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Draft Record of Decision

Gila National Forest Land Management Plan

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

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Gila National Forest Land Management Plan

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

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Cooperating Agencies:	**New Mexico Department of Agriculture, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, and San Francisco Soil and Water Conservation District**
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Introduction

This record of decision documents my decision and rationale for approving the Gila National Forest Land Management Plan (hereinafter referred to as "the final LMP"). This decision implements the Forest Service's 2012 Land Management Planning Rule at 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 219 and fosters productive and sustainable use of our National Forest System lands by promoting sound land stewardship in partnership with communities. This decision also advances other strategic goals of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) including efficient, effective, integrity-driven program delivery with a focus on customer service; maximizing the ability of American agricultural producers to prosper; and facilitating rural prosperity and economic development.

The Gila National Forest plays a unique role in supporting communities in southern New Mexico and the southwestern United States. The final LMP implements the USDA's strategic plan and was designed with the following three goals:

- Maintain or restore sustainable, resilient terrestrial ecosystems;
- Protect and restore watershed health, water resources, riparian and aquatic ecosystems, and the built environment that relies on them; and
- Actively contribute to social and economic sustainability in the broader landscape and connect citizens to the land.

Counties directly affected by this decision are Catron, Grant, Hidalgo, and Sierra Counties. The final LMP improves customer service to the American people. It streamlines management of the forest and reduces the potential for future conflict by reducing the complexity of the plan and making it easier to read and understand.

The Gila National Forest contributes to rural prosperity, providing economic opportunities for wood and other botanical products, livestock grazing, and recreation. Many residents rely on the forest's abundant fuelwood, which is used as the primary, and sometimes only, fuel source for heating rural homes. Communities and families that live around the Gila National Forest continue to rely on forest resources for economic opportunities and to sustain the social and cultural practices that form the backbone of rural New Mexican life. The final LMP recognizes active forest management as a primary tool to improve forest health, reduce wildfire risk, and restore and maintain watersheds. Water quality and riparian and aquatic ecosystem health are persistent, overarching concerns. The final LMP incorporates fire management approaches that will help address the wildfire crisis and build climate resilience.

The assessment, land management plan, public notices, and associated environmental documents are available online at the Gila National Forest website. The planning record includes documents that support analytical conclusions made throughout the planning process and the alternatives considered. The planning record is available at the Gila National Forest supervisor's office located in Silver City, New Mexico.

Forest Setting

The Gila National Forest (also referred to as "the forest") is one of five national forests in New Mexico. The forest covers nearly 3.3 million acres in Catron, Grant, Hidalgo and Sierra Counties, including the portion of the Apache National Forest in New Mexico, and is divided into six ranger districts—Quemado, Reserve, Glenwood, Silver City, Wilderness, and Black Range. It shares boundaries with the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests in Arizona; lands managed by the State of

New Mexico, the U.S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management, and the Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument, managed by the National Park Service; as well as several small villages, towns and private lands. The final LMP covers all National Forest System lands within the Gila National Forest's administrative boundary, including the portion of the Apache National Forest in New Mexico.

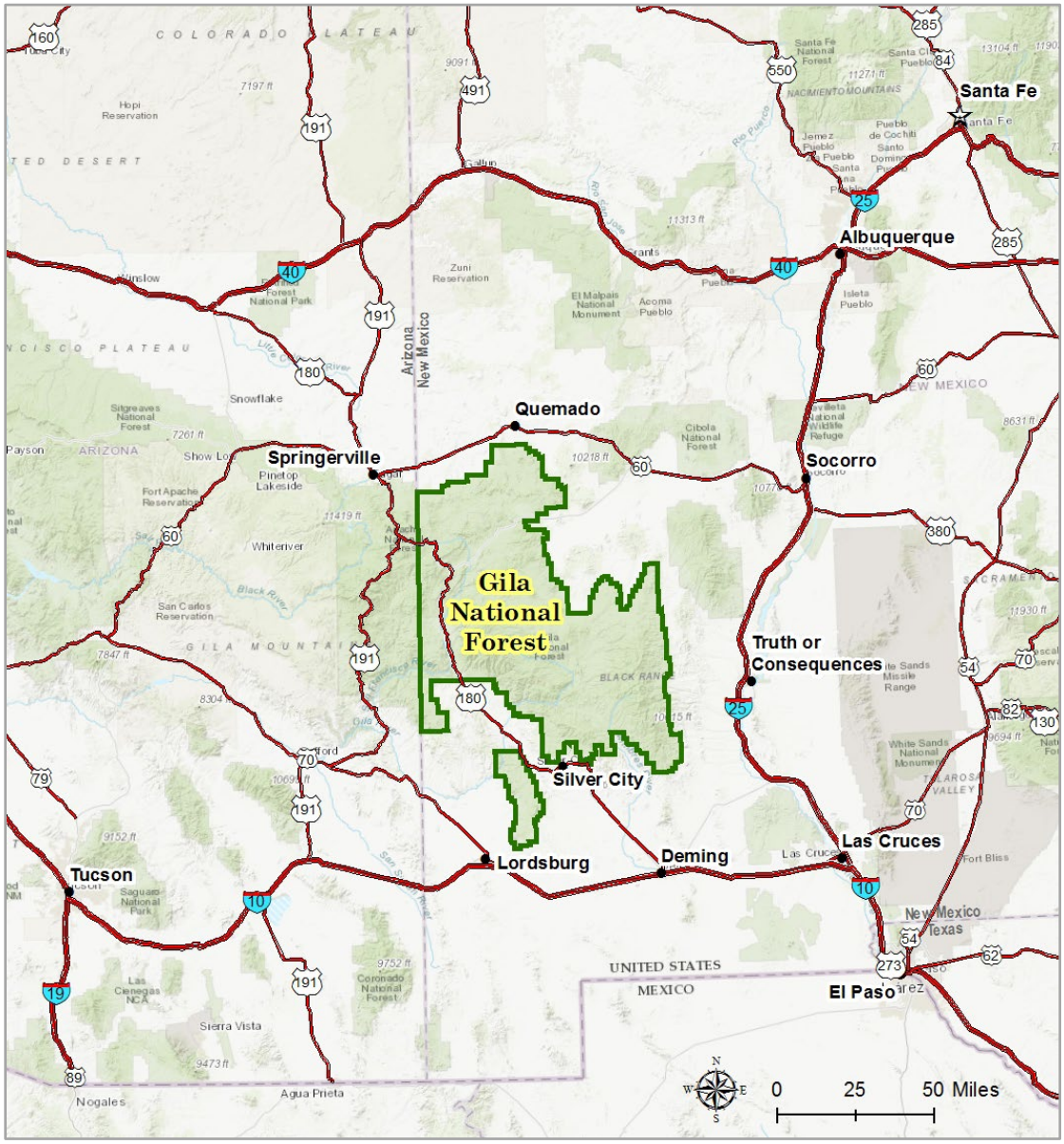

Figure 1. Gila National Forest vicinity map

National Forest System lands managed by the Gila National Forest make up 46, 34, less than 1, and 13 percent of Catron, Grant, Hidalgo, and Sierra Counties, respectively. There are many small unincorporated communities, as well as small incorporated towns and villages within and surrounding the forest. Residents benefit from opportunities to recreate, harvest wood products, and graze livestock in the forest. Each community is geographically and historically rooted to a particular landscape in the Gila National Forest.

The Gila National Forest contributes resources and provides for uses that are important to federally recognized tribes and pueblos, traditional rural communities, and many newcomers to the area—all with connections to the national forest. The forest's natural assets provide the basis for local customs and practices, which contribute to the cultural lives and social institutions essential to the people who live here. These include fuelwood for heating and cooking; timber, latillas, and vigas for construction; opportunities for hunting and fishing; forage for livestock grazing; medicinal plants and herbs; pinyon nuts; family recreation opportunities; water for acequias, livestock and domestic uses including drinking water; and sacred sites significant to tribes and pueblos.

The forest comprises some of the most productive and essential watersheds in southwestern New Mexico and the basic components for biological diversity in the southwestern United States. Its remote and rugged mountains are major sources of stream runoff and regional groundwater recharge. Lands within the Gila National Forest form the headwaters of numerous streams that flow into the Gila, San Francisco, and Mimbres Rivers. The forest contains varied landscapes, vegetation, and wildlife that provide unique combinations of resources and recreation opportunities, attracting a wide spectrum of forest visitors. The State of New Mexico has designated many streams and wetlands in the Gila National Forest's wildernesses as outstanding national resource waters.

Over 2,300 species of plants and animals occur in the Gila National Forest. In addition to playing an important ecological role, diverse wildlife provides enjoyment and aesthetic value for photographers, bird watchers, nature lovers, hikers, and campers. Game species support hunting, fishing, traditional ways of life, and employment for outfitters and guides. The forest supports 13 threatened and endangered species and 2 candidate species (table 1). It also supports many rare species, some of which are found nowhere else in the world. The State of New Mexico's Rare Plant Conservation Strategy identifies 12 important plant areas in the Gila National Forest, three of which received the highest biodiversity ranking of "outstanding." All 12 of these important plant areas support an abundance of rare and endemic plants.

Table 1. Species recognized under the Endangered Species Act that occur in the Gila National Forest

Species	Status
Chiricahua leopard frog, *Lithobates chiricahuensis*	Threatened
Chihuahua chub, *Gila nigrescens*	Threatened
Gila chub, *Gila intermedia*	Endangered
Gila trout, *Oncorhynchus gilae*	Threatened
Loach minnow, *Tiaroga cobitis*	Endangered
Mexican gray wolf, *Canis lupus baileyi*	Experimental
Mexican spotted owl, *Strix occidentalis lucida*	Threatened
Monarch butterfly, *Danaus plexippus*	Candidate
Narrow-headed gartersnake, *Thamnophis rufipunctatus*	Threatened
New Mexican meadow jumping mouse, *Zapus hudsonius luteus*	Endangered
Northern Mexican gartersnake, *Thamnophis eques megalops*	Threatened
Rio Grande cutthroat trout, *Oncorhynchus clarkia virginalis*	Candidate
Spikedace, *Meda fulgida*	Endangered
Southwestern willow flycatcher, *Empidonax traillii extimus*	Endangered
Western yellow-billed cuckoo, *Coccyzus amercanus occidentalis*	Threatened

The Gila National Forest manages just over 792,500 acres of designated wilderness (24 percent of the forest), two designated wilderness study areas totaling 27,660 acres and 733,800 acres of inventoried roadless area (22 percent of the forest). The forest also contains three national recreation trails and over 250 miles of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail. The forest is home to the Gila Wilderness, the nation's first designated wilderness area. Along with the Aldo Leopold and Blue Range Wildernesses, the forest's large, mostly contiguous, wilderness areas provide unparalleled opportunities for solitude and unconfined recreation. The Gila National Forest also hosts one of the few certified international dark sky sanctuaries in the world, and the first on National Forest System lands.

The forest's relatively mild climate supports a wide variety of motorized and non-motorized recreational activities in a back-country setting, with plenty of opportunities for solitude outside of designated wilderness. Of the Gila National Forest's estimated one-half million annual visitors, almost all come for recreational pursuits (USDA FS 2017a), and tourism contributes jobs to the local economy. In New Mexico, annually, outdoor recreation generates over 99,000 direct jobs, producing $2.8 billion in wages and salaries, and $9.9 billion in consumer spending, producing $623 million in state and local tax revenue (Outdoor Industry Association 2018). However, livestock grazing and agency expenditures provide the most socioeconomic benefit in terms of jobs and labor income in the four-county area (see final environmental impact statement).

In 2016, agriculture-related jobs, including timber and ranching, accounted for approximately 8 percent of private sector employment in the four counties comprising the Gila National Forest—Catron, Grant, Hidalgo, and Sierra Counties (Headwaters Economics 2015). Catron County's economy is less diverse, leading to a higher percentage of agriculture-related jobs than Grant and Sierra Counties. Ranching in New Mexico is deeply rooted in history; families have been grazing livestock in the plan area and greater landscape for generations. Livestock ownership and ranch life are powerful forces that bind communities and families, and many ranching operations rely on public lands for livestock grazing. Livestock grazing as a use of the forest comprises approximately one-third of the Gila National Forest's contribution to labor income in the four-county area (see final environmental impact statement).

The Gila National Forest's contribution to the timber and wood product industry in the four-county area generates approximately half of what livestock grazing does in terms of labor income. This use has changed dramatically over the years with national and regional shifts in social values, environmental regulations, and forest conditions. Since the adoption of the 1986 plan, there has been a steady decline in timber harvesting, forest industry, and the infrastructure to support it. The wood product industry, its emerging innovations, and developing markets remain critical to tackling many of the issues pressing forest management today.

The final LMP could contribute approximately 1,131 jobs and $34.3 million dollars annually in total forest management-related labor income to local communities, representing a 2.9 percent increase from current management. National Forest System land management balances the short- and long-term needs of people and nature through collaboration, promoting socioeconomic and ecological vitality, delivering world-class science and technology, and connecting people to the land and one another. The national forest offers opportunities for education and developing scientific understanding. The Gila National Forest plays a significant role in promoting the value of public lands and the importance of sustaining the symbiotic interaction among ecological integrity; the ability of society to produce and consume or otherwise benefit from goods and services; and the ability of society to support the network of relationships, traditions, culture, and activities that connect people to the land and to one another in vibrant communities.

Needs for Change

Over 35 years have passed since the regional forester approved the first forest plan in 1986. Today, we have a better understanding of ecological conditions and trends, the role of natural disturbance processes, and how the disruption of those processes has altered the landscape in ways that make it less resilient to a changing climate. In preparation for plan revision, the planning team conducted an assessment to determine what was working under the 1986 forest plan, ongoing challenges, and new circumstances and conditions that need to be addressed. This preparatory work was presented in two documents completed in March 2017, the "Final Assessment Report of Ecological/Social/Economic Sustainability Conditions and Trends" (USDA FS 2017a) and "Need for Change Statements for Management Direction under the Existing 1986 Forest Plan" (USDA FS 2017b). The needs for change document included 54 individual statements that are broadly summarized here.

