

# Decision Memo

## Santa Barbara Mountain Communities Defense Zone Project

### USDA Forest Service, Los Padres National Forest, Santa Barbara Ranger District, California

Location: Santa Ynez Mountains between Santa Barbara, and Gaviota,  
California, North of U.S. Highway 101, in Santa Barbara County, California

#### Decision

It is my decision to conduct community defense zone fuel treatments in the areas around the communities of Painted Cave, San Marcos Trout Club, Haney Tract, Rosario Park, Refugio, and Gaviota (Figure 1, page 2). These treatments will create fuel breaks covering approximately 411 acres. Details on the treatments and how they will be implemented, including maps and design criteria for protecting resources, are described in the attached project description following page 10 of this decision memo.

My decision will address Forest Plan goals by:

- Improving the ability of southern California communities to limit loss of life and property and recover from the high-intensity wildland fires that are a natural part of this state's ecosystem; and
- Reducing the number of acres at risk from excessively frequent fires while improving defensible space around communities.

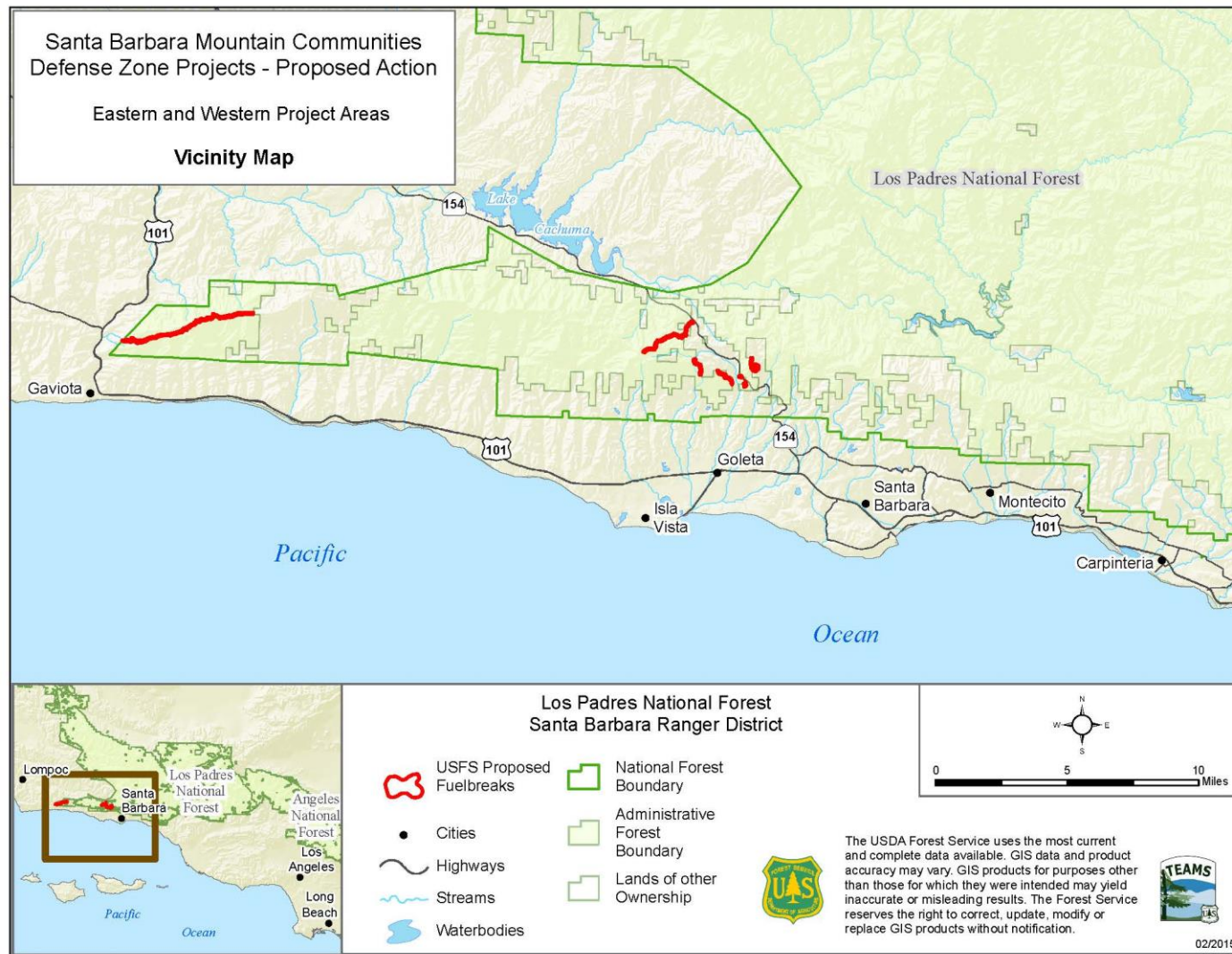
My decision categorically excludes this project from further analysis and documentation in an environmental assessment (EA) or environmental impact statement (EIS).

