

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT  
FOR  
THE ALTAR VALLEY FIRE MANAGEMENT PLAN  
PIMA COUNTY, ARIZONA**

**Introduction**

This is a federally assisted action authorized under The Conservation Technical Assistance Program (CTA) authorized in the Soil Conservation Domestic Act of 1935 (P.L. 74-46) (16 U.S.C. 590a-g and 590q). An environmental and biological assessment was undertaken in conjunction with the development of the Altar Valley Fire Management Plan (AVFMP). This assessment was conducted in consultation with local, state, and federal agencies as well as with interested organizations and individuals. Data developed during the assessment are available for public review at the following location:

US Department of Agriculture  
Natural Resources Conservation Service  
230 N. First Avenue, Suite 509  
Phoenix, AZ 85003

The purpose of this project is to develop, facilitate, and implement scientifically sound land resource management and conservation strategies using prescribed fire in the Altar Valley, Southwest of Tucson, Arizona. The intent of the project is to improve range and watershed health by reducing invasive and woody species in the Altar Valley Watershed grassland habitats. It would also reduce the risk to human life or property due to large-scale wildland fire events by reintroducing the use of prescribed fire as a primary management tool.

Acting as the lead agency, the NRCS has agreed to conduct the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review, to pursue ESA Section 7 consultation with the FWS, and to issue a determination and decision for implementation of the AVFMP. The AVFMP, developed under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with a number of partners, establishes and designates its signatories as “cooperating agencies.”

**Recommended Action**

The AVFMP will implement prescribed fire management to achieve improved range and watershed health. The AVFMP includes conservation measures to minimize adverse affects to listed species, monitoring, and an adaptive management program that allows the AVFMP to adjust to new information. The AVFMP also provides Altar Valley ranchers a clearly defined process that will remain predictable over the life of the plan.

Prescribed fire will be used across the landscape to produce and maintain a mosaic of shrub and native grasslands in near-historical conditions with naturally functioning riparian systems, while reducing woody plant encroachment of upland vegetation communities. Restoring the historical

vegetation and fire regime into the ecosystem of the planning area will maintain a mosaic of vegetation associations with irregular or clumpy appearance and patterns, age structure, and cover types.

### **Planning Area**

The Altar Valley is an area approximately 52 miles long and 20 miles wide through which the Altar Wash flows out of the Arivaca watershed, Figure 1. Elevation ranges from 2,500 feet (ft) above mean sea level (msl) on the valley floor near SR 86 to 7,730 ft above msl at the top of Baboquivari Peak. Elevation increases relatively rapidly east to west from the valley floor to the tops of the surrounding mountains, and gradually from north to south on the valley floor. The approximately 282,600 acres covered by the AVFMP are privately owned and state trust land and could be subject to prescribed fire. A threshold of 15 percent of the 282,600 acres (42,390 acres) has been set as an annual maximum burn acreage threshold. This acreage threshold will be calculated as an average across three years to provide flexibility for variable conditions from year to year. Unpredictable wildfires are included in the annual acreage threshold and are outside the control of NRCS. Therefore, the combination of wildland fire and prescribed burns may impact approximately 42,390 acres annually on average with the preceding two years.

### **Prescribed Fire Management Goals**

The cooperating agencies have established the following goals of the AVFMP:

1. Integrate the fire management activities of all major non-Federal land users of the Altar Valley.
2. Minimize adverse effects of prescribed fire on listed and candidate species under the Endangered Species Act, as well as other fish and wildlife resources.
3. Provide for habitat enhancements for listed and candidate species under the Act, as well as other fish and wildlife resources.
4. Provide a voluntary landowner agreement template with which a landowner may participate in the implementation of prescribed fire.
5. Provide long-term watershed improvement.

### **Monitoring, Adaptive Management, and Reporting**

The cooperating agencies and landowners will use monitoring information to track burn acreage, effect thresholds, and the ability of NRCS to meet the goals of the AVFMP.

### **Effects of Recommended Action**

Prescribed fire will be used across the landscape to produce and maintain a mosaic of shrub and native grasslands in near-historical conditions with naturally functioning riparian systems, while reducing woody plant encroachment of upland vegetation communities. Restoring the historical vegetation and fire regime into the ecosystem of the planning area will maintain a mosaic of vegetation associations with irregular or clumpy appearance and patterns, age structure, and cover types.

Grasslands in central and southern Arizona have undergone dramatic vegetative changes over the past 130 years, including encroachment by shrubs, loss of perennial-grass cover, and spread of non-native species. The exclusion of natural fire from the ecosystem is a contributing factor to the changes in grassland composition. As a result, shrub encroachment has occurred on over 84

percent of existing and former rangeland in the U.S. (Gori and Enquist, 2003) Thirty-two percent of shrub-invaded native rangelands is considered to have restoration potential. (Gori and Enquist, 2003) Thus, the opportunity for restoration through prescribed fire is substantial, but time sensitive, considering the amount of grasslands already converted to shrublands. The US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) concurred that the proposed AVFMP covering the non-Federal portion of the Altar Valley, Pima County, Arizona, may affect:

the threatened Chiricahua leopard frog (*Lithobates chiricahuensis*) and the endangered Pima pineapple cactus (*Coryphantha scheeri* var. *robustispina*).

It is the FWS's biological opinion that the AVFMP, as proposed, is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the Chiricahua leopard frog or Pima pineapple cactus. No critical habitat has been designated for these species; therefore, none will be affected.

The FWS also concurred that the proposed action was not likely to adversely affect:

the endangered jaguar (*Panthera onca*),  
the endangered Kearney's blue star (*Amsonia kearneyana*),  
the endangered lesser long-nosed bat (*Leptonycteris curasoae yerbabuena*),  
the endangered masked bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus ridgewayi*),  
the threatened Mexican spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis lucida*) and its critical habitat, and  
the endangered southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii eximius*) and its critical habitat.

## Alternatives

1. No Action
2. Wildland Fire
3. Preferred Alternative: Prescribed burning following the Altar Valley Fire Management Plan.


## Consultation--Public Participation

A consortium of cooperating agencies and organizations is proposing the Altar Valley Fire Management Plan (AVFMP) to allow for the re-introduction of fire as a functioning component of the ecosystem within the planning area. The consortium includes the Altar Valley Conservation Alliance (AVCA), Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Ecological Services (AESO) and Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge (BAWNR)), Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD), Arizona State Land Department (ASLD), Arizona Date Forestry Division (ASFD), Pima County Natural Resources, Parks and Recreation Division, and The Nature Conservancy (TNC). The plan addresses ESA compliance/recovery goals, while implementing a fire management plan that reestablishes fire as a component of the grassland ecosystem in the planning area.

The development of the plan and alternatives was a collaborative, multi-agency and landowner approach. NEPA scoping public meetings were held in Arivaca, AZ, 17 February 2006 and in Tucson, AZ, 21 February 2006. The draft EA was made available December 2007 for public comment through letters to interested parties and posting in local newspapers and on the Arizona NRCS website. Three comment letters were received, all in support of the proposed action.

**Conclusion**

The plan/environmental assessment summarized above indicates that this federal action will not cause significant local, regional, or national impacts on the environment. Therefore, based on the above evidence, I find that an environmental impact statement for the Altar Valley Fire Management Plan is not required.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
DAVID L. MCKAY  
State Conservationist

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
DATE