> **Plan-wide changes:** Successful implementation also requires good working relationships among leadership, staff, and stakeholders. Leadership and staff have not always capitalized on partners who are willing to help or recognized emerging opportunities. They have also struggled to reach all stakeholders. The plan needs to promote relationships, collaboration, and shared stewardship, and leverage opportunities that have ecological and socioeconomic benefits. The plan also needs to emphasize conservation education as it relates to the agency's multiple-use sustained-yield mission, and leverage opportunities to connect youth and underserved populations with nature and their public lands (USDA Forest Service 2017b).
>
> **Ecological changes:** The plan needs to promote the adaptive capacity and resilience of the forest's ecosystems and watersheds by restoring the structure, composition, and function of native vegetation communities. It also needs to accelerate restoration, remain within reasonably foreseeable budgets, and provide the flexibility for management to choose the best restoration tool or combination of tools, which will vary across the landscape based on site conditions. Plan direction for integrated pest management needs to be strengthened to support this. Beyond restoring the vegetation community components, the plan needs to maintain or improve habitat connectivity and native biodiversity. It also needs to better address soil, watershed, riparian, and aquatic resources while continuing to support compatible multiple uses (USDA Forest Service 2017b).
>
> **Social, cultural, and economic changes:** In addition to the plan-wide changes needed relative to relationships, the plan needs to reflect economic and noneconomic importance that places and uses hold for tribes and local communities. The plan needs to support the adaptive capacity and resilience of socioeconomic systems by continuing to provide for public access and multiple uses. The plan should encourage industry innovations and emphasize opportunities that create ecological benefit, budget efficiencies, and socioeconomic contributions. The plan also needs to provide enough flexibility for adaptive multiple-use management, recognizing that sustainable practices will change with environmental conditions. To comply with planning regulations, the plan needs to update the suitability of lands for timber production, and planning frameworks for recreation opportunities and scenery management (USDA Forest Service 2017b).

The public commented on these needs for change and a preliminary draft plan following publication of the notice of intent to revise the 1986 Forest Plan in the Federal Register on April 26, 2017. Comments received during the assessment phase and scoping were analyzed, grouped into issues, and used to develop the draft LMP and alternatives. The environmental impact statement documents the analysis of five alternatives to meet the need for change and issues raised by commenters. Issues serve to highlight effects, both anticipated and unanticipated, that may occur from the proposed action

or alternatives. Addressing the issues identified during analysis provides opportunities to reduce adverse effects and compare trade-offs. Public comments on the draft LMP and draft environmental impact statement were then used to further refine the alternatives. The Gila National Forest final LMP is a collaborative product resulting from extensive public involvement throughout the plan revision process.

Tribal Engagement

Numerous tribes and pueblos have relied on the lands managed by the Gila National Forest since time immemorial and have sacred sites, cultural heritage sites, and sites for gathering traditional and cultural resources on lands within the forest. Gila National Forest maintains governmental relationships with 13 federally recognized Indian tribes, and relationships with non-federally recognized tribal bands, chapters, and other tribal entities. Tribal involvement began in the initial stages of the planning process. All federally recognized tribes have been contacted by mail and by telephone regarding plan revision. Face-to-face consultation has occurred with 6 of the 13 tribes. The Gila National Forest also participated in regional tribal roundtables held by the Southwest Regional Forester. These discussions brought together all the national forests in the region to discuss, learn, and collaborate with tribes around forest plan revision. The Gila National Forest's tribal liaison regularly reached out to federally recognized tribes to ensure that their interests were included in the plan. Tribal comments included concerns related to access for traditional cultural and religious uses, recommended wilderness, and the wild and scenic rivers eligibility study. Consultation with tribes ensured the revised plan components addressed the above concerns and needs with respect to the Gila National Forest.

Engagement with Federal Agencies, State and Local Governments, and the Public

The Gila National Forest's leadership and planning staff have provided meaningful opportunities for diverse stakeholders to engage and collaborate in the plan revision process, beginning in 2015. These efforts were aimed at cultivating transparency, a shared understanding of the planning process, and regular dialogue among different stakeholder groups. This extensive involvement and feedback resulted in a land management plan that is responsive to state and local governments, other federal agencies, federally recognized tribes, and the public. The final LMP contains specific language, themes and concepts developed through this engagement, and successful implementation fundamentally relies on relationships.

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (42 United States Code (U.S.C.) 4231 et seq.) allows certain governmental organizations to be granted cooperating agency status when the agency has "special expertise with respect to any environmental impact involved in a proposal (or a reasonable alternative) for legislation or other major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment" (40 CFR 1508.5). The decision-making authority for managing the national forest is held by the Forest Service and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Gila National Forest leadership and planning staff reached out to state and local governments and other federal agencies for their interest in cooperating agency status. New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, New Mexico Department of Agriculture, and San Francisco Soil and Water Conservation District all entered cooperating agency status, helped develop the revised LMP, and informed the decision.

Cooperating agencies reviewed and provided feedback on pre-draft and draft products and contributed to plan development by describing their objectives as expressed in their plans and policies, the compatibility and interrelated impacts of these plans and policies, opportunities for the

land management plan to address identified impacts or contribute to joint objectives, and opportunities to resolve or reduce conflicts in the context of developing the final LMP's desired conditions and objectives. Forest leadership and planning staff also coordinated with county governments that opted not to enter cooperating agency status to understand their objectives, opportunities to contribute to shared objectives, and opportunities to resolve conflicts.

Throughout the plan revision process, Gila National Forest leadership and planning staff encouraged local community participation by holding meetings in multiple locations throughout southwestern New Mexico. The public process included design features to improve accessibility for all interested individuals and entities, with a focus on providing meaningful opportunities for youth, rural, low-income, minority and disadvantaged populations. Thirteen of the area's 15 census tracts are carrying a disproportionate climate burden,[1] and 20 percent of households in 6 of the 15 census tracts are living below the poverty line.[2] To provide equitable access, we posted documents online, made printed copies available at many locations, and provided personal hard copies to those that self-identified accessibility needs. At least one bilingual, Spanish-speaking employee was available at most public meetings.

The first public meetings were a series of community conversations held in March 2015 with the Forest Service National Collaboration Cadre. These conversations were meant to build shared understanding of the planning process we were about to embark upon, to hear from the public, and to establish new and strengthen existing relationships with residents, community leaders, local and state governments, tribal members, and non-governmental organizations. Since these initial conversations, public engagement included over 50 additional community conversations, technical meetings, open houses, surveys, symposia, workshops, and field trips. Most meetings were community conversations, typically a couple hours long on weekday evenings, which provided opportunities to exchange information and learn from each other. Technical meetings were scheduled for an extended period during the day to encourage participation by interested local governments, state and federal agencies, non-governmental organizations, and members of the public with more time for detailed discussion on specific topics. Open houses at Forest Service offices provided opportunities for anyone with questions or ideas about plan revision to stop by and visit with planning staff.

In addition to in-person public meetings and open houses, interactive web-based mapping applications provided opportunities to gather public input on the wild and scenic rivers eligibility study and wilderness inventory, evaluation, and analysis process steps. Throughout the wild and scenic rivers eligibility study and wilderness process, we posted documents on the plan revision webpage as they were developed, and we placed hard copies at each district office for the public to review and provide feedback.

Workshops, including field trips, focused on frequent-fire forest vegetation types; helped build shared understanding of the science basis for desired conditions; and provided an opportunity to learn about and discuss that science, management activities, and the opportunities and challenges facing forest management. Partners that helped make the desired conditions workshops possible included New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute at New Mexico Highlands University, Forest

[1] Communities carrying a disproportionate climate burden are those at or above the 90th percentile for expected agricultural loss rate, building loss rate, population loss rate, projected flood risk, or projected wildfire risk owing to the effects of climate change AND are at or above the 65th percentile for low income. In other words, these are communities that are expected to experience high impacts and lack sufficient resources to adapt or recover.

[2] https://screeningtool.geoplatform.gov/en/#7.35/32.239/-108.224.

Service Southwestern Regional Office and Rocky Mountain Research Station, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Earth Systems Ecology Lab at the University of New Mexico.

Online and interactive classroom sessions conducted by Dr. Kathy Whiteman of Western New Mexico University gathered assessment input from youth and educators about existing designated areas, at-risk species, air, soil, water, ecosystems, and ecosystem processes. Planning staff engaged specifically with youth, leading a field day with the Student Wildland Adventure Program, a program focused on low income, minority, community college students. This field day was an opportunity to be in the woods for these young people and to learn about fire ecology and natural resource management. In addition, forest staff engaged in 15 outreach tabling events at county fairs and community festivals to raise awareness and answer questions about plan revision.

The planning team gave presentations to and participated in many meetings organized by other groups, including: county commissions, the Southwestern County Commission Alliance, soil and water conservation districts, Gila Farm Bureau, Grant County Farm and Livestock Bureau, Grant County Cattlemen, Western Institute of Lifelong Learning, Kiwanis Club, Retired Educators, New Mexico Garden Club, New Mexico Native Plant Society, Gila Native Plant Society, Grant County Rolling Stones, The Wilderness Society, New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, Defenders of Wildlife, Southwestern New Mexico Audubon Chapter, Center for Biological Diversity, New Mexico Airstrip Network and Pilots Association, and New Mexico Central Arizona Project Entity.

We released a preliminary draft plan for public review and comment between March 13, 2018, and April 23, 2018. Comments received during this period were used to refine the preliminary draft. The planning staff used input received during the planning process and in response to scoping to identify potentially significant issues. Significant issues are environmental effects that could be caused by implementing a proposed action or alternative that could be meaningfully and reasonably evaluated and addressed within the programmatic scope of the plan. Alternatives were developed around significant issues that involved incompatible and competing preferences concerning use of available resources. The following issues were identified as significant during the public engagement process and drove the development of alternatives.

- Methods or tools for managing vegetation and fuels
- Priority vegetation types
- Roads and infrastructure management related to riparian areas, wildlife, fish, and plants
- Livestock grazing management
- Land adjustments
- Group size limits in wilderness areas
- Length-of-stay limits
- Recommended wilderness areas
- Proposed research natural areas
- Botanical areas

A significant opportunity for public engagement and feedback followed the release of the draft plan and draft environmental impact statement. The draft documents were released to the public on the forest's webpage on December 23, 2019, prior to the formal comment period to allow additional time for review. A notice of availability published in the Federal Register on January 17, 2020, initiated the

formal 90-day comment period, as required by Forest Service National Forest Management Act regulations at 36 CFR 219. The comment period closed April 16, 2020. During the 90-day comment period, the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020, and the libraries and community centers planning staff had distributed hard copies to were closed on March 13, 2020, by order of the New Mexico Governor.

Before the close of the comment period, the Forest Supervisor, Regional Forester, and national headquarters received requests to pause, postpone, or otherwise extend the comment period. National-level leadership determined that the decision to pause, postpone, or extend the comment period was best decided at the local level based on the project, what public engagement had already occurred, and where in the process the project was at. The Forest Supervisor decided to let the comment period close as scheduled and responded publicly in a letter distributed to the contact list on April 7, 2020.

Planning staff did respond to need-based accessibility requests with hard copies of the documents to those that self-identified. Multiple methods of comment submission were available throughout the comment period including mail, email, the Comment and Analysis Response Application (CARA) database, phone, fax, or physical delivery to Forest Service offices, providing for COVID-19 best practice, and commenters used every option available to them. On the last day of the comment period, the CARA system had issues, possibly due to the volume of submissions. A commenter brought this to the attention of planning staff. The planning staff reported the issue to the support desk and posted a message providing two email addresses as alternate submission methods. These email addresses were monitored until midnight—the official close of the comment period—with personal confirmation of receipt emails provided to each commenter. Because of this issue, the Forest Supervisor decided to accept comments that were submitted up to 24 hours following the official close of the comment period. We received over 27,000 comment letters, of which 1,290 contained at least one unique comment.

Planning staff summarized and grouped comments from these letters into similar ideas, interests and supporting reasoning. The final LMP and environmental impact statement reflect changes based on these public comments, as described in appendices A and B of the final environmental impact statement. Key concerns from comments centered on eight major themes summarized in the following paragraphs.

Methods or tools for managing vegetation and fuels—Comments express a preference for or against vegetation and fuels management and specific methods or tools for their management. Some commenters support the use of wildland fire but oppose timber harvest and other mechanical thinning treatments. Other commenters support timber harvest and other mechanical thinning treatments that provide products to people and suggest the Gila National Forest is inappropriately over-reliant on prescribed and naturally ignited wildfire. Some commenters express a preference for or against the use of herbicide to manage vegetation, especially native species. Others would prefer the plan allow no vegetation management to maximize carbon storage and mitigate global climate change.

Wilderness recommendations—Comments express a preference for or against recommended wilderness. Some commenters suggest there should be no wilderness recommendations because of the management constraints that come with it. Others would prefer the maximum amount of area be recommended, or at least the areas identified in a citizen's proposal that was submitted to the planning team early in the process. Many suggest wilderness recommendations as a climate change adaptation and mitigation strategy. Some

individuals and groups object to the evaluation process and analysis criteria used to develop the range of alternatives, especially those used to develop alternative 2.

Wild and scenic rivers eligibility study—The Gila National Forest's eligibility study finds more rivers to be eligible than those found eligible in a 2002 study. Some groups question the validity and results of the study, since a previous eligibility study exists, and suggest the identified river values are not outstandingly remarkable. Some of these commenters suggest certain rivers should not be eligible because eligibility would interfere with possible future uses of the river. Other commenters provided a citizen's proposal including additional rivers they suggest should have been found eligible and examples of additional outstandingly remarkable values that they believe certain rivers possess.

Rare and endemic plants and botanical areas—Comments express a preference for or against establishing botanical areas. Commenters who prefer no botanical areas are established suggest there is no compelling need for them or are concerned about additional management constraints that may accompany their establishment. Other commenters suggest support of smaller botanical areas if their management is focused on educating the public about rare and endemic plant values and research. The original proponent (Gila Chapter New Mexico Native Plant Society) and supporters prefer establishing the botanical areas in their full size with management focused on providing for the persistence of species, education, and research, and suggest specific language for additional plan direction.

Wildlife—There is support for wildlife protections and improved habitat connectivity. Advocacy groups would like to see designated migration corridors in the plan and recommended wilderness to improve connectivity. Many comments urge the Gila National Forest to coordinate with other agencies, such as New Mexico Department of Game and Fish or New Mexico Department of Transportation. There is also opposition to these ideas. Several commenters suggest there are already too many restrictions on management and no barriers to wildlife movement. Many commenters suggest additional species should be added to the species of conservation concern list based on climate change predictions.

Livestock grazing—Some conservation groups want to eliminate or reduce livestock grazing or want more restrictive standards and guidelines related to livestock grazing. There is strong support for continued grazing from some traditional communities, permittees, and grazing associations, who express concern that the final LMP does not adequately value, protect, and promote livestock grazing as a use of the forest, and request all restrictions on that use be removed from the plan.

