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Record of Decision for Travel Management

Gila National Forest



Cover photo: Forest road south of Luna, Quemado Ranger District, Gila National Forest

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Record of Decision for Travel Management on the Gila National Forest

Catron, Grant, Hidalgo, and Sierra Counties, New Mexico

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Gila National Forest

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Introduction

General Location

The project area consists of Federal public lands managed and administered by the Gila National Forest (Forest), in southwestern New Mexico. The Forest has over 3.3 million acres of public land within its boundary with approximately 126,000 acres of other ownership, including private and National Park Service lands. This includes the portion of the Apache National Forest in New Mexico that is managed by the Gila National Forest. Figure 1 is a vicinity map of the planning area.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is to comply with the Travel Management Rule by providing a system of roads, trails, and areas designated for motor vehicle use by class of vehicle and time of year on the Gila National Forest (36 CFR 212.50). On the Gila National Forest:

- There is a need to comply with 36 CFR 212.51(a), which requires the forest to designate a system of roads, trails, and areas for vehicle use by vehicle class and, if appropriate, by time of year.
- There is a need to manage motorized vehicle use on National Forest System lands on the Gila National Forest in accordance with the provisions of the Travel Management Rule and 36 CFR parts 212, 251, and 261.
- There is a need to comply with 36 CFR 261.13, which requires the forest to prohibit motor vehicle use off the system of designated roads, trails, and areas (close the forest to motorized cross-country travel).
- There is a need to amend the forest plan to comply with the Travel Management Rule.