#### Rationale for Categorical Exclusion

The Council on Environmental Quality's (CEQ's) implementing regulations for the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) provide for categorical exclusions (CEs) to reduce delay and paperwork (40 CFR §1500.4(p)). The CEQ's regulations allow Federal agencies to exclude from documentation in an EA or EIS specific categories of actions that "do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment and which have been found to have no such effect in procedures adopted by a Federal agency. . ." (40 CFR §1508.4).

Under the Forest Service's NEPA regulations at 36 CFR Part 220, a Forest Service proposed action may be categorically excluded from further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS if two requirements are met:

- 1) The proposed action is consistent with a designated category of excluded actions described at 7 CFR §1b.3, 36 CFR §§220.6(d) or (e), or categories established by statute listed in the Forest Service NEPA Handbook at FSH 1909.15, Sec. 32.3; and
- 2) The responsible official finds that there are no extraordinary circumstances that would require the preparation of an EA or EIS (36 CFR §220.6(a)(1)).



**Figure 1. Map showing the location of the treatment areas (in red). Left to right are the Gaviota/Refugio Canyon, Rosario Park, Haney Tract West, Haney Tract East, San Marcos Trout Club, and Painted Cave treatment areas.**

“In considering extraordinary circumstances, the responsible official should determine whether or not any of the listed resources are present, and if so, the degree of the potential effects on the listed resources. If the degree of potential effect raises uncertainty over its significance, then an extraordinary circumstance exists, precluding use of a categorical exclusion” (FSH 1905.15, Sec. 31.2).

### Finding of Consistency with a Category of Excluded Actions

I find that the Santa Barbara Mountain Communities Defense Zone Project is consistent with a designated category of actions that is categorically excluded from further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS.

The Forest Service has found that “*timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction*” do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment (36 CFR §220.6(e)(6)). The regulation lists examples of the activities covered by the category that include but are not limited to, “thinning or brush control to reduce fire hazard,” and “prescribed burning to reduce natural fuel build-up.”

This project will apply thinning and brush control to enhance community wildfire protection and reduce the risk of loss of human life, structures, improvements, and natural resources from wildland fire and subsequent floods. It will accomplish this by creating and improving existing fuel breaks located around the local communities in zones of strategic importance for wildfire suppression efforts. The vegetative material cut as a result of these treatments will be either masticated or chipped and left on the site to decompose, piled and burned on the site, or jackpot burned. No herbicide treatments or road construction will occur.

My decision will reduce the intensity of fire behavior within these zones by reducing the amount and changing the arrangement of flammable vegetation and protecting wildlife habitat. As wildfire moves into the fuel breaks to be created in these zones, fire behavior, as measured by flame length, will lessen in intensity and allow these fuel breaks to serve as points of direct control by personnel and equipment. Firefighters will have improved opportunities for tactical operations and safety near structures, improvements, and areas with high resource values. By providing for defensible space, public and firefighter safety will be enhanced. The fuel breaks will also reduce risks associated with ingress and egress for the public and emergency responders during a wildfire event.

### Finding of No Extraordinary Circumstances

I find that there are no extraordinary circumstances that would require further analysis and documentation of the environmental impacts of this project in an EA or EIS. The Code of Federal Regulations at 36 CFR §220.6(b) specifies the seven resource conditions that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances related to a proposed Forest Service action warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or an EIS. I address each of these resource conditions as follows:

- 1) Federally listed Threatened or Endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service Sensitive species:

- a. Botany: A Forest Service Botanist prepared a Biological Evaluation for Threatened, Endangered, Proposed, and Sensitive Plant Species (Project Record, Botany BE). The Botanist's determinations are as follows:

- i. *Listed Species and Critical Habitat*: The project will have no effect on federally listed Threatened or Endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat. There are no known occurrences of federally listed Threatened, Endangered, Proposed, or Candidate (TEPC) plant species or designated or proposed critical habitat within the project area where activities are planned.
- ii. *Sensitive Species*: The project will not affect *Acanthoscyphus parishii* var. *abramsii*, *Allium howellii* var. *clokeyi*, *Calochortus palmeri* var. *palmeri*, *Caulanthus amplexicaulis* var. *barbarae*, *Delphinium parryi* ssp. *purpureum*, *Delphinium umbraculorum*, *Horkelia yadonii*, *Malacothrix saxatilis* var. *arachnoidea*, *Navarretia peninsularis*, *Nemacladus secundiflorus* var. *robbinsii*, *Quercus dumosa*, *Sidalcea hickmanii* ssp. *parishii*, or *Streptanthus campestris*. These species or their habitats do not exist within the project area.

