

Cañones Community Meeting with US Forest Service Guests

Cañones Community Center, Cañones, New Mexico

Apr 11, 2024, 5:00 pm

Melissa-Roxanne Velasquez

Good afternoon, evening, thank you everyone here for coming to this one-of-a-kind meeting. Logistics - restrooms are just right through these doors. I have incorporated some meeting rules. We have a sergeant of arms present in the room.

He is a sergeant of arms. We are not here to insult anyone in the room, and so if we feel that you have violated some of the terms of our meeting today, the sergeant of arms will escort that person out of the room.

To introduce myself, my name is Melissa-Roxanne Velasquez. I represent the Juan Bautista Valdez Land Grant, as a liaison to the Land Grant. I do serve also as Executive Director of the Land Grant (Juan Bautista Valdez Land Grant).

I have been in conversations with the District Ranger . . . and we helped organize this meeting, and I look forward to any productive results that come in hand at this meeting. I will ask for everyone to please state your name and affiliation for the record.

Amos Corrales

Amos Corrales, I'm the Acting Fire Management Officer on the Coyote Ranger District of Santa Fe National Forest

Claudia Brookshire

Good evening everyone, I'm Claudia Brookshire, I'm the Public Affairs Officer for the Santa Fe National Forest.

June Galloway

My name is June Galloway . . . I'm the Environmental Coordinator for Santa Fe National Forest

Jacob Key

Hello my name is Jacob Key. I am the NEPA Planner for the Espanola and Coyote Office

Brent Murray

Hello my name is Brent Murray. I live out here.

Meredith Monk

I'm Meredith Monk. I live . . . out there.

Abbot Silouan

Abbot Father Silouan and Father Maximos. St Michael's Monastery

Diego Serrano

Diego. Sergeant of Arms for the Juan Bautista Valdez Land Grant

Sam Hitt

Sam Hitt with the Santa Fe Forest Coalition

Daniel Chacon

I'm Daniel Chacon, a reporter with the New Mexican

Andres Salazar

I'm Andres Salazar, and I grew up here in Cañones - I'm a writer and photographer

Shaun Sanchez

I'm Shaun Sanchez, I'm the Forest Supervisor here on the Santa Fe.

Jeff Marszel

Good afternoon. I'm Jeff Marszel. I'm the Deputy Forest Supervisor on the Santa Fe National Forest. Nice to meet everyone.

Jonathan Glass

Hi, everybody. I'm Jonathan Glass with Public Journal. I'm a reporter.

Sarah Salazar

I'm Sarah Salazar, Zaqueo's wife, and I'm a community member married in.

Mark Sando

Good evening, everyone. My name is Mark Sando. I am the District Ranger in the Coyote District Office. Thank you for the invite.

[Missed introductions for the following: JD Vialpando (USFS), Lorenzo Salazar, (Community Member) Peter Garcia Sr (Community Member), Allison Garcia, (Community Member), Isaiah Velasquez, (Community Member), Fransisco Lovato, (Community Member), Martha Vialpando, (Community Member), and 4 less than 18 years of age, Mario Garcia, Peter Garcia Jr, Katalina Trujillo, and Antonio Garcia (all community members)]

Melissa-Roxanne Velasquez

Thank you, everyone. So we have some time allotted, and we wanted to start with the United States Forest Service. I did have the District Ranger on the agenda, but if the Forest Supervisor Shaun Sanchez wants to take over, that's up to you guys.

We did want a quick summary of the Encino Vista Landscape Restoration Project and why the Forest Service would like to do this project.

Shaun Sanchez

I'll go ahead and get started and then turn it over to the team to go through the details of the specific, turn it over to Mark to introduce himself and the leadership. But thank you for having us here today.

It's my first time in Cañones. I'm from Northern New Mexico, home is Mora. Just outside of Mora and Buenavista, in Mora County. And I've been now the Forest Supervisor for 14 months, I think, something like that.

I came over last February after spending the last 22-plus years with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The opportunity arose to be able to come back home after being gone for over 20 years.

I jumped at it. And my family, like many, I think Melissa was sharing, many families have been here for hundreds of years. My family, similarly, was in northern New Mexico.

And the records go as far as like the Pueblo Revolt and they don't know exactly what happened before that, if we were here or if we came right after the Pueblo Revolt. . .

We were somewhere deviated and headed toward Penasco and then over to the Mora Valley. So this area is really important to me, and I'm hoping to be my last job. And so I hope to be here for a while, with that connection to the land.

I was sharing with Melissa your introductions and my intent that I shared with our team when I first took on the Supervisor role about priorities and what was important. And it wasn't anything having to do with specific projects, or anything like that.

It was very much top priorities to know and relate to our communities, and then we need to be a community asset. And I know just in talking to folks, there's still a lot of work to do both of those things to really understand.

I asked Melissa, she was sharing with me that during the scoping of this project that was back in 2018, kind of 2019, that we really missed the bar there. And so I asked her, I was like, well, did we get better this time?

And she said, well, you improved. And so that's good news that we improved, but we're still not meeting fully that intent of knowing and relating to our communities and being that community asset and developing, you know, collaborative projects, working together.

I very much appreciate Melissa for welcoming us and having us here and you all for being here and listening. I'm sharing also that to me, there's a lot of focus on, you know, what level of NEPA is done.

And if we're working collaboratively and, you know, in developing proposals, frankly, the NEPA is just a process. If we've done work ahead of time, then that's where we're hoping we can get this one.

We had work to do on this project and didn't get there. But I'm hoping that this is like the beginning of more of that dialogue with the community here in Cañones. . . land grant. I know that the traditional cultural relationships and communities, whether it's acequias, land grants, things like that are really important,

And I know we made an effort during our Forest Plan to really reach out and connect with the communities and get an understanding and collaborate and develop and use our design solutions, stuff like that.