Watershed and riparian—Some commenters want additional protections for watersheds, water, and riparian and aquatic ecosystems, including additional standards and guidelines and inclusion of a conservation watershed network. Some individuals prefer livestock grazing be eliminated from riparian zones. Other individuals are concerned their water rights and multiple uses would be negatively affected by plan direction for watersheds and riparian areas.

Climate change—Many commenters suggest the plan does not adequately address climate change and some provide specific suggestions for ways the plan should address climate change. A citizen's proposal for addressing climate change suggests the plan should maximize wilderness areas, continue using fire as the primary restoration tool, minimize livestock grazing impacts, and prioritize the identification and protection of refugial areas.

Decision and Rationale

Overview

The final environmental impact statement for the Gila National Forest Land Management Plan documents the analysis and conclusions upon which this decision is based. I have reviewed the environmental analysis disclosed in the final environmental impact statement; the planning record; comments from our state and local government partners, cooperating agencies, federally recognized tribes and pueblos, other federal agencies, and the public. I have considered how the final LMP responds to input throughout the planning process; allows for flexibility in managing the forest; and provides a balance for resource protection, public uses, and restoration need. I have also considered how the final LMP meets the identified needs to change and the requirements of 36 CFR 219. Based upon my review, I selected alternative 2-modified (hereafter referred to as the preferred alternative) as described in the Gila National Forest's final LMP.

The purpose of the final LMP is to guide future projects, practices, and uses to assure sustainable multiple-use management in the Gila National Forest. A land management plan establishes goals, desired conditions, objectives, standards, guidelines, and land suitability to ensure coordination of multiple uses (such as outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife and fish, and wilderness) and sustained yield of products and services. The final LMP does not authorize projects or activities, commit the Forest Service to act, or dictate internal operations (such as personnel matters, law enforcement, budget, or organizational changes). Management direction will be implemented through site-specific activities, which must be consistent with the land management plan (36 CFR 219.15).

The final LMP replaces all previous plan direction in the 1986 plan and its amendments. It applies plan direction to all portions of the Gila National Forest and the portion of the Apache National Forest in New Mexico that the Gila National Forest manages. With this decision, I approve the following:

1. Forestwide (chapter 2) and area-specific (chapter 3) plan components, including desired conditions, objectives, standards, guidelines, and suitability (chapter 4) that meet the social, economic, and ecological sustainability requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule.
2. Identification of management areas and their plan components, including recommended wilderness, eligible wild and scenic rivers, utilities management area, and wildland-urban interface.
    a. Nine areas (72,103 acres) recommended for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System: (1) Aldo Leopold Addition Northeast, (2) Aldo Leopold Addition Southeast, (3) Aldo Leopold Addition Carbonate Creek, (4) Aldo Leopold Seco Addition B1a, (5) Aldo Leopold Seco Addition B1c, (6) Gila Whitewater Addition, (7) Mineral Creek, (8) Taylor Creek, and (9) Rabb Park.
    b. Identification of 16 rivers (24 segments totaling 224.11 miles) eligible for inclusion in the Wild and Scenic Rivers System.
    c. The utilities management area includes linear corridors under special-use authorizations that provide for those private uses of forest lands necessary to serve a local, regional, or national public benefit such as reliable electric, natural gas, water, and communication networks.
    d. The wildland-urban interface management area includes those areas delineated in approved community wildfire protection plans and the set of conditions that can exist in and around nearly every community and surrounding many other types of infrastructure.

3. Plan components for designated areas (chapter 3), including established research natural areas, designated wilderness, wilderness study areas, inventoried roadless areas, national recreation and scenic trails, and national scenic byways.
4. The land management plan monitoring program (chapter 5).
5. Identification of 353,079 acres as suitable for timber production.

The final LMP and preferred alternative is similar to alternative 2 but was modified in the following manner:

1. It does not establish botanical areas. Instead, it provides forestwide plan direction to achieve a similar protection for this resource. Several commenters requested that 3 of 12 important plant areas delineated by the state be established as botanical areas by the final LMP. The purpose of this request was to provide for the persistence of the rare and endemic plant species known to occur within these areas and increase public awareness and valuation of rare and endemic plants. While the Rare and Endemic Vegetation Management Area included in alternatives 5 and 2 is not included in the preferred alternative, the final LMP recognizes the importance of these rare and endemic plant species everywhere they occur in the forest by including specific plan components for them in forestwide direction, such as the following desired condition: "The locations of rare and endemic plant and animal species, habitat requirements, abundance, threats, and responses to management are known. Habitats and refugia for these species are intact, functioning, and sufficient for species persistence" (final LMP p. 132).
2. It does not propose research natural areas that are not already designated. Alternative 2 carried forward two of the four proposals made in 1986. Two were not eligible for research natural area status based on my evaluation documented in the process in appendix J to the final environmental impact statement. The two it did carry forward, were dropped from the decision because the establishment process was never completed. This does not preclude considering these areas for inclusion in the future. More detail about research natural areas can be found in the Preliminary Administrative Recommendations section of this document.
3. It reduced the amount of recommended wilderness. A detailed discussion by area considered can be found in the Preliminary Administrative Recommendations section of this document.

It maintains most of the elements of ongoing management that remain relevant and useful and are responsive to public comments. When compared to the other alternatives, the preferred alternative most effectively integrates management strategies and guidance that:

1. Is responsive to the issues, concerns, and opportunities expressed by state, local and tribal governments, the public, and other federal agencies. It addresses all 10 of the issues identified in the final environmental impact statement, including: (i) allowing for flexibility in which tools will be used for restoring vegetation and riparian areas; (ii) livestock grazing management, including management of vacant allotments; management of recreation uses such as group size and length-of stay, and the amount of recommended wilderness; and (iii) use of herbicides to address treatment of non-native invasive plants and native plant species to address restoration needs.
2. Meets the purpose of and need for action by addressing the needs for change and issues that drove plan revision. Specifically, information gathered from the assessment phase, a series of technical meetings with a diverse group of stakeholders, and public input throughout the process.
3. Maximizes ecological and socioeconomic co-benefits by increasing the number of jobs and labor income in the local economy; increasing the fish- and wildlife-related visitation through improved

stream quality and riparian habitat; and promoting the increased use of prescribed and naturally ignited wildfire.

4. Manages land uses in ways that are ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable, by providing for opportunities for land to be either acquired or conveyed.
5. Establishes ambitious and achievable objectives for ecological restoration and adaption based on expected budget allocations, including development of plan components focused on ecological sustainability and biodiversity for ecological response units, soils, hydrology resources, wildlife, fish, and plant species, and wildland fire and fuels management.
6. Provides a balance of recreation opportunities by developing plan components based on the recreation opportunity spectrum, which provides for opportunities for developed and dispersed recreation uses and recreation special uses.
7. Meets the intent and requirements of the planning rule at 36 CFR 219 by addressing the needs for change from the 1986 forest plan, specifically plan-wide changes, ecological changes, and social, cultural, and economic changes.

The final LMP is the result of extensive public involvement beginning in 2015. Through numerous versions of assessment reports, needs for change statements, wilderness inventory, evaluation and analysis, wild and scenic river eligibility studies, and preliminary land management plans, Gila National Forest leadership and staff have worked closely with state, local, and tribal governments; cooperating agencies; other federal agencies; and the public. The preferred alternative is the result of that collaboration and includes perspectives and language developed by a broad range of national forest users and interested parties.

The final LMP best meets the needs for change and best addresses the issues listed in the Engagement with Federal Agencies, State and Local Governments, and the Public section of this decision. The core management themes and plan guidance in the preferred alternative provide ecological and socioeconomic co-benefits and a balanced response to the issues raised by the public. An example of this balance is the distribution of resources under the preferred alternative, which provides for ecosystem restoration and adaptation, an increased focus on riparian and stream management, and a diverse array of ecosystem services. The entire forest is recognized for its contribution to watershed function, wildlife, fish and plant habitat, outdoor recreation, grazing and other multiple uses and economic benefits.

An example of the ecological and socioeconomic co-benefits provided by the plan is the way the preferred alternative addresses the climate change and the wildfire crises by recognizing and enhancing the national forest's role in contributing to a sustainable wood product industry. Based on the Southwestern Region Aquatic-Riparian Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment (Wahlberg et al. 2023), adaption to climate change was identified in the final LMP through resistance and resilience strategies, including reducing the risk and long-term impacts of severe disturbances and the impacts of biological stressors and promoting upland and aquatic habitat connectivity and the creation and maintenance of refugia. Additionally, the final LMP recognizes the importance of monitoring for climate change for mid- and long-term outcomes of management actions. It also addresses sustainable contributions to the service-based recreation and tourism sector, as well as other multiple-use activities and products. While the plan cannot commit partners to act, the preferred alternative emphasizes cultivating partnerships to work across boundaries, build consensus, and increase capacity.

Ecological Integrity

36 CFR 219.8(a) and 219.9(a)

The final LMP provides direction for increasing ecosystem integrity, which will improve function and resiliency to climate-altered disturbance regimes and extreme events. A combination of mechanical treatment, prescribed fires, and naturally ignited wildfire allows management to balance the need to protect communities and infrastructure with the need to restore degraded watersheds, terrestrial, riparian, and aquatic ecosystems; maintain healthy watersheds and ecosystems; and adapt to climate change.

The final LMP provides a flexible framework that supports risk-based fire and fuels management. The preferred alternative will allow natural resources to move toward desired conditions, maintaining the current emphasis on wildland-urban interface treatments, and maintain the current ability to engage in direct attack and address the risk to human values more effectively than the other action alternatives. Under the final LMP, we will strive to treat roughly 2 million acres of forests, woodlands, and grasslands each decade using the most appropriate combination of mechanical treatments, prescribed fire, and naturally ignited wildfire. There is flexibility to focus on treating priority watersheds, firesheds, areas identified in community wildfire protection plans, and other lands in the wildland-urban interface. These treatments will help protect communities, public safety, firefighters, and the national forest.

Management actions that reduce the threat of large extents of high-intensity wildfire promote habitat quality and connectivity, species persistence and diversity, vegetation community structure, composition, pattern, process, and function; maintain and improve watershed function; and protect air and water quality. All of which contribute to the national forest's ability to adapt to stressors including climate variability, extreme weather events, changing disturbance regimes, and human activities. Mechanical treatments are expected to result in a sustainable flow of wood products to local and regional industries, provide fuelwood for local families, and forest products for traditional and cultural purposes.

The final LMP carries forward the Forest Service's commitment to manage for healthy watersheds that benefit communities and the integrity of ecosystems. The final LMP includes watershed management direction that will:

1. Maintain soil productivity – "The soil can perform essential functions, sustain biological productivity and overall ecosystem and watershed health, and contribute to resilience. The ability of the soil to sustain ecosystem services within its natural capability is high" (final LMP p. 100).
2. Protect water quality and quantity – "Water quality meets or exceeds state water quality standards and provides for the attainment of designated uses. Water quality is sustained at a level that retains the biological, physical, and chemical integrity of aquatic systems, and benefits the survival, growth, reproduction, and migration of native aquatic and riparian species" (final LMP p. 105).
3. Sustain native biodiversity – "Natural disturbances (for example, insects, disease, wind, and fire), and human activities that mimic the effects of natural disturbances, maintain fully functioning ecosystems and native vegetation communities that contain the full range of characteristic components, processes, and conditions" (final LMP p. 54).
4. Provide for designated beneficial water uses – "Landscape-scale projects will incorporate activities identified in watershed restoration action plans, other watershed-based plans, or other

restoration and adaptation plans to move toward soil and watershed desired conditions" (final LMP p. 110).

5. Reduce the threat of flood damage to Forest Service infrastructure and downstream values – "Quantity and timing of water flows support ecological structure and functions, including aquatic and riparian species diversity, and downstream human values. Watershed resilience to drought, higher air temperatures, reduced snowpack, erratic runoff timing, and other effects of long-term climate variability is sustained, maintained, or restored" (final LMP 109).

Best management practices mitigate or reduce adverse impacts to soil and watershed resource values during all management activities. For example, the final LMP establishes a minimum buffer distance from riparian management zones when activities involve construction or realignment of motorized routes, recreation facilities, or other infrastructure. Plan direction also requires transportation system projects to provide for aquatic organism passage where applicable.

It includes detailed desired conditions for riparian and aquatic ecosystems. For the preferred alternative, objectives for upland vegetation treatments and the relative emphasis placed on fire as the primary restoration tool, contributing to an increased progress toward desired conditions for some vegetation types, reducing the likelihood of large, contiguous extents of high-severity wildfire in these zones. Implementation of the final LMP is expected to result in upward trends in riparian and aquatic habitat conditions based on the overall focus on restoration; climate adaptation; and specific objectives to improve watershed function; control erosion; treat riparian areas; and improve riparian, wetland, and aquatic habitat.

The final LMP protects and improves soil and air resources that support wildlife, contribute to high levels of biodiversity, and maintain water quality. Plan components direct management that promotes soil retention and development by restoring and maintaining vegetative cover, including downed woody debris. Productive soils maintain hydrologic function, soil stability, nutrient cycling, store carbon and help regulate greenhouse gas exchange with the atmosphere, while providing food and cover for species. Air quality standards protect human health and visibility. Air impairments are mitigated by managing prescribed fire smoke impacts and fugitive dust.

The final LMP manages for plant and animal species assemblages that are healthy, well-distributed, genetically diverse and connected, enabling species to adapt to changing environmental and climatic conditions. It also protects and restores rare and unique resources that support high levels of biodiversity, such as springs, wetlands, and habitats and refugia for species that have narrowly restricted distributions or declining populations. The final LMP addresses habitat configuration and availability, preserving the connectivity value of Gila National Forest to allow for range shifts of wildlife, fish, and plant populations. It provides for connectivity over time and space, considering landscape linkages. Disruptions and barriers to movement are minimized, except where they benefit species management and recovery.

The final LMP will be responsive as opportunities, partnerships, and needs arise, without prescribing specific treatments or prioritizing project locations. Site-specific consideration of possible approaches and limitations will allow efficient designs that take advantage of unique circumstances to maximize benefits. Rates of progress disclosed in the final environmental impact statement are based solely on expected Forest Service capacity; partnerships with interested stakeholders have the potential to expand opportunities and available funding.