The project **may affect individuals, but is not likely to result in a trend toward Federal listing or loss of viability** for Sensitive *Arctostaphylos refugioensis*, *Calochortus fimbriatus*, *Fritillaria ojaiensis*, *Horkelia cuneata* ssp. *puberula*, *Juncus luciensis*, *Lonicera subspicata* var. *subspicata*, *Thelypteris puberula* var. *sonorensis* or, *Thermopsis macrophylla*. Therefore, the project may affect individuals of eight Sensitive species, but these effects would not be significant when considered in the context of each species' population as a whole on the Los Padres National Forest.

- b. Fisheries

- i. *Listed Species and Critical Habitat*: A Forest Service Fisheries Biologist conducted a Biological Assessment (Project Record, Fisheries BA) for effects to Southern California Steelhead Distinct Population Segment (SCS DPS) (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*). This species is federally listed as Endangered. Designated critical habitat for this species also exists on the Los Padres National Forest.

The Fisheries Biologist determined that the project **may affect but is not likely to adversely affect** (NLAA) SCS DPS and essential features of designated critical habitat, including rearing and migration habitats. This determination is based on consideration of the proximity of actions to steelhead habitat which are separated from each other by sufficient distance to prevent adverse effects, the extent of the geographic area where disturbance may occur, timing of effect in relationship to species life history information, nature of the effect on anadromous habitat, duration of effect, and disturbance intensity and severity (Biological Assessment for the Southern California Steelhead Distinct Population Segment for Santa Barbara Front Country Defensible Fuel Profile Zone, Project Record). All of these factors imply conditions in which there will be no harm to the species and its critical habitat.

NOAA Fisheries concurred with our determination in a letter dated January 12, 2016 (Project Record). The proposed action is expected to have only extremely unlikely or insignificant effects on designated critical habitat for endangered steelhead because:

1. The proposed action specifically includes measures that preclude encroachment into the riparian corridor and, therefore, the riparian corridor is expected to retain the ability to sequester sand and smaller particles (fine sediment) and stabilize stream channels during and after the proposed action is completed; and
  2. Only minor increased delivery of fine sediment to waterways is anticipated and reaches containing designated critical habitat are considerably distant from the action area.
- ii. *Sensitive Species*: There are no fish species classified in Region 5 of the National Forest System as Sensitive within the project area. Therefore, the project would have no effect on Sensitive fish species.
- c. Wildlife
- i. *Listed Species and Critical Habitat*: A Forest Service Wildlife Biologist conducted a Biological Assessment/Evaluation (BA/BE) focusing on impacts of the proposed action on the Threatened, Endangered, Proposed, Candidate (TEPC) species, designated critical habitat, and Forest Service Sensitive species (Project Record, Wildlife BA/BE). The BA/BE disclosed potential effects for those species and habitats determined likely to occur within the project's area of effect (Table 1).

**Table 1. Summary of BA/BE determinations.**

Species	Status	Determination of Project Effects
California red-legged frog <i>Rana draytonii</i>	Threatened	No Effect
Vernal pool fairy shrimp <i>Branchinecta lynchi</i>	Threatened	No Effect
California red-legged frog <i>Rana draytonii</i>	Critical Habitat	No Effect
Pallid bat <i>Antrozous pallidus</i>	FS Region 5 Sensitive	May impact individuals, but are unlikely to contribute to a trend which would require the species to be listed
California legless lizard <i>Anniella pulchra</i>	FS Region 5 Sensitive	May affect individuals, but are unlikely to contribute to a population trend which would warrant listing
Monarch butterfly <i>Danaus plexippus</i>	FS Region 5 Sensitive	May affect individuals, but are unlikely to contribute to a population trend which would warrant listing

Species	Status	Determination of Project Effects
California Spotted Owl <i>Strix occidentalis occidentalis</i>	FS Region 5 Sensitive	No effect on individuals or their habitat, nor would they contribute to a trend that would require listing the species
Two-striped garter snake <i>Thamnophis hammondi</i>	FS Region 5 Sensitive	No effect on individuals, nor will they contribute to a population trend which would require listing

Based on these determinations, the project would have no effect on ESA-listed species or designated critical habitat. Suitable habitat for the listed frogs and shrimp is not present in riparian corridors on the higher reaches of stream systems because the primary constituent elements (PCE) for this habitat are not present. The closest known occupied habitat occurs near Nojoqui State Park, west-northwest of the Gaviota fuelbreak. Project actions would not alter PCEs through direct, indirect, or cumulative impacts, so the probability of adverse modifications to critical habitat occurring are negligible.

- ii. *Sensitive species.* The project may affect individuals of three species considered Sensitive in Region 5 of the National Forest System: Pallid bat, Northern California legless lizard, and Monarch butterfly. However the project is not likely to result in a trend toward Federal listing or loss of viability. These effects would not be significant when considered in the context of each species' population as a whole.

2) Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds:

The project's impacts will be consistent with E.O. 11990 and E.O. 11988 and the Forest Service's best management practices for the protection of floodplains and wetlands. This activity will not impact the functional value of any floodplain as defined by Executive Order 11988 and will not have negative impacts on wetlands as defined by Executive Order 11990. Municipal watersheds would not be affected because there are no designated municipal watersheds in or downstream of the project area.

3) Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas:

The project will have no effect on congressionally designated areas. There are no congressionally designated areas in the project area.

4) Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas:

Approximately 30 acres of the Rosario Park fuel break are located within the 9,086-acre Tequepis Inventoried Roadless Area (IRA) (see Figure 2, page 23). The fuel break will include 0.3 percent of the area of the IRA. This fuel break would be a re-installation of a former fuel break to protect the community.

Wilderness evaluation of the roadless inventory of the national forests, as well as of other undeveloped areas proposed by the public, is based on criteria of capability, availability, and need. The Tequepis IRA is rated as follows for these three criteria (LRMP EIS, Appendix D, page 152):

- Low Capability: The degree to which it contains the basic characteristics that qualify it for wilderness designation is low.
- Low Availability: The wilderness values in that location compared to the value of and need for other resource uses and production from the same land area is low.
- Low Need: The need for designation of new wilderness, comparing the value of a potential area to existing wilderness in nearby locations as well as to the National Wilderness Preservation System as a whole is also low.

The project will not reduce the existing low Wilderness evaluation ratings of the Tequepis IRA's capability, availability, and need.

There will be no road construction or timber harvest in this IRA. The project will not result in extraordinary circumstances with regard to inventoried roadless areas. Although there may be localized short-term effects to roadless area characteristics on 30 acres, the project will maintain or improve one or more of the following roadless area characteristics (66 FR 3245 and 3272, January 12, 2001):

- High quality or undisturbed soil, water, and air;
- Sources of public drinking water;
- Diversity of plant and animal communities;
- Habitat for threatened, endangered, proposed, candidate, and sensitive species and for those species dependent on large, undisturbed areas of land;
- Primitive, semi-primitive non-motorized and semi-primitive motorized classes of dispersed recreation;
- Reference landscapes;
- Natural appearing landscapes with high scenic quality;
- Traditional cultural properties and sacred sites; and
- Other locally identified unique characteristics.

These effects would not be significant when considered in the context of the IRA's inherent low Wilderness evaluation ratings for capability, availability, and need.

The project will have no effect on potential wilderness areas because none are located in the project area.

5) Research natural areas (RNAs):

The project will have no effect on RNAs. There are no RNAs in the vicinity of the project.

6) American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites; and (7) Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas.

A Forest Service Archaeologist surveyed the project area for cultural, archaeological, and historic properties following the Region 5 Hazardous Fuels Protocol for Non-Intensive Inventory Strategies for Hazardous Fuels and Vegetation Reduction Projects.

The Archaeologist determined “No Adverse Effect to Historic Properties” by implementation of this project because Standard Protection Measures will be used to protect, manage or maintain historic properties in a manner that avoids adverse effects (Regional PA Stipulation 7.8.(b)(2)).

The required mitigation measures that will be followed in the implementation of this project for the protection of archaeological resources are listed on page 18 of the project description attached to this decision memo. These measures include a pre-implementation meeting with Heritage Resource staff, avoidance measures for treatments near archaeological sites, and post-treatment surveys.

## **Interested and Affected Agencies, Organizations, and Persons Contacted**

This project was first listed in the Los Padres National Forest’s Schedule of Proposed Action in July of 2014. I sent a scoping letter and the detailed description of the proposed action to interested and affected agencies, organizations, and individuals on September 30, 2015. My scoping letter invited these parties to submit comments, concerns, or questions about the project for me to consider in the analysis.

The scoping letter and the list of recipients are in the project record. I received 30 responses submitting comments about the proposed action. After reviewing scoping comments, I excluded a 7-acre treatment unit on the south end of the San Marcos Trout Club area from the list of treatment areas. I sent letters of consultation to local tribes, but received no environmental concerns.

I also consulted with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) for concurrence with our determinations of effects to Endangered Southern California Steelhead Distinct Population Segment and its critical habitat. NOAA Fisheries concurred with our determinations (page 5, above).

All scoping comments were reviewed and the agency’s responses are in the project record.

## **Other Required Findings**

### **National Forest Management Act**

The Santa Barbara Mountain Communities Defense Zone Project responds to the following Forest Plan goals:

- Goal 1.1: Improve the ability of southern California communities to limit loss of life and property and recover from the high-intensity wildland fires that are a natural part of this state’s ecosystem.
- Goal 1.2.2 - Reduce the number of acres at risk from excessively frequent fires while improving defensible space around communities.



The Forest Plan has designated four land use zones within the Santa Barbara Front Place. The project would take place within three of these land use zones. Fuels management activities are suitable in each of the three land use zones (Table 2).