And so I'm looking forward to listening a lot tonight and seeing just exactly how we can learn and understand more and then how we can be that asset to you all. So thank you for having us here. Mark?

Mark Sando

So like Shaun was saying, this project has been in the books for us since 2019, we've been talking about this. And when I got here, I was tasked by the previous Forest Supervisor that this was going to be my priority.

And so he made it clear that we need to be working on this. And so, I started the year kind of bad due to COVID. And so that kind of stopped a lot of things for almost two years. So this project was kind of like on hold.

And then other events occurred. And then throughout those four years, we have people coming in, detailing what they're doing, what they're doing. And the NEPA itself, it especially supports the stuff like that. There was a lot of questions that we needed to ask ourselves.

And as time went on, we finally got our two permanent people that really took this project and ran with it with support from Jeff, our Deputy Forest Supervisor and myself, encouraging, we need to do this, we need to do this, we need to do this.

We have other folks that have a lot of stake into this program, like the State. The State is very involved and actually put money into some of our work that we need done. And so with that said, again, like Jeff, not Jeff, but Shaun. We dropped the ball, with the request back in the scoping letter, to be more transparent, to have more meetings like this.

And so I take responsibility for that. Again, you know, it's really crazy. However, if I can somehow redeem myself a little bit, I am willing to do that. I've met with some folks. . .

And I told them my vision, my dream, my passion. As a lot of you all know, I live in Jemez Pueblo. So I have a lot of ownership in this part of the country as well, my ancestors, being around here.

And so we, meaning us, as a tribe, we the same vision, the same goal. Let's protect our lands. These lands is how we grew up, custom and traditions. To me, yes, we have our own, you guys have your own, but there's still custom and traditions that we've got to make sure that we instill in our young kids for the future.

And so with that said, this project came about after a couple of. . . with that, the concern was we need to take care of that to take care of this down here. And with that, what do we need to do?

That's why all the experts came in, our wildlife, our range, our archaeology, engineering, timber, fuels, all these folks went in and looked at this. What can we do in areas? It's a big picture, yes.

But these pictures, only small areas, are being affected. It's not like we're going to come in and, you know, it's a 10-plus year project. And so we're taking baby steps. And the picture I have is, if we come in, like a timber sale, you know, we have loggers that can bid for those projects that can get the timber out.

That's going to help the community. After that, we have smaller timber that aren't merchantable for logging, but for latillas or vigas, just like this right up here. And so that's another product that we can give out to the community, you know, come in and, you know, and then fuelwood.

And so there's a whole lot more in the background that we are envisioning in this EA that I really haven't conveyed to the rest of the folks, which is what I meant by I dropped the ball, by keeping people informed of where we're at, what we're planning to do, and our timeline.

So that's, again, that's what I see. I think I've, you know, gave you my perspective, my passion of the land that you all have, that we all share. And so again, you know, I'm not going to go down a rabbit hole and, you know, like, you know, again, you know, I have a lot passion. That's it, just like you guys. So I'm going to let my experts go from here. Thank you.

Jacob Key

Do you all remember that? . . . As far as the amount of work that was going to be done, a lot of it the project area was a little bit smaller.

So initially, when we first started talking about this, I worked on the Coyote District in timber and the initial conversations were, one, we had the Southport fire in 2010, and that, all that flooding, you know, blew out lower Cañones. . .

And so that was like a big eye opener. And so then the big thing was that we don't want to see that happen in Cañones, and the whole drainage. And we all know that it's overgrown up top and it's just a matchbox.

And so we started looking at this area to kind of really look at this. And then we started stretching it out. Another thing during scoping was Mesa Poleo and Gallina asked, well, why don't you include us too?

And so we included those communities in as well. And so that's why the project was so big. It's like we're trying to not only protect Cañones, but Coyote, Mesa Poleo, Gallina. We're really trying to protect all of the communities.

But the start was Cañones. So, like Mark was saying, everything in purple is proposed for RX burning. And a lot of that is because of the way the forest has, and the Forest Service, you know, we've had the 10 AM policy where we put all the fires out.

And that landed up getting us to where we're at, and we're seeing all these huge fires all over the West. It's not just a Santa Fe problem. It's a Western problem, where we're seeing all these fires, and like, Las Conchas and all kinds of fires.

So we're gonna be looking at this. All this yellow is fuel breaks using masticators along the roads. So we can start strategically planning and getting, so all the purple shows about 74 ,000 acres of the 120 ,000 acres of the project area.

And then of that, we're only thinning, with the commercial logging, which is up here in yellow, is 33%, a little bit over 33% of the whole project area, what's being burnt. So that's just one portion of it.

It's some thinning, a lot of the thinning is looking at, you know, we just went out with our Forest Plan and the Forest Plan has set standards of what desired conditions are. A lot of the desired conditions, we want a healthy forest.

And all the way down from the PJ down here, all the way up to the spruce up top. We want all of those forests to be healthy and resilient so we can, all of our kids and grandkids can enjoy them like we have.

And so a lot of that, since the forests are overgrown, particularly with small trees, we want to thin back some of those small trees and reintroduce fire that has been removed from the ecosystem in order to combat these big large fires and uncharacteristic wildfires that we've seen over the last 20 years.

The Forest Service is really trying to take a proactive approach instead of a reactive approach and try to mitigate some of that risk. On top of that, we have some watershed work where we went through and we analyzed a lot of the road systems up here and they're eroding into the waterways.

And those are in the EA, but basically some of the road systems in small areas are contributing up to 500 pounds of sediment into the water every year. And so those are

like our focus points. But overall, with the thinning and burning and creating the healthy forest, these upper watersheds up on the slopes are gonna be able to hold more snow, have more water into the canyons year-round and then reduce the sediment.

