


# Truchas to Costilla Project Frequently Asked Questions

### What is being proposed?

The Carson National Forest (NF) is proposing to reduce fuels and restore forest structure, composition, and function on approximately 100,000 acres in the Questa and Camino Real Ranger Districts. Project objectives include maintaining watersheds that are resilient to fire and to protecting adjacent communities while supporting rural economies by providing firewood and wood products. Treatments are focused in frequent-fire ponderosa pine and dry mixed conifer forest types that historically burned under a lower-severity fire regime. Treatments would be located to reduce risk to communities and infrastructure while providing mosaic fuel breaks that would assist fire suppression in the event of a wildfire.

### Why does this decision overlap with ongoing projects? Does it change what was already planned?

The proposed project would overlap several ongoing projects including the Pueblo Ridge Project, the Rio Trampas Project, and the Valle Vidal Northeast Prescribed Burn Project. Those projects have implementation planned over the coming years that is consistent with and will not be altered by this decision. Many of those existing projects were developed years ago and were signed under the Carson NF's 1986 land management plan. This Truchas-Costilla decision would provide a uniform approach to forest restoration and fire risk mitigation that is consistent with direction in the revised 2022 land management plan, covering all of the east side of the Carson NF.

### Where and when will tree thinning or prescribed fires occur?

This project uses a conditions-based management approach that will support responsiveness and flexibility between planning and implementation. While current environmental conditions have been examined and the analysis identifies known opportunities where treatments would reduce wildfire risk, no specific treatment boundaries have been established. The project describes a variety of appropriate treatments, from which the most appropriate will be selected at the time of implementation based on current site conditions. Specific site-specific implementation will be developed over the life of the project in collaboration with other state and federal agencies, partner organizations, and collaboratives.

**How will the public be notified when treatments are planned?**

The public can subscribe to the Carson NF email list for notifications—including prescribed fire and thinning project updates. The forest's Prescribed Fire webpage provides details on current and upcoming projects and a link to join the email list. The Carson NF regularly provides updates about planned implementation to local collaborative groups including the Taos Valley Watershed Coalition, the Cimmaron Watershed Alliance, and the Tres Rios Watershed Coalition.

**What safety measures are taken on prescribed fires?**

Prescribed fires are conducted under strict planning, qualified oversight, real-time monitoring, and continuous compliance with best practices to protect public safety, ecological integrity, and air quality. Implementers are bound by national and interagency guidance, including:

FSM 5103, 5131 (Doctrine) & NWCG PMS 484 (Interagency Procedures); PMS 424 (Complexity Rating); PMS 420-1 (Smoke Management); PMS 310-1 (Qualifications); NWCG NFES 2724 (Aviation & Fire Operations standards); plus additional mobilization, policy, and smoke management resources.

Following the 2022 National Prescribed Fire Program Review, additional measures are in place to tightly control planning, daily authorization, human-factor oversight, direct leadership involvement, and structured accountability. These measures include only authorizing ignition for a 24-hour operational period on the specific day of the burn; verification by the burn boss that all conditions, including human factors, meet the authorized criteria prior to ignition; and enhanced line officer or agency administrator oversight according to burn complexity.

**Can material be chipped, masticated, or removed as firewood rather than being burned?**

The Truchas-Costilla project proposal includes the option to chip or masticate materials in place or remove them as firewood or other products such as logs or latillas. These options will be appropriate in some instances. However, mechanical removal is usually slower, requires more personnel, and is limited by terrain and accessibility compared to removal by burning. Prescribed burning removes fuels in place, without the need for hauling or processing. It also mimics a natural process that releases nutrients back into the soil, triggers germination, and promotes grass and forbs. Burning effectively targets the fine fuels that carry fire, while chipping or mastication can increase fine fuel loads by shedding larger woody materials and in many cases will not modify fire risk.

**Will the work be accomplished by local workers?**

The Forest Service uses competitive Blanket Purchase Agreements (BPAs)—notably the Land Management Integrated Resources (LMIR) BPA—to efficiently hire contractors for thinning and forest treatment projects such as hand thinning, piling, and mastication. Contractors from any U.S. location can join a BPA but local firms gain priority opportunity for nearby projects since BPA

call orders are by state or forest. Work on the national forest that is contracted through the New Mexico Department of Energy, Minerals, and Natural Resources price agreement tends to solicit bids from operators in New Mexico. A project's size and complexity will determine if it can be accomplished by local operators from northern New Mexico or is more appropriate for larger, higher capacity operators.