**Table 2. Suitability of fuels management activities within the three affected land use zones in the Santa Barbara Front Place**

Activity or Use	Forest Plan Land Use Zone		
	DAI – Developed Area Interface	BC – Back Country	BCMUR – Back Country Motorized Use Restricted
Community Protection Areas	Suitable	Suitable	Suitable
Fuelbreak Construction Including Type Conversion	Suitable	Suitable	Suitable

Source: Forest Plan, Part 2: Los Padres National Forest Strategy; p. 5

### Environmental Justice (E.O. 12898)

My decision is consistent with Executive Order 12898. I have determined that, in accordance with Executive Order 12898, this project does not have disproportionately high or adverse human health or environmental effects on minority populations and low income populations.

### Implementation Date

This decision may be implemented immediately upon the issuance of this decision memo.

This decision is not subject to administrative review or appeal (36 CFR §218.23(a)). Section 431 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 (Pub. L. No. 113-76, 128 Stat. 5 (2014)) directs that the 1993 and 2012 legislation establishing the 36 CFR Part 215 (post-decisional appeals) and 36 CFR Part 218 (pre-decisional administrative review and objection) processes “shall not apply to any project or activity implementing a land and resource management plan . . . that is categorically excluded . . . under the National Environmental Policy Act [NEPA].”

Section 8006(a) of the Agricultural Act of 2014 (Pub. L. No. 113-79) repealed the Appeals Reform Act of 1992 which had been implemented by 36 CFR Part 215 (Pub. L. No. 102-381, 106 Stat. 1419 (1992)). Section 8006(b) of the Agricultural Act of 2014 directs that the pre-decisional objection process established in Section 428 of division E of the Consolidated Appropriation Act of 2012 (Pub. L. No. 112-74) shall not be applicable to categorically excluded projects or activities.

### For Further Information

Additional information concerning the project may be obtained from Greg Thompson, Forester, Mt. Pinos Ranger District, 34580 Lockwood Valley Road, Frazier Park, CA 93225, (661) 245-3731.

  
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JOHN "PANCHO" SMITH

9-8-2016  
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Date

District Ranger  
Santa Barbara Ranger District



# **Santa Barbara Mountain Communities Defense Zone Project**

## **Project Description**

### **Los Padres National Forest – Santa Barbara Ranger District**

July 2016

#### **Background**

Over the past half century, urban development has expanded into the chaparral and forested environments on the Santa Barbara Front. This expansion has placed residences adjacent to highly flammable wildland fuels that typically burn with high intensity and can pose a threat to both structures and residents alike. Much of this expansion of urban development has occurred next to national forest boundaries without the adoption of sufficient provisions for establishing defensible space needed in the event of wildfire. The Forest Service is proposing the Santa Barbara Mountain Communities Defense Zone Project to address this situation.

#### **Project Location**

The Santa Barbara Mountain Communities Defense Zone Project would be conducted on the Santa Barbara Ranger District, Los Padres National Forest. The proposed project would be located on the Santa Barbara Front in the Santa Ynez Mountains. This area is north of U.S. Highway 101, in Santa Barbara County, California. It overlooks the Pacific Ocean between Santa Barbara, and Gaviota, California.

We propose several activities covering a total of approximately 411 acres to directly improve the ability of the communities of Painted Cave, San Marcos Trout Club, Haney Tract, Rosario Park, Refugio, and Gaviota to address this threat. This project would create or expand on existing fuel breaks, reducing the amount of standing vegetation to improve the ability of these communities to strategically mitigate the potential impacts of wildfire.

#### **Historic Condition**

The proposed project area has a Mediterranean climate and its chaparral ecosystem is considered to be one of the most fire hazardous landscapes in North America. The combination of uniformly dense chaparral fuels, summer drought, Sundowner winds (a local foehn wind<sup>1</sup>), steep terrain, and communities built along exposed ridgelines and deep canyons contribute to this condition.

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<sup>1</sup> A foehn (pronounced “fän,” similar to “vane”) is a dry, warm wind that descends the downwind side of a mountain range.

Wildfires are a fundamental part of the native chaparral ecosystem. Fires have occurred regularly around the communities located within this project area. The Santa Barbara Front Country area has had numerous devastating wildfires in the past. These fires include the Jesusita (2009), Gap (2008), Gaviota (2004), Paint (1990), Wheeler (1985), Eagle Canyon (1979), Sycamore Canyon (1977), Romero (1971), Coyote (1964), Polo (1964), and Refugio (1955). These fires have served as periodic reminders that the mountain communities of the Santa Barbara Front are at risk from the potential for wildland fire to spread from National Forest System (NFS) land into one of these communities or from the communities into the national forest.

Because Southern California chaparral ecosystems typically burn in stand-replacing crown fires, extreme wildfires will inevitably continue to occur in the Santa Barbara Front Country. According to the California Fire Plan, the communities on the Santa Barbara Front are rated at high value, high risk, and have a high probability that large fires will occur.

