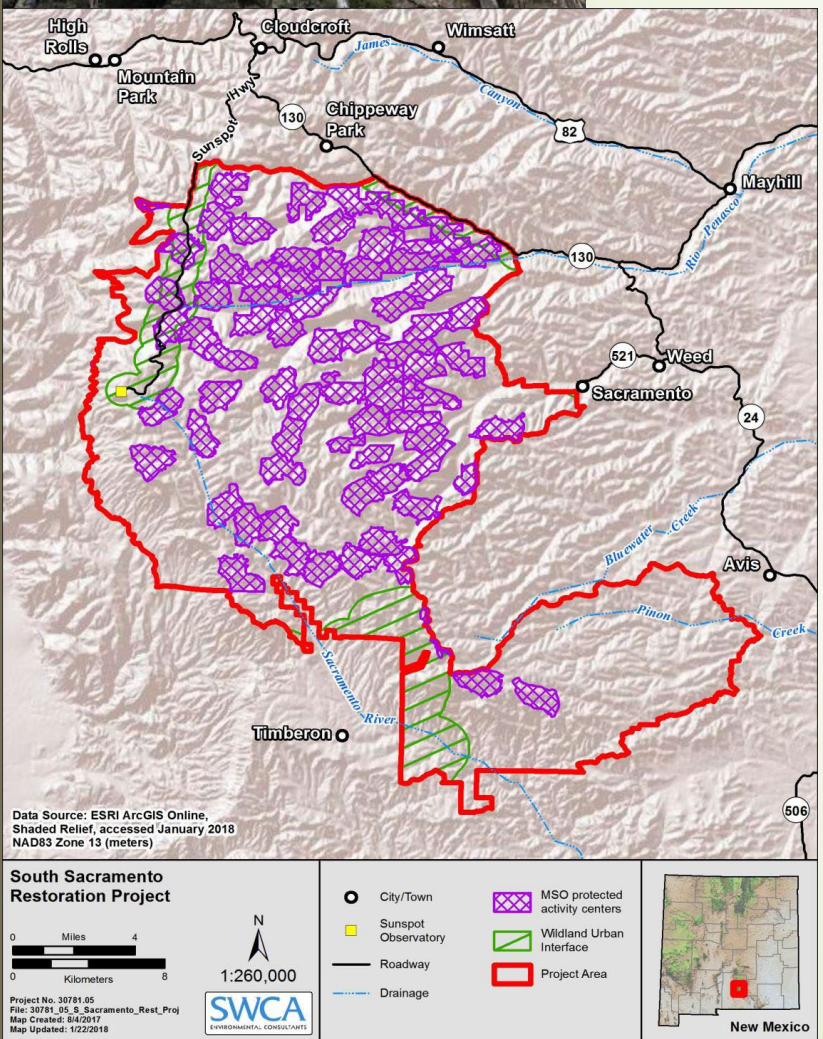


New Mexico Department of Wildlife & U.S. Forest Service – Lincoln National Forest

The New Mexico Department of Wildlife and the United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service, Region 3 Lincoln National Forest have proposed to collaboratively implement forest thinning treatments that conserve, enhance, and manage wildlife habitats on National Forest System lands in New Mexico.

This project supports habitat improvement while enhancing opportunities for wildlife viewing, education, hunting, and fishing. It reflects a mutual cost-share partnership under the existing Master Challenge Cost Share Agreement and aligns with the missions and objectives of both agencies.

Project Overview

The project will implement up to 2,600 acres of manual forest thinning and hand piling treatments within the Lincoln National Forest, specifically in designated Mexican Spotted Owl Protected Activity Centers under the South Sacramento Restoration Project (SSRP) Mexican Spotted Owl Management Experiment Area.

These treatments are designed to improve forest structure, enhance ecosystem resiliency, and conserve critical wildlife habitat for a range of wildlife species, including game and nongame. They have the additional benefit of testing the compatibility and timing of forest treatments within MSO activity centers.