At-Risk Species

36 CFR 219.9(b)(1) and 219.9(b)(2)(ii)

The final LMP provides for a diversity of plant and animal communities commensurate with the suitability and capability of the Gila National Forest by restoring and maintaining ecological integrity. Consistent with the 2012 Planning Rule, the final LMP adopts a complementary ecosystem and species-specific approach to maintaining species diversity (36 CFR 219.9). Most species, both known and unknown, are protected by managing vegetation community structure, composition, pattern, function, and the ecological and watershed processes that support those communities. This is known as the "coarse-filter" approach. For those species requiring specific ecological conditions or habitat features that are not met by the coarse-filter approach, the final LMP includes "fine-filter" plan components to promote continued biological diversity within the national forest. Fine-filter plan components are species or guild-specific plan components.

The regional forester identified 1 amphibian, 2 fishes, 6 insects, 3 birds, 3 mammals, 20 snails, and 21 plant species of conservation concern in the Gila National Forest. The best available scientific information for these species indicates a substantial concern about their capability to persist in the forest over the long term. In addition, 15 species are recognized as threatened, endangered, experimental, or are candidate species for federal listing under the Endangered Species Act. Fine-filter components are included, as necessary, to maintain these at-risk species that are vulnerable to decline. These plan components were developed and evaluated in the final environmental impact statement based on their ability to contribute to the recovery of federally listed species, conserve candidate species, and maintain viable populations of species of conservation concern and to prevent federal listing.

Some threats to species cannot be addressed by plan direction. For example, illegal harassment and shooting of Mexican gray wolves is not a planning issue; it is a law enforcement issue. In these cases, plan components focus on addressing threats the Gila National Forest can control and which will maintain or restore the ecological conditions necessary to support viable populations, as required by 36 CFR 219.9(b)(2). Plan components specific to the conditions and threat on the Gila National Forest may differ from those of other nearby national forests. These fine-filter components are tailored to each forest's unique situation to help maintain viable populations of the species without interfering with other resources and uses.

Multiple Use and Integrated Resource Management

36 CFR 219.10(a)

The preferred alternative provides opportunities for economic growth while sustaining ecosystems and watersheds for future generations. The final LMP focuses on providing the full range of ecosystem services that contribute to the diversity and stability of local communities over the long term. The final LMP recognizes the importance of the Gila National Forest's continued contributions of social, cultural, and economic benefits upon which local and tribal communities and families rely and those benefits and opportunities desired by visitors.

The final LMP recognizes key relationships among multiple uses. Plan components are integrated to recognize the interdependence of ecological, social, cultural, and economic factors. This integrated, adaptive management framework promotes the Gila National Forest's continued relevance and ability to respond to changing user demands while maintaining economic feasibility and the productivity of the land. It recognizes that providing wood products to people benefits local economies, but it is also

a valuable tool that helps generate movement toward and achievement of desired ecological conditions.

Many households rely on fuelwood for heat, and the plan manages for its continued availability. Forest thinning projects that produce timber and biomass for emerging industries will contribute to business and employment opportunities. Livestock grazing in the national forest contributes to the livelihoods of producers and to the economy of counties and local communities. Management of rangelands will encourage sustainable forage production, contribute to agricultural business, local employment, traditional lifestyles, and generational ties to the land. The plan responds to local elected official, tribal, and community needs, contributing 1,131 jobs and $34,300,000 annually in total forest management-related labor income.

Suitable Timber Base

36 CFR 219.11

Based on National Forest Management Act requirements, the final LMP identifies 353,079 acres suitable for timber production. This represents a 1,167-acre decrease in the suitable timber base compared to the previous plan, which is the result of the wilderness recommendations. The final LMP includes the following standard: “To protect the wilderness characteristic of apparent naturalness, no timber harvests, mechanical vegetation treatments, or cutting of trees will occur within recommended wilderness” (p. 246). The areas removed from the suitable timber base are in areas difficult to access and occur as small, isolated pockets within areas recommended for wilderness designation and represent less than one-half of one percent of the total. The amount of timber that could potentially be sustainably harvested on the lands identified as suitable for timber production if they were managed for the primary objective of producing timber without considering other multiple uses or fiscal, organizational, and industry capacity, is approximated to be 583 million board feet or 130 million cubic feet per decade.

The projected timber sale quantity would be 9 million cubic feet per decade, which is the same as would be projected under continuation of the previous plan but is approximately 2.5 times more than recent production. This would include approximately 30 million board feet of saw timber. Total green wood sale quantity, including hardwoods and non-industrial products would average 10.5 million cubic feet per decade, which is well below the sustained-yield limit. Total fuelwood removal, including by dead-and-down permit, is estimated to be 4.1 million cubic feet per decade but will vary based on demand. Group selection harvesting combined with periodic selection or variable density thinning would help move toward desired conditions for vegetation communities, maintain or improve ecological integrity and diversity, and contribute to a dependable flow of forest products to existing and prospective local industry.

Social and Economic Sustainability

36 CFR 219.8(b) and 36 CFR 219.10(b)

The final LMP recognizes and values tribal communities, rural historic communities, and the traditional uses that maintain these cultures. Local rural communities are tied to the land and uses of the forest such as livestock grazing, fuelwood gathering, hunting, and fishing. The final LMP provides for the sustainability of these and other uses, continuing to make resources available for cultural and traditional needs, subsistence practices, and economic support.

The final LMP recognizes responsibilities to preserve and protect cultural and historic resources that possess scientific, cultural, or social value and directs management to minimize adverse impacts of

human influence. It maintains tribal access to areas of traditional and ceremonial use while providing opportunities for solitude and privacy. The final LMP honors the Federal Government's trust responsibilities to federally recognized tribes and pueblos and places value on including them in identifying, protecting, and preserving those places that are spiritually and culturally important to them. The final plan integrates forest management with tribal needs through co-stewardship and the inclusion of indigenous knowledges.

The final LMP is built around the concepts of collaboration, shared stewardship with the state, and co-stewardship with the tribes and pueblos, and cannot be implemented without those elements. It provides a focus on building relationships and partnerships and organizing volunteers to achieve more than forest leadership and staff can on their own. Partnerships with other organizations and government entities will increase the ability to develop and provide improved recreation opportunities and create a dynamic of shared work, assets, and ideas leading to ecological, social, and cultural projects that benefit the greater good.

The final LMP provides a framework for comprehensive and consistent management of recreation opportunities and scenic resources that balances developed and dispersed recreation opportunities and motorized and non-motorized access. Taking an approach that is responsive and adaptable to changing uses and trends, it provides high-quality recreation opportunities commensurate with public interest, resource capacity, and other values and uses. It reduces conflicts between uses and contributes to the cultural identity, socioeconomic vitality, and well-being of surrounding communities.

The final LMP requires that activities sustain recreation settings and opportunities and achieve scenic character goals; it clarifies the use of the recreation opportunity spectrum and scenery management system as tools to achieve this requirement during interdisciplinary project planning. The final LMP provides for sustainably designed, well-marked, and well-maintained roads and trails that provide safe and reasonable access for public travel, recreation uses, traditional and cultural uses, and management activities. The final LMP includes minimum objectives to maintain and improve the forest's trail system; and with partners and volunteers, much more than the minimum is realistically achievable.

The final LMP does not revisit existing travel management decisions, with one exception. The wilderness recommendation process resulted in a new restriction on the authorization of motorized or mechanized uses in the nine areas recommended for wilderness designation. The final LMP does not open or close any roads. Travel management decisions are best made on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration site-specific factors, multiple-use management, and desired conditions as described in the final LMP. However, the final LMP does provide direction for future transportation system decisions, including avoidance areas for new road construction and an objective for decommissioning closed roads and temporary roads.

Management Area Direction

The preferred alternative adopts forestwide direction by resource and activity, overlaid with area-specific direction for unique areas established by administrative and legislative actions. This approach replaces the previous plan's reliance on continuous coverage by management areas, thus reducing plan complexity and increasing flexibility, restoration, and adaptation planning. Forestwide plan direction applies where on-the-ground conditions meet the definition of a resource instead of where resources have been mapped. Management area direction overlaps forestwide direction, with the most restrictive direction taking precedence.

In compliance with 36 CFR 219.10(b)(iv), final plan components protect and maintain the wilderness character of designated wilderness areas, and the wilderness characteristics of each wilderness study area and recommended wilderness area. The Forest Service has an affirmative obligation to manage recommended wilderness areas for the social and ecological characteristics that provide the basis for their recommendation until Congress acts. The final LMP restricts management in recommended areas that would affect the wilderness characteristics of these areas and possibly jeopardize their designation as wilderness in the future. Designated and recommended wilderness areas provide opportunities for solitude and non-motorized, non-mechanized recreation in an essentially unmodified environment.

The Gila National Forest will continue to manage eligible wild and scenic river segments to protect or enhance their free-flowing nature and outstandingly remarkable values, within agency authority. In compliance with 36 CFR 219.10(b)(v), the final LMP adopts a revised evaluation and classification of eligible rivers based on an updated, comprehensive, and systematic study that included extensive public input and provides clear direction for managing eligible rivers until a suitability determination is made.

In compliance with 36 CFR 219.10(b)(vi), the final LMP directs management of other legislatively designated areas, consistent with their establishing legislation or administrative decision. In addition to three designated wildernesses and two designated wilderness study areas, the Gila National Forest manages inventoried roadless areas, national scenic and recreation trails, and national scenic byways.

In compliance with 36 CFR 219.10(b) and 36 CFR 219.7(d), the final LMP also includes direction for the administratively established Gila River Research Natural Area, the Wildland-Urban Interface, and Utilities Management Areas. This direction includes area-specific plan components that reflect the management emphasis. The plan components either constrain an activity or allow for discrepancies that would otherwise conflict with forestwide direction. They do not authorize any specific future use or development.

Preliminary Administrative Recommendations

The Gila National Forest followed the wilderness process required under the 2012 Planning Rule directives (FSH 1909.12 chapter 70) to inventory, evaluate, and analyze areas for recommendation as designated wilderness. This recommendation is a preliminary administrative recommendation that will receive further review and possible modification by the Chief of the Forest Service, the Secretary of Agriculture, and the President of the United States. Congress has reserved the authority to make final decisions regarding wilderness designation. Land management plan direction for recommended wilderness provides direction that would retain or improve the wilderness values of these areas if and until they are established by Congress.

I have carefully considered a range of land management allocations, recreation uses, and boundary adjustments across the alternatives to determine the mix of land and resource uses that would best

meet public needs. Based on our analysis and extensive engagement with interested stakeholders, including local governments, federally recognized tribes and pueblos, and the public, I am recommending nine areas for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. All these areas are adjacent to or contiguous with existing designated wilderness (Aldo Leopold Addition Northeast 8,062 acres; Aldo Leopold Addition Southeast 944 acres; Aldo Leopold Addition Carbonate Creek 2,819 acres; Aldo Leopold Seco Additions 4,724 and 48 acres; Gila Whitewater Addition 1,960 acres; Mineral Creek 16,538 acres; Taylor Creek 10,012; and Rabb Park 26,996 acres). Together, the nine areas total 72,103 acres. The recommendations for wilderness under the final plan have a low potential to conflict with other management goals and multiple uses; they contain no designated mountain bike trails or motorized trails; and generally, their boundaries are easily identifiable based on existing natural features, locatable human-made features, or existing surveyed lines. Additionally, many of these areas are steep and rugged terrain, making pursuit of non-conforming uses more difficult. A few examples of this include Nolan North (a crescent-shaped area dominated by steep, rugged terrain with deeply incised canyons), Mineral Creek (dominated by steep, complex, and rugged terrain), Gila Whitewater Addition (very steep and challenging terrain), Aldo Leopold Addition Northeast and Southeast (by characterized as rugged, mountainous areas dissected by drainages), Aldo Leopold Addition McKnight Canyon (variable terrain with ridges, mesa tops, steep slopes, and deep canyons) and Rabb Park (featuring highly variable terrain ranging from moderate to very challenging with steep slopes, long ridgelines, and deep canyons).

I conclude that, on these 72,103 acres, the benefits to be obtained by recommending these areas to Congress for wilderness designation and managing them as recommended wilderness management areas outweigh any associated limitations on management. This alternative strikes a balance between protecting wilderness values and the need to provide for multiple uses and retain management flexibility. Components in the final LMP protect these areas and maintain the ecological and social characteristics that provide the basis for each area's wilderness recommendation. Plan direction for recommended wilderness identifies suitable uses and provides direction to allow for some activities needed for the administration of the area and for restoration and climate adaptation activities.

The McKnight Canyon area (11,094 acres) was not carried forward, based on the impacts of the 2022 Black Fire to the trail system. These impacts, added to those the trail was still experiencing after the 2013 Silver Fire, are expected to create a need for frequent, heavy maintenance for many years to come. The trail in McKnight Canyon is a high-value trail to many local community members and has largely been maintained by volunteers and partner organizations. While the plan's direction for recommended wilderness areas allows exceptions to the prohibition on mechanized and motorized equipment for the purpose of trail maintenance, the anticipated need for that equipment is more than an exception to a rule. It will probably be the rule for years to come.

The Aldo Leopold Addition West (1,110 acres) was not carried forward based on its proximity to the National Forest System Road 150 corridor. This corridor has been used as a fuel break for managing wildland fire, albeit not always successfully. According to district fire and fuels staff, the 2022 Black Fire confirmed the need to do more along the road corridor to improve and maintain its effectiveness as a fuel break, which may necessitate repeated mechanized intrusion into the area, impacting wilderness characteristics and the degree to which Aldo Leopold Addition West contributes to the wilderness character of the Aldo Leopold Wilderness.

The Nolan North and Aspen Mountain areas (6,718 and 19,053 acres, respectively) were not carried forward because they did not contribute to a larger, mostly contiguous wilderness complex as they may have if the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests had moved forward with recommendations on the Arizona side of the state line. The Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests deferred making any

recommendations for wilderness in their plan decision contingent on what came out of the Gila National Forest's wilderness process. We made repeated attempts to coordinate, but staff capacity and competing priorities on the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests led to their leadership deciding not to pursue recommendation further. Further, I have concerns that the perimeter roads between the Blue Range Wilderness, Aspen Mountain, and Nolan North may detract from the quality of the larger area that would have been created by their recommendation.

Again, my recommendation is a preliminary administrative recommendation, which will receive further review and possible modification by the Chief of the Forest Service, the Secretary of Agriculture, and the President of the United States. Congress has reserved the authority to make final decisions on the wilderness designation.

A total of 245 river segments in the Gila National Forest were evaluated for their eligibility to be included in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System (Public Law 90-542). Of those river segments, 158 were not evaluated in the previous 2002 eligibility study. The 2002 study process did not fulfill the requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule directives (FSH 1909.12, Chapter 80) because not all rivers named on a U.S. Geological Survey quadrangle map were evaluated. Further, the forest had seen enough changes since 2002 that an evaluation of changed circumstances was warranted.

