

DECISION MEMORANDUM FOR THE CHIEF

Proposed Emergency Response, R5 Fuels Reduction Treatments within Giant Sequoia Groves, Sequoia and Sierra National Forests

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with recent wildfires has left more dead and dying trees across the landscape. This has left the Giant Sequoia groves extremely vulnerable to high severity fire. Giant Sequoia trees are extremely fire tolerant and therefore were thought to survive all fires. In 2015, a few monarch Giant Sequoias were killed in a high severity wildfire, and in 2017, a few more were killed. Then in 2020, approximately 17 percent of all monarch Giant Sequoias were killed in the Castle Fire. At that time the agency began to understand what the extreme fuels build up and drought could do to these iconic Giant Sequoia trees and began environmental analysis to address the problem. Then in 2021, the Windy Fire and the KNP Complex burned another five percent of the monarch Giant Sequoias. The remaining unburned groves and unburned portions of burned groves are under severe threat to wildfire. Lightning strikes threaten the groves daily and immediate action is needed to remove fuels from around these trees to limit further mortality.

The identified actions are not likely to have significant environmental impacts based on preliminary analysis and experience implementing similar projects. Implementation of the emergency actions, starting with hand treatments in the three unburned groves at greatest risk of severe wildfire, would begin immediately. Fuels treatments within nine groves would be initiated this summer (2022) and work on the three additional groves could begin in fall 2022. Emergency response actions would accelerate treatment work by up to 9-12 months in most groves and up to several years for others.

The Giant Sequoia Working Group and Giant Sequoia Lands Coalition, representing a diverse group of landowners and scientists have been engaged in the management of Giant Sequoias. These groups are particularly concerned about the substantial impacts that severe wildfires could have on Giant Sequoia groves if the agency does not take immediate action to reduce the threat. Public scoping and tribal consultation have been initiated for the Castle Fire Restoration and Hume Basin Restoration projects. Tribal consultation has been initiated for Windy Fire Restoration Project. Public scoping and tribal engagement for the other projects will be initiated within 45 days of approved emergency actions. Public scoping and tribal engagement have indicated strong support for fuels reduction treatments in Giant Sequoia groves, though some have expressed concern with using mechanical equipment within the groves and removal of trees between 8 to 20 inches dbh. There is general support for handwork and prescribed burning.

RECOMMENDATION

Approve the proposed emergency response for NEPA compliance under 36 CFR 220.4(b)(2) with associated conditions so that the Sequoia and Sierra National Forests can immediately implement fuels reduction treatments within 12 Giant Sequoia groves.

Proposed Emergency Response:

1. Grant authorization to begin the fuels reduction treatments on approximately 13,377 acres (displayed in attached maps) prior to completion of the documentation of the Categorical Exclusions (four) and Environmental Assessments and FONSI (three).
2. For the four Categorical Exclusions, exclude the requirement at 36 CFR 220.6(e) to document a decision to proceed with an action in a decision memo for certain Categorical Exclusions.

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3. For the three Environmental Assessments and FONSI, exclude the requirement at 36 CFR 220.7(c) to document a decision to proceed with an action in a Decision Notice if an EA and FONSI have been prepared.

Associated Conditions:

4. Ensure compliance with other laws, such as Endangered Species Act, National Historic Preservation Act, and Clean Water Act are in place before implementation of the fuels treatments.
5. Ensure all required consultations and permitting have been completed before implementation of the emergency fuels treatments. Emergency provisions may be employed where necessary, such as emergency consultation under ESA.
6. Stakeholders will be notified of the approved emergency response.
7. For those projects which have not initiated public or tribal involvement, initiate public scoping and tribal engagement within 45 days of approved emergency response actions. Continue engagement with the Giant Sequoia Working Group and Giant Sequoia Lands Coalition.
8. Monitor the effects of the actions subject to emergency response. Reconsult with my office through the Director of Ecosystem Management Coordination if monitoring reveals effects outside of those disclosed in the ongoing environmental analysis.
9. The intent is to complete the Emergency Response for Emergency Fuels Treatments by the end of 2023, however emergency fuels treatments may occur through 2024. The Pacific Southwest Region will provide regular implementation progress updates. An annual review will be conducted to re-evaluate the need for the emergency response.
10. All other proposed actions in the EAs and CEs which are not part of this emergency response will follow the normal 36 CFR 220 and 36 CFR 218 process.

DECISION BY THE CHIEF:

Approval: _____

Disapproved: _____

Discuss with Me: _____

Date: _____

Enclosures (1)

Background and Rationale for Emergency Response with Maps