This threat can be addressed through the strategies that promote fire-adapted communities. The mountain communities are aware of the potential wildfire impacts and have taken some corrective action to address this potential threat. Each has embarked on fuel reduction activities and has plans developed in collaboration with public fire agency professionals to reduce potential wildfire hazard. Agreements have been developed to cross boundaries between the national forest and private lands with fuel reduction activities. For example, the Wildland Residents Association (WRA)<sup>2</sup> was awarded a grant in 2005 to complete fuels reduction projects. Some of the local communities have applied for similar grants through the Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2015.

### Existing Condition

Communities have developed next to the Los Padres National Forest with inadequate planning for defensible space from fire. Because these communities lie immediately next to a chaparral ecosystem, fire behavior modeling conducted by fuels planners suggests wildfire impacts can be severe. This is particularly true under the weather conditions that result in the most extreme fire behavior. These conditions are referred to by fuels planners as “97<sup>th</sup> percentile fire weather.”

A preliminary analysis was conducted to look at fire behavior fuel models before and after treatment in the project area with fire behavior modeling results using 97<sup>th</sup> percentile weather from local remote area weather stations. The analysis looked at the conditions in areas that are either no longer benefitting from previous treatments, or have never been treated. Under existing conditions, chaparral flame lengths would potentially exceed 19 feet. This represents a wildfire of much higher intensity than could be directly suppressed by personnel who would be the first to respond to the wildfire.

The analysis showed that proposed fuels treatments would reduce potential flame lengths to no more than approximately 6 feet, which can be directly attacked by first responders. Eight-foot flame lengths represent the maximum intensity of a wildfire that could be directly suppressed by responding personnel.

Another analysis was conducted that considers how the treated vegetation would typically respond to an initial treatment over time. The analysis showed that without maintenance of

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<sup>2</sup> “The WRA serves as a liaison between Santa Barbara County’s mountain communities and various government agencies and provides the management of the San Marcos Pass Volunteer Fire Department” (<http://www.wildlandresidents.org/about/>).

treated areas, flame lengths are anticipated to be 6 to 7 feet in as few as 3 to 7 years following initial treatment, with potential flame lengths likely to exceed 19 feet in 10 or more years.

Analysis shows that flame lengths after treatment would be well below the 8-foot flame lengths and represent a wildfire with an intensity that could be directly suppressed by responding personnel.

After treatment, the shrub component in the previously treated vegetation would grow again using the established root systems. These previously treated areas would also include a masticated fuel bed (chipped or ground-up vegetation) that would decompose over time. As this masticated fuel bed decomposes, it would become less available as fuel for wildfires.

As a general rule of thumb, the need for retreatment of the fuel breaks would be triggered in the future when the shrub component again reaches approximately 18 inches in height. This could take from 3 to 7 years from the initial treatment, and the speed of development of this condition would depend on several ecological parameters such as soil type, moisture, and aspect.

Areas left untreated for 10 years or more would begin to show fire behavior more closely resembling currently untreated areas, depending on the amount of time since the previous treatment. Flame lengths would again exceed 8 feet and represent a wildfire with an intensity that could not be directly suppressed by responding personnel.

## **Need for Action**

The purpose of the project is to address Forest Plan's goals and desired conditions. The Forest Plan identifies goals that are responsive to both national priorities and the management challenges identified for the multiple-use management of the four southern California national forests (Forest Plan, Part 1: Southern California National Forests Vision; pp. 19-49). The responsible official for the Santa Barbara Mountain Communities Defense Zone Project has chosen to propose resource management actions that respond to the following Forest Plan goals:

- Goal 1.1: Improve the ability of southern California communities to limit loss of life and property and recover from the high-intensity wildland fires that are a natural part of this state's ecosystem.

The desired condition is to have vegetation treated to enhance community protection and reduce the risk of loss of human life, structures, improvements, and natural resources from wildland fire and subsequent floods. Firefighters would have improved opportunities for tactical operations and safety near structures, improvements, and high resource values. By providing for defensible space, public and firefighter safety would be enhanced.

- Goal 1.2.2 - Reduce the number of acres at risk from excessively frequent fires while improving defensible space around communities.

The desired condition for chaparral is to establish a diversity of shrub age classes in key areas near communities to improve the effectiveness of fire suppression operations. Adequate defensible space around communities could greatly reduce the risk of structure loss, as well as improve safety for residents. Thus, at the urban interface there will be a management emphasis on direct community protection. This could be accomplished in at least two ways: (1) by removing or heavily modifying shrublands immediately adjacent to populated areas (Wildland-Urban Interface Defense Zones); and (2) by strategically creating blocks of young,

less flammable vegetation near the interface areas. Both types of fuels modification could slow or even halt the rate of fire spread into urban areas.

The differences between existing conditions and desired conditions identified in the Forest Plan, and the Forest Service’s responsibility to reduce those differences through management practices, define the need for action. The need for Santa Barbara Mountain Communities Defense Zone Project is based on the Forest Plan goals identified above.