The evaluation of wild and scenic river eligibility is the same for all alternatives. Eligibility is based on whether a river is free-flowing and has at least one outstandingly remarkable value; these findings are based on existing conditions and current management. Eligibility is a preliminary administrative recommendation that will receive further review through a suitability study and possible modification by the Chief of the Forest Service, Secretary of Agriculture, or the President of the United States prior to designation. Congress has reserved the authority to make final decisions on designation of rivers as part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

The Gila National Forest released evaluation criteria, inventory, eligibility, and classification findings multiple times during the plan revision process, both prior to and during the formal comment period. We used input from the public, stakeholder groups, and local governments to refine the inventory, clarify eligibility criteria and the evaluation process, inform outstandingly remarkable value findings, and help determine eligibility.

I have assigned each eligible wild and scenic river, or river segment, one or more preliminary classifications: wild, scenic, or recreational. Approximately 191 miles are classified as wild, 17 miles as scenic, and 16 miles as recreational (final LMP, table 12). These preliminary classifications are based on the condition of the river and the development level of adjacent lands at the time of the study and dictate the level of necessary interim protection measures. The final LMP includes components for eligible wild and scenic rivers that maintain free flow, outstandingly remarkable values, and classification until a determination of the river's suitability is made, or Congress designates without a suitability study. These eligible wild and scenic rivers or river segments possessed many unique features, including the only known source population of the Main Diamond lineage of Gila trout, a concentration of prehistoric Mimbres-Mogollon cultural sites, sheer rock cliffs about 500 feet tall, and an area of geothermically altered rock from the Alum Mountain eruptive volcanic complex.

Research natural areas are a type of special area within the National Forest System designated for their unique or special characteristics (FSM 1905 – Definitions). Research natural areas must be large enough to provide essentially unmodified conditions within their interiors. Whenever possible, proposed areas should show no evidence of major disturbances by humans nor is there evidence that the area is highly departed from reference conditions. We evaluated 11 areas for proposal as research

natural areas. Candidate areas were those proposed but never established as part of the 1986 planning process (Turkey Creek, Rabbit Trap, Largo Mesa, and Agua Fria Proposed Research Natural Areas) and broader areas the 1986 plan compelled staff to go look for places that might qualify for research natural area status. The evaluation was informed by a regional research natural area needs assessment that considered representation areas across major climate gradients, biophysical settings, and life zones. No additional proposals were brought forward by forest or regional staff, research station staff, or the public.

I choose not to propose any areas for establishment by the regional forester and research station director. The Largo Mesa and Agua Fria proposals are withdrawn because they are not high-quality areas representing intact ecological processes, regardless of support from the station director during the last planning cycle. Largo Mesa does not fill an identified need and represents a departure from reference condition. Restoration would require manipulative management. Similarly, Agua Fria contains a substantial amount of area that does not fill an identified need. Research natural area status for both areas could conflict with continuing multiple-use management.

The Turkey Creek proposal is entirely within designated wilderness. While its establishment could add value to the regional network of research natural areas, it is a highly popular area for wilderness recreation pursuits, and I do not want to discourage that use. Rabbit Trap has been excluded from livestock grazing since the 1940s. Although it was a candidate in the 1986 forest plan for inclusion as a research natural area to study the recovery of the landscape after grazing, Rabbit Trap was not considered for research natural area status as it continues to experience grazing impacts.

The 1986 plan also identified some general landscape areas that were to be examined for future research natural area proposals. These include the Rocky Canyon, Eagle Peak, Piños Altos Mountains, Mineral Creek, Tillie Hall, Lower San Francisco River, and Mule Creek areas. While there may be smaller areas within these large landscapes that could add value to the regional network. All these areas contain some combination of management needs, including wildland-urban interface, multiple-use management, and non-native invasive species concerns. Again, with no research interest in these areas in over 35 years, I find no compelling reason to propose their establishment.

Monitoring Program

I recognize the importance of applying an adaptive management approach to plan implementation and of tracking our progress over time. Therefore, the final LMP includes a robust monitoring program (36 CFR 219.7 (c)(2)(x) and 219.12) designed to test our assumptions, track relevant conditions over time, measure our management effectiveness, and evaluate the effects of our management practices (chapter 5 of the final LMP). The minimum required monitoring program addresses what I believe to be the most critical components of informed management of the Gila National Forest's resources that are within the financial and technical capability of the agency. Every monitoring question links to one or more desired conditions, objectives, standards, or guidelines; however, not every plan component has a corresponding monitoring question. The capacity-dependent portion of the monitoring program can also help inform management. Many of the capacity-dependent monitoring questions may be evaluated with data that are already being collected, while others provide opportunities for multi-party monitoring to fill knowledge gaps.

This monitoring program is not intended to encompass all monitoring, inventorying, and data-gathering activities undertaken on the Gila National Forest, nor is it intended to limit monitoring to just the minimum required questions and indicators listed in chapter 5 of the final LMP. Consideration and coordination with broader-scale monitoring strategies adopted by the regional forester, multi-party monitoring collaboration, and cooperation with state and private forestry as well as research and

development, as required by 36 CFR 219.12(a), will increase efficiencies and help track changing conditions beyond national forest boundaries to improve the effectiveness of the plan monitoring program. In addition, project and activity monitoring may be used to gather information for the plan monitoring program where it provides relevant information to inform adaptive management.

The minimum required monitoring questions in chapter 5 of the final LMP address each of eight required monitoring categories in the planning rule (36 CFR 219.12(a)(4)), plus one identified in the in the planning directives (FSH 1909.12 sec 32.13(f)). Within these categories, key ecological characteristics in the plan area and objectives from the final LMP focus available monitoring resources. This includes improving watershed function and wildlife habitat, particularly aquatic and riparian habitats. It also includes fire and fuels management, the restoration of frequent-fire forests, and the status of climate stressors on water resources and livestock grazing as a use of the forest. In addition, the monitoring program addresses key socioeconomic metrics including visitor use and satisfaction, recreation facilities maintenance, and contributions to local economies.

Details of the plan monitoring program—including monitoring and analysis protocols, data collection schedules, responsible parties, and data management—will be part of a separate monitoring guide. Because data sources and frequency of updates are likely to change over the life of the LMP, the specific monitoring process is more appropriately included in a monitoring guide, instead of in the final LMP itself. The Gila National Forest staff currently work with other federal, state, and local agencies and stakeholder groups to complete monitoring and continue to invest in those partnerships. The specific roles of partners in monitoring will be developed in more detail in the monitoring guide.

A biennial monitoring evaluation report will be prepared to indicate whether a change to the land management plan, management activities, or monitoring program may be needed or whether a new assessment may be warranted, based on new information. This report will be made available to inform the public and to encourage feedback on the methods used and how the forest is doing in moving toward, achieving, and maintaining desired conditions. While monitoring results are to be reported biennially, not all monitoring questions are expected to be evaluated that frequently.

Requirements of the Planning Rule

The final LMP has been prepared in compliance with the Forest Service's 2012 National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule at 36 CFR Part 219. The set of plan components meets specific content requirements of the rule as follows:

219.8 Sustainability

The final LMP provides for ecological sustainability, which can facilitate the reduction in vulnerability of natural and human systems and allow for climate change adaptation, by:

1. Maintaining and restoring the ecological integrity including structure, function, composition, and connectivity of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems and watersheds in the plan area (Ecological Sustainability and Biodiversity section and subsections).

2. Maintaining and restoring air quality (Ecological Sustainability and Biodiversity Air Quality subsection).

3. Maintaining and restoring soils and soil productivity including guidance to reduce soil erosion and sedimentation (Ecological Sustainability and Biodiversity Soils, Water Quality, Watersheds, and Riparian and Aquatic Ecosystems subsections).

4. Maintaining and restoring water resources and water quality (Ecological Sustainability and Biodiversity Soils, Water Quality, Watersheds, and Riparian and Aquatic Ecosystems subsection).

5. Maintaining and restoring the ecological integrity of riparian areas, in part by establishing riparian management zones around all lakes, streams, and open water wetlands (Ecological Sustainability and Biodiversity Water Quality, Watersheds, and Riparian and Aquatic Ecosystems subsections).

6. Ensuring implementation of best management practices for water quality (Ecological Sustainability and Biodiversity Soils S1 and Watersheds S1; Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Renewable Energy S1, Livestock Grazing S1, Timber, Forest and Botanical Products S3, Roads S2, Facilities S1, and Sustainable Recreation Ss3 and 4).

The final LMP provides for social and economic sustainability by:

1. Providing desired conditions that articulate traditional community values and uses, (Community and Tribal Relationships section and subsections; Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Livestock Grazing DC1 and Timber, Forest and Botanical Products DC2).

2. Providing opportunities for local employment and economic development associated with objectives for restoration and ongoing support of grazing, recreation, mineral development, and other multiple uses and ecosystem services (Ecological Sustainability and Biodiversity vegetation community objectives; Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Minerals subsection, Livestock Grazing DC1 and Timber, Forest and Botanical Products DC2).

3. Providing surface and groundwater for many uses throughout the state, including those that contribute to economic growth and ecosystem integrity (Ecological Sustainability and Biodiversity Soils, Water Quality and Watersheds subsections; Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Water Uses subsection).

4. Supporting a variety of high-quality developed and dispersed recreation opportunities for a diverse group of national forest users that are responsive, sustainable, and contribute to the economic, cultural, and social vitality and well-being of surrounding communities (Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Sustainable Recreation subsection).

5. Providing safe and reasonable access via sustainably designed, well-marked, and well-maintained roads, bridges, and trails (Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Roads and Sustainable Recreation subsections).

6. Preserving and protecting cultural and historic resources (Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Cultural Resources and Archaeology subsection).

7. Sustaining scenic character in ways that contribute to visitors' sense of place and connection with nature (Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Scenic Character subsection).

8. Protecting communities and ecological resources from wildland fire (Ecological Sustainability and Biodiversity vegetation community objectives, Wildland Fire and Fuels Management subsection, and Wildland-Urban Interface management area).

9. Advancing partnerships and collaboration to manage forest resources, assist in communicating with and educating the public, and achieve short- and long-term mutually shared goals (management approaches throughout the plan and Community and Tribal Relationships section and subsections).

219.9 Diversity of plant and animal communities

The final LMP adopts a complementary ecosystem- (coarse-filter) and species-specific (fine-filter) approach to maintaining the diversity of plant and animal communities and the persistence of native species in the plan area by:

1. Maintaining and restoring ecosystem integrity and diversity as described above, including rare and endemic species, plant and animal communities, and diverse native tree species.

2. Including additional species-specific plan components where ecosystem components do not adequately contribute to the recovery of federally listed threatened and endangered species, conserve proposed and candidate species, and maintain a viable population of each species of conservation concern within the plan area (appendix G of the final environmental impact statement contains a list of fine-filter plan components by species).

219.10 Multiple use

The final LMP provides for ecosystem services and multiple uses, including outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife, and fish, within Forest Service authority and the inherent capability of the plan area by:

1. Integrating management for multiple uses across resources (Interrelationships between Plan Components).

2. Considering multiple uses during the public participation process that identified relevant resources and uses throughout plan development (documentation of the public participation process is included in appendix C of the final environmental impact statement).

3. Maintaining and restoring vegetation conditions, soils, and riparian areas to ensure multiple benefits, including biodiversity, wildlife habitat, and resilience to natural disturbance (Ecological Sustainability and Biodiversity section and subsections).

4. Maintaining and restoring watershed conditions to provide water for beneficial uses through an integrated aquatic and riparian resource management approach (Ecological Sustainability and Biodiversity section and subsections).

5. Recognizing and protecting cultural, historical, and traditional resources and uses and areas of tribal importance (Community and Tribal Relationships Tribal Importance and Use subsection; Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Cultural Resources and Archaeology subsection).

6. Providing rangeland for livestock grazing that contributes to agricultural businesses, local employment, livelihoods, as well as generational ties to the land in a manner that is compatible with the desired conditions for ecological sustainability, biodiversity, and other uses while creating conditions on the land that support movement toward natural fire regimes (Ecological Sustainability and Biodiversity section and subsections; Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Livestock Grazing subsection).

7. Providing fuelwood and other forest products that contribute to the long-term socioeconomic diversity and stability of local communities (Ecological Sustainability and Biodiversity vegetation objectives and Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Timber, Forest and Botanical Products subsection).
8. Providing a variety of sustainable, high-quality developed and dispersed recreation opportunities and activities to a diverse group of forest users (Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Sustainable Recreation subsection).
9. Providing motorized opportunities and access as well as non-motorized and primitive areas (Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Sustainable Recreation and Roads subsections; Designated Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas, Recommended Wilderness, Inventoried Roadless Area, Continental Divide National Scenic Trail, National Recreation Trails, and National Scenic By-Ways management areas).
10. Protecting congressionally designated wilderness areas and areas recommended for designation (Designated Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas and Recommended Wilderness management areas).
11. Protecting designated wild and scenic rivers and rivers found eligible for designation (Eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers management area).
12. Protecting research natural areas (Research Natural Area management area).
13. Providing opportunities for the development of mineral resources, where appropriate (Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Minerals subsection).

219.11 Timber requirements based on the National Forest Management Act

The final LMP provides guidance for timber management by:

1. Identifying 353,079 acres in the plan area that are suited for timber production (chapter 4 and appendix F of the final environmental impact statement).
2. Prohibiting timber harvest for the purpose of timber production on lands not suited for timber production (Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Timber, Forest and Botanical Products S2).
3. Limiting timber harvest to only those lands where soil, slope, or other watershed conditions would not be irreversibly damaged (Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Timber, Forest and Botanical Products S3).
4. Requiring that timber harvest be carried out in a manner consistent with protecting soil, watershed, fish, wildlife, recreation, and aesthetic resources (Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Timber, Forest and Botanical Products Ss1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, and 11 and Gs 3-6).
5. Limiting the size of openings that may be cut during one harvest operation with standards describing specific conditions under which exceptions for larger openings may be allowed (Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Timber, Forest and Botanical Products S6a).
6. Limiting the quantity of timber that may be sold from the national forest (Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Timber, Forest and Botanical Products S9).

7. Limiting regeneration harvest of even-aged stands of trees to stands that have reached or surpassed 95 percent of the culmination of mean annual increment (Multiple Uses and Social, Cultural and Economic Sustainability Timber, Forest and Botanical Products S6c).