So there's a big watershed portion too. Part of the proposed action is we're gonna improve all of them because Cañones is impaired. Coyote is impaired, so those are impaired watersheds. We wanna definitely improve those.

That's a big goal of the project.

June Galloway

So for the watershed portion of it as well, the way that we're looking at that portion of the work that's needed is to improve the watersheds. We're treating a lot of the roads that have the highest levels of sedimentation, erosion, those areas where they're dumping down into streams and watersheds and impacting those watersheds.

So the best way to fix that sometimes is to fix the roads. So out of that, we had four of the main watersheds that were in the worst conditions based on our hydrology model. The output of those models showed us which roads were kind of in the worst shape.

And so we picked kind of the highest out of that group, a subset of that group, about 55 miles of roads that were in the worst condition that we felt by treating those under this project, we could help improve water quality and improve function in those watersheds through this project.

And specifically for the communities to try to fix those impaired watersheds to the best of our abilities by repairing those roads. So we're not doing road closures. Most of the work is basically maintenance work to fix the road beds and to make them more effective.

And also safer for everybody that uses all those areas to travel. As you guys know better than we do, some of the roads out there are pretty dangerous. So also dangerous. Safer for people, easier for people to go out and get fuel wood, and also have a better water quality.

Jacob Key

So a lot of this country basically, all the way down, is, there's better maps up here if you guys want to come up. All this dark green are roadless areas, and so they have designated areas based on the 2001 Roadless Rule, they have special designation on what management activities you can do, so there's like, there's no logging and no road building.

And so within that, there are exceptions to thinning in there, as long as you're meeting certain parameters, and the parameter that we've been looking at, we suggested for approval by the Regional Forester, is to mitigate well-qualified risk, and to improve ecosystem services.

And so a lot of this in there, we have to meet certain exceptions. One has to, the work has to be infrequent, and of small scale, so within that, we requested a 750 acre a year thinning, and we know that it's all throughout the country, like thinning up there, that's just the max.

We can do the likelihood of actually meeting that on an annual target is unlikely, but we've had to put a max cap on ourselves. The other one is for the burning, so the pile burns are probably gonna be whatever we finished the year before, give them one year of curing, and then be able to go in and burn it, which is the only issue because it's a rough country, and it's remote, and we burn it in the winter, and we get a lot of snow up top, so access is pretty hard.

So all of this country up here, AMS, as well as our fuels guys, and GE, they're all gonna be really critical and strategic about anything that happens in this watershed, and the mesas, because it's just hard, and it's a hard country to get in there, it's remote.

You drive all the way down to Mesa del Medio to work. Well, it's like two hours from here once you get up there, so it's like, and that's all in the summer. You start putting in the snow in that, and it's an all-day event just to try to get up there, so everything we do up in this upper country, because it's so rough and remote, we're gonna be really critical of ourselves and strategic, and so we're not doing anything that would be unsafe. Not only for us, but for you guys.

June Galloway

I just want to mention one more thing, one of the other focuses of the project is treatment around private land boundaries, what we call the Wildland Urban Interface. I'm sure most of you have heard of that already.

So we do have focused treatments in some of those areas, and once we get out and ground truth a little bit more, we'll have a little bit more information on that, but most of that will be in pinon-juniper, and that will just be thinning and piling.

And we'll be doing burn in those areas, but we will be treating them to reduce the risk of fire from one to private lands. So that's another part of the project. . .

Melissa-Roxanne Velasquez

So, as you know, there's different elements to the Juan Bautista Valdez Land Grant. So, there's the Juan Bautista Valdez Land Grant. Within the land grant, we have our board of trustees, we have the executive director, and then we have this other group, which is the advisory group.

And that's basically who I'm representing today is the advisory group, and that's a team of community members. I just wanted to clarify that initially. So, we initially submitted comments in 2019.

As I mentioned to several individuals before, the community felt largely overlooked, sort of in that initial scoping phase. Just to give you an example, we never saw a flyer posted in the community. No community member ever came forward and said, hey, we received a letter, this project is going on.

We just felt like the Forest Service didn't do a very good job of adequately informing "one of" the most small and rural isolated communities, which would be primarily impacted by the project. And so, when we initially submitted comments, we really went into detail about just how we felt that we had been overlooked.

Just to get some comments that I really want to get out here tonight, and then we'll allow the opportunity for other folks to speak, but just general NEPA. NEPA requires federal agencies to assess the environmental effects of their proposed actions prior to making decisions, so that we make sure that there's an important decision being made.

It's about community empowerment. It's about democratic decision making. And it's about making sure that people have the adequate access to information. So, before a project can receive federal approval, the state or local government addresses these comments and, where possible, makes changes to mitigate community environmental impacts.

I think the reason why Congress was enacted in 1969 was to make sure that developing projects weren't being carried out behind closed doors. It's about an open process, it's about a democratic process, and it's about making sure that communities- primarily small rural communities- are adequately being involved in that process, especially when they're primarily affected.

Just to point out a few things, Executive Order 12898, federal action to address environmental justice in minority populations and low-income populations. The major points to this was to ensure greater public participation in minority communities and to improve research related to the health and environment of minority populations.

Number two, ensure that public document notices and hearings related to human health or the environment are concise, understandable, and readily accessible to the public. USDA implemented its own environmental justice strategy that basically implements this executive order, and that is to identify and address, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of their programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations, and to incorporate

environmental justice evaluations into environmental assessments and environmental impact statements as appropriate along with potential avoidance, minimization, and mitigation options, and agencies providing necessary outreach.

I just wanted to share a little bit of statistics in Rio Grande County. As far as urbanization, 85% rural. Hispanic or Latino that identify, 71%. Access to broadband internet, 66.5%. Adults at home whose primary language is English, only 36%.

