

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 4/6/2024 1:02:28 AM

First name: Aaron

Last name: Bentley

Organization:

Title:

Comments: Friday, April 5, 2024

Mark Sando, Coyote District Ranger

HC 78, Box 1

Coyote, NM 87012-0001

RE: The Encino Vista Landscape Restoration Project # 54965

I, Aaron D. Bentley, respectfully submit these comments regarding the U.S. Forest Service's proposed Encino Vista Landscape Restoration Project, an approximately 130,305-acre vegetation management project located on the Coyote and Cuba Ranger Districts of the Santa Fe National Forest. These comments are submitted in a timely manner. The responsible official is Mark Sando, District Ranger, Coyote Ranger District.

Dear Mr. Sando:

It is mind-boggling to me that it's already been two years since the Calf Canyon/Hermits Peak Fire. For the communities it affected, the pain is surely still felt as though it were yesterday. This, the most damaging and destructive fire in the state's history destroyed lives and livelihood, has had an estimated cost of \$4 Billion, and, thanks to it being the result of a prescribed burn, completely wrecked the communities' trust in the U.S. National Forest Service's ability to, as the website states, "care for the land and serve people."

My parents were among those who brought help to those in shock and still in danger in Mora, NM after the worst of the fires had been contained. The scenes of utter annihilation that they saw there still haunt them. My dad told us about a mechanic's shop where the fire and heat had been so intense that a car lifted up on a car lift had melted and folded in half around the lift.

With these horrors still fresh in my mind and the minds of New Mexicans, it's no wonder that there are very real and valid concerns now with the proposed Encino Vista Project. My partner's family has lived in the village of Cañones for generations, ranching and caring for the land, the acequias, and the water shed. Cañones, Abiquiú (Avéshu) and the surrounding lands could now be directly in danger of a similar fate of Mora and all other towns decimated by the Hermits Peak Fire.

While the communities in Northern New Mexico are aware of the possible benefits of prescribed burns in maintaining a healthy forest, there is work that the U.S. Forest Service must do FIRST to restore trust, to prove that they can perform such burns without creating another catastrophe. This needs to start with truly listening to the families living in the lands encompassed by the Restoration Project, partnering with them and learning from their wisdom about the land they have known for hundreds or thousands of years.

Taking the "we know best" approach regarding maintaining these treasured lands has obviously not gone to plan in the past, and that truly brings up questions of environmental justice for all those living in these to-be-affected communities. The process of notifying those whose homes and lands will be affected by this plan has been dismal and embarrassing. Only 143 people received the notification of the scoping document. There has been next to nothing in the news. What notification has happened seems to merely check a box that "well, we tried to tell people," rather than get large-scale buy-in from communities. This runs directly contrary to building back trust.

Additionally, community meetings and requests for input have been poorly advertised and attended. This flies

directly against the U.S. Forest Service's "Requirements for Public Participation" regulation, which requires the Service to encourage participation by low income and minority populations. And yet, despite the huge number of people for whom Spanish is either their first or only spoken language, none of the meetings or literature have been in Spanish. These are families living within still-honored, original Spanish Land Grants - Spanish is their heritage. That's nothing to say of the Indigenous, Genízaro, and Mestizo peoples living on and near the affected areas whose knowledge of land care has been rejected since before the United States was founded.

There is still time to do this right. There is still time to structure the Encino Vista Landscape Restoration Project so that it is going to TRULY care for the land and serve the people living there. There is a clear choice that must be made to be a partner with these Northern New Mexican communities, to listen and learn, not to dictate and make the same mistakes as before.

Thank you for considering these comments,

Aaron Douglas Bentley