219.12 Monitoring

The final LMP monitoring phase comes after revision is complete. The monitoring phase includes:

1. Designing proposed management activities to implement the final LMP in a way that will yield specific information and support learning.
2. Analyzing monitoring results using scientific methods that reduce uncertainty and improve understanding of system behavior. Well-designed monitoring programs and management activities contribute to better scientific analysis of these results. Monitoring and analysis also evaluate progress toward achieving desired conditions and objectives of the final LMP and the assumptions used in developing the plan.
3. Learning from the results of the analysis and sharing how the results either confirm or modify existing assumptions and provide feedback on management effectiveness. Learning is proactively shared with land managers and the public.
4. Adapting planning and management activities based on learning from the results of the analysis. This adaptation takes the form of modifying assumptions, models, data, and understanding of the system. This knowledge is then used to inform the planning process that leads to adjustment of plans and projects.

Summary

The preferred alternative represents the result of extensive public involvement. The distribution of resources under the preferred alternative provides for the full spectrum of climate change adaptation options, diverse ecosystem services, and equitable program delivery in a flexible, risk-management framework. The plan supports adaptation by establishing a range of desired conditions for tree density and fire regimes based on the scientific literature. The preferred alternative addresses the need to recognize and enhance the national forest's role in contributing to local economies, including timber and forest products, livestock grazing, the service-based sectors of recreation and tourism, and other multiple-use activities and products. Compared to the previous plan, there is an increased focus on soil, watershed, and riparian management. While the final LMP cannot commit the public to act, the preferred alternative emphasizes cultivating partnerships to work across boundaries, find win-win scenarios, and increase capacity. The preferred alternative recognizes and values rural communities and traditional uses, reflecting the Gila National Forest's contribution to local cultural, social, and economic vitality.

The broad framework for the interconnected management of resources provides for sustainable uses that support vibrant communities and their reliance on the Gila National Forest's resources, while also adapting to current and future demands by providing for forest conditions that protect communities, infrastructure, and watersheds; air quality; traditional and cultural forest uses; sustainable recreation opportunities; scenery; and forest-based economic activities such as wood products industries and ranching.

Based upon my review of all alternatives, I have decided to implement the preferred alternative, which most effectively integrates management strategies and guidance that: (1) respond to the issues, concerns, and opportunities expressed by state, local and tribal governments, the public, and other

federal agencies; (2) meet the purpose of and need for action by addressing the needs for change and issues that drove plan revision; (3) maximize ecological and socioeconomic co-benefits; (4) manage land uses in ways that are ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable while providing for the greatest flexibility in tools and management actions to achieve the desired conditions; (5) establish ambitious and achievable objectives for ecological restoration and adaptation based on expected budget allocations; (6) provide a balance of recreation opportunities; and (7) meet the intent and requirements of the planning rule at 36 CFR 219.

I have reviewed the environmental analysis in the final environmental impact statement; the planning record; comments from our state and local government partners, tribes and pueblos, other federal agencies, and the public; and have considered how the final LMP meets the identified need for change and the requirements of 36 CFR 219. The selected alternative and its components include features of all alternatives considered and reflect extensive modifications in response to comments, which are documented in appendix B of the final environmental impact statement.

This decision adopts components that will guide future project and activity decision-making, including all desired conditions, objectives, standards, guidelines, and suitability of lands determinations in the final LMP. The specific components included are consistent with the rationale detailed above and the requirements of the planning rule. The decision also constitutes preliminary administrative recommendations for recommended wilderness, eligible wild and scenic rivers, and proposed research natural areas, and a monitoring plan.

Alternatives Considered

I considered five alternatives analyzed in detail, which are discussed below. The preferred alternative incorporates elements of alternatives 1, 2, 3, and 4 and is the environmentally preferred alternative. A more detailed comparison of these alternatives can be found in chapter 2 of the final environmental impact statement. I also considered several other alternatives or alternative elements that were not analyzed in detail for various reasons as discussed in chapter 2 of the final environmental impact statement.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

National Environmental Policy Act regulations require agencies to specify the alternative or alternatives considered to be environmentally preferable (40 CFR 1505.2(a)(2)). Forest Service National Environmental Policy Act regulations define an environmentally preferable alternative as: “the alternative that best promotes the national environmental policy as expressed in the National Environmental Policy Act’s section 101. Ordinarily, the environmentally preferable alternative is that which causes the least harm to the biological and physical environment; it also is the alternative which best protects and preserves historic, cultural, and natural resources” (36 CFR section 220.3). Under the preferred alternative, all practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm have been adopted as part of the alternative’s desired conditions, standards, guidelines, and management strategies. Through the monitoring plan, the effectiveness of minimizing environmental impacts will be reviewed periodically as required by the 2012 Planning Rule.

I find, based upon the laws and regulations guiding National Forest System management, that the preferred alternative is the environmentally preferred alternative. Alternative 5 was developed to address public input for less active management of vegetation (that is, relying on natural processes such as wildland fire), including barring the use of herbicides on native plant species. While this alternative may appear to be more focused on environmental protection of the resources, its lack of flexibility for vegetation management does not allow for the use of all tools and treatments that may

prove necessary in providing for the most ecologically sustainable systems across the forest, especially for highly vulnerable vegetation types with lower frequency, mixed, and stand-replacement type fire risks. When compared to the other alternatives, the preferred alternative best contributes to, and moves the Gila National Forest toward the desired conditions for ecological, social, and economic sustainability, which will benefit future generations.

Alternative 1 – No Action

Alternative 1, the no-action alternative, reflects current management practices under the 1986 plan, as amended and implemented. Alternative 1 emphasizes resource outputs over ecological, social, cultural, and economic outcomes. It explicitly incorporates constraints of the initial approved recovery plan for Mexican spotted owl, which has since been replaced based on new science and information. It allows the use of prescribed fire and naturally ignited fire but places unnecessary constraints on fire management. It also places constraints on mechanical treatments that do not consider new technology or science. It allows the use of herbicide on native and non-native invasive species and establishes specific native plant species that project-level herbicide use proposals might target. The current plan has no well-articulated desired conditions for ecosystems or watersheds, but at the discretion of the regional forester, the regionally consistent desired conditions for vegetation communities featured in every alternative is used for the 1986 plan for the purpose of environmental analysis. There are no priority vegetation types, but it does direct management to maintain areas where trees had been chained or pushed for the express purpose of providing additional forage for livestock grazing.

The 1986 plan does not establish a minimum buffer zone for riparian areas for projects involving construction or realignment of motorized routes, recreation facilities, or other infrastructure, leaving those constraints to be developed at the project level. Plan direction for range infrastructure does not include specific provisions for wildlife movement and left identification of best management practices to protect soil, water quality, and riparian and aquatic ecosystems to the project level. The 1986 plan does not integrate range and fire management objectives or attempt to establish a process by which vacant allotments could be considered for their strategic value as swing allotments, or forage reserves, to sustain livestock grazing when wildfire, drought, or other disturbances or wildlife conflicts occurred.

Alternative 1 directs a lands program approach that promotes management efficiency, rather than enhancing public access and use or resource management objectives. It establishes a group size limit for special-use permits in designated wilderness, but it is not based on current accepted methods for determining those limits. It does not prescribe a default length-of-stay limit for forest closure orders to support recreation management. Climate change and environmental justice concepts are entirely missing from the 1986 plan.

The 1986 plan does not recognize the importance of tribal or community relationships. It does not reflect changes in economic, social, and ecological conditions; new policies and priorities; or new information based on monitoring and scientific research. Management is organized using management areas that cover the entire forest. Since this alternative reflects no change in current management, no additional wilderness is recommended. There are four proposed research natural areas and no botanical areas. This alternative is the “no-action alternative” and serves as a basis for comparing the effects of the other alternatives.

Alternative 2

Alternative 2 is the originally proposed land management plan. It was developed iteratively to respond to key issues identified with by planning staff and the public to address the needs for change. This alternative provides for restoration, climate adaptation, environmental justice, and a diversity of societal benefits that come from the forest (ecosystem services). Alternative 2 addresses the need to better recognize and enhance the Gila National Forest's role in contributing to local economies, including service-based sectors such as recreation and tourism, timber and forest products, livestock grazing, and other multiple-use-related activities and products. It addresses the need to address the wildfire crisis, protect communities, critical infrastructure and watersheds while restoring the natural role of fire on the landscape. Like all the action alternatives, alternative 2 also includes plan direction that allows for adaptive management to address possible ecological and climatic changes that have the potential to alter the quality, quantity, distribution and availability of ecosystem services.

Alternative 2 uses a mix of mechanical treatments and wildfire, both prescribed and naturally ignited, to move toward desired conditions and adapt to climate change. Its vegetation treatment objectives are ambitious compared to what current management has been able to accomplish and may exceed the social tolerance for disturbance on the landscape. However, these objectives represent the minimum ecological need for treatment. Alternative 2 provides site-specific constraints on mechanical treatments while providing for exceptions to protect watershed and wildland-urban interface values. Herbicide use would be allowable under this alternative for treating non-native noxious and invasive plant species or re-sprouting native species like alligator juniper and evergreen oak, but only where it helps to move toward desired conditions for vegetation communities, wildland fire and fuels management, and the wildland-urban interface. Aerial application of herbicides is prohibited and extensive baseline constraints for projects considering herbicide use are included. Vegetation treatments under this alternative would benefit wildlife by improving habitat.

Increased mechanical treatment and support of a restoration and adaptation economy create opportunities for small businesses and would make fuelwood more available. Improved rangeland conditions would improve forage for livestock grazing and wildlife as an effect of moving toward desired conditions for vegetation communities, not for the sole purpose of providing additional forage. Direction for range infrastructure includes provisions for wildlife movement and some commonly recommended best management practices for range management are included as plan components to improve consistency in implementation. Alternative 2 integrates range and fire management objectives and provides a process through which vacant allotments should be considered for their strategic value as swing allotments, or forage reserves, as an adaption tool. Alternative 2 establishes a minimum buffer zone for riparian areas and projects involving construction or realignment of motorized routes, recreation facilities, or other infrastructure, leaving the flexibility to adjust based on site-specific considerations that can only be known at the project level.

Alternative 2 directs a lands program to enhance public access, use, and resource management objectives. It establishes a smaller group size limit for special-use permits in designated wilderness but based on currently accepted methods for determining those limits. It establishes a default length-of-stay limit for forest closure orders to support recreation management, while allowing for exceptions to be made for those that agree to mitigation terms and demonstrate a high proficiency for Leave No Trace® ethics. Alternative 2 provides the context, direction, and necessary flexibility to support climate-informed projects and instills the principles of environmental justice into management practices and program delivery.

This alternative includes a mix of developed and dispersed recreation like that currently taking place in the forest and holds us accountable for providing equitable recreation access. Maintenance of

infrastructure, such as developed recreation sites and trails, would contribute toward sustainable recreation by better meeting the needs of visitors and preventing or reducing ecological damage.

This alternative, like all the action alternatives, puts a greater emphasis on relationships, recognizing the forest management's contribution to meeting cultural, social, as well as economic needs of rural communities. Sections of the land management plan focus on communities and traditional uses with desired conditions, guidelines, and management approaches that recognize and value their significance. Sections of the land management plan also focus on relationships with tribal communities. Availability of traditionally used products is protected.

Recommended wilderness areas (110,402 acres) are those with moderate/high, high, and or outstanding wilderness characteristics and contribute to large, contiguous extents of wilderness, for which the Gila National Forest is already known. Recommended areas also have relatively low likelihoods of large extents of stand-replacement fire (if a fire occurs), even under extreme fire weather, indicating there is not a pressing ecological or fire management need for mechanical thinning treatments and the area can be managed with fire alone. Recommendation of these areas generally does not introduce substantial limitations on existing or potential future multiple uses that are not already in place because of terrain and plan direction for recommended wilderness. The process by which these areas were identified specifically excluded most range infrastructure, and with application of the Congressional Grazing Guidelines, trail maintenance is the only activity that would be substantially impacted should Congress decide to designate.

Two areas proposed for research natural area establishment from the 1986 planning process, Turkey Creek and Rabbit Trap (1,500 acres total), are carried forward. Current recreational use in Turkey Creek may not be compatible with research natural area status. Three botanical areas totaling 68,171 acres would be established as management areas for the purpose of increasing awareness and valuation of rare and endemic plant values and increasing knowledge of species life history requirements through monitoring and research. Direction providing constraints to avoid or mitigate adverse impacts of activities on rare and endemic plant species are also included in the management area direction.

Alternative 3

Alternative 3 responds to public comments about how current management isn't making much headway in restoring grasslands and historically open-canopy woodlands. It also responds to preferences for mechanical treatments being the primary tool to achieve progress and for limitations on the use of prescribed fire. Alternative 3 focuses available resources on making progress in these vegetation types using mostly mechanical treatments, providing wood products to people, and minimizing the use of prescribed fire. This alternative provides slightly more management flexibility for livestock grazing, providing more guidelines instead of standards relative to alternative 2. Guidelines are not optional and still place constraints on activities because the intent of the guideline must be met; there is just more flexibility in how the intent is met. Alternative 3 does not direct management to consider the strategic value of vacant allotments to serve as swing allotments or forage reserves, but instead focuses on keeping them stocked and moving through the process to reissue the permit as soon as possible. Alternative 3 also responds to public preferences for no net loss of private property in a county because of Forest Service land adjustments and does not establish group size limits in wilderness or default length-of-stay limits.

Alternative 3 recommends areas with low to outstanding wilderness characteristics that do not contain large expanses of grasslands or in historically open-canopy woodlands that could benefit from mechanical treatments, as indicated by the likelihood of high-severity fire, if a fire occurs. This

alternative's wilderness recommendations also exclude most range infrastructure and would apply the Congressional Grazing Guidelines as appropriate. These wilderness recommendations total 130,012 acres. There are no areas proposed for research natural areas or botanical areas. Other plan components are the same as in alternative 2.

Alternative 4

Alternative 4 is like alternative 3 except it responds to public comments about how current management isn't making much headway in restoring forested vegetation communities that produce timber products. The management focus is forested vegetation communities, rather than grasslands and historically open-canopy woodlands and wilderness recommendations (72,901 acres) do not contain large expanses of forested areas that could benefit from mechanical treatments.