Those that carry a bachelor's degree, 18.2%. Poverty rate, 24.1%. The reason why I bring up these statistics is because you're in one of the most, (possibly) "the smallest" rural isolated communities in Northern New Mexico.

It is a rural community below the project area with less than 100 residents, predominantly Spanish-speaking. They are ancestral and generational with small economies mostly sustained by living off the land, ranching, farming, and wood gathering.

Most students who attend college are among the first in their families to do so, and the community in general is considered a low-income minority population.

Our major concerns. Number one, the community is largely being overlooked.

There hasn't been publicized meetings. The interactions haven't always been the best with the Forest Service. There have been significant language barriers. And there has been extreme Forest Service turnover of staff.

We can see that as an example just from 2019, to those folks that we have here today. Number two, second major concern, the scope, the magnitude, the acreage, and the timeline of this project. One of the two largest projects ever initiated on the Santa Fe National Forest.

The history of this project began with the project being known as the Cañones Vegetation Project. When the project first begun, I don't know what year this was; and somebody might be able to correct me; but there were several community members that were met with at that time.

And the intent by the Forest Service was to make sure that the watershed for this community was being protected. But over time, that project just grew and grew and grew to this magnificent level. And it just, it didn't seem like the communication was there to explain why that occurred.

Number three, the potential impacts and implications of this project. Just on a regular spring runoff or fall... we get massive flows in the stream. And I know that you pass by and you see this small creek, but come in spring runoff or come in September when you get massive rainfalls (that changes drastically).

Thinning those areas on the top could really lead to drastic effects at this moment. And I think it's important that the best science data is being looked at to make sure that you know what those results can be.

With that, I do want to turn it over to two people on our team, Lupita Salazar and Sarah Salazar. . .

Lupita Salazar

I want to say a couple of things because there's lots of other folks that can talk to you to have some really interesting and well -researched things to talk about . . . But I guess one of the biggest things that I've been thinking about pondering . . . from my own experience is I farm along the creek over here.

And as Melissa said, we see the water, we see the runoff, we've seen the effects of the weather patterns on the river, on the acequias . . . I remember it devastated these lower fields and these . . . out of the side of the canyon.

And I was up . . . the canyon years ago just walking and trying to just see what the headwaters looked like. So I hiked up there with my friend. And it's not like, oh, I'm going to go and hike.

It's like, oh, I'm on a bushwhack. This is steep. Your ankles are hurting. It's not a walk from the park. So these areas, we receive all the runoff from these giant spaces, all this surface area. And my big concern is how we're talking about these very present areas.

What does that look like? What does that mean? What are the steps that are going to be taken? And have you been there? Have you seen it? A lot of us haven't been there. A lot of us haven't seen it. We see what happens down here.

And what I'm hoping, or what I would suggest, I guess, just from my own thought patterns and learnings about things, is that there's some sort of fire breaks or erosion control practices that are happening as you're coming down.

And I'm also wondering, where do you choose, and what are the timings of the treatments that you're doing in these different areas? Is it going to be one big chunk? Is it going to be a little at a time, over a long period of time . . . it's not a clear thing.

So I guess it's a little confusing for me. I'm also interested when we brought up using a masticator. Those are big machines, and I think it's cool you're going to want to be using those, because I've seen really good effects from using them in more wetland areas in Abiquiu.

We had a lot of invasive species, and there was a gentleman that was a parent in the group that I was working with at an early youth project, and he was working with the Forest Service. He had this big machinery that he could use that day.

And he literally cleaned up this really intense, overgrown area, and I was joking, there's two things that happened . . . One thing was that all these wild plants came back because . . . we chipped all these invasive species, but the second thing was that there's all these bears that showed up, which were there all the time.

We just didn't know they were there. Anyways, that's another story. I just think it's interesting, and I would be more interested to know more about how you're going to use a masticator in this area.

The wood and the timber are a huge resource, have been a huge resource for the communities for ages, and so just burning them seems ridiculous. So I'm also very interested in how we can maybe make the timber sales and the logging areas larger.

And just doing research or talking to other Forest Service folks, learning about their huge acronyms, the CFL RPs, or the CFRPs, the different ways that you can actually have companies come in and do logging practices, or even some kind of offshoot ideas of actually training local people how to do it, giving them an area to do it, and paying them to do it. Bringing money into the area, and not taking it out. We're a land based community. If you look at things through the money perspective, you're burning the money. You're letting it go downstream.

So just thinking about that as well. So let me see. Canyon, timber, water, and smoke. One other thing, and I'm sorry if I'm rambling, just things that I had written down. One thing that I have also noticed is just having so many fires in our area growing up here, there's just like a pattern to the way that air in the canyons.

So I would just say, just for the books or whatever, that the smoke will come down at night. So it's like, if you're burning all day, come night, the smoke will be in our houses and our lungs and our hair and everything.

And so just think about like a little kid that's gonna be born this year. For 10 years, every summer, he's gonna be full of smoke. So what can we do to mitigate that? I would suggest starting early and ending early if you have to.

And also just don't burn in the spring at all, please. And I think I'll turn it over to Sarah because she has a lot more.

Sarah Salazar

Okay, thank you Lupita. So I felt like coming into this, I needed to better understand the context that this document came up from. So I enjoyed thoroughly reading almost 800 pages of Forest Service documents in the last week.

So I've been honored to be part of this community by marrying my husband 17 years ago. I have learned so much that I didn't know before and I'm only scratching the surface. So please forgive me if there's anything wrong.

I don't mean any harm. So from my research and all of my reading, I did notice as I combed through this document that there were some things that stood out to me that made it very clear that there will be significant impacts to the environment, including humans and culture, as a result of this project.

And so my understanding of the current stage of the process is that, and please correct me if I'm wrong in this understanding, is that from this point, public comment will be reviewed. The responsible authority, Mr.