Funds requested: $750,000

Project Phases

The SSRP Mexican Spotted Owl Management Experiment includes three primary phases:

- **Vegetative Thinning** – Manual thinning and hand piling conducted by contractors funded and procured by the Department.
- **Pile Burning** – Conducted by the U.S. Forest Service.
- **Broadcast Burning** – Conducted by the U.S. Forest Service following vegetation treatments.

The Department and U.S. Forest Service will jointly organize and coordinate the work.

Expected Outcomes and Benefits

This collaborative effort will:

- Improve wildlife habitat health and resilience on National Forest System lands to benefit elk, deer, and turkey
- Enhance ecosystem stability within treated areas
- Support research on forest thinning impacts on Mexican Spotted Owls
- Improve opportunities for wildlife viewing, hunting, fishing, and public education

Project Contacts

USFS- Kimberly Himshaw- *kimberly.hinshaw@usda.gov*
NMDOW- Caitlin Ruhl- *caitlin.Ruhl@dgf.nm.gov*
NMDOW- Rose Peralta-Hagen- *rose.peralta-hagen@dgf.nm.gov*

South Sacramento Restoration Project Year 1

Lincoln National Forest

New Mexico Department of Wildlife

History

Due to past management practices such as commercial harvest and fire suppression, along with insect infestation and climate change, the forest as been altered and the risk of high severity fire is extreme.

In 2017, the Lincoln National Forest in cooperation with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and New Mexico Game and Fish (now New Mexico Department of Wildlife) developed the South Sacramento Restoration Project to address forest health issues, hazardous fuels, and declining wildlife habitat quality on the Sacramento Ranger District.

South Sacramento Restoration Project

140,000 acres overall project area

108,120 total acres of burning

Prescribed fire

Management of fire to meet multiple objective

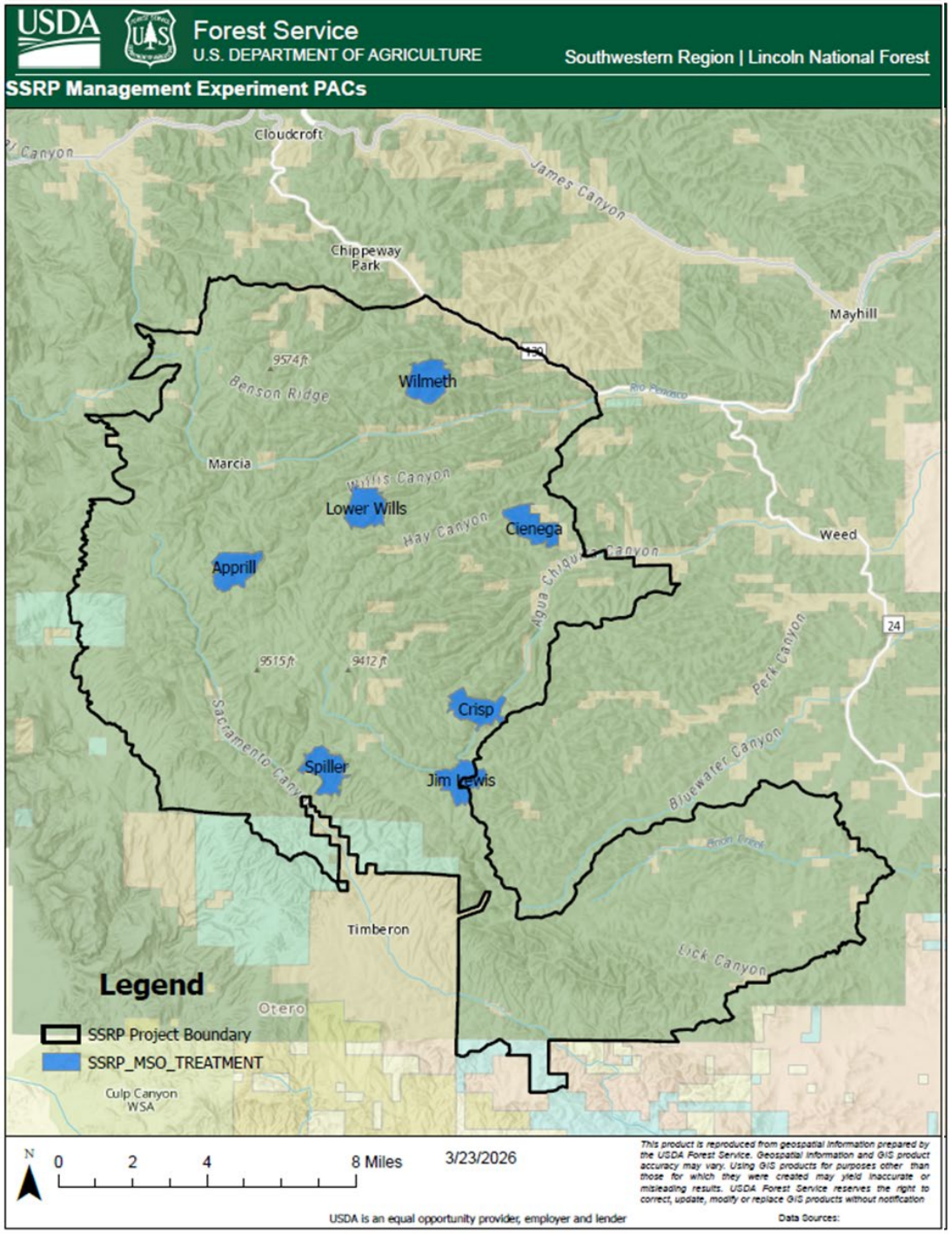
53,910 total acres of vegetative treatment