Alternative 5

Alternative 5 was developed to respond to preferences for mechanical treatments to be limited and for the maximum amount of area to be recommended for wilderness designation. Wilderness recommendations total 725,286 acres. Mechanical treatments are restricted to the Wildland-Urban Interface management area unless science suggests mechanical treatments in a specific area outside the urban interface would mitigate the risk of undesirable fire effects and allow more fire on the landscape, with effects we can accept, over the long term. The minimum buffer for riparian areas established in alternative 2 would be larger under alternative 5, which also establishes a large minimum buffer around Mexican spotted owl protected activity centers beyond what would be necessary to implement the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's most current approved recovery plan for the species. Alternative 5 also responds to concerns about the use of herbicide and prohibits aerial application and its use on native plant species. Alternative 5 also does not direct management to consider the strategic value of vacant allotments to serve as swing allotments or forage reserves, but instead focuses on keeping cattle off these allotments until a new environmental analysis and decision determine appropriate future use of the allotment. Like alternative 2, proposals for Turkey Creek and Rabbit Trap research natural areas are carried forward. Alternative 5 establishes three botanical areas totaling 150,590 acres.

Best Available Scientific Information

The 2012 Planning Rule (sections 219.6(a)(3) and 219.14(a)(4)) requires the responsible official to document how the best available scientific information was used to inform the assessment, the plan decision, and the monitoring program. Such documentation must identify what information was determined to be the best available scientific information, explain the basis for that determination, and explain how the information was applied to the issues considered.

The Gila National Forest's Final Assessment Report of Ecological/Social/Economic Sustainability Conditions and Trends (USDA FS 2017a) and the final environmental impact statement includes an analysis and summary of the best available scientific information and provides the foundation from which plan components for the proposed action were developed. In developing the final LMP and related environmental analyses, specialists used many resources such as peer-reviewed and technical literature, databases and data management systems, modeling tools and approaches, information obtained through participation and attendance at scientific conferences, local information workshops and collaborations, and information received during public participation periods for related planning activities. State and local governments, other federal agencies, and federally recognized tribes and pueblos, and other interested parties contributed science that was considered and incorporated as appropriate. The best available scientific information includes the publications listed in the literature

cited sections of the assessment and final environmental impact statement, as well as others used in supporting documents included in the project record.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

The Forest Service manages the Gila National Forest in conformance with many laws and regulations. I have considered the statutes specific to individual resources as described in the final environmental impact statement and I find that this decision meets our obligations to the current statutory duties of the Forest Service. Following are summaries of how the final LMP addresses the relevant laws and regulations.

American Indian Religious Freedom Act

Federal agencies must make a good faith effort to understand how American Indian religious practices may conflict with other national forest uses and consider any adverse impacts on these practices in their decision making. The Gila National Forest consults with 13 federally recognized tribes and pueblos with an interest in and historic ties to lands managed by the national forest.

We anticipate no effects on American Indian social, economic, or subsistence rights because of the land management plan revision. Regardless of which alternative is chosen, the Forest Service is required to consult with federally recognized tribal entities when management activities may impact treaty rights, cultural sites, or cultural use. Desired conditions for areas of tribal importance for all action alternatives of the plan are:

1. The uniqueness and values of the tribal cultures in the Southwest and the traditional uses important for maintaining these cultures are recognized and valued as important.
2. The long history of tribal communities and uses including hunting, gathering plant and mineral materials, and use of sacred places on National Forest System lands and resources are recognized and valued as important.
3. Forest resources, such as plants, minerals, and animals, important for cultural and traditional needs, as well as for subsistence practices and economic support of tribal communities, are available and sustainable. Collection of culturally important plants by America Indians does not negatively affect the presence of those species in the forest.
4. Tribal practitioners have access to sacred sites, traditional cultural properties, and collection areas for activities that are essential to traditional and ceremonial use to maintain their continuity of culture.
5. There are opportunities for solitude and privacy to conduct tribal traditional and cultural activities.
6. Social, cultural, and economic resources provide a setting for educating tribal youth in culture, history, and land stewardship, and for exchanging information between tribal elders and youth.
7. Tribal interests are incorporated into management strategies for natural and cultural resources, including management changes to increase plants, animals, and trees of tribal importance.
8. Indigenous knowledges, or traditional ecological knowledges are incorporated into project planning and decision-making.

Archaeological Resources Protection Act

This act provides protection to archaeological resources found on public lands and Indian lands of the United States. The legislation provides civil and criminal penalties for those who remove or damage archaeological resources in violation of the prohibitions contained in the act. The act prohibits the removal of archaeological resources on public lands or Indian lands without first obtaining a permit from the affected federal land manager or tribe and requires federal agencies to develop plans to survey lands under their management to determine the nature and extent of archaeological and cultural resources.

The land management plan is strategic and programmatic in nature, providing guidance and direction to future site-specific projects and activities. Compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and 36 CFR 800 regulations requires assessments to document the presence of historic properties within the area of potential effect for any site-specific activities and to meet the intent of this act. We will also continue to consult with tribes and pueblos during site-specific management activities that may impact cultural sites and cultural use. The plan components in the land management plan include provisions that take into consideration American Indian rights and interests and cultural resources. Therefore, I find that the land management plan is compliant with this act.

Clean Air Act

In accordance with the Clean Air Act of 1990 and the Organic Administration Act of 1897, the Forest Service has the responsibility to protect the air, land, and water resources from the impacts of air pollution produced within the boundaries of National Forest System lands and to work with states to protect air resources from degradation associated with the impacts of air pollution emitted outside of National Forest System boundaries. The final environmental impact statement (chapter 3, air resources section) discloses potential impacts to air resources from program activities that are approved by the final LMP, including the use of prescribed fire.

At the scale of a programmatic plan such as this, the overall level of activities proposed under this decision is not anticipated to degrade air quality or violate state implementation plans; this finding is supported by information in the final environmental impact statement. Conformity determinations and more detailed air quality impact analyses will be made at subsequent levels of planning and analysis when emissions can be more accurately quantified, reasonably forecasted, and local impacts assessed.

Clean Water Act

Implementation of this final LMP is expected to maintain and improve water quality and satisfy all state water quality requirements. I base this finding on the extensive standards and guidelines contained in the final LMP, the application of state-approved best management practices specifically designed to protect water quality, and the discussion of water quality and beneficial uses contained in chapter 3 of the final environmental impact statement. Examples include management direction protecting riparian management zones and the requirements for road design. Additionally, project-level analysis for subsequent activities under the final LMP will be required to demonstrate compliance with the Clean Water Act and state water quality standards.

Endangered Species Act

The purpose of the Endangered Species Act is to provide a means whereby the ecosystems upon which endangered and threatened species depend may be conserved and to provide for the conservation of endangered and threatened species. Section 7(a)(1) of the act requires federal agencies to carry out programs for the conservation of listed species. In addition, the Endangered Species Act requires federal agencies to ensure that any agency action does not jeopardize the continued existence of the species (section 7(a)(2)). The act also requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Forest Service, respectively, to base the biological opinion and subsequent agency action on the use of best scientific and commercially available data.[3] In accordance with section 7(c) of the act, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service identified the federally listed threatened and endangered species, species proposed for federal listing, and candidate species to be considered for further evaluation throughout the land management plan revision process. In June 2021, the Gila National Forest received the finalized list of species and designated critical habitat that would be addressed in the biological assessment.

In accordance with section 7(c) of the act, the biological assessment was prepared (dated June 22, 2021) to assess the effects of implementing the Gila National Forest's final LMP on 13 federally listed threatened and endangered species and designated critical habitat known or likely to occur on the Gila National Forest. According to the United States Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service, these listed species include Mexican gray wolf, New Mexico meadow jumping mouse, Mexican spotted owl, southwestern willow flycatcher, western yellow-billed cuckoo, Chihuahua chub, Gila chub, Gila trout, loach minnow, spikedace, Chiricahua leopard frog, narrow-headed gartersnake, and Northern Mexican gartersnake. There are two candidate species relevant to the Gila National Forest—Rio Grande cutthroat trout and monarch butterfly—but consultation is not required on candidate species.

The proposed action may affect and is likely to adversely affect all these species, except the Mexican gray wolf, their critical habitat, or both. There is no critical habitat for New Mexico meadow jumping mouse or the Northern Mexican gartersnake within Gila National Forest boundaries, therefore critical habitat will not be affected for those species. The proposed action may affect but is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the Mexican gray wolf or Mexican spotted owl.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued a biological opinion (dated September 2022) regarding effects of implementing the proposed action on federally listed species present on or near the national forest. That final biological opinion determined that adopting the proposed action would not jeopardize the continued existence of federally listed species and would not adversely modify designated critical habitat.

The final LMP remains within the scope and scale of the proposed action and includes desired conditions, standards, guidelines, and objectives and provides broad management direction that meets our responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act section 7(a)(1). These plan components comply with the requirements of the act and the associated recovery plan for each federally listed species. For these reasons, I find that the final LMP follows the requirements of the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

The 2012 Planning Rule defines a species of conservation concern as: a species, other than a federally listed threatened, endangered, proposed, or candidate species, that is known to occur in the plan area and for which the regional forester has determined that the best available scientific information

[3] 16 U.S.C. 1536(a)(2)

indicates substantial concern about the species' capability to persist over the long term in the plan area (36 CFR section 219.9; 77 FR 21169). The Gila National Forest followed the guidance provided in the proposed directives for the 2012 Planning Rule (Forest Service Handbook [FSH] 1909.12 – Land Management Planning, Chapter 10) in developing its species of conservation concern list. More information about the species of conservation concern selection process can be found on the Gila National Forest's plan revision webpage.

Executive Orders

Executive Order 12898—Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations directs federal agencies to focus attention on human health and the environmental conditions of minority and low-income communities. The purpose of this Executive order is to identify and address, as appropriate, disproportionately high, and adverse human health or environmental effects on minority and low-income populations.

Executive Order 13985—Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government directs federal agencies to produce a plan to address barriers to the full and equal participation of underserved communities in federal benefits, services, and programs, including agency procurement and contracting opportunities. Equity, as defined in Executive Order 13985 is the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as Black, Latino, Indigenous, and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.

Executive Order 14008—Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad requires at least 40 percent of the benefits of certain federal programs must flow to disadvantaged communities. This mandate is referred to as Justice40. Climate justice is an extension of environmental justice. It is the fair treatment of all people and the freedom from discrimination in the creation of policies and projects that address climate change, as well as the systems that create climate change and perpetuate discrimination. The term recognizes that the multiple consequences of climate change (including but not limited to, increased flooding, more frequent and severe storms, prolonged drought, severe fires, and sea-level rise) disproportionately impact people who already experience more inequity in our society.

Executive Order 14072—Strengthening the Nation's Forests, Communities, and Local Economies focuses on strengthening America's forests, which are home to cherished expanses of mature and old-growth forests on federal lands, is critical to the health, prosperity, and resilience of our communities—particularly considering the threat of catastrophic wildfires. The Executive order focuses on the fact that forests provide clean air and water, sustain the plant and animal life fundamental to combating the global climate and biodiversity crises, and hold special importance to Tribal Nations. The order directs land management agencies to pursue science-based, sustainable forest and land management; conserve America's mature and old-growth forests on federal lands; invest in forest health and restoration; support indigenous traditional ecological knowledge and cultural and subsistence practices; honor tribal treaty rights; and deploy climate-smart forestry practices and other nature-based solutions to improve the resilience of our lands, waters, wildlife, and communities in the face of increasing disturbances and chronic stress arising from climate impacts.

The Forest Service Equity Action Plan was released in 2022. The action plan includes a justice roadmap focused on tribal relationships, limited English proficiency, gender equity and equality, and Justice40 integration. The plan pledges the agency to expand tribal co-stewardship; enhance engagement with tribes, pueblos and underserved communities through culturally relevant strategies and partnerships; achieve a representative, inclusive and thriving workforce; institutionalize the onboarding experience for new employees, increase equity in opportunities for small and disadvantaged businesses in delivering the agency's mission; reduce wildfire risk to tribes, pueblos, underserved communities, and socially vulnerable communities; expand urban forestry benefits to underserved communities; and promote access to outdoor experiences within underserved communities (USDA FS 2022e).

All but two of the census tracts in the four-county area encompassing the Gila National Forest are considered low-income, disadvantaged, overburdened, and underserved and all contain minority populations.[4] All alternatives considered in the final environmental impact statement would contribute to social and economic sustainability by providing benefits to environmental justice communities, improving the quality of life, and providing opportunities for income and jobs. The Gila National Forest would continue to provide for traditional, cultural, and spiritual values that are of particular interest to Native American tribes and pueblos. No populations in the plan area would experience significant adverse human health impacts or environmental effects due to management actions proposed under any of the alternatives considered. Therefore, I find that the land management plan follows these executive orders.

Executive Order 13084—Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments recognizes the unique legal relationship with Indian tribal governments as set forth in the Constitution of the United States, treaties, statutes, Executive orders, and court decisions and recognizes Indian tribes as domestic dependent nations under its protection. The Gila National Forest consulted with 13 federally recognized tribes with ties to the Gila National Forest. The forest's tribal liaison communicated frequently with tribal representatives to ensure tribal perspectives were included as part of the revised plan. The Gila National Forest also participated in regional tribal roundtables held by the Southwest Regional Forester. These discussions brought together all the national forests in New Mexico to discuss, learn, and collaborate with federally recognized tribes and pueblos around plan revision. Conversations about the forest's future and co-management are ongoing.

Federal Land Policy and Management Act

This act allows the granting of easements across National Forest System lands. The final LMP is strategic and programmatic in nature, providing guidance and direction to future site-specific projects and activities; it does not create, authorize, or execute any site-specific activity, although it does provide for the consideration of granting easements and rights-of-way. Forestwide desired conditions include strategic easements to provide reasonable public and administrative access. Therefore, the final LMP is consistent with the Federal Land Policy and Management Act.

4 https://screeningtool.geoplatform.gov/en/#7.35/32.239/-108.224.

Invasive Species

Executive Order 13751 (amends Executive Order 13112) directs federal agencies to prevent the introduction of invasive species; to detect, respond rapidly to, and control populations of such species in a cost-effective and environmentally sound manner; to monitor invasive species populations accurately and reliably; to provide for restoration of native species and habitat conditions in ecosystems that have been invaded; to conduct research on invasive species and develop technologies to prevent introduction; and to promote public education on invasive species and the means to address them. All these actions are subject to the availability of appropriations. Forest Service Manual 2900, Invasive Species Management, sets forth Forest Service policy, responsibilities, and direction for the prevention, detection, control, and restoration of effects from aquatic and terrestrial invasive species (including vertebrates, invertebrates, plants, and pathogens).

