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MY VIEW CODY DEMS

Encino Vista project green light is right decision

By Cody Dems

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Balancing risk and reward, the Santa Fe National Forest is headed in the right direction for local people, forests, waters and wildlife.

On April 7, the Forest Service issued a draft decision of no significant impact for the Encino Vista Landscape Restoration Project located near Coyote. This means that after extensive review of local and scientific knowledge, multiple public meetings with community members and in line with federal law, the forest intends to strategically cut trees, use good fire, repair damaged roads and hire local contractors to help protect the area’s water and homes from wildfire.

Making a recommendation like this is not easy, and I applaud forest leadership for taking action, even if it’s not “perfect,” so that Northern New Mexico forests, waters and communities are better suited to the sustain themselves despite ongoing drought, forest insect and disease outbreaks, and high severity wildfires. By law, the forest service must manage the land to benefit recreation, timber, grazing, waters, wildlife and fish.

To do this, there are inherent trade-offs. Not every action has immediate benefits for all components. For example, recent research in the Jemez Mountains showed that increased grass cover after forest thinning and prescribed burning was great for elk and mule deer preferred the thinned areas approximately five years later. In the same areas, the number of forest rodents varied by species, with some preferring less trees and others preferring more. These trade-offs apply to people, too. Removing trees from the forest can be hard to witness. We make connections with forests as they are now, and with any change, we experience uncertainty or unrest.

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At the same time, removing some trees provides vigas, latillas and firewood for our homes and jobs for our neighbors. When thinking about trade-offs, there is rarely a perfect route forward. However, through a thorough review process, Santa Fe National Forest leadership has made a “good” recommendation that balances the complex trade-offs of doing something, with the those of doing nothing.

Trade-offs also exist when deciding to “do nothing.” As Northern New Mexicans, we know the history of this landscape, and understand how federal, state and community policies have altered the connections between people, forests and cultures. Land dispossession, changes in grazing patterns, heavy handed logging and over a hundred years of fire suppression all add to our current forest conditions.

At scale, Northern New Mexico forests are tightly packed with trees of largely the same age. These individual trees are more stressed for nutrients and water, and when insects or disease or wildfire show up, those forces spread more easily between tightly packed trees. With this in mind, Santa Fe National Forest leadership reviewed what could happen without implementing the EVLRP. If forest officials don’t, the significant threat of severe wildfire in the project area could wipe out the forest, water systems and local communities as we know them.

The Santa Fe National Forest has a difficult decision to make: lead a coordinated effort to reduce wildfire risk knowing that forest ecosystems are complex and dynamic and that their actions could be good and not perfect, or let the legacy of historical decisions play out and continue to build toward a severe wildfire event that would create rapid, widespread change. Forest leaders are on the right path for forests, waters, wildlife and local communities. They are balancing risk and reward to do something so that the people, trees, birds and bees all have a place in these forests well into the future.

Cody Dems works for the Forest Stewards Guild in support of resilient forests, clean water and dynamic communities.