**Will wood be sold locally?**

Timber sales are not restricted to local bidders; they are offered through an open, competitive process that ensures fair market pricing and encourages competitive bidding while considering economic conditions and broad access, as required by law (36 CFR 223.88). Any responsible and qualified individual or company across the U.S. can participate. Some sales include small-business or small-operator set-asides, especially when road construction is required. These sales are preferentially offered to qualified small businesses but not necessarily local entities. If no valid small-business bids are received, sales are reopened to all bidders.

**Will there be firewood available?**

Firewood will be a byproduct of many of the proposed activities. It may be available as a commercial sale (bulk removal for resale or large-scale use), from mayordomo projects (local leñeros thinning an acre at a time who then get to keep the wood), or as residual material from other thinning or timber treatments that can be collected with a personal use firewood permit.

**Will tree removal mainly benefit the timber industry?**

Forest thinning is primarily an ecological restoration and fire risk reduction tool. It benefits overall forest health and resilience by reducing tree competition, and improving tree vigor, while creating more structural diversity. It benefits watersheds by reducing the risk of uncharacteristically severe wildfires that can remove the forest overstory and lead to severe post-fire erosion. It benefits communities and infrastructure that are threatened by wildfire risk that would otherwise be higher than it would have been historically. Most restoration thinning produces small trees and non-merchantable wood that can be used as firewood, latillas, or biomass but are low-value for commercial logging purposes. Large, old trees are generally retained, not removed by forest restoration thinning and the byproducts are typically too small for sawmills and not profitable enough to incentivize industrial logging. Where thinned material does have commercial value, the most cost-effective way to remove it is to have an operator transport and process the material. A timber industry that can market and utilize material serves dual purposes of providing economic benefits and wood products while also contributing capacity for restoration and moving toward desired forest and watershed conditions.

### Will old growth forests be removed?

Most treatments are intended to retain large, old trees and protect them from uncharacteristically severe wildfire to which they are not adapted. Thinning of dense stands to a more open, multi-aged, multi-storied condition recreates the historic condition of frequent fire forest types which are the focus of this proposed action. Thinning removes ladder fuels and reduces overall fuel loading, meaning that fires are more likely to burn at survivable, low intensities around old trees. It also removes competition from dense younger trees and reduces competition for water, light, and nutrients and improves stand health and resilience to stressors like drought or insects.

### Will forests be clear cut?

Forest treatments will comply with the requirements of the Carson NF land management plan which describes the desired distribution of open and closed stands for each vegetation community. Uneven aged management is generally the goal in frequent fire forest types that are the focus for this project. Any clear cut openings are limited to no more than 40 acres by the National Forest Management Act and the Carson NF's land management plan except in limited circumstances that would require a stand-alone 60 day public comment period and regional forester approval or are the result of a natural catastrophic event like a wildfire or insect outbreak.

### How will wildlife habitat be protected?

Implementation will follow Carson NF land management plan direction which establishes desired ecological conditions for major habitat types aimed at supporting species diversity and viability. It includes forest-wide standards and guidelines that address vegetation seral stages, structural retention, disturbance rates, and fragmentation. Coarse-filter plan components ensure overall ecosystem structure and processes support a range of species while fine-filter plan components target specific needs of at-risk or sensitive species. These species receive additional buffers, special treatments, and monitoring protocols to support recovery and viability.

### How will archeological resources be protected?

Implementation of any of the proposed actions—thinning, mastication, prescribed fire, or road management—must comply with the Archaeological Resources Protection Act (ARPA) and 36 CFR Part 296, requiring inventory, evaluation, and, if needed, permitting before work begins.

Planned activities must include input from cultural resource specialists, who identify and map sensitive sites to design mitigations to avoid or protect archaeological features. Mitigations may include avoidance, physical protection, reduced fire intensity, or manual only fuel treatments instead of mechanical operations.