The final LMP is strategic and programmatic in nature, providing guidance and direction to future site-specific projects and activities; it does not create, authorize, or execute any ground-disturbing activity, although it does provide for the consideration of certain types of activities that may have the potential to affect the dispersal of invasive species. The final LMP includes forestwide desired conditions, objectives, and guidelines that stress the need to treat new invaders and use best management practices that limit the introduction and spread of invasive species due to management activities. In addition, other direction serves to protect watershed, soil, riparian, and aquatic conditions in ways that will reduce management-caused disturbances that otherwise might increase weed spread or introduction. The monitoring program includes indicators associated with invasive plant species and the effectiveness of treatments. Therefore, the final LMP is fully compliant with Executive Order 13751.

Migratory Bird Treaty Act

Executive Order 13186, Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds, was in furtherance of the purposes of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Acts, Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, Endangered Species Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act. This order requires including effects of federal actions on migratory birds as part of the environmental analysis process. On December 8, 2008, the Forest Service signed a memorandum of understanding with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to complement the Executive order and the Forest Service agreed to (a) incorporate migratory bird habitat and population objectives and recommendations into the agency planning process, in cooperation with other governments, state and federal agencies, and non-federal partners; and (b) strive to protect, restore, enhance, and manage the habitat of migratory birds and prevent the further loss or degradation of remaining habitats on National Forest System lands.

Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act

Consistent with the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960 (16 U.S.C. 528–531), the Forest Service manages National Forest System lands to sustain the multiple use of its renewable resources in perpetuity, while maintaining the long-term health and productivity of the land. Resources are managed through a combination of approaches and concepts for the benefit of human communities and natural resources. As demonstrated in the final environmental impact statement and as required by the act, the final LMP guides sustainable, integrated management of the resources of the Gila National Forest in the context of the broader landscape, giving due consideration to the relative values of the various resources in particular areas. Therefore, the final LMP is fully compliant with the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act.

National Environmental Policy Act

The National Environmental Policy Act requires public involvement and consideration of potential environmental and social effects of implementing federal actions. The environmental analysis and public involvement process outlined in the final environmental impact statement complies with the major elements of the requirements the Council on Environmental Quality set forth for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (40 CFR 1500–1508). These include: (1) considering a range of reasonable alternatives; (2) disclosing cumulative effects; (3) using best available scientific information; (4) considering long-term and short-term effects; and (5) disclosing unavoidable adverse effects.

We considered a range of alternatives in the final environmental impact statement and compiled a comprehensive record of the effects relevant to the alternatives (long-term, short-term, and cumulative), considering best available scientific information. The final LMP adopts all practical means to avoid or minimize environmental harm; such means include provisions for providing the ecological conditions needed to support biological diversity and standards and guidelines to mitigate adverse environmental effects that may result from implementing various management practices. The final LMP includes monitoring requirements and an adaptive management approach, assuring necessary adjustments over time.

The final LMP does not represent an irreversible or irretrievable commitment of resources; it is a programmatic-level planning effort and does not directly authorize any ground-disturbing activities or projects. Future ground-disturbing activities and projects will be consistent with the final LMP and subject to additional site-specific public involvement, environmental analysis, and pre-decisional review processes. Therefore, the final LMP is fully compliant with the National Environmental Policy Act and the Council on Environmental Quality implementation regulations.

National Forest Management Act

The National Forest Management Act requires the development, maintenance, amendment, and revision of land management plans for each unit of the National Forest System. These plans help create a dynamic management system so that an interdisciplinary approach to achieve integrated consideration of physical, biological, economic, and other sciences is be applied to all future actions on the unit (16 U.S.C. 1604(b), (f), (g), and (0)). Under the act, the Forest Service is to ensure coordination of the multiple uses and sustained yield of products and services of the National Forest System (16 U.S.C. 1604(e)(1)).

The National Forest Management Act requires the Secretary of Agriculture to promulgate regulations for developing and maintaining land management plans. Accordingly, on April 9, 2012, the Department of Agriculture issued a Final Planning Rule for National Forest System land management planning (2012 Planning Rule; 36 CFR Part 219; refer to the Federal Register at 77 FR 68, pages 21162-21276). The final LMP is fully compliant with, and fulfills the requirements of, the National Forest Management Act.

National Historic Preservation Act

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires each federal agency to consider the effects of its actions on historic properties, prior to approving expenditure of federal funds on an undertaking or prior to issuing any license. Section 110 of the act outlines the federal agency responsibility to establish and maintain a preservation program for the identification, evaluation, and nomination to the National Register of Historic Places and protection of historic properties. The final

LMP is a programmatic action and authorizes no site-specific projects. Projects undertaken in response to direction in the final LMP will fully comply with the laws and regulations that ensure protection of heritage resources. The final LMP contains direction for heritage resource management, including direction to integrate such management with other resources management activities. Because the final LMP does not authorize ground-disturbing activities, consultation with the New Mexico Historic Preservation Office under the National Historic Preservation Act is not required per the 2003 Programmatic Agreement between the Forest Service's Southwestern Region and the State Historic Preservation Officers of Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. It is my determination that the final LMP complies with the National Historic Preservation Act and other statutes that pertain to the protection of cultural resources.

National Trails System Act

The National Trails System Act of 1968, as amended, calls for establishing trails for people of all ages, interests, skills, and physical abilities. The act promotes enjoyment and appreciation of trails, while encouraging greater access. It establishes four classes of trails: national scenic trails, national historic trails, national recreation trails, and side and connecting trails. The Gila National Forest has one designated national scenic trail (the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail), three national recreation trails (Catwalk, Sawmill Wagon Road, and Woodhaul Wagon Road National Recreation Trails). The National Trails System Act guides management of these assets.

As required by the National Trails System Act, the 2009 Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan provides management direction within the corridor of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail. The intent of the 2009 Comprehensive Plan is to provide a uniform program for the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail that reflects the purposes of the designation and allows for the use and protection of the natural and cultural resources within the trail's corridor. The land management plan references the 2009 Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan in the introduction to the National Scenic, Historic, and Recreation Trails section.

Consistent with the act and the 2009 Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan, the final LMP provides specific plan components and other content for each of the nationally designated trails on the Gila National Forest to protect their nature and purpose and to promote trail maintenance and signage to enhance user experience and access. The final LMP is fully compliant with the National Trails System Act.

Roadless Area Conservation Rule

Management direction for inventoried roadless areas is compliant with the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (36 CFR 294 Subpart B, published at 66 FR 3244–3273). The Roadless Conservation Rule includes a prohibition on road construction and road reconstruction in inventoried roadless areas and prohibitions on timber cutting, sale, or removal except in certain circumstances. The final LMP is a programmatic-level planning effort and does not directly authorize any road construction, reconstruction, or timber removal. Therefore, I find that the final LMP is compliant with the Roadless Area Conservation Rule.

Travel Management Rule

The final rule for Travel Management; Designated Routes and Areas for Motor Vehicle Use (commonly referred to as the 2005 Travel Management Rule) implements provisions of Executive Orders 11644 and 11989 to address the use of off-road motor vehicles on federal lands.

Regulations implementing this rule are found at 36 CFR Part 212. The portion of the rule pertaining to motor vehicle use is subpart B; the portion of the rule pertaining to motorized over-snow vehicle use is subpart C, which was updated in January 2015. The Executive orders' "minimization criteria" specify:

> In designating National Forest System trails and areas on National Forest System lands, the responsible official shall consider effects on the following with the objective of minimizing:
>
> - Damage to soil, watershed, vegetation, and other forest resources;
> - Harassment of wildlife and significant disruption of wildlife habitats;
> - Conflicts between motor vehicle use and existing or proposed recreation uses of National Forest System lands or neighboring federal lands; and
> - Conflicts among different classes of motor vehicle uses of National Forest System lands or neighboring federal lands.
> - Compatibility of motor vehicle use with existing conditions in populated areas, taking into account sound, emissions, and other factors (36 CFR 212.55(b), Specific criteria for designation of trails and areas).

Prior to this plan revision, the Gila National Forest designated specific roads, areas, and trails for the use of motor vehicles (which includes off-road vehicles), which are displayed on the motorized vehicle use maps required by 36 CFR 212 subpart B. This programmatic plan decision does not authorize additional motor vehicle use or prohibit existing motor vehicle uses; those maps therefore remain unchanged and the final LMP is compliant with the Travel Management Rule.

Wetlands and Floodplains

These Executive orders (11988 Floodplain Management and 11990 Protection of Wetlands) require federal agencies to avoid, to the extent possible, short- and long-term effects resulting from the modification or destruction of wetlands and the occupancy and modification of floodplains. Forestwide standards and guidelines are provided for soil, water, wetlands, and riparian areas to minimize effects to wetlands and floodplains. They incorporate the best management practices of the Forest Service Soil and Water Conservation Handbook. Therefore, I find that the final LMP is compliant with these Executive orders.

Wild and Scenic Rivers Act

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (Pub. L. 90-542, section 1(b), Oct. 2, 1968, 82 Stat. 906, as amended); (16 U.S.C. section 1271) describes consideration of potential additions during planning in Section 5 (d)(1): "The Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Agriculture shall make specific studies and investigations to determine which additional wild, scenic and recreational river areas within the United States shall be evaluated in planning reports by all federal agencies as potential alternative uses of the water and related land resources involved."

Forest staff completed a systematic study, as documented in appendix I of the final environmental impact statement, and developed plan direction to protect water quality, free-flowing conditions, and the outstandingly remarkable values for eligible segments. This direction was analyzed in the environmental impact statement. Management direction in the land management plan maintains the eligibility of eligible river segments by protecting free-flowing conditions and outstandingly remarkable values.

Wilderness Act

The Wilderness Act of 1964 established a National Wilderness Preservation System to be administered in such a manner as to leave these areas unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness. It provides the statutory definition of wilderness, how areas are assessed for addition to the wilderness preservation system, and management requirements for congressionally designated areas.

Evaluation of existing wilderness and areas recommended for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System was included in the environmental analysis for the revised land management plan. The final LMP provides direction for designated wilderness through desired conditions, standards, guidelines, and suitability that preserves the wilderness character of designated wilderness. Therefore, I find that the final LMP is compliant with this act.

Plan Implementation and Consistency

This final LMP becomes effective 30 calendar days after publication of the notice of its approval in the Federal Register (36 CFR 219.17(a)). A final record of decision is issued concurrent with this approval.

Land management plans are permissive in that they allow, but do not mandate, the occurrence of certain activities. The revised land management plan will be implemented through a series of project-level decisions based on site-specific environmental analysis and public involvement that will adapt to changes in budget, resource capability, and management priorities. The final LMP guides management activities and projects by establishing clear desired conditions, rather than by establishing schedules of action.

As required by the National Forest Management Act and the planning rule, subject to valid existing rights, all projects and activities authorized by the Forest Service after the approval of this plan must be consistent with the applicable plan component (16 U.S.C. 1604(i)) as described at 36 CFR 219.15. Previously approved and ongoing projects and activities are not required to meet the direction of the land management plan and will remain consistent with the direction in the 1986 forest plan, as amended.

All project or activity approval documents, made after the effective date of the land management plan, will describe how the project or activity is consistent with the applicable components as described in the Implementation of a Forest Plan – Consistency section of the final plan (chapter 1). When a proposed project or activity would not be consistent with the applicable plan components, the responsible official must take one of the following steps, subject to valid existing rights:

1. Modify the proposed project or activity to make it consistent with the applicable plan components;
2. Reject the proposal or terminate the project or activity;
3. Amend the land management plan so that the project or activity will be consistent with the land management plan, as amended; or
4. Amend the land management plan contemporaneously with the approval of the project or activity so that the project or activity will be consistent with the land management plan, as amended. This amendment may be limited to apply only to the project or activity.

Any substantive changes to plan components require a plan amendment, with appropriate analysis as required under the National Environmental Policy Act. Administrative changes can be made without documentation of environmental effects, such as updates to data and maps, management approaches, and relevant background information; fixing typographical errors; or updating other required or optional content of a plan other than plan components. The public will need to be notified of all administrative changes to the land management plan. Plan content other than components, such as contextual information, glossaries, management approaches and strategies, monitoring questions, referenced information or guidance, and prioritization criteria are not matters for which project consistency is required.

Forest Service resource plans (for example, travel management plans) that apply to areas within the planning area must be consistent with plan components. Resource plans developed prior to this plan decision will be evaluated for consistency with the land management plan and updated if necessary.

Authorizations for occupancy and use made before this plan approval may proceed unchanged until time of reauthorization. At time of reauthorization, all permits, contracts, and other authorizing instruments must be made consistent with the land management plan, subject to existing valid rights, as provided at 36 CFR 219.15(d).

A land management plan is an integral part of adaptive management, including assessment, revision or amendment, and monitoring. This adaptive management cycle enables Gila National Forest leadership and staff to identify and respond to changing conditions, changing public desires, and new information such as that obtained through scientific research. The land management plan monitoring program is an integral part of this adaptive management cycle (see chapter 5 of the land management plan for additional information about the monitoring plan).

Administrative Review or Objection Opportunities

This decision is subject to the pre-decisional administrative review process required by 36 CFR Part 219, subpart B. An objection must be filed in writing to the Objection Reviewing Officer. The preferred method for objection filing is through the CARA (Comment and Analysis Response Application) web form. Documents can be Word (.doc or .docx), rich text format (.rtf), text (.txt), portable document format (.pdf), and/or hypertext markup language (.html). In cases where no identifiable name is attached to an electronic message, a verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature is one way to provide verification.

Objections filed by mail should be addressed to: Michiko Martin, Regional Forester, USDA Forest Service, 333 Broadway Blvd SE, Albuquerque, NM 87102. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered objections are: 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, excluding holidays.

Objections, including attachments, must be filed within 60 days from the publication date of the notice in the *Silver City Daily Press*, the newspaper of record. Objections or attachments received after the 60-day objection period must be set aside from review. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an objection. Those wishing to object to this project should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Individuals or organizations who submitted comments related to plan revision during the opportunities provided for public comment (as provided in subpart A of 36 CFR Part 219) during the planning process for this decision may file an objection. Objections must be based on previously submitted substantive formal comments attributed to the objector unless the objection concerns and issue that arose after the opportunities for formal comment.

Additionally, we request that objection issues related to species of conservation concern be identified in the cover letter or introduction of the objection along with the page numbers where the species of conservation concern-related objections can be found in the objection document. The decision to approve the species of conservation concern list will be subject to a separate objection process. The Chief of the Forest Service is the reviewing officer for species of conservation concern identification since the Regional Forester is the deciding official. Objections related to species of conservation concern will be forwarded.

CAMILLE HOWES
Forest Supervisor
Gila National Forest

DATE