Sando here, will either decide to issue a Finding of No Significant Impact and proceed, or that there needs to be a further investigation and analysis done through the more intense Environmental Impact Statement.

That's my understanding of where we're at right now. So in my view and all of my research and understanding, it's very clear to me that there will be significant impacts to the environment that are not clearly addressed in this environmental assessment and that the EIS is warranted at this point.

For example, the Cañones Watershed is addressed in this environmental assessment, and it is stated in there that there will be negative impacts to the watershed lasting two to seven years, or two to three growing seasons.

There is no indication of any plans for monitoring of any sort, whether that be water quality or peak flow or other effects downstream. That significantly impacts Cañones all the way to Abiquiu Reservoir, Rio Chama, Rio Grande, everybody downstream.

It's not quantified exactly what those impacts will be or how negative they will be, in part because the modeling that has informed a lot of this uses one creek and one watershed as a proxy for all others in the project area.

That is Coyote Creek. It is smaller and much less complex, which with much less agriculture relying upon it directly downstream. Canones Creek is not directly modeled and I think that is a serious problem with the current environmental assessment.

There are plans in the environmental assessment right now to coordinate any impact to, for example, the Continental Divide Trail. Who do you contact? How do you protect it? Providing an alternate route?

None of that is included for these watersheds. I think that is a shame. Another thing about the modeling is it is stated in the environmental assessment that a lot of the model input data is kind of stand in data.

That there is not currently enough or reliable enough data locally available. And so there is a lot of assumptions. These assumptions are not in doubt in the environmental assessment. For example, a project where to move forward, a piece of this, it is not clear to me, although I am an outsider, I am not familiar with all of your procedures, but to me from this document, it is not clear if I go in to do a project, what assumptions are being

made that need to be precisely field verified in order to verify the assumptions on which the decisions were made.

And just real quick, going back to local, the mutual domestic water associations are individually named that will be impacted by this project. Acequias are not. And I think that's a gap. And Lupita mentioned before about the tree and the wood products.

And that's a concern that my husband has and he's not able to be here because he's doing his military training he wanted to be. Just making sure that smaller contracts that we're not just looking at very large timber units, timber sale units.

And that was one of the findings from the 2022 prescribed fire program review nationally was that in order to better accomplish the goals to reduce fire risk is making sure that you include a variety of treatment options, including multiple sizes and types of timber sales.

So there's a lot of qualified people around here, smaller operators. Another benefit to using smaller operators is in the environmental assessment there's discussion about how roads will need to be modified, realigned to handle large log trucks.

That's not necessarily the case if you're going with smaller operators. They can use much smaller equipment. So perhaps that's an opportunity to save some money and some effort there. And just reiterating that a lot of the document focuses on timber products of less than or equal to 12 inch diameter not being marketable or valuable.

And Mr. Sando, thank you for clarifying that they are valuable indeed, and they are commonly used for vigas, latillas, poles, posts, beams, even fuelwood. And that is of value. And this environmental assessment over and over again qualifies it as non-marketable and does not make it clear that it will be available to the community.

And finally, both the Santa Fe National Forest Plan issued in 2022 and this draft EA frequently state that they will make timber resources available to local community members as well as fuelwood. But there's no, as far as I can tell, there's no policy, there's no mandate in this project to prioritize locals or community members in any way.

And I think that's also a gap. Thanks so much for listening and being here.

Melissa-Roxanne Velasquez

So from, if we backtracked a little to 2019, when we initially submitted comments and there were various community comments submitted, both on behalf of the community and the separate comments that were submitted, and one of the first documents we got back, page 52 from your document, "as a responsible official, I have determined that no significant issues were raised during the scoping process."

The person making this declaration that was signed on September 1st, 2021, was neither present at the scoping meetings, nor made any attempt to introduce himself or herself to the Cañones community as the leader of the Encino Vista Project.

Cañones has three governmental organizations. The acequia associations with two acequia heads present in the meeting today, the Domestic Water Association, and the Juan Bautista Valdez Land Grant. Three government entities that were never contacted regarding the Encino Vista landscape project.

With that, I'm going to open it up to the Cañones community concerns. And so I would ask if any community members have anything to raise, this would be the moment to do so.

Peter J. Garcia Sr.

Good afternoon, everybody. My name is Peter J. Garcia, Sr. I'm the Chairman of the . . . Acequia No. 1 Association, Acting Chairman of the . . . Acequia No. 2 Association, and also the Secretary Treasurer of the Mesa del Medio Allotment Association.

My concern, our concern is that, again, with what folks had spoken to before, is that it's an impoverished community. And in regards to the use of controlled burns, there's one way in and one way out of this community via vehicle.

So in essence, if there's a massive wildfire, where are these folks that have these controlled burns, that are going to be met by the forces, going to be? Because we have mountains all around us, and one way in, one way out via vehicle.

Second, there is documented disaster that has occurred back in 2022 with the Calf Canyon and Hermit's Peak Wildfire that was sparked as a result of these pile burnings that you're speaking of, in addition to the Cerro Pelado Fire that was also began as a result of these pile burnings.

With my position that I work with, I was directly involved with the debris cleanup in both the Mora and San Miguel counties, which was devastated, devastated from these pile burnings, which I don't believe that they'll even see in two or three or even four generations that they'll be able to see what it was back prior to the wildfire beginning.

I'm a seventh generation rancher, lifelong community member, and of course, I don't want to see any of my neighbors, houses, homes, properties, lots of livestock, their livelihood being lost to this.

. . . Let's go ahead and pull off the control burning off the table and let's look at logging, thinning, wood gathering, let's look at those items first. Let's look at those items first because those are much, much less invasive than starting a wildfire, I'm sorry, a control burn, which in essence could be a wildfire.

How are you going to get vehicles up into these roads? And that's one of the issues that we've been bringing up with the Forest Service and Mr. Sando in our meetings for the grazing allotments, that these roads are inaccessible.