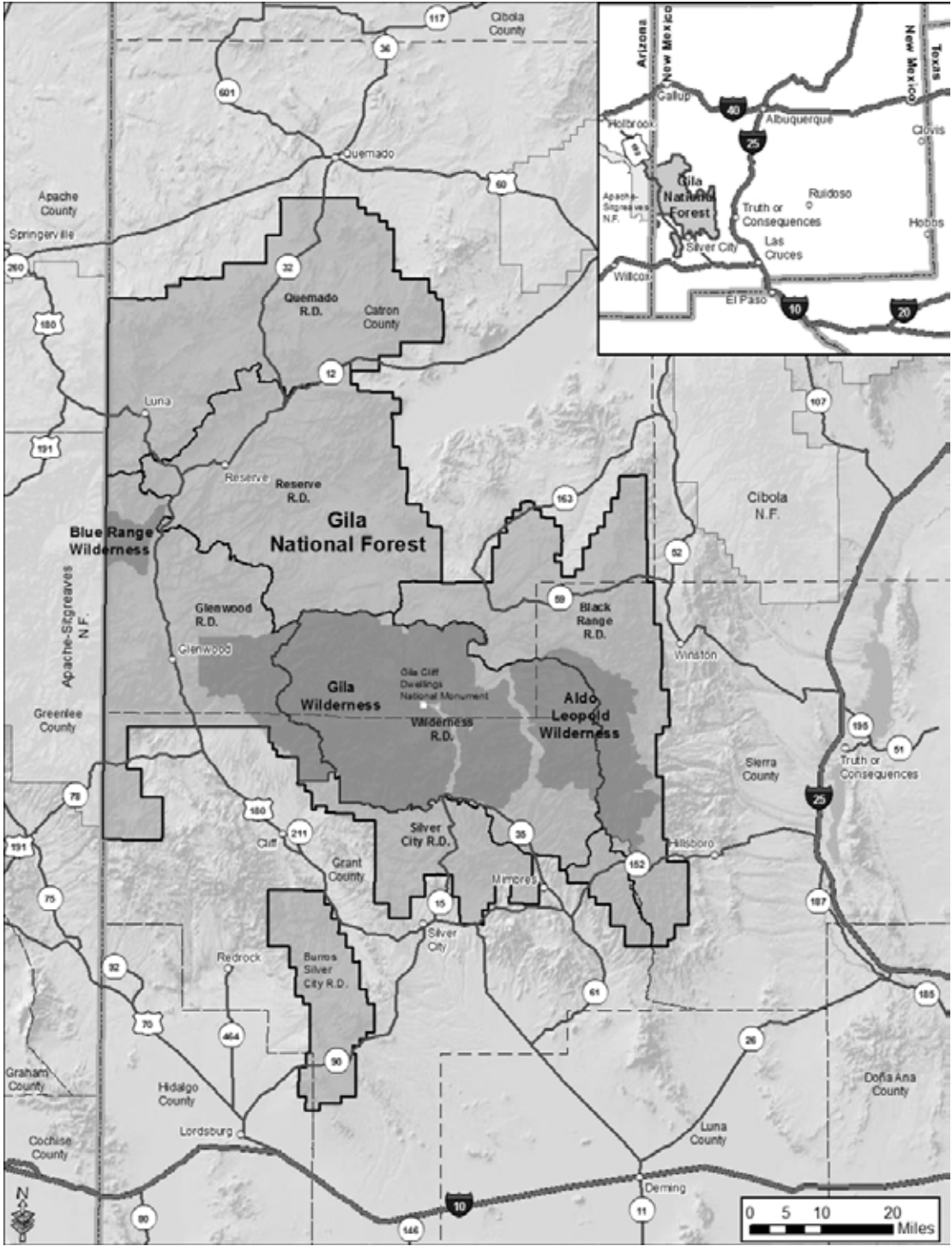


Figure 1. Location of the Gila National Forest

Decision and Rationale

Based on the analysis presented in the Final Environmental Impact Statement for Travel Management on the Gila National Forest (FEIS), I have decided to select and implement alternative G, with the following changes:

- Drop BR6 – this unauthorized route was proposed to be added to the National Forest System for administrative use or written authorization only for range management purposes on the Black Range Ranger District. Upon further review, it was decided that this route would not need to be motorized to conduct management activities associated with the allotment.
- Drop 4084 F – this closed road was proposed to be re-opened to access facilities associated with the Fort Bayard area water system on the Silver City Ranger District. Upon further review of the map of the water facilities, this was the incorrect road, and therefore, does not need to be re-opened for administrative use.
- Motorize the entire length of Road 522 – just south of Highway 152, a segment of National Forest System Road 522 was proposed to be open for administrative use or written authorization only and another segment was proposed to be closed to motorized vehicles due to concern for vehicles, especially full-size vehicles, to be able to safely traverse the area without damage. The proposed closure did not eliminate access into the area as there was access still available from the other end. During the Silver Fire (2013), there was a need for direct fire vehicle access into the area off of Highway 152, so the road condition was improved to allow vehicle access. The designation of this road will be open to motor vehicle use by the public.

The changes listed above are within the range of effects described within the FEIS. These changes are not reflected in the alternative G FEIS map packet. The maps still show the symbology associated with alternative G as described in the FEIS.

Alternative G, as described in the FEIS, also reflects the public response to the DEIS as well as updated or new information included in the environmental analysis (appendix A of FEIS). With the exception of the three changes above, the designated motorized system of roads and trails, corridors for big game retrieval and motorized dispersed camping, and motorized areas are shown in the alternative G FEIS map packet.

Alternative G meets the purpose and need by providing for a system of roads, trails, and areas designated for motor vehicle use by class of vehicle and time of year as specified in the Travel Management Rule (rule) and by minimizing adverse effects to natural and cultural resources (FEIS, chapter 3). The changes proposed in alternative G prohibit driving off roads or motorized trails unless in a designated area or fixed-distance corridor; clarify which roads and trails are open to motorized use; and amend the forest plan to be consistent with the rule. The FEIS uses the best available science, as evidenced by the extensive literature citations (FEIS reference section) and, where appropriate, acknowledges incomplete or imperfect information.

I feel the designated motorized roads and trails open to the public and the roads and trails under administrative use only, provide the access needed for both the public and management of the Forest. The majority of the roads to be closed to motor vehicle use are less than one-half mile in length; some had signs of little to no use; some had cultural or natural resource concerns; and some were duplicates of others or parallel to each other and ended near the same locations. I understand that any road to be closed may remove motorized access to a potential favorite area, but reducing the number of motorized routes on the Forest provides better protection for water

and soil resources, cultural resources, and aquatic and terrestrial species and habitat including habitat for game species such as deer, elk, and pronghorn.

Many comments favored selecting alternative E because it reduces road mileage by nearly 50 percent and because current budget trends for road maintenance are declining. Other comments stated that roads are not being maintained now, so we should leave them as they are. None of the alternatives can be fully maintained with current and projected Forest funding levels. Therefore, I still feel that alternative G provides a balanced effort to protect resources and provide for public access and continued Forest management.

Alternative G increases the motorized trail system from 16 to 179 miles—a tremendous increase to the Forest’s motorized trail system. It may feel like this mileage is a reduction from the current situation where the forest is open to cross-country travel. However, the designated system minimizes potential damage to natural and cultural resources related to unmanaged off-road use as compared to current conditions (FEIS, chapter 3). In addition to motorized trails, open roads will also be available to access the Forest.

This alternative provides a 3-acre area on the Reserve Ranger District for motorcycle and all-terrain vehicle (ATV) use. Overall, the reduction to 3 acres of unrestricted cross-country use is a significant change with the elimination of cross-country travel across the entire Forest. It does not preclude consideration of similar opportunities if identified in the future. But the Forest may or may not have suitable areas that can provide for all desired uses.

