



United States Department of the Interior

Fish and Wildlife Service
Arizona Ecological Services Office

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In reply refer to:

AESO/SE

02EAAZ00-2013-F-0190-R001

December 20, 2018

Ms. Laura Jo West, Forest Supervisor
Coconino National Forest
1824 South Thompson Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001-3600

Dear Ms. West:

Thank you for your October 9, 2018, electronic mail regarding reinitiation of the Flagstaff Watershed Protection Project (FWPP) on the Flagstaff Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest (NF) in Coconino County, Arizona. The Forest Service consulted with the Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) on this project and we issued a non-jeopardy, non-adverse modification biological opinion (Consultation #02EAAZ00-2013-F-0190) on June 5, 2015, for potential effects resulting to the threatened Mexican spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis lucida*) and its critical habitat from mechanical thinning and burning activities.

The primary purpose of FWPP is to reduce the risk of high severity wildfire and subsequent flooding in two key watersheds near Flagstaff, Arizona: the Dry Lake Hills (DLH) portion of the Rio de Flag Watershed located north of Flagstaff; and the Mormon Mountain (MM) portion of the Walnut Creek-Upper Lake Mary Watershed located south of Flagstaff. More specifically, there is a need to reduce the potential for crown fires, high intensity surface fires, and to reduce the likelihood of human-caused ignitions.

A key component of this project is a collaborative Mexican spotted owl-monitoring plan between the Forest Service and Service designed to evaluate the effects of prescribed fire and mechanical thinning on short-term owl occupancy and reproduction, and key habitat components. As part of the monitoring plan, biologists' surveyed Mexican spotted owl protected activity centers (PAC) and habitat within the DLH portion of the project (FWPP Phase II) consistently since 2013. They detected Mexican spotted owls in recovery habitat during nighttime surveys adjacent to the Mt. Elden and Weatherford PACs each year, but daytime follow up visits did not locate birds outside of those PACs until 2018. In 2018 surveyors detected owls again outside of established PACs and relocated a pair of owls during daytime follow up visits. Surveys also confirmed owls in the Mt. Elden and Weatherford PACs supporting the need to establish an additional PAC.

Based upon our new analysis to the proposed action as described above, the changes to our existing biological opinion for the project are only to the Description of the Proposed Action, the Environmental Baseline, the Effects Section and one sentence under 'Amount of Take' in the Incidental Take Statement. The Status of the Species, Cumulative Effects, non-jeopardy conclusion, and the actual Incidental Take Statement will not change. The modified sections amend our June 5, 2015, biological opinion and are included in Appendix A of this letter.

Thank you for your continued collaboration and partnership. No further section 7 consultation is required for this project at this time. Should project plans change, or if information on the distribution or abundance of listed species or critical habitat becomes available, this determination may need to be reconsidered. In all future correspondence on this project, please refer to consultation number 02EAAZ00-2013-F-0190-R001.

If you require further assistance or you have any questions, please contact Shaula Hedwall (928-556-2118) or me (602-242-0210).

Sincerely,



Jeffery A. Humphrey
Field Supervisor

cc (electronic):

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Director, Cultural Resources Department, Hualapai Tribe, Peach Springs, AZ
Director, Historic Preservation Department, Navajo Nation, Window Rock, AZ
Director, San Carlos Tribal Historic Preservation Office, San Carlos, AZ
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Director, Cultural Resources, White Mountain Apache Tribe, Whiteriver, AZ
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Director, Cultural Research Program, Yavapai-Prescott Indian Tribe, Prescott, AZ
Director, Zuni Heritage and Historic Preservation Office, Zuni, NM
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APPENDIX A – Revised Sections for the FWPP Biological Opinion

CHANGES TO THE DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

The Forest Service plans to implement thinning treatments that they originally identified in the proposed action and analyzed for mixed conifer recovery habitat with the exception of 100 acres within the newly designated “Oldham” Mexican spotted owl nest core and 395 PAC acres (total of PAC acres thinned). Prescribed fire will be applied to the entire Oldham PAC, post-thinning. The Forest Service worked with the Service to re-mark these acres to increase residual basal area, basal area of large trees and canopy cover from the original mark, but thinning will occur within the nest core as opposed to the other PACs within the FWPP. Forest Service and Service objectives for the treatment in the new Oldham PAC remain the same as originally identified in the proposed action and the biological opinion.

The Forest Service will implement the conservation measures in the original proposed action with three exceptions: 1) loggers will use a helicopter to harvest 28 acres within the nest core; 2) there is no mandatory breeding season restriction for activities in the nest core; and, 3) there is a log landing and spur road within the nest core. As in other PAC treatments in the proposed action, treatments during the breeding season in the Oldham PAC will be limited to a two-year timeframe.

The Forest Service and Service will continue to monitor occupancy and reproduction of the Oldham PAC throughout project implementation and at one, three and five years post-treatment as with the other PACs within the project area.

CHANGES TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL BASELINE

A. Status of the species and critical habitat within the action area

The only change to the Environmental Baseline is the addition of the Oldham Mexican spotted owl PAC to the action area. The Forest Service and Service worked together to draw the PAC and nest core boundary, so now within the DLH portion of the project area there are five PACs, versus the four known occupied sites listed in the original biological opinion.

Critical Habitat

With the designation of the Oldham Mexican spotted owl PAC, 520 acres of critical habitat moved from a label of recovery to protected habitat.