16,010 Free Thinning

8,400 Thin From Below

29,500 Individual Tree Selection with Reserves

ROUND 1 (FY26)	ROUND 2 (FY27)	ROUND 3 (FY28)	ROUND 4 (FY29)	ROUND 5 (FY30)
Projects ➢ Monument Timber Sale ➢ Bridge Timber Sale ➢ Crisp PAC Timber Sale ➢ Jim Lewis PAC Timber Sale ➢ Apprill PAC Timber Sale ➢ Broadcast Burn Block 1	Projects ➢ Rodgers Timber Sale ➢ Lower Willis PAC Timber Sale ➢ Cienega PAC Timber Sale ➢ Spiller PAC Timber Sale ➢ Wilmeth PAC Timber Sale ➢ Mastication Unit 1 ➢ Mastication Unit 2 ➢ Mastication Unit 3	Projects ➢ Sunspot Timber Sale ➢ Cosmic Timber Sale ➢ Danley Timber Sale ➢ Mastication Unit 4 ➢ Mastication Unit 5 ➢ Mastication Unit 6 ➢ Crisp PAC Pile Burning ➢ Jim Lewis PAC Pile Burning ➢ Apprill PAC Pile Burning ➢ Monument Pile Burning ➢ Bridge Pile Burning	Projects ➢ Cathey Timber Sale ➢ Deadman Timber Sale ➢ McAfee Timber Sale ➢ Rodgers Pile Burning ➢ Lower Willis PAC Pile Burning ➢ Cienega PAC Pile Burning ➢ Spiller PAC Pile Burning ➢ Wilmeth PAC Pile Burning ➢ Broadcast Burn Block 2	Projects ➢ Hay Timber Sale ➢ Deadman Pile Burning ➢ Sunspot Pile Burning ➢ Cosmic Pile Burning ➢ Danley Pile Burning ➢ McAfee Pile Burning ➢ Broadcast Burn Block 3


