

# FAQ

## Why does the Forest Service need to implement the North Sandia Fuels Reduction project?

The purpose of the North Sandia Fuels Reduction (NSFR) project is to restore, maintain and improve forested conditions to future disturbances by restoring forest structure and composition and reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire. Fostering conditions that facilitate the reintroduction of fire, a keystone ecological process, in the frequent-fire vegetation types found across this landscape, is a critical component of restoration. This translates to managing forest structure, composition and densities that would not contribute to active crown fire. Moreover, prescribed burns and natural ignitions under most circumstances would remain at low to moderate intensities.



Photo: USFS, Cibola National Forest & National Grasslands, Sandia Ranger District, NM-165 Corridor

There is a need to:

- Provide a strategic fuel break between National Forest System (NFS) Lands and communities at risk;
- Move frequent-fire forests in the project area towards their characteristic species composition, structure, and spatial patterns in order to improve ecological function;
- Create conditions that facilitate the safe reintroduction of fire, allowing fire to play its natural role in frequent fire forest types;
- Reduce the risk for uncharacteristic high-severity wildfire, create safe, defensible zones for firefighters and minimize the risk of fire to nearby valued resources;
- Reduce the risk of hazardous fuels within the NM-165 corridor for public safety by hand thinning;
- Increase the resiliency of important resource collection areas along NM-165. These resource collection areas have previously been identified by traditional communities that utilize Las Huertas Canyon;
- Improve and maintain diverse wildlife habitats to provide a large array of habitat types, habitat components, seral stages, and corridors for a variety of species that utilize the area;
- Improve watershed conditions by restoring the overall vegetative structure, composition of riparian ecosystems, and by improving fire regime; and
- Mitigate potential negative impacts of climate change, especially in high vulnerability areas where changes in plant composition and structure are needed to realign gradually to shifting climate and site potential.

Visit <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/cibola/?project=65654> to view the *Categorical Exclusion Review Form/Decision Memo* and the *Proposed Action* documents.

## What happens after the NEPA document is signed and ‘implementation’ begins?

Upon completion of the NEPA process, the Forest Service may begin the implementation phase. The agency plans out when and how activities will be carried out, develops more detailed site

plans (or 'plan in hand'), completes project preparation, and develops contracts or agreements. Only after this preliminary work is complete can work begin on the ground.

There are four phases to implementation:

- 1. Implementation Planning:** This phase involves developing plans and timelines for implementing activities that were evaluated and approved via the NEPA process. The agency considers several interrelated factors when deciding when and how to get work done on the ground.
- 2. Implementation Preparation:** This set of steps includes on-the-ground activities as well as more specific planning needed to prepare a project for inclusion in a sale, contract, or agreement. Various aspects of the project, such as the exact location of temporary roads, log landings, and treatment areas may need to be changed or adapted as agency staff compare on-the-ground conditions with the activities outlined in the NEPA document.
- 3. Contract or Agreement Development & Offering:** Any activities on National Forest System lands that the Forest Service does not perform itself are implemented by other entities through either contracts or agreements. Contracts are used by the agency to sell trees and other forest products (via timber sales, for example) or to purchase goods or services. Agreements are used by the Forest Service to partner with a non-agency entity. They usually involve resource contributions (e.g., funding, staff time, indirect costs) by both parties, they generally may not be used for profit-making endeavors, and they often require mutual interest and mutual benefit. Following the implementation planning and preparation phase, agency staff set about developing contracts or agreements that capture all project activities, specifications, and requirements through clear, enforceable language. The wording in these documents is crucial in determining how the intended outcomes of the NEPA analysis and decision will be realized on the ground. Once finalized, agreements move forward into implementation while contracts usually go through some type of public advertisement process, after which the agency evaluates responses and selects a contractor or timber sale purchaser. As projects move into the contract and agreement development phase from implementation preparation, responsibility transitions from the line officer and their team of resource specialists to a designated contracting officer and their sale or contract administration team or, in the case of agreements, a grants and agreements specialist and a program manager. Because timber sales, service contracts, and agreements have distinct characteristics and associated processes, some of the following sections include subsections to clearly explain any relevant differences between these types of implementation mechanisms.
- 4. Project Implementation & Monitoring:** The implementation of planned activities represents the culmination of the project planning, implementation preparation, and contract development phases. For work performed by non-agency entities, implementation of agreed-upon activities may begin after finalization of a contract (timber sale, service, etc.) or agreement. Implementation also may be preceded or followed by monitoring activities designed to assess the impacts and effectiveness of management actions.

For more information refer to the [Forest Service Project Planning to Implementation](#) guidebook developed by Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition.

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## How did the US Forest Service engage with the public and how will they continue to engage with the public throughout implementation?

*Table 1. North Sandia Fuels Reduction (NSFR) Project – Public Involvement Summary*