Many hunters commented that being unable to drive to retrieve their game meant they would be unable to hunt because of their age or disability. For motorized big game retrieval and motorized dispersed camping corridors, I chose alternative G because it considers hunters the same as campers by allowing them to drive in the same places. I made this selection because the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish requested this treatment during coordination meetings and in comments; and it is consistent with other New Mexico national forests that proposed motorized big game retrieval corridors.

Alternative G would allow hunters to drive up to 300 feet from either side of roads designated with a corridor to retrieve their game. I understand that this may not seem to be an adequate distance for some hunters, and may pose an obstacle to game retrieval, especially for elk or other large game animals. But, reducing motorized access and route density, effects to big game species and their habitat would be beneficial, and the experience and/or quality of hunting may also benefit by reducing the probability of a motorized vehicle passing by and disturbing the hunt.

Alternative G has approximately 1,316 miles of motorized dispersed camping corridors and 36 areas. These motorized dispersed camping corridors and the 36 areas in alternative G capture the majority of locations where motorized dispersed camping currently occurs. I also believe the ability to drive off the road 300 feet from either side of the road where motorized dispersed camping corridors are designated is an adequate distance to establish a camp.

Many commenters expressed concern that camping will become concentrated if motorized dispersed camping was limited to these corridors. I do not feel this would occur as the majority of locations traditionally used now are captured within the designated corridors and areas. Plus, camping is not limited to the corridors or areas. The public can park, within a vehicle length or vehicle-plus-trailer length, along any of the roads open to motorized use in alternative G, as well as county roads within the Forest, and can set up a camp any distance from the parked vehicle.

I have determined that the Forest Plan amendments are needed and appropriate. The changes to Amendments 1 through 6 were assessed in the FEIS. I have determined the amendments are not a significant change to the Forest Plan in terms of the National Forest Management Act. The amendments adopt language that complies with the Travel Management Rule.

FEIS Effects Analysis Consideration

Roads Closed to Motorized Uses – Roads that are closed to motorized uses under any of the alternatives will continue to be on the landscape and, to some extent, continue to impact the various forest resources for some time to come. These routes will continue to be sources of such things as fugitive dust, sediment to stream channels and aquatic habitat, and will continue to fragment wildlife habitat. The overall greater benefit of route closures will not be realized until the Forest moves forward with a public planning process to determine which of the routes should be restored to a more natural state to benefit resources.

Public safety – Analysis in the FEIS indicates there is no overall difference in the action alternatives from the current situation in which public safety concerns are relatively low. All action alternatives proposed restricting some National Forest System roads to highway-legal vehicles only. Most of these roads are within campground facilities and have considerable amounts of vehicle and foot traffic from campers and family groups. Therefore, I support restricting vehicle types along the roads listed in table 2 of the FEIS, as it reduces the potential risk within our recreational facilities and, for some roads, complies with state law. With this restriction, I understand that ATV, utility-terrain vehicle, and other non-highway-legal vehicle users may be impacted by having to trailer their vehicles out of or around these facilities or segments of roads to ride.

National Forest System Roads Maintenance Costs – Analysis in the FEIS shows that none of the action alternatives identify a road system that can be fully maintained with current or projected funding levels. A road system that fits current funding levels would be inadequate to provide an appropriate level of access for public and Forest management.

Continental Divide Scenic Trail – Commenters expressed concerns regarding the potential impacts of motorized roads and trails near to or crossing the Continental Divide Scenic Trail. Alternative E reduces the number of motorized roads and trails crossing the trail, thus reducing the potential risk of motorized vehicle access to the trail system. The other action alternatives reduce motorized crossings from the current situation, but not to the extent of alternative E. Alternative G does reduce the risk of motorized access to the trail and reduces motorized roads near the trail, improving the qualities associated with hiking the Continental Divide Scenic Trail.

National Forest System Motorized Trail Maintenance Costs – All action alternatives except alternative E would significantly increase the motorized trail maintenance and operational costs from the current situation. By designating a motorized trail system, impacts to cultural and natural resources are reduced, along with the potential for motorized and nonmotorized interactions. Although budgets could potentially increase with a designated motorized trail system, the Forest now has more opportunities to look at partnerships, grants, and other funding sources that could not previously be considered.

Recreation Opportunity Spectrum – All action alternatives would continue to provide a mix of motorized and nonmotorized opportunities on the Forest.

Visual Quality Objectives – All action alternatives would be consistent with the visual quality objectives of the Forest. Eliminating unlimited cross-country travel and developing unauthorized routes would have beneficial effects to visual qualities with the reduction of impacts to vegetation and soils.

Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs) – Alternatives D and E provide the most benefit and improvement to resource conditions and roadless characteristics within inventoried roadless areas. Impacts to roadless characteristics in alternative C are similar to the current situation. Alternative G reduces motorized road miles by 27 percent across all roadless areas on the Forest, and has an increase of approximately 26 miles of motorized trail opportunities. Alternative G displays the potential for reducing risk to cultural and natural resources as well as some increase in benefit to some recreational opportunities and some resource conditions, but not all to the same extent as alternatives D and E.