USDA
Forest Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Southwestern Region | Lincoln National Forest
SSRP Management Experiment PACs
Cloudcroft
James Canyon
Chippeway Park
Mayhill
9574 ft
Benson Ridge
Wilmeth
Marcia
Willis Canyon
Lower Wills
Hay Canyon
Cienega
Weed
Agua Chiquita Canyon
Apprill
9515 ft
9412 ft
Perk Canyon
24
Crisp
Sacramento Canyon
Spiller
Jim Lewis
Bluewater Canyon
Timberon
Lick Canyon
Legend
Otero
SSRP Project Boundary
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N
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3/23/2026
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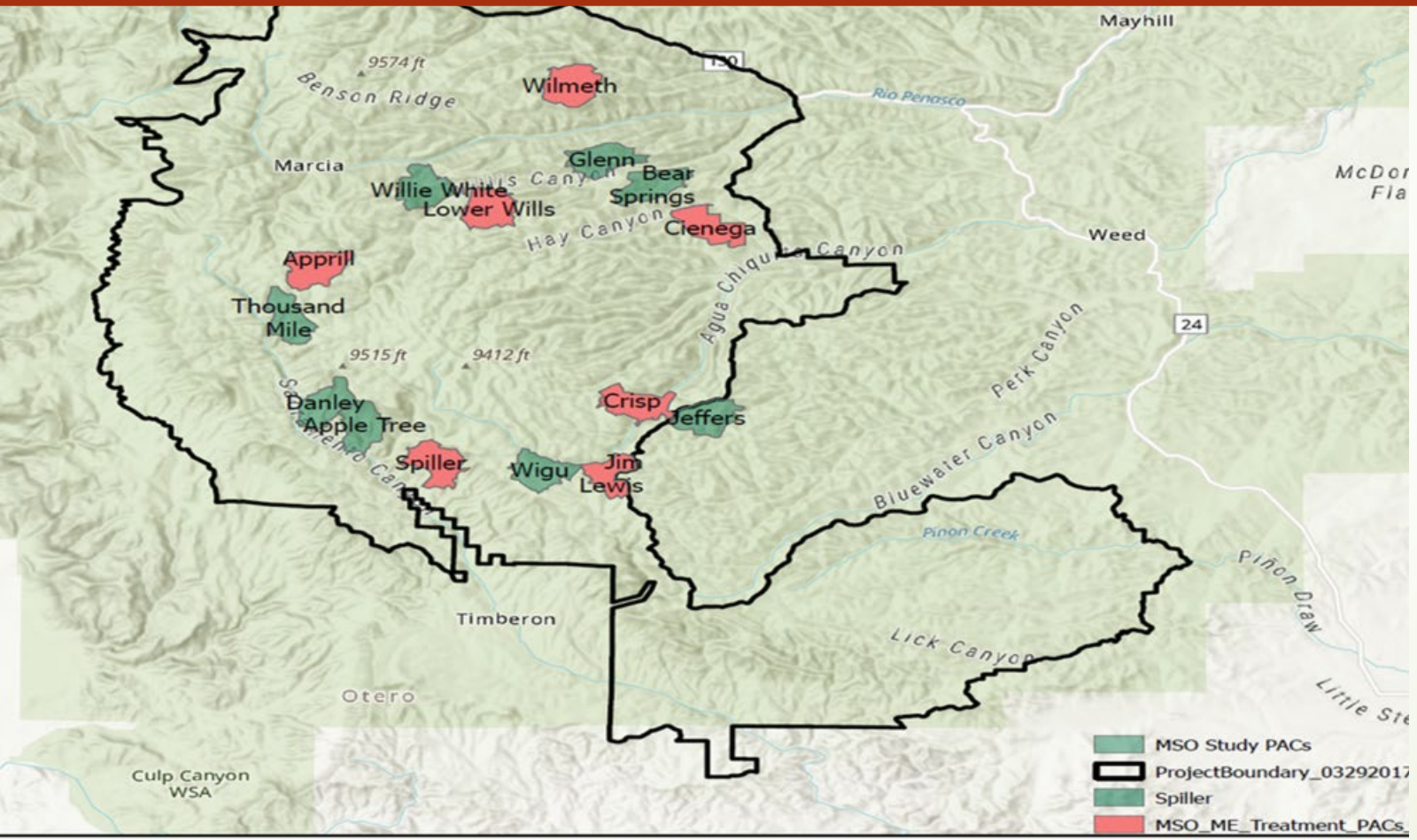
Data Sources:

Mexican Spotted Owl Management Experiment



- 7 Treatment Protected Activity Centers
- 7 Reference Protected Activity Centers
- 23 Alternative Protected Activity Centers
- Split into 2 treatment groups
  - 3 Treatment PACs in Round 1 (Sept 2026)
  - 4 Treatment PACs in Round 2 (Sept 2027)

The project will be executed in three phases

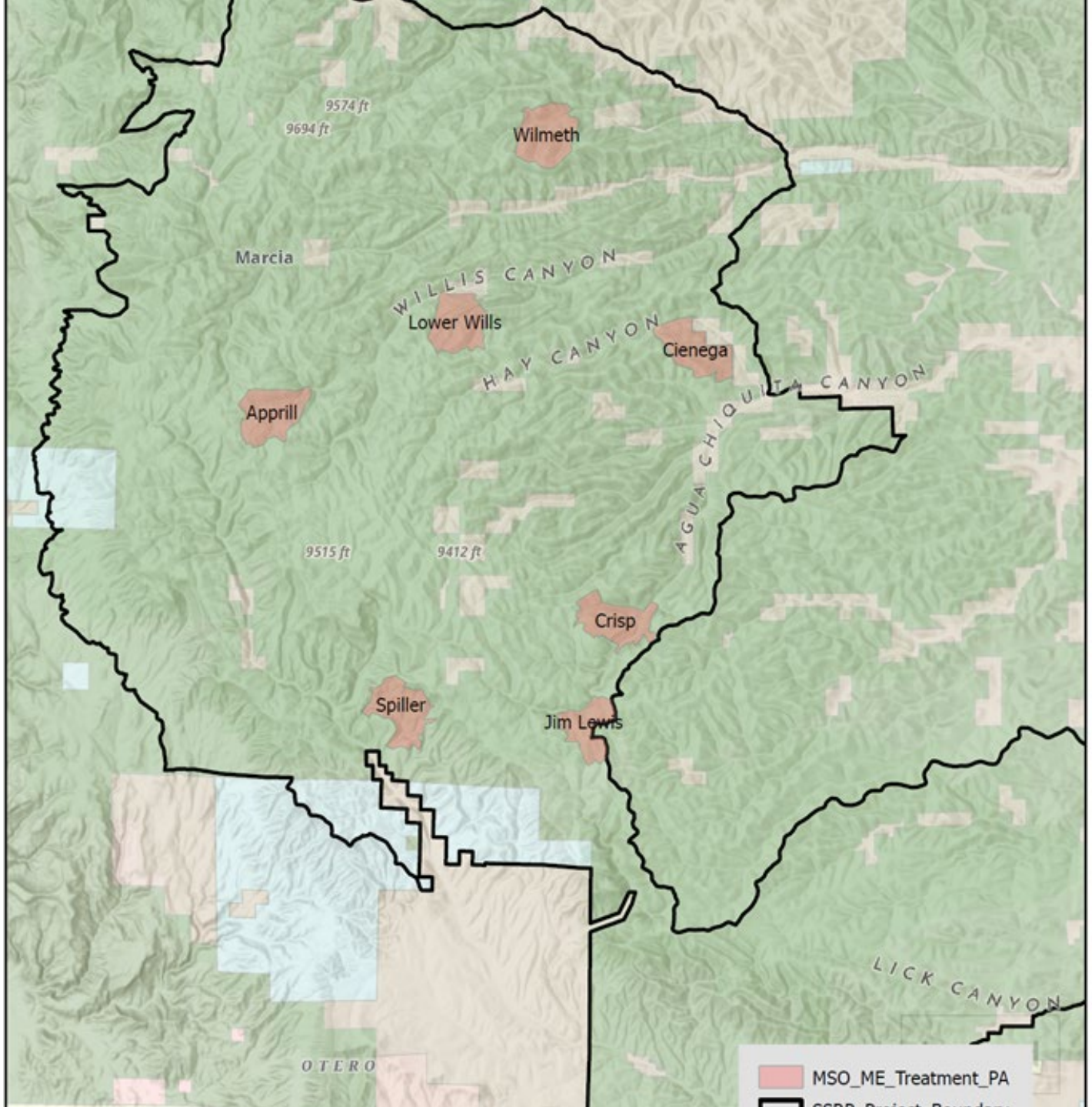
1. Vegetative Thinning
   - 18-month implementation period (September 1 of treatment year 1 through February 29 of treatment year 3).
   - Treatments must occur through one breeding season (March1-Aug31)
2. Pile Burning by the U.S. Forest Service
3. Broadcast burning.