To make progress toward achieving these goals, the project would address the following need:

- The Forest Plan recognizes the need to create conditions that allow firefighters to stay on the ground and defend homes and property more safely within community defense zones (Forest Plan, Part 1: Southern California National Forests Vision; p. 13). Flame lengths below 8 feet are desired because they allow for direct suppression of fires under more extreme fire weather conditions using readily available equipment, and represent a noticeable improvement for fire fighter and public safety. The goal after treatment is to attain a potential flame length of 6 feet for chaparral areas and 3 feet for grass areas in 97<sup>th</sup> percentile weather conditions.
- Once established, these zones should be maintained so they remain effective in the future.

## Proposed Treatments

The project proposes to create and maintain fuel breaks on approximately 411 acres of chaparral in seven separate areas to help manage against the wildfire threat posed to the mountain communities. Fuel breaks to be included in this project are listed in Table 3.

**Table 3. Summary of proposed activities**

Fuel Break	Legal Description	Approximate Acres
Painted Cave	Township 5 North, Range 28 West, Sections 22, 23. San Bernardino Base Meridian	37
San Marcos Trout Club North	Township 5 North, Range 28 West, Section 27. San Bernardino Base Meridian	4
Haney Tract South East	Township 5 North, Range 28 West, Sections 21, 27, & 28. San Bernardino Base Meridian.	31
Haney Tract North West	Township 5 North, Range 28 West, Section 20. San Bernardino Base Meridian.	28
Rosario Park (National Forest System Land)	Township 5 North, Range 28 West, Sections 8, 17, 18 & 19. Township 5 North, Range 29 West, Section 24. San Bernardino Base Meridian.	94
Rosario Park (Non-National Forest System Land)	Township 5 North, Range 28 West, Sections 8 & 17. San Bernardino Base Meridian.	4
Gaviota/Refugio Canyon	Township 5N, Range 32 West, Sections 22, 23 & 24. Township 5 North, Range 31W, Sections 16, 17 & 18. San Bernardino Base Meridian.	213
Total Project Treated Acres		411

The fuel breaks would be located around the local communities in zones of strategic importance for wildfire suppression efforts. The fuel breaks would reduce the intensity of fire behavior within these zones by reducing the amount and changing the arrangement of flammable vegetation.

As wildfire moves into the fuel breaks to be created in these zones, fire behavior, as measured by flame length, would lessen and allow these fuel breaks to serve as points of direct control by personnel and equipment. The fuel breaks would also reduce risks associated with ingress and egress for the public and emergency responders during a wildfire event.

The fuel breaks would consist of treated areas of variable widths, shapes, and patterns to accommodate Forest Plan visual standards and community visual concerns with linear features across the landscape. The fuel break widths would be dependent on slope and topographical features.

This project may be implemented as early as the fall of 2016 and would continue into the foreseeable future. Treatment areas would be monitored for fuel condition and would be treated on a 3- to 10-year cycle. This would maintain the vegetation within the fuel breaks in the desired condition over the long term. The maintenance schedule would be variable as rates of brush regrowth would vary, depending on precipitation. Annual funding constraints might also result in a longer interval between maintenance treatments.

### Treatments in the Area of Painted Cave

Painted Cave is the most eastern community affected by the proposed project (Figure 3, page 24). Painted Cave is an unincorporated community located in the Santa Ynez Mountains and is named due to its proximity to Painted Cave State Historic Park. It is primarily served by Camino Cielo Road and California State Route 154, which link the community both to the nearby Santa Ynez Valley and the City of Santa Barbara. The community is made up of roughly 250 acres and includes 100 homesteads, plus a large number of outlying settlements.

Painted Cave is the highest and largest of the private inholdings within the Santa Ynez Mountains. This community sits atop a rough plateau, and includes the large Laurel Springs Ranch. The local terrain is extremely hilly, and numerous homes along Rim and Lookout roads approach or overhang sheer cliffs

To increase the defensible space around the community of Painted Cave, a fuel break would be created on the south-southwest portion of the community. The fuel break would be approximately 5,000 feet in length and would vary in widths between 280 feet and a maximum of 500 feet, covering approximately 37 acres. It would take advantage of topography and roads to increase its effectiveness. The fuel break would lie along the National Forest boundary.

### Treatments in the Area of San Marcos Trout Club

The community of San Marcos Trout Club is located approximately ½-mile west of the community of Painted Cave (Figure 3, page 24). It is comprised of 39 residential lots, with approximately 100 residents on a total of about 100 acres of property. San Marcos Trout Club is accessed off of Old San Marcos Road and is directly across California State Route 154 from Painted Cave Road.

A small fuel break of 4 acres is proposed in the north portion of the community. The fuel break would be approximately 1,100 feet in length and would vary in widths between 300 feet and a maximum of 400 feet, to take advantage of the topography and existing roads. The fuel break would be immediately adjacent to the National Forest boundary.