Lower San Francisco River – This portion of the San Francisco River lies within both an inventoried roadless area and wilderness study area. The 1986 Forest Plan recommended that the Lower San Francisco River not be designated wilderness. There was a great deal of public comment and concern regarding the motorized route system in the San Francisco River, specifically the area from Big Dry Creek to Mule Creek. All alternatives in the DEIS analyzed changes to the route system in this area. Due to the level of public comment, I decided to have the San Francisco River area specifically addressed in the FEIS.

Comments included adding no motorized routes and removing motorized access from the San Francisco River to reduce impacts to riparian and aquatic species and their habitat. Comments also focused on maintaining access for fishing, camping, bird watching, and other traditional family outings. I recognize that this is only one of very few public access points to the river.

The action alternatives provided differing mixes and amounts of motorized roads and motorized dispersed camping and motorized big game retrieval corridors. I feel that alternative G is the best choice to provide public access to the San Francisco River, continue the parking and camping opportunities currently used near the river, and greatly reduce the impacts to resources adjacent to or along the San Francisco River. Direct impacts to water quality, streambank stability, riparian vegetation, and aquatic species including critical habitat for loach minnow and spikedace from motorized uses would be eliminated at 39 of 40 stream crossings under alternative G. There is also a reduction of 88 percent of the motorized routes within 300 feet of the New Mexico Environmental Department's listed impaired (303d) reach of the San Francisco River.

Air Quality – Action alternatives did not vary significantly from the current situation for air quality. The generation of fugitive dust and emissions may be reduced due to the change in motorized miles of roads and trails. However, reduction of miles does not necessarily mean a reduction in the number of vehicles, so there may be little difference amongst alternatives.

Soils – Of the action alternatives, alternatives D and E provide the greatest reduction in relative risk to soils from motorized vehicle use on roads, trails, and areas within moderate or severe erosion hazard and unsatisfactory or unsuited soils. Alternative C exhibits the least amount of reduction to relative risk of impacts to soils. Alternative G shows a significant reduction, greater than 94 percent, for disturbance to soil resources within moderate or severe erosion hazard and unsatisfactory or unsuited soils with corridors being designated for motorized big game retrieval and motorized dispersed camping. The reduction of relative risk to soils for motorized roads and trails in alternative G, although not as great as alternatives D and E, still shows a measurable reduction.

Riparian and wetlands – The action alternatives vary in the potential acres of disturbance to riparian and wetland habitats. Alternatives D and E display the greatest reduction of potential disturbance by motorized roads, trails, and areas. Alternative C shows little to no change from the current use. Alternative G reduces potential disturbance to these resources from motorized roads and trails, but not to the level of alternative D or E. It is within the same range of reduction of potential disturbance (over 80 percent) by motorized big game retrieval and motorized dispersed camping as alternatives D and E.

Water Quality – The action alternatives vary in the effects to water resources. The assessment analyzed impacts to perennial, intermittent, ephemeral, Outstanding National Resource Waters, and impaired—New Mexico Environmental Department listed 303d—streams. The most reduction of potential impacts is displayed under alternative E, with little to no change under alternative C. Although the reduction of impacts to water resources from motorized roads and trails is not as high as alternative E, alternative G does reduce the overall number of crossings on perennial, intermittent and ephemeral channels, and impaired channels. The potential risk of impacts by motorized dispersed camping and motorized big game retrieval is significantly reduced with alternative G.

Aquatic Species – The action alternatives vary in their level of risk to aquatic resources. For the most part, alternatives D and E display the greatest reduction of risk to aquatic resources from motorized roads, trails, and areas. Alternative C displays little or no change from the current situation. Alternative G reduces the overall risks to aquatic resources from motorized impacts compared to current levels, but not to the extent of alternative E. There is significant reduction of the risk of impacts to aquatic resources from motorized dispersed camping and motorized game retrieval with alternative G.

Aquatic Threatened and Endangered Species and Designated Critical Habitat – The relative risk of impacts to listed aquatics species and their habitat would be reduced in alternative G. For most listed species, the reduction is about the same as alternatives D and E. Overall, there is a reduction of direct and indirect impacts and the relative risks to listed aquatic species and their habitat.

Aquatic Sensitive Species – The effects determinations for each sensitive aquatic species do not vary by the action alternatives. The potential risk to species varies slightly between alternatives, however, the overall effects determination shows that the species may be impacted, but it will not likely result in the loss of species viability or create a significant trend toward Federal listing.