All phases must follow strict timing and MSO protection requirements

MSO Management Experiment Monitoring

Monitoring will assess:

- Owl Occupancy
- Reproduction
- Habitat Response
- **Results will guide future management decisions**



The project involves forest thinning on approximately 2,600 acres of the Lincoln National Forest in New Mexico to conserve and enhance wildlife habitat. It aims to improve opportunities for wildlife viewing, education, hunting, and fishing, particularly within the Mexican Spotted Owl Protected Activity Centers (PAC) as part of the South Sacramento Restoration Project's Management Experiment.

Goals

- Address declining forest heath
- Enhance ecosystem health and resilience
- Reduce the risk of high severity fire
- Create better wildlife viewing and hunting opportunities
- Support research on forest thinning and Mexican Spotted Owls (MSO)

Game Species to benefit:

- Turkey
- Elk
- Deer

Funding Estimate:

- Completing the entire 2,600 acres is expected to cost ~ 3.5-4 million dollars.
- The request for this project is **$ 750,000** to contribute to Year 1 thinning (~500 acres)

Questions

HSP CAC Subcommittee Rangeland Habitat Proposal Recommendations

Submitted on March 5, 2025, Voted on by CAC August 5, 2025

The HSP CAC Subcommittee recommends that project proposals to be submitted for review with the goal of being funded by the HSP shall consist of but are not limited to:

Lincoln National Forest input provided in blue text below.

1. **Project must contain specific details that clearly define any prior and future mitigation that addresses the project degradation.**

   Degradation of habitat in the South Sacramento Restoration Project Mexican Spotted Owl Protected Activity Centers that will be treated as part of the management experiment is due to historic land management practices, insects and disease, lack of active forest management, and departure from natural disturbance fire regimes. The primary objectives of the overall SSRP are to address degradation through implementation of thinning and burning activities. Rangeland management practices since the formation of the National Forest have addressed rangeland conditions through adjusted stocking rates, seasonal rotations, protection of sensitive habitats, and water developments to better distribute livestock. Rangeland management will continue to employ the suite of tools to mitigate and future degradation. The proposed thinning and burning activities within the PACs will allow for more forage growth to support livestock and wildlife distribution.

2. **Provide details of prior funding for the degraded habitat restoration.**

   ***If there were no funds implemented by the range biologist or from the permittee please explain why.**

   A variety of funds, including but not limited to Habitat Stamp funds, Range Betterment Funds, Congressional Appropriations, and permittee cooperative funds (personal or through grants) have been used on the grazing allotments in the project area to improve rangeland and habitat conditions. These funds have been used for water developments to provide water to livestock and wildlife and aid in better distribution of grazers to reduce concentration of grazing impacts. They have been used for exclosure fencing to protect sensitive resources or habitats. They have also supported habitat restoration such as planting native vegetation and erosion control.

