fire, meadow restoration, and herbicide use. The project also includes activities to maintain a safe and efficient transportation system including road maintenance and rehabilitation, and temporary road construction. The Creek Fire is the largest fire to have occurred on the Sierra National Forest, and one of the largest in California history. Therefore, we're looking at a much larger scale of restoration activities than previously attempted on the Sierra National Forest. There is an urgent need for an effective and timely management response, particularly for the reforestation, hazard abatement, and safety aspects of the project.

This letter provides a summary of the project and the proposed action. A more detailed description of the purpose and need and proposed actions, as well as maps, are posted to the project website for public review and comment: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=60422>.

Summary of the Need for Action

The Creek Fire started September 4, 2020 and burned roughly 380,000 acres in Fresno and Madera Counties, before it was fully contained on December 24, 2020. The fire affected National Forest System Lands and recreation infrastructure managed by the Bass Lake and High Sierra Ranger Districts of the Sierra National Forest. The fire contained large areas of high burn severity, where we expect a low chance of natural regeneration of conifer forest. We also expect detrimental effects to soil and a potential for excessive sedimentation impacting water quality.

The fire area also contained unburned or low-intensity fire areas. Three post fire assessments documented the changed conditions and considered both (1) the potential for ecological degradation because of the fire and (2) areas that experienced improvement as a result of beneficial fire effects. The assessments included management recommendations which have informed the development of our proposed action. We have determined a need for management actions outside of designated wilderness and inventoried roadless areas to restore wildlife and aquatic habitat, maintain ecosystem resiliency, and provide for public safety and community protection. Considering the urgency and



scale, post-fire management needs to be creative, address bigger areas, and occur more quickly than in the past. To meet this challenge, we are taking new approaches to planning, funding, and implementation, particularly collaboration and partnerships.

Ecosystem resilience – We have determined a need for restoration activities outside of designated wilderness areas that can restore wildlife and aquatic habitat, reestablish conifer forests, improve forest health, and address the spread of non-native invasive species occurring in the post-fire environment. In areas degraded by fire, there is a need to reestablish conifer forest, especially for very large high burn severity patches which are unlikely to have natural regeneration. This includes restoring wildlife habitat impacted by high vegetation burn severity and restoring forested conditions near streams and other waterbodies. There is also a need to restore instream and upland coarse woody debris to provide habitat for amphibian, turtle, and fish species that rely on these habitat components. Coarse woody debris would also reduce soil erosion and maintain soil productivity in areas prioritized for reforestation or natural recovery. Across the project area, fire suppression activities and loss of native ground cover have led to a dramatic increase in invasive plant species; therefore, there is a need for invasive species control.

Thinning and fuels reduction is needed to increase ecosystem resiliency of surviving trees and reforested areas to future disturbance and allow for the introduction of fire consistent with the natural fire regime. In areas where mature forest remains, there is a need to protect these stands from future fire and help them thrive, particularly where it serves as key wildlife habitat. Seed propagation from these areas would help facilitate natural recovery as a compliment to active restoration activities. Forest thinning would ultimately foster healthy forest conditions (reduce potential impact from insect and disease), reduce hazardous fuel loadings, promote resilient wildlife habitat, and maintain visually appealing forests within patches of unburned to low severity fire.

Public health and safety – In areas where hundreds of thousands of dead trees dominate the landscape, there is a need to remove trees for safety reasons, particularly along roadways and areas where the employees, permittees, or contractors may be working. There is also a need to reduce safety hazards within recreation areas affected by the fire and restore a forested landscape that improves visitor experiences. There is a need to reduce hazardous fuels along major roadways, within the wildland urban interface defense zones, and in areas where reforestation activities are planned to reduce risk of future wildfire.

Access and transportation system – Finally, we have also identified a need to promote a safe and sustainable road and trail system in the area affected by fire. Long-term access is needed for restoration activities, recreational opportunities, and future fire suppression. There is also a need to minimize road failures and debris to downslope aquatic ecosystems.

Although this proposal focuses on areas where there is a need for active restoration, some areas within the large fire footprint have been improved or maintained by fire. In these areas, there are no management actions currently identified, but we would monitor natural recovery.

Summary of Proposed Action

The proposed action includes the following activities on National Forest System Lands within the project area to restore degraded conditions in areas of higher fire severity and maintain or enhance

conditions in unburned areas or areas of lower fire severity. Each of these activities is described in more detail in the sections that follow.