They are too shambles, these roads. You're not going to get these large vehicles in there to begin wildfire suppression, there's no way. So, you have to think about what if that's going to start a wildfire, a control burn in your guys' backyard, how would you feel?

What would your sentiments be in regards to beginning those control burns in your backyards? I'm sure you would be against it as well. So, we are, what we want is to begin at a smaller scale in the logging, the thinning, the wood gathering, gathering latillas, those items are mud, those methods are much more or less invasive than starting a wildfire control burning.

Even if you pile these items up, what you're speaking about, piling them up and burning the following year, that's still an opportunity for the, and exceeding beyond the control burn and then they're accelerating into a wildfire.

And then . . . the smoke, the smoke, yes, I mean, you have a lot of older committee members here in the community that have health problems, that have difficulties breathing, that are on oxygen.

So, what about their socioeconomic, their health, their livelihood. I mean, them to have a prosperity life. Additionally, why you would want to begin a control burn in the spring when there was much more, better idea to have these control burns in the fall months, the winter months, where you realize that there's gonna be some moisture coming with the snowfall.

But number one, our priority is that this project begins with a much less invasive methods to begin the thinning process of these areas. It's a great idea because these forests are overgrown. They are overgrown.

They are overgrown, but we need to begin with a much less invasive, thank you, thank you.

Melissa-Roxanne Velasquez

Any other community member would have something else that they would like to do?

Meredith Monk

I just want to tell experience of being out in the Cañones . . . like I think it was 2018, when they were doing a controlled burn on the mesa, I literally could not breathe. I thought I was going to die.

I mean, I literally left my door open because so hopefully somebody could find my body. Because it was by the evening, you just could not breathe, at all. So my question is, if you're going to think about doing this kind of plan, who do you even contact?

How do you, how is there any kind of way of telling what's going on and being helped? Because I got like this machine from the Fire Service, I mean the Forest Service, and so, you know, it was pretty scary. So I just wanted to say that the smoke is very important, and there are a lot of people who have asthma and breathing issues.

Abbot Silouan

I think it was the 2011 fires we had up here, that we had to leave every day. We couldn't breathe. And every night, we woke up with our lungs aching. And this was the forest fire. I don't know exactly where it was. I think it was 2011.

And the smoke just settles in the canyon. And also, just the water runoff, we've had these during the monsoon season, where we have these runoffs that they've done damage to our property that takes months to clean up.

They've taken away our footbridge three times already. But hopefully, we'll go on to last. But I'm afraid that the amount of the Forest Service understands that one flood can do so much damage that it takes literally months.

And if the runoff impact is, if there's nothing to stop the water from coming down and bringing all the rubbish with it, it could do, they said, to the agricultural lands and to all the farmlands. And then just the thought, we've had fires tease us for several decades now.

And the thought of actually starting fire with, as I think it was in Sarah's letter, that the Forest Service has said, we're undermanned. We don't have sufficient management to do these controlled burns, I mean, I think.

And so to think that you're going to be starting fires with an undermanned, knowing that you don't have sufficient men available to control these burns, I mean, just imagine how . . . that's very scary. It's something that's very alarming. Thank you.

Andres Salazar

We're a really small town, but I just want to highlight kind of the identity of Cañones, just so you have an awareness of who we are, and what we're about, and what it's like here.

And you might be thinking, this is such a small town. And they're not that many people here. But I think it's important to understand that a lot of the people here have contributed greatly to the culture of New Mexico, to the heart of New Mexico.

And this is a historic village. This is a historic village in that it's an old Spanish town. It's a town that there's a lot of mixed heritage in terms of mestizo, in terms of . . . heritage here as well.

There's a lot of knowledge of the land here. There's a lot of knowledge of the forest, as we heard from this gentleman to my left here. We're a town that is a culture of loggers. A lot of our heritage is from the forest.

A lot of our heritage and the way we made our money historically and ancestrally is from the forest. And so I think that what our community just really wants and what our community deserves, as far as our voice is concerned in this, is just the trust that we want to see building again between the Forest Service and the community of Cañones, and not just Cañones, but Youngsville, Coyote, Gallina, et cetera.

We want to see that trust continue to be built. More forums such as this so that our voice can be heard, so that people can be heard, so that there are just sessions where people can be listened to in terms of how that trust can continue to be built.

I think we'd like, I mean, this is a really difficult topic, but one of the elephants in the room, as I heard from . . . Peter Garcia . . . you brought up the fire in Mora, and that's so difficult, but I think it's really important for us to learn and understand as community members what did the Forest Service learned from that incident?

What steps are they taking from that incident as we move forward? You said, you assured us, as you spoke about the forest areas, that you would burn safely. My sister, Lupita Salazar here, brought up: what measures are you taking?

And I think, I wrote here, can you define specifically what steps you're gonna take in a controlled burn to ensure safety? And I think all of us would love to see bullet points, numbers, data, square footage.

I would love to see, as a community member and as a voter and as a constituent, I would love to see incentives for building trust, or excuse me, I would love to see incentives for local loggers, I would love to see opportunities for local loggers, trainings, free trainings, possibly, so that they can also be of assistance and in this process as you are extracting from the forest.

So that it's not just the Forest Service extracting, but it's also community members who have a long heritage and history of logging in the forest.

Melissa-Roxanne Velasquez

Thank you Andres.

Isaiah Velasquez

. . . I belong to several acequia associations here, cattle association, and so on. I'd like to thank you guys for pointing out these key terms, voicing our concerns, and being not a great public speaker, but you guys did an awesome job.

And going back to a fire that scarred us on this . . . there's still some dark spots that you can still see from that fire on the fields. And anybody that has land over on that site can attest to that.

And as you said, that was just a small portion that much goes about. Still has a significant impact . . .