Wildlife – Ungulates and Carnivores – Depending on the species, the effects of motorized route density and habitat disturbance vary. Alternative E reduces the potential for direct and indirect effects from motor vehicle interactions such as collisions or disturbance. Alternative E also has the greatest benefit for reducing disturbance to the species habitat. Alternative G decreases the potential for direct impacts to species and decreases the potential for disturbance to species and their habitat from motorized vehicle uses.

Mexican Gray Wolf – Effects to the wolf and its habitat vary by alternative. Alternative E provides the greatest beneficial effects to the Mexican gray wolf and its habitat. Alternative C displays little change from the current situation. The changes to the motorized system and the elimination of unlimited cross-country motor vehicle use under alternative G improve habitat conditions and decrease the potential risk of direct and indirect effects to the Mexican gray wolf, but not to the extent of alternative E.

Wildlife Sensitive Species – The effects determination for Forest Service aquatic sensitive species does not vary by alternative. However, the potential to affect individuals varied by alternative. The effects determination for aquatic sensitive species shows that the species may be impacted, but it will not likely result in the loss of species viability or create a significant trend toward Federal listing.

Management Indicator Species – The potential to affect individuals and their habitat varies by alternative. Alternative G reduces the potential effect to the species and their habitat, but not to the extent of alternative E. Under alternative G, population levels and habitat trends will not be adversely affected.

Mexican Spotted Owl – All action alternatives vary in the effects to habitat, critical habitat, and disturbance to individuals. Alternatives D and E provide the greatest beneficial effects to the species and its habitat. Alternative G also provides beneficial effects, but not to the extent of alternatives D and E.

Chiricahua Leopard Frog – All action alternatives vary in the amount of reduced motorized routes, stream crossings, and motorized use in corridors within leopard frog critical habitat and dispersal areas. Alternative E greatly reduces motorized activities and provides the greatest benefit to the species and its habitat. The changes to the motorized system and elimination of cross-country travel under alternative G reduce the risk of potential effects to the leopard frog, but not to the extent of alternative E.

Southwestern Willow Flycatcher – All action alternatives vary in the effects to critical habitat and disturbance to individuals. Alternative E provides the greatest beneficial effects to the species and its habitat, especially with the lack of motorized big game retrieval and motorized dispersed camping. The changes to motorized cross-country travel and the designation of corridors for motorized dispersed camping and big game retrieval reduce motorized activities within occupied sites and habitat under alternative G. This reduction is beneficial to the species and its habitat, but not the extent of alternative E.

Sensitive Plants – The action alternatives vary in the potential risk of disturbance to known occurrences of sensitive plants. Alternative E has the least potential risk of disturbance to sensitive plants. Alternative G has the same reduction of risk as alternative E except for four species related to corridors for motorized big game retrieval and motorized dispersed camping. For three of the four species, there is still a reduction of risk of disturbance when compared to the current situation. The fourth species does not present any change from the current level. Under alternative G, motorized vehicle use would not impact the majority of the sensitive plants. Impacts to individuals will not likely result in the loss of species viability or create a significant trend toward Federal listing.

Invasive Species – Under all action alternatives, the potential risk of introduction, establishment, and spread of invasive species will continue to a certain degree due to natural pathways and vectors. Alternative E has the least risk for the introduction, establishment, and spread of invasive species from motorized roads, trails, and areas. Alternative C is similar in potential risks as the current situation. Alternative G reduces the overall potential risks, but not to the extent of alternative E. The reduction of acres of motorized dispersed camping and big game retrieval to designated corridors under alternative G greatly reduces the risk for introduction, establishment, and spread of invasive species compared to the current situation. Also, the reduction of stream crossings and miles of motorized routes within riparian areas will reduce the risk of aquatic invasive species introduction, establishment, and spread.

Cultural Resources – The action alternatives vary in the relative risk of direct or indirect effects to cultural resources. Alternatives D and E have the least potential risk to cultural resources compared to the other action alternatives and the current situation. The potential risk of direct and indirect effects from motorized roads, trails, and areas is reduced under alternative G, but not to the same extent as alternatives D and E. The changes to the motorized system and the elimination of unlimited cross-country motor vehicle use under alternative G are highly beneficial for cultural resources across the Forest.

The Gila National Forest consulted with and received concurrence from the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Officer on travel management survey strategy, survey methods, and mitigation measures for sites in 2012. This report was based on alternative G, the preferred alternative, as described in the DEIS. Changes to alternative G that require Section 106 compliance and consultation will be consulted through the phasing process as outlined in appendix I, Standard Consultation Protocol for Travel Management Route Designation of the Southwestern Region Programmatic Agreement.

Under phasing, consultation will continue through 2013 and 2014. Several reports are currently being written for travel management surveys. After Section 106 consultation and compliance is completed on these reports, only a few hundred acres of motorized dispersed camping corridors, newly proposed routes, and areas remain to be surveyed. I anticipate this work will consist only of small survey areas, site visits, and report writing. I also anticipate that most of this work will be completed by the release of the first motor vehicle use map.