CHANGES TO THE EFFECTS OF THE ACTION

For the steep-slope, conventional, and helicopter logging operations in the Oldham PAC (and nest core), there are three conservation measures that the Forest Service will not apply as they have for the other Mexican spotted owl nest cores in the FWPP project area. The proposed thinning in the nest core and the PAC during the breeding season will result in adverse effects to

owls in the PAC from noise disturbance that may disrupt courtship, breeding, and rearing of young. In addition, the Recovery Plan for the Mexican spotted owl, first revision does not recommend mechanical or handing thinning activities occur in nest core areas. However, heavy fuel loads, the density of small diameter conifers, and the location of this site in a tight, narrow drainage just a few miles above Flagstaff, are all reasons why thinning and burning in this area will result in long-term benefits to the resiliency of this PAC and the three adjacent PACs. We specify the three conservation measures and the associated affects to the Mexican spotted owl below.

1) There are 28 acres within the Oldham Mexican spotted owl PAC nest core that loggers will use a helicopter to harvest trees.

The operator will conduct the helicopter logging outside the Mexican spotted owl-breeding season (March 1 to August 31) due to warmer air temperatures during this time. Summertime temperatures can adversely affect the ability of the helicopter to obtain lift; therefore, to provide for contractor safety, the contractor will conduct all helicopter logging outside of the breeding season. By conducting the helicopter logging outside of the breeding season, this will reduce disturbance effects to Mexican spotted owls using the Oldham PAC nest core area.

However, helicopter logging would result in loss of snags within the Oldham Mexican spotted owl nest core and PAC. Snags are a key component of Mexican spotted owl habitat and prey habitat; therefore, the removal of snags, particularly in occupied habitat, is an adverse effect. As noted in the original proposed action, helicopter logging requires that loggers remove all hazard trees from the entire area that would be helicopter logged to provide for safety of personnel on the ground outside of protected (closed cab) machinery. During a site visit, the logging company indicated that they would likely need to remove few snags from the nest core and PAC, with the exception of areas around log landings. Regardless, Forest Service modeling indicates that mixed conifer PAC and recovery habitats would continue to provide a minimum of two snags per acre greater than or equal to 18 inches (in) diameter breast height (dbh) and greater than 30 feet (ft) tall. Treatment objectives include maintaining a diversity of tree sizes with the goal of having trees greater than or equal to 16 in dbh contributing to over 50 percent (%) of the stand basal area. Emphasizing the retention and growth of large trees should enhance the recruitment of large snags and logs over time.

2) There is no mandatory breeding season restriction for activities in the Oldham Mexican spotted owl nest core.

Breeding season restrictions reduce the likelihood that nesting Mexican spotted owls will be disturbed to the extent that activities affect reproduction. Because some of the proposed thinning activities will need to occur during the breeding season, there is the potential for disturbance to result in displacement and/or reduced reproduction of the Oldham owls because of this action. Although thinning will only occur within the PAC during two breeding seasons (one to two years), the existing conventional and steep slope ground-based logging will not include a seasonal timing restriction for 58 acres of ground-based thinning treatments proposed in Oldham PAC nest core. We estimate that the proposed mechanical thinning may thin up to eight acres per day; therefore, it could take seven to eight days to complete treatments in the nest core during

the breeding season. The Forest Service will continue monitoring the PAC during the thinning activities and will work with the contracting officer and contractor to minimize noise disturbance to locations where owls are present. There will be breeding season restrictions for the proposed hand thinning (14 acres) and burning in the Oldham nest core.

3) Within the Oldham Mexican spotted owl nest core there is a two-acre log landing where trees from adjacent cut units would be processed and stockpiled and a 200 foot-long spur road that provides access from Mt. Elden Lookout Road to the log landing.

To provide for the safety of personnel on the ground, loggers will remove snags within areas around the two-acre log landing. As stated above, snags are a key component of Mexican spotted owl habitat and prey habitat; therefore, the removal of snags, particularly in occupied habitat, is an adverse effect. The landing is located within an existing opening in the forest, which reduces the need for cutting snags as there are few present in this location. This snag removal represent a very small portion of the project area. As stated above, Forest Service modeling indicates that mixed conifer Mexican spotted owl PAC and recovery habitats would continue to provide a minimum of two snags per acre greater than or equal to 18 in dbh and greater than 30 ft tall. Treatment objectives include maintaining a diversity of tree sizes with the goal of having trees greater than or equal to 16 in dbh contributing over 50% of the stand basal area. Emphasizing the retention and growth of large trees should enhance the recruitment of large snags and logs over time.

The original proposed action recognized that the Forest Service would need to construct temporary roads, landings, and skid trails in Mexican spotted owl PACs and recovery habitats in order to accomplish thinning treatments. The Forest Service will rehabilitate all of these areas following tree thinning. Within the Oldham PAC, the development of and operations at the log landing are limited to a two-year period during the breeding season. There is potential for short-term adverse effects to owls from disturbance caused by the use of the log landing and spur road during the breeding season.

Critical Habitat

With the designation of the Oldham Mexican spotted owl PAC, 520 acres of critical habitat moved from a label of recovery to protected habitat. The effects to critical habitat are the same as analyzed in the original biological opinion. As stated above, we re-marked the trees for harvest in the nest core to increase the residual basal area, basal area of large trees, and canopy cover within the nest core. However, besides that, the acres, treatment type and harvesting method proposed in critical habitat are the same as analyzed in the June 5, 2015, biological opinion.

CHANGES TO THE INCIDENTAL TAKE STATEMENT

The only change to the incidental take statement is the following sentence, under the ‘**Amount of Take**’ section (10 Mexican spotted owl PACs changed to 11 Mexican spotted owl PACs):

There are at least 11 Mexican spotted owl PACs that could be affected by FWPP. All Mexican spotted owl PACs have acreage that will be thinned and prescribe burned.

The rest of the incidental take statement is as written in the June 5, 2015, biological opinion.