Melissa-Roxanne Velasquez

Does anybody else from the community have any concerns?

Sarah Salazar

May I acknowledge something really fast? I wanted to thank Jacob for pointing out the percentages of what's currently planned for timber sales versus treatment area and that we're actually at 33 percent.

So thank you so much for correcting me. I had that wrong in my letter. So thanks.

Melissa-Roxanne Velasquez

Just having the opportunity to listen to everyone in the room, I think one of the main questions that I have, and certainly I think community members have, is what is the definition of significant? What is a significant impact?

And who has the authority to determine whether something is going to be significant to a small rural community or not? And so I think that's where I'd kind of like to leave the conversation as we think about that, and how can Forest Service work collaboratively with these small rural local communities, of which Cañones is just one.

You know, there's Coyote, there's Youngsville, there's Meso Poleo. I was sitting in a friend's backyard in Meso Poleo when the Black Feather Fire started. You know, there's just, there's a lot to consider.

And I think that we should be learning lessons from, especially what happened just a few years ago with Hermits Peak and Calf Canyon. That was a bad decision that led to bad

results. And we certainly, I think, have the opportunity to learn from that and do something different.

And so with that, Shaun, we'll allow you some concluding comments.

Shaun Sanchez

I've been feverishly trying to capture notes and to capture concerns and thoughts. And I'm kind of left with a couple of very short things. I wanted to say wow. One is, you're probably the only one in here that's read 800 pages of Forest Service files.

So you get an gold star.

Because that that is a lot of reading. You read an environmental assessment, any of these documents, and that document itself isn't very big, you know, they're not the easiest things to read. We speak in a different language quite often, and there's a fair amount of there tonight. Even just in our presentation. Maybe you Sarah mentioned specifically that in our document we say that much of the wood products are not marketable and hold no value or little value. Well, everyone around the table here, myself included, knows well you go to buy one of those vigas and there's a lot of a lot of value in it. You go to get latillas, you get fence stakes - there's a lot of value in it.

But in the world in the mindset that we're thinking about it's from a commercial timber operation - big major thing like you would see in a Pacific Northwest and so that's . . . frankly, I think we just talked right past our communities.

And so I'm hearing some of that. And the rest of your question about like what we've learned, like I looked over at Claudia because we have a one page document that says exactly what we've learned and what we're doing differently. We have. We have that. Sort of like the question or the concern that we are going to do prescribed fires not fully staffed and not with the resources. That's just not true. We will only conduct a prescribed burn if we have the resources necessary to do it, that's one of the things we learned, are the things that we're doing differently. And so it's some of this that I think we've done a really poor job in some areas about really communicating. And communicating - it's not like talking - it needs be dialogue and conversation, and sitting down, and yet a really great question to be thought about: Just how do you hear when you were talking about the smoke and coming down in the evening?

You said well, maybe if you started earlier and you finished earlier, then you know things get burned up. That's actually exactly what we do in many cases when we think we might have had the ventilation to let the smoke out. Stop at three o'clock so that you don't have wood just sitting there smoldering all night long that then settles in the inversions and things like that. I was very impressed in with the amount of like effort and research and the interest in being collaborative. And I very much appreciate that and for me and our team, that's our intent also. I will ask specifically, you know, I have been

asked and hopefully I saw a lot of comments that were written down as opposed to getting submitted.

Because you're absolutely right Sarah on the process. So this is we have this proposal. The process is where we get the comments and then based on that, we either get to a Finding of No Significant Impact, or we go through the Environmental Impact Statement process. And so that's kind of the steps there.

And so make sure that we get those those comments I've been through a number of these efforts now. Asking questions about various pieces, the modeling aspects that you know, that we didn't identify acequias.

Shame on us and we should make sure the impacts to acequias were identified. Those types of things that you know, we're trying to figure out all these pieces, but sometimes we miss stuff, and working collaboratively will help us to not miss these things, and to be able to answer a lot of questions and a lot of concerns, and looking at how we prioritize local communities and local operators. There was some questions there about how do we go about doing those types of things.

That's exactly what we're interested in doing. I can tell you on the Hermits Peak / Calf Canyon side now with a lot of the hazard trees, we've kind of flooded the market with fuelwood. It's all the hazard trees that's coming off the forest, or it's coming off the private land.

And so a lot of the leneros, they're saying, hey, whoa, whoa, we used to go and cut wood and sell it, and now you're flooding. And so we're working to, hey, how do we put them in the equation of some of the efforts with the neighbors helping neighbors where wood is being delivered?

Well, let's put those Leneros to work delivering the wood, bringing the wood off the mountain. It might not be what they were used to or accustomed to, but we're figuring ways out on how to do that. I'll use that as an example of trying to figure out how we're going to do this.

If you thought you brought up one of the programs that when I talked to Laura McCarthy yesterday, Laura McCarthy is the state forester with New Mexico State Forestry talking about this project. When I met her last February, she had her highest priority.

She said, I got one ask of you, and that's to get to and see Encino Vista moving along. This project, it's of great priority to the state of New Mexico. And you mentioned a lot of the things there. Sarah on what's really important to these watersheds because of the impacts it has downstream and then to many, many people.

And I talked to her about, so what are the things that we could do? And she shared the state's gonna be coming out with the request for proposals to engage in. I put, I don't wanna put words in your mouth, but I heard the mayordomo program.

You familiar with that on the Carson?

Lupita Salazar

I've heard about it, yeah . . .

Shaun Sanchez

So that's one that we need to figure out how to connect, because the state's going out with an RFP to help us with some funding for some of that. Maybe we can get you all connected with J .R. Logan up in house, who is really the key for making that happen.

And how do we go about doing that? How do we incorporate that within our project? Those types of things that they're trying to, these are, when I was going through and capturing notes, these are the things that I was thinking and how to connect it to work.