3. **Provide what the permitted stocking rate and pasture rotation on the degraded area of the allotment has been.**

   ***Is there any livestock presently on the allotment or degraded area? if so, provide all pertinent information**

   There are four active allotments in the project area (see map). Current and recent stocking and pasture rotation is outlined briefly below:

   - Agua Chiquita Allotment: 275 cow/calf pairs split as evenly as possible from May 1 to October 31 annually
   - North Bluewater Allotment: 149 cow/calf pairs dispersed between two pastures from May 16 to October 10 annually (only one pasture has a treatment area)
   - Sacramento Allotment: 130-150 cow/calf pairs rotate between two summer pastures in alternating order annually, from approximately May 15 to July 30 in the first pasture and August 1 to October 31 in the second pasture (there are two treatment PACs in one pasture and one in the other). Stocking rates vary based on forage conditions. Five horses are also permitted on the summer pastures.
   - Scott Able Allotment: 100 cow/calf pairs are distributed among summer pastures based on forage and water availability from May 20 to November 15 annually.

4. **Provide the adapted management plan that was implemented in the effort to contain the degradation.**

   ***If there were no mitigation efforts please explain why.**

   Rangeland management practices since the formation of the National Forest have addressed rangeland conditions through adjusted stocking rates, seasonal rotations, protection of sensitive habitats, and water developments to better distribute livestock. Each allotment has its own environmental analysis and decision document that sets parameters for resource condition-based management. All allotments are managed for conservative forage use in balance with providing habitat for wildlife. Implementing the SSRP treatments on these allotments will contribute to reducing impacts from livestock grazing by opening gaps in the forest canopy, allowing forage to grow and

enhance distribution of livestock and wild ungulates throughout the allotments.

5. **Provide any future adapted management plans to maintain future grazing and vegetation restoration of the degraded area so that the rangeland habitat can function properly and be used by local wildlife.**

   ***Information should include but is not limited to : what livestock will be permitted on the degraded allotment, stocking rate, pasture rotation, and who will be responsible for monitoring.**

   Each allotment has its own environmental analysis and decision document that sets parameters for resource condition-based management. All allotments are managed for conservative forage use in balance with providing habitat for wildlife. The Forest Service conducts monitoring operations. Additionally, on these allotments that have federally listed species under the Endangered Species Act (i.e., MSO), the Forest has and continues to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to ensure monitoring and livestock grazing are conducted appropriately to maintain and improve habitat used by livestock and wildlife.

6. **Are there any agreements to help protect and monitor fences and vegetative restoration? Provide details of a monitoring plan. Plan should include but is not limited to: adequate inspections and who is responsible for inspections. Inspections should include photo verification of restoration progress and a detailed description of restoration photos.**

   ***An agreement in place for the restoration and monitoring process will tend to provide a higher degree of restoration success benefiting all vested parties.**

   This project requires a comprehensive monitoring plan as part of its formal consultation with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and is described in detail in Appendix B of the Biological Opinion. Monitoring includes owl surveys and vegetation monitoring. Vegetation monitoring using the standard Common Stand Exam protocol provides information about composition and structure to assess progress toward desired conditions.

7. **Riparian areas that are dependent on upland watershed to maintain its viability must include a mitigation plan for both the watershed and the riparian area.**

   ***Some riparian areas may be able to be fenced without a watershed plan as long as the amount of fenced area encompasses enough habitat to sustain its viability. Provide all details justifying the amount of habitat to be encompassed.**

   This project does not involve project work in riparian areas or fencing. Project work of thinning upland forested areas will improve watershed health by encouraging understory plant growth in openings, allowing for retention of moisture and reducing runoff and erosion.

8. **Provide comprehensive itemized use of funds.**

9. **Project details should define direct benefits to the public, permittee and wildlife.**

   This project benefits the public, permittee, and wildlife by reducing risk of catastrophic wildfire, improving forest health and providing for more forage with better distribution, and enhances wildlife habitat.

Citizen Advisory Committee recommendation:

It is recommended that the full CAC explore and develop respectful relationships with USFS and BLM rangeland biologist and to encourage rangeland biologists to be active partners with the NMG&F Habitat Stamp Program in protecting range habitat for the Public, Permittees and Wildlife.