Phased work may show the need to protect cultural resources from potential adverse effects of travel management designations. If this occurs, I anticipate that some designations may be dropped and not appear on the motor vehicle use map.

Access for Disabled and Elderly Populations – We received many comments about retaining motorized roads and trails and cross-country travel to facilitate access to the Forest and other opportunities for people affected by age or disability. All action alternatives may have an effect on people with these concerns. The action alternatives treat everyone the same, and therefore, are not considered discriminatory. There is no legal requirement to allow persons with disabilities to drive places closed to motorized use, and allowing such exemptions would not be consistent with resource protection and other management objectives of the Travel Management Rule (29 U.S.C. 794; 7 CFR 15e.103).

Firewood Gathering – All action alternatives may affect how people collect firewood; however firewood collection would continue to be allowed under all alternatives.

Jobs and Income – Compared to the current situation, alternatives D and E present the greatest potential for a reduction in jobs and incomes related to motorized activities. Alternatives F and G display less of a reduction. I do not find the effects described to be significant; however, some businesses and counties are likely to disagree when looking at the numbers. As identified in the analysis, these numbers may be overstated due to limitations of the model to assess effects described in the social and economic-assumptions and methodology section. Also, the potential of business opportunities or changes related to motorized and nonmotorized activities over time are unknown.

Environmental Justice – None of the action alternatives are expected to have a disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effect.

Public Involvement

This project has been listed on the Forest's schedule of proposed action since April 2008. Before scoping the proposed action, from 2006 to 2007, we held 46 public meetings and open houses across the Forest to introduce the Travel Management Rule and the Forest travel management process to over 900 participants. In the fall of 2008, we held another 18 workshops, which more than 800 people attended. The workshops generated more than 2,000 public comments. Over 380 individuals, including landowners, range permittees, and outfitters and guides were contacted, and meetings were held with local motorized user groups, conservation groups, various local organized groups, Federal and State agencies, and local county officials.

The Forest published the proposed action on September 11, 2009. We mailed the proposed action to approximately 4,000 people and we held 10 open houses. In response, we received almost 16,000 letters and emails.

The draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) was released to the public on January 7, 2011, for a 60-day comment period; which ended March 7, 2011. We mailed the DEIS to 16,513 people and we held 4 open houses. In response, we received more than 2,000 comment letters on the DEIS.

Tribal Consultation

Tribal consultation for the Forest Service is guided by a variety of laws, Executive Orders and Memoranda, as well as case law. Laws include the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and subsequent amendments (Public Law 89-665, 15 October 1966), Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 (Public Law 96-95, 16 U.S.C. 470aa-mm, 31 October 1979), American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 (Public Law 95-341, U.S.C. 1996 and 1996a, 11 August 1978), National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) (Public Law 91-190, 42 U.S.C. 4321-4347, 1 January 1970), Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (Public Law 101-601, 16 November 1990), and National Forest Management Act of 1976 (Public Law 94-588, 22 October 1976, codified in 36 CFR 219). Executive Orders and Memoranda include a 1994 Memorandum on Government-to-Government Relations with Native American Tribal Governments (59 FR 85, 4 May 1994), E.O. 13007 on Accommodation of Sacred Sites (61 FR 104, 29 May 1996), and E.O. 12898 on Environmental Justice (59 FR 32, 16 February 1994).

Tribal consultation for the travel management project was also guided by Section III of the U.S. Forest Service Region 3 Heritage Programmatic Agreement with New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office, and Section V of appendix I of the programmatic agreement, the Standard Consultation Protocol for Travel Management Route Designation. These documents ensure that tribes were consulted as early as possible in the travel management planning process, to identify and address places of traditional and cultural significance, and ensure tribal access to those locations.

The Gila National Forest is committed to, and has conducted tribal consultation and provided documents associated with the NEPA during the travel management process. These consultations were carried out at the government-to-government level, ensuring that interested tribes were given the opportunity to participate in the planning process as required in NEPA and elsewhere. Gila National Forest has and will continue to be engaged in ongoing tribal consultation through all phasing work of travel management. The following 11 tribes or chapters were consulted regarding travel management:

- Pueblo of Acoma
- Alamo Navajo Chapter
- Ft. Sill Apache Tribe
- The Hopi Tribe
- Pueblo of Laguna
- Mescalero Apache
- The Navajo Nation
- Ramah Navajo Chapter
- San Carlos Apache
- Ysleta Del Sur Pueblo
- Pueblo of Zuni

Letters, phone calls, providing travel management materials, and face-to-face meetings at tribal offices were the primary methods of consultation (USDA Forest Service 2013j). Although all tribes were contacted, not all were available or expressed an interest in consulting at the time.