We need the comments. I like wrapping up here about the significance and there's legal terms, and I'm sure you know that. There's actual legal terms and the Council of Environmental Quality identifies how you make the definition of the decision to say something is not significant.

There's 10 questions that the deciding official have to describe, that if you can describe why it's not significant to those 10 questions, then you go to a FONSI, and if you can't, then you go to an EIS.

And so these are, I think you've given us a lot of things to think about, to chew on, to work on. I think there's a fair amount of information that we can share, like just kind of write, like saying like our one -pager on the post-fire stuff, like that one's a fairly easy thing to understand and it's kind of an infographic.

Just what came out of the prescribed fire review and then how we implemented that on the Santa Fe. And then looking at, so what are the next steps for engaging and collaboration? I know we would love to host like some field trips, like going out and looking at where some of this work has occurred and what that looks like on the landscape.

And I would ask you maybe to take us out to some areas where you might have concerns with questions. Maybe that can be incorporated and not just be where we go and show you on some area, but you can show us some of the areas that there's concerns here and so that we learn from that so that we can actually step foot and make sure that we're looking at these specific watersheds and the specific community and get that understanding.

Melissa-Roxanne Velasquez

One of the things I wanted to add is just in a room full of the grandchildren of our grandfathers, the Forest Service is somewhat a baby in the room. I've worked a lot with the genealogies, with the land grant (heirs), and when the land grant settlement came in, (and) when homestead settlement came in, a lot of these homestead settlements of these families are on Forest Service land now.

And so there's been this real disconnect in working with Forest Service because there is this sense of identity and that Forest Service has taken away the lands of the people, and in reality that is actually what happened.

And so have to get to the point where we work collaboratively to make sure that we're being listened to and heard. You know, we've all heard . . . there's ties going back generations, there's ties going back to the Native communities.

And so I think it's very important that these sort of documents sort of reflect a localized portion to them, and not just this federal, national requirement that needs to be followed, but a more localized portion . . .

Lorenzo Salazar

Okay, I'm going to go back to about the mid -60s to early 70s. The first Forest Service came here and introduced a grazing plan in our rotation system. Anyway, the service was going to help, you know, increase the grass, more grass, bringing it out real nice right now.

But after that, all the elk introduced. All those cattle were in this pasture, the elk started grazing on fresh grass, the grass that was growing. This is the way the Forest Service has treated people in this community, and probably all over.

I'm concerned now about this plan that you have. What's going to be the effect after the finish? Is it going to increase morale? Is it going to be introduced moose? Or elk? There are over a hundred head of elk going in from the Forest Service to a private property, and you've probably seen them.

We talked to a Forest Service personnel: we have nothing to do with the elk. We've already put on a special plan this past year that they all will be blaming the cows for everything. It's not even elk that even put a dent on what's going on.

It has to be the elk, because there's a herd of them. And one herd, there's more elk in one herd than what there is in all the . . . cows in the allotment. But nothing said about that. I've seen it since the mid-60s. And I'm concerned now, after you guys do all this, and then you can put a printout, a real national printout, what's the intention afterwards? How about a reason?

Introduce morale. Take away the livelihood of the people here. I say, all right, do it right now. Everybody's been hearing a ditch. Ditches to build irrigate and the elk already in the fields.

Melissa-Roxanne Velasquez

Thank you Lorenzo.

Andres Salazar

Thank you, Lorenzo, so just to kind of even follow up with Lorenzo, so I just wanted to say that I think, I believe this process of trust building, this project is an opportunity not in and of itself, but just as an opportunity for the Forest Service and for our community to speak to one another.

As Melissa mentioned, a lot of our lands, a lot of our ties to the land involved, just like that's where a lot of our people used to get like, make a living, was from the forest, that land was taken from our communities by the US government.

And so I think that this is something that we hope, and that we would like to see a long term continued rebuilding of trust between US Forest Service and local communities. And I think that can look like a few things.

So, yeah, long term. And secondly, as far as that document goes, I think the community of Cañones would be very interested in seeing it. And my follow up question, thank you, is just how involved was the community of Mora in that document?

Shaun Sanchez

The short answer is, Mora was not involved in that document. That was the follow up from the Chief of the Forest Service . . . a complete review of all prescribed fire.

Peter J. Garcia Sr.

So in regards to the Hermits Peak / Calf Canyon wildfire, I understand that at the point in time, right prior to it was, it became out of control. They had, according to the Forest Service, at the time, they claimed that they had sufficient personnel equipment to contain that fire in the event it was gonna become a wildfire.

And we can see now that almost 400,000 acres were burned in that fire alone. At that point in time, they said there was. They had been looking at meteorological events and what was gonna be occurring.

And according to them, prior to that afternoon, they had sufficient. And look what happened. 400,000 acres were burned.

Melissa-Roxanne Velasquez

I think unless anyone has an outstanding comment that they really need to get out, we really appreciate the Forest Service taking the time to come out to Cañones and to listen to us. And we hope that those comments will be taken back and really reviewed into the project.

June Galloway

We have some paperwork over there on the snack table in case anyone hasn't submitted a comment yet, and they'd like to. That says exactly how you can do that, and if you want to just do a handwritten one . . .

Melissa-Roxanne Velasquez

So we provide resources here with the land grant to help people submit their comments.

June Galloway

I just wanted to make sure everybody has that information.

Peter J. Garcia Sr.

One more request from the Forest Service is that we request additional and future community meetings here in the community of Cañones so that we can see what the progress is of the project, what comments were made, what has been a FONSI, or if they're going to be complete EIS.

That is one thing we're requesting, additional community meetings. We have this lovely building that the land grant has and those out in the community and at no charge for these organizations and associations and for the community.

It's no charge for you and that's the good thing . . .

Melissa-Roxanne Velasquez

So that concludes our meeting.