Wildlife and aquatic habitat restoration in conjunction with reforestation, resilience, and other restoration treatments described below, including:

- Piling or felling some dead trees and logs (large woody material) where needed to provide for denning, hiding cover, soil stabilization, and aquatic habitat features.
- Creating aquatic organism passage at key stream crossings.
- Enhancing black oak aggregates.
- Restoring meadows.

Reforestation on up to approximately 68,000 acres and within certain recreation sites to reestablish conifer forests. Activities include: (1) commercial tree removal for fuels reduction and planting site preparation; (2) additional vegetation removal by hand, mechanical, and herbicide use to prepare areas for planting; (3) planting of conifers or monitoring of natural regeneration; and (4) conifer release treatments to reduce competing vegetation using hand, mechanical, or herbicide methods.

Non-native invasive plant control and management through integrated pest management approach using herbicide, mechanical, and manual methods where invasive plant species occur throughout the project area.

Hazard tree felling and removal along roadsides and within certain recreation sites, administrative sites, range infrastructure, heritage sites, and within areas where crews would be working.

Hazardous fuel reduction along key roadsides for ingress and egress and in key wildland urban interface defense zones as well as within reforestation areas through thinning, removal of dead trees, piling, and prescribed fire.

Fuel break maintenance of existing fuel breaks, through removal of dead, dying, or green trees as needed using mechanical or manual methods, targeted grazing, or herbicide treatments.

Improve or maintain approximately 150 miles of existing roads or construct temporary roads to allow access for above activities, provide for a safe and efficient transportation system, and reduce effects to water quality and other natural resources.

Enhance resiliency, forest health, and wildlife habitat within remaining living conifer forests on up to 53,000 acres through thinning, piling, and prescribed fire.

Design features to protect sensitive project area resources from undesired effects and ensure consistency with the Forest Plan, law, regulation, and policy.

How to Comment

I would welcome your comments on this proposed action, along with supporting reasons I should consider in issuing a decision. Most helpful to my team are comments identifying specific areas or conditions where you have concerns with our proposals, or alternate approaches that align with project goals and various laws, policies, and regulations that guide management of public lands.

To be most helpful in the planning process, please submit your comments by March 18, 2022 to ensure timely preparation of the environmental analysis and decision. You may submit comments via the online comment form at: <https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public//CommentInput?Project=60422>

Attachments to comments must be submitted in one of the following formats: Microsoft Word, rich text format (rtf), or Adobe Portable Document format (pdf). Comments submitted to email addresses or in other formats than those listed or containing viruses will be rejected. If unable to access the online form, comments may also be submitted by regular mail to Sierra National Forest Supervisor's Office; Attention: Creek Fire Project Comments; 1600 Tollhouse Road, Clovis, CA 93611. The office business hours for submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays.

Comments received in response to this initial request, including names, addresses, and any other information provided with the comments, will be considered part of the public record and may be subject to the Freedom of Information Act and released if requested.

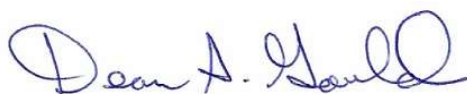
Upcoming Planning Steps

We intend to conduct an environmental analysis for this project pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act. At this time, we anticipate a finding of no significant impact. There will be another opportunity for interested individuals and organizations to review and comment on the environmental analysis (anticipated early summer 2022).

The proposed project is an activity implementing a land management plan and is subject to pre-decisional objection process at 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and B. Only those who submit timely and specific written comments §218.2 regarding the proposed project or activity during a public comment period established by the responsible official are eligible to file an objection §218.24(b)(6). For issues to be raised in objections, they must be based on previously submitted specific written comments regarding the proposed project or activity and attributed to the objector. It is the responsibility of all individuals and organizations to ensure that their comments are received in a timely manner. For objection eligibility, each individual or representative from each entity submitting timely and specific written comments regarding the proposed project or activity must either sign the comments or verify identity upon request §218.24(b)(8).

For additional information, please contact Christine Handler, at christine.handler@usda.gov or 559-920-2188. Thank you for your interest and participation in developing this project.

Sincerely,



DEAN GOULD
Forest Supervisor

cc: Judi Tapia