Date	Task
<b>PRE-NEPA</b>	
01/16/2024	Sandia Collaborative Meeting
2/29/2024	MOU Meeting with Sandia Pueblo
3/15/2024	Enter into PALS/Website Created
4/1/2024	Published on Fiscal Year 2024 Quarter 3 SOPA
<b>SCOPING PERIOD</b>	
<b>4/3/2024</b>	<b>Initiate Scoping Period/NEPA Process Begins</b> (input received via electronic comment, mail, in-person, or via phone)
Day of Scoping Initiation	New Release, Social Media Post
Day of Scoping Initiation	Print Letters Sent Out
Day of Scoping Initiation	CARA Comment Period Activated (electronic commenting)
Day of Scoping Initiation	Update Public Website/Upload documents to Public Website via Pinyon Public
2/29/2024	Project discussed during quarterly tribal consultation meeting with Sandia Pueblo
4/4/2024	Tribal, Pueblo, and Land Grant Letters Sent Out
4/2024	Fiscal Year 2024 Quarter 3 SOPA report emailed to Tribes and Pueblos
4/11/2024	Field Trip to discuss silvicultural prescription with representatives from Sandia Pueblo
4/24/2024	Public Meeting hosted by Coronado Soil and Water Conservation District, Las Acequias de Placitas, Las Huertas Community Ditch, and San Antonio de Las Huertas Land Grant (SADLHLG)
<b>EXTENDED SCOPING</b>	
4/26/2024	Based on public feedback, decided to extend the public scoping period from a 30-day comment period to an 80-day comment period
4/26/2024	Updated PALS/Public Website/CARA Comment Period
5/1/2024	Updated Tribal, Pueblo, and Land Grant Letters sent out (email, mail, and/or hand delivered)
5/1/2024	Added 4/24/2024 meeting materials to Pinyon Public
5/2/2024	Notification of Extended Scoping Period sent to 4/24/2024 Meeting Attendees
5/2/2024	Publish Updated News Release
5/2/2024	News Release, map, copy of proposed action delivered to Placitas Community Library and the post office
5/24/2024	New Mexico Land Grant Council Meeting
<b>Additional Collaboration throughout NEPA Analysis</b>	
06/24/2024	Project discussed during quarterly tribal consultation meeting with Sandia Pueblo
06/28/2024	US Forest Service and Placitas Stakeholders Meeting (comment accepted from the group)
7/16/2024	Sandia Collaborative Meeting
9/19/2024	Project discussed during quarterly tribal consultation meeting with Sandia Pueblo
9/10/2024	Sandia Collaborative Meeting
9/30/2024	Project discussed during tribal consultation meeting with Isleta Pueblo
10/10/2024	4 <sup>th</sup> Quarter SOPA Report sent to Tribes and Pueblos
10/18/2024	New Mexico Land Grant Council Meeting
<b>DECISION ROLLOUT</b>	
11/14/2024	Update PALS and Public Website
11/14/2024	Upload final documents to Public Website via Pinyon Public
11/14/2024	Notify Commenters of Signed Decision
11/14/2024	Deliver final documents for viewing to Placitas Community Library
11/14/2024	Make documents available for view at District Office and Supervisor's Office
11/14/2024	News Release

11/14/2024	Social Media Post
<b>Future Public Engagement</b>	
Annual or semi-annual	District Open House/Prescribed Fire Open House
TBD/Prior to Implementation	Coordination Meetings with Tribes and Land Grants affiliated with Las Huertas TCP to discuss implementation process.
Quarterly <i>or as determined by tribes</i>	Tribal MOU Meetings
Every other month	Sandia Collaborative Meeting
As Needed	News Releases (e.g., prescribed fire, smoke, road closures, recreation closures, etc.)

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## **The prescribed fire plan and complexity analysis are not included in the NEPA document. When are these plans developed and what is included in these plans?**

Prescribed fire plans are typically developed after all proposed mechanical treatments in an area have been completed. These plans involve multiple site visits by fire managers to accurately assess on-site conditions, including fuel loading, arrangement, and characteristics. During these visits, fire managers also evaluate where to implement or utilize natural or man-made barriers, such as roads and trails, to control fire spread. They also consider whether constructing firelines in strategic locations is necessary while determining the size and shape of the prescribed fire burn block. This requires close communication and coordination with all other resource areas including, Wildlife, Heritage, Soils & Hydrology, Timber, & Recreation staff to ensure all concerns or mitigations are addressed to minimize impacts to values and critical resources.

Once sufficient data and intelligence are gathered, the prescribed fire planning process begins. The plan consists of 21 elements and details of the planning process and each individual element can be found at the following link:

[2022 National Wildfire Coordinating Group \(NWCG\) Standards for Prescribed Fire Planning and Implementation](#)

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## **How is the US Forest Service incorporating the policy changes and ‘lessons learned’ from the *National Prescribed Fire Program Review* and the *Gallinas-Las Dispensas Prescribed Fire Declared Wildfire Review* into the implementation of NSFR?**

The National Prescribed Fire Program Review was released in September of 2022 and includes key elements to be incorporated into prescribed fire planning into the future. Post national review, all prescribed fire plans and associated complexity analyses were technically reviewed and approved to ensure they reflect current conditions and received approval from the agency administrator. Agency administrators are now required to authorize ignitions for every operational period (24 hours) to make certain a discussion is occurring with burn personnel about current conditions, drought, and also human factors of fatigue, experience levels of implementers and any pressures associated with implementation. Agency administrators are now required to present on the unit for all high complexity projects and 30-40% of moderately complex projects.

Additionally, protocols are in place to have contingency resources that are identified in the plan to have a response time of 30 minutes or less to the prescribed fire project area. The holding plan, element 16 of the burn plan, now thoroughly identifies conditions required to put a prescribed burn into a holding pattern and outlines what resources are needed for the days and weeks following ignitions to include a critical weather setup plan that accounts for unforeseen weather conditions and an appropriate response level. All of these items are incorporated into the planning, implementation and monitoring of a prescribed fire to ensure accountability from the start of the planning process to when a prescribed fire is declared out.

See the [USDA Forest Service 2022 Gallinas-Las Dispensas Prescribed Fire Declared Wildfire Review](#) and the [USDA Forest Service 2022 National Prescribed Fire Program Review](#) for more information.

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