

Cragin Watershed Protection Project FAQs

Why here, why now?

The Town of Payson, Ariz., which sits directly below the Mogollon Rim, has been working since 2008 toward a plan for accessing water from C.C. Cragin Reservoir, which is located above the Mogollon Rim on the Coconino National Forest. Through collaborative efforts that include the Forest Service, Salt River Project, the Bureau of Reclamation, and the Town of Payson, a pipeline and water treatment facility are being constructed that will allow Payson to use water from the Reservoir. Beginning in 2018, the Town of Payson will have access to 3,000 acre/ft. of water from the reservoir per year, which the town will use for drinking water. Additionally, water from the reservoir will be used by the Salt River Project and is also being made available for use in smaller communities in Northern Gila County and the Tonto Apache Indian Community.

The three watersheds that surround and feed C.C. Cragin are vegetated by ponderosa pine and dry mixed conifer. These vegetation types along the Mogollon Rim historically experienced frequent, low intensity fires. However, land management activities have excluded natural fire behavior for decades and now, due to unnatural fuel build-up, there is a high hazard for uncharacteristically severe wildfires. These types of wildfire would result in increased erosion and flooding that would impact reservoir operations and storage, directly affecting water supply for the Town of Payson and other users.

The Mogollon Rim Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest is initiating the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process to address these watershed and fire risk concerns. The Forest Service has chosen to use the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) as the legal authority to meet the requirements of the NEPA planning process. The National Forest Foundation has also started a collaborative process to facilitate project development and to inform analysis to meet collaboration and public involvement requirements of HFRA and NEPA.

Is the Cragin Watershed Protection Project part of the Western Watershed Enhancement Project (WWEP)?

Yes, the C.C. Cragin Reservoir and surrounding watersheds are one of the critical watersheds included in the WWEP. In support of the WWEP, the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Interior have established a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), signed on July 19, 2013, to accomplish common goals and interests in water supply, quality, conservation, and watershed function. Additionally, related common interests will be addressed to improve wildlife habitat, restore wildfire-damaged resources, and reduce the risk of uncharacteristically severe wildfire.

Through this MOU the Forest Service and the Bureau of Reclamation have begun a new chapter of Federal cooperation, beginning with six pilot projects in the Northern, Rocky Mountain, Southwestern, Intermountain, Pacific Southwest, and Pacific Northwest Regions of the Forest Service.

These pilots are designed to improve watershed functions and reduce the risk of uncharacteristically severe wildfire across jurisdictional boundaries. This effort will also benefit water supply, irrigation, and hydroelectric customers over the long term. Working collaboratively with water users, the pilots will develop an avoided-cost approach, leveraging other Forest Service investments with partner contributions to support site-specific treatments.

What is the planning timeline?

The Forest Service started the proposal development stage in 2015. Since that time we have worked to establish existing conditions, collecting data on access, sensitive wildlife habitat, forest conditions and other resources. This information, along with input from the collaborative group, will be used to provide a proposed action for public scoping in the winter of 2016. In addition to collaboration there will be opportunities for public input on a proposed action, the opportunity for public comment on the preliminary Environmental Analysis and an opportunity to object to the draft decision. The planning process is expected to be completed in 2017, prior to the Town of Payson's water use from the reservoir.

What is the purpose of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act and why use this authority?

The purpose of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) is the same as the Cragin Watershed Protection Project: Reducing hazard fuels to protect the wildland urban interface, and reducing the risk of damage to nearby communities and municipal water supply watersheds.

HFRA is also an appropriate authority because the entire Cragin Watershed Protection Project is within the Blue Ridge Community Wildfire Protection Plan of 2009, with private land inholdings, government facilities, and infrastructure within the project area that meet wildland urban interface definitions of human improvements.

HFRA also has provisions for the protection of old growth, and allows for fuel reduction treatments in threatened and endangered species habitat. The project area is home to the Mexican Spotted Owl, and the Little Colorado Spinedace, which are both threatened species, and the Northern Goshawk, which is a Forest Service sensitive species.

How many action alternatives will be analyzed in the environmental analysis?

The Forest Service will develop and describe the actions, to include: 1) Proposed agency action, 2) Alternative of no action, and possibly one additional action alternative if there are issues brought up during the collaborative or public scoping process and it meets the purpose and need.

What kinds of treatments are being proposed and how many acres might be treated?

Approximately 60% of the 64,000 acre project area is expected to be treated with mechanical thinning. A large majority of the project area is also planned to be treated with prescribed burning during project implementation and into the future to maintain desired fuel loading. Based on the preliminary fire risk assessment and motorized access, some of the Mexican Spotted Owl Protected Activity Centers will also be proposed for treatment, including the Northern Goshawk habitat to meet the project purpose of reducing fire hazard. The mechanical treatments would include ground-based logging on slopes less than 40%, and the plan is to utilize both timber and biomass that result from treatments. Implementation could occur through a variety of mechanisms, including stewardship contracting, timber sales and task orders.

How does this overlap or complement the Four Forest Restoration Initiative (4FRI) Rim Country Environmental Impact Statement?

The purpose of the Cragin Watershed Protection Project (CWPP) is to focus on fuels reduction that will diminish the chance of an uncharacteristic wildfire effecting municipal water supplies, while 4FRI has a much broader purpose of forest restoration. For example, CWPP focuses on reducing immediate fire hazard, while the 4FRI purpose can complement that purpose by following up with restoration such as of improving wildlife habitat, watershed condition and health, and stream channel restoration, aspen regeneration, and meadow and stream habitat restoration.

Fuels reduction activities completed through CWPP will not be intensified or further analyzed for treatment under 4FRI, rather 4FRI activities will complement CWPP by focusing on other restoration objectives. The Mogollon Rim Ranger District is also considering other project planning within the area for forest restoration activities, such as stream stabilization. The District also has prior approval under the East Clear Creek Watershed Health Decision Environmental Analysis to implement restoration work within the project area.