Alternatives Considered

In addition to alternative G, I considered five other alternatives. These are briefly described below. Chapter 2 of the FEIS provides a detailed description and comparison of these alternatives. Alternative A was the Forest's proposed action, but after scoping, it was eliminated from detailed analysis. Reasons for eliminating the alternative are explained in chapter 2 of the FEIS. Alternative F was identified as the modified proposed action that was carried forward during analysis.

Alternative B – No Action

Alternative B would continue the current situation. NEPA regulations at 40 CFR 1502.14 require that “agencies shall...include the alternative of no action.” This is intended to provide a baseline against which the effects of other alternatives can be measured. Under alternative B, cross-country motorized use would continue and the current open National Forest System roads and motorized trails would remain in place. Many members of the public favored alternative B. However, they felt that not all of the Forest System roads or unauthorized (user-created) were displayed, and therefore, they believed alternative B did not reflect the current situation. The rule allows me to incorporate roads that are currently closed or decommissioned by previous decisions into the process and it does not require the Forest to locate and map all unauthorized routes. But that did not preclude the Forest from considering including identified closed, decommissioned, or unauthorized routes provided by the public or Forest personnel in any of the alternatives.

I did not select alternative B because it does not meet the intent of the purpose and need by not implementing the Travel Management Rule; not prohibiting motorized cross-country travel; and not managing motor vehicle use and transportation system in accordance with the provisions of the Travel Management Rule and 36 CFR 212, 251 and 261.

Alternative C

Alternative C provides the most motorized opportunities. This alternative has the most miles of motorized roads and trails open for the public; the most miles of designated motorized dispersed camping corridors; and the widest areas and most miles of designated motorized big game retrieval. This is the only alternative that provides designated single-track motorized trail miles specifically for motorcycle riders. Some members of the public favored this alternative as it increases motorized trail miles and does not greatly change the miles of open motorized roads and access on the Forest. I did not choose alternative C because other alternatives better meet the purpose and need. Although this alternative eliminates unlimited cross-country travel, the 1-mile corridor for motorized big game retrieval and additional miles of motorized trails do not provide a significant reduction in the risk and potential impacts to natural and cultural resources compared to the current situation where unlimited cross-country travel is allowed.

Alternative D

Alternative D provides for moderate motorized access while providing greater protection of sensitive resources. This alternative has more miles of roads; provides opportunities for motorized trails; and has more corridors for motorized big game retrieval and motorized dispersed camping than alternative E, but less than the other action alternatives. The corridors for motorized big game retrieval and motorized dispersed camping are the same. It proposes more roads for seasonal use to protect resources than other action alternatives. I did not choose alternative D because I feel the miles of motorized roads and trails are not adequate for access and management of the Forest.

Alternative E

Alternative E provides the least amount of motorized roads open to the public and emphasizes the most resource protection and nonmotorized recreation opportunities. It does not provide motorized trail opportunities, limiting vehicles such as ATVs and motorcycles to designated open motorized roads. It does not provide designated corridors to drive off-road for big game retrieval; therefore, all game retrieval would have to be done by foot, horseback, or other nonmotorized methods. Also, there are no designated corridors for motorized dispersed camping. The lack of motorized dispersed camping corridors would require people to park their vehicles or vehicle with trailers next to the side of the road and either vehicle/trailer camp next to the road or carry their gear to a camping spot.

Although this alternative provides the most benefit to cultural and natural resources and provides more opportunities for nonmotorized recreational experiences, I did not choose this alternative because I find the reduction of motorized road and trails too restrictive for public use and access to the Forest. Also, the lack of motorized dispersed camping corridors eliminates the ability for the camp setting to be centered around the vehicle or trailers, which is a very common activity on the Forest.

Alternative F – Modified Proposed Action

Alternative F is very similar to the proposed action presented during scoping. It reduces the miles of roads and increases the miles of motorized trails, but still emphasizes motorized recreation opportunities. This alternative proposes a one-half-mile motorized big game retrieval corridor for elk retrieval and provides corridors for motorized dispersed camping. I did not select alternative F

because the motorized big game corridor is not consistent with other New Mexico national forests that proposed motorized big game retrieval corridors nor is it in line with New Mexico Department of Fish and Game recommendations. The amount of motorized roads and trails and dispersed camping corridors are similar to alternative G.

Alternative G – Preferred Alternative

Alternative G motorized roads, trails, areas, and dispersed camping corridors are similar to alternative F. The differences lie in some of the roads, trails, and corridors proposed under this alternative, which provide a different mix of motorized and nonmotorized opportunities to be considered. The corridor for motorized big game retrieval and motorized dispersed camping is the same as alternative F. I chose this alternative for the reasons outlined previously.

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study

Chapter 2 of the FEIS describes alternatives that were considered but eliminated from detailed study. Components of these alternatives were incorporated into one or more alternatives studied in detail, and included in the decision.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

The environmentally preferred alternative is the alternative that will best promote the national environmental policy as expressed in NEPA's section 101 (42 U.S.C. 4321). The environmentally preferable alternative causes the least harm to the biological and physical environment. It also is the alternative that best protects and preserves historic, cultural, and natural resources.

I believe alternative E is the environmentally preferred alternative. Alternative E reduces road and motorized trail mileage open to the public by approximately 50 percent; adds the least amount of unauthorized routes to the motorized system; closes the most area to cross-country motorized travel; and greatly reduces impacts to the natural, historic, and cultural resources.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

I find that the decision to provide for a system of roads, trails, and areas designated for motor vehicle use by class of vehicle and time of year by implementing the changes listed in alternative G is consistent with the intent of the Forest Plan's long-term goals and objectives.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concurred with the species determinations for this proposal and provided a biological opinion in accordance with section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (Consultation # 22420-2011-F-0032). The New Mexico State Historic Preservation Officer also concurred. Mine is an independent decision based on the analysis for the Gila National Forest.

The specialist reports in the project record certify that alternative G is consistent with a variety of laws and regulations pertaining to each resource topic, and I incorporate the findings in each report into this record of decision. These include:

- Clean Air Act
- Clean Water Act
- Endangered Species Act
- National Environmental Policy Act
- National Forest Management Act

- National Historic Preservation Act
- Executive Order 11644, as amended by Executive Order 11989 (regulating motorized off-road travel)
- Executive Order 11990 (Wetlands Management)
- Executive Order 11998 (Floodplain Management)
- Executive Order 12898 (Environmental Justice)

Implementation

If no appeal is filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of the decision may begin on, but not before, the 5th business day following the close of the appeal filing period (§215.15).

When an appeal is filed, implementation may occur on, but not before, the 15th business day following the date of appeal disposition (§215.2). In the event of multiple appeals of the decision, the implementation date is controlled by the date of the last appeal disposition.

Implementation Date

This decision will be implemented under the provisions of the Travel Management Rule, which requires publication of the motor vehicle use map. The motor vehicle use map is the legal documentation displaying the roads, trails, and areas open to motor vehicle use on the Forest.

Implementation will occur on the effective date of the published motor vehicle use map, subject to administrative review timelines described below. At this time, the Forest estimates the first motor vehicle use map to be published in 2014.

The Forest recently experienced heavy rain events that caused flood damage to many roads forestwide. Some of the roads damaged during these events are designated open to motor vehicle use by the public under alternative G and, I do not expect a need to change the designations. Various levels of maintenance may be necessary to repair the flood damage to these roads. We will work toward having these roads open for motorized use by the implementation date.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to the regulations at 36 CFR 215. People or organizations who commented on the DEIS during the 60-day notice and comment period that ran from January 7 until March 7, 2011, have standing to appeal. People who commented anonymously or outside of the notice and comment period (i.e., before or after the close of the comment period) do not have standing to appeal.

The appeal must be filed (regular mail, fax, email, hand delivery, express delivery, or messenger service) with the appropriate Appeal Deciding Officer. Submit appeals to:

Regional Forester, Appeal Deciding Officer
Southwestern Region
333 Broadway Blvd., SE
Albuquerque, NM 87102
Fax number: (505) 842-3173

Appeals may be hand delivered to the above address during regular business hours from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, excluding Federal holidays.

Electronic appeals may be submitted to: appeals-southwestern-regional-office@fs.fed.us, with .doc, .rtf, .pdf, .txt, or other formats readable by Microsoft Word. The appeal must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic appeals. When an appeal is electronically mailed, the appellant should normally receive an automated electronic acknowledgement confirming agency receipt. If the appellant does not receive an automated acknowledgement of the receipt of the appeal, it is the appellant's responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other means (36 CFR 215.15(c)(3)).

Appeals, including attachments, must be in writing, fully consistent with 36 CFR 215.14, and filed (postmarked) within 45 days following the date of the publication of the legal notice of decision in the Silver City Daily Press and The Herald. The publication date of the legal notice of the decision in the newspapers of record are the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal (§215.15 (a)). Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. It is the responsibility of persons providing comment to submit then by the close of the appeal period.

The content of your appeal must meet the content requirements described in 36 CFR 215.14.

In compliance with the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), please be advised that written appeals received, including names and addresses, will be considered part of the public record and will be available for public inspection.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service's appeal process, please contact:

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Silver City, NM 87508
575-388-8267
r3_gila_travel@fs.fed.us

Signature and Date



KELLY M. RUSSELL
Forest Supervisor

9/26/2013
DATE