Focus would be taken on the removal of the non-native eucalyptus and acacia trees to try to support a healthier oak tree stand adjacent to the Trout Club community. The removal of the trees would occur over a 3 to 5 year period to ensure crews are adequately able to remove the majority of the material from the project site through prescription pile burning.

Due to the location of this particular project and its proximity to Highway 154, there are very limited conducive burn days. Therefore, care would be taken to only cut and pile what can realistically be burned that year, so the crews don't add to the amount of dead material on the forest floor which could increase fire danger during "high" fire season.

### Treatments in the Area of the Haney Tract

The Haney Tract community is located approximately 1 mile to the west and across the San Jose Creek Drainage from the San Marcos Trout Club (Figure 3, page 24). The community is composed of approximately 20 residential structures and totals approximately 170 acres. The community is accessed off of the West Camino Cielo Road and is comprised of narrow, mostly one-way roads leading down from the ridgelines to the residences intermixed throughout the hillside.

Two fuel breaks totaling approximately 59 acres are proposed for installation within the Haney Tract Area. One would be installed northwest of the community and one would be installed to the southeast of the community. The southeast fuel break would also provide additional protection to the San Marcos Trout Club community. The overall combined length of the fuel breaks would be approximately 8,500 feet. Their maximum width would be approximately 300 feet. The fuel breaks would be located either immediately adjacent to the National Forest boundary or located along roads or ridges to take advantage of the favorable topography.

### Treatments in the Area of Rosario Park

The community of Rosario Park is approximately 1.5 miles to the northwest of the Haney Tract (Figure 4, page 25). The community is made up of approximately 15 residences sharing 40 acres of property and is best accessed from Highway 154, to Stagecoach Road, to Rosario Park Road. The Rosario Park Road is a narrow one way road which does a loop around the residences.

This fuel break would be a re-installation of a former fuel break to protect the community. The fuel break would be approximately 2.7 miles long with a maximum width of 300 feet. The fuel break would total approximately 98 acres. It would be installed along a ridge and would include existing roads and favorable topography into its design features. The majority of the fuel break would be within the National Forest boundary with a small 4-acre portion on the northeast end located on private property.

### Treatments in the Area of Gaviota/Refugio Canyon

The major traffic corridor of California Highway 1 and U.S. Highway 101 is adjacent to the Gaviota/Refugio Canyon treatment area (Figure 5, page 26). This highway is used to access a large number of private residences and properties. In addition, along the West Camino Cielo Road, critical weather and radio infrastructure is located at the Gaviota Omni Radio Range Station.

This part of the project would reinstall an old fuel break in the area of Gaviota/Refugio Canyon. This fuel break would be approximately 6 miles long with a maximum width of 300 feet and would be approximately 213 acres in size.



## Treatment Definitions for Proposed Activities

The Forest Plan provides project design criteria for defense zone treatments in chaparral vegetation (Forest Plan, Part 3: Design Criteria for the Southern California National Forests, page 82).

“Generally, a [Wildland-urban Interface Defense Zone] width of 100 to 300 feet will be sufficient in some conditions to provide community safety objectives in chaparral types, however on steep slopes or areas of significant mortality, a greatly expanded width of defense zones may be necessary. These conditions may require defense zone widths over 300 feet. Defense Zone management activities take precedence over all other management activities within the Defense Zone and Standard 8<sup>3</sup> would apply. Some conditions may allow for less than the 100-foot width.

Isolated plants can be left intact within this zone as long they are maintained in such a way as to not ignite during a wildland fire. In that portion of the defense zone greater than 100 feet from structures, chaparral vegetation should be reduced to 18 inches in height to promote low flame lengths and to minimize the potential for soil erosion.”

Fuel breaks near the Painted Cave and San Marcos Trout Club communities would exceed widths of 300 feet to use the available topographic features in enhancing treatment effectiveness, and to provide sufficient treatment effectiveness on steep slopes where wildfire intensity and rate of spread would be greater.

### *Vegetation Treatments*

Fuel levels would be reduced to the extent that would allow the desired conditions to be met. All vegetation is proposed for treatment, which would include the numerous brush species present along with the live oaks. Up to 95 percent of the existing woody vegetation would be treated within each fuel break. We would treat ground cover to produce younger seral stage of shrubs interspersed with a mixture of bare ground, grasses, and forbs. Where oaks or other trees are present, they would be thinned or pruned to remove the ladder fuels that would otherwise conduct fire into the tree canopy.

Where feasible, we would incorporate existing roads into the fuel break design. This would reduce the number of acres where vegetation is removed, and facilitate the safe use of these roads by the public and emergency response personnel during a wildfire event.

Brush would be cut either by hand or by mechanical methods to create the fuel breaks. Hand methods would include crews using chainsaws and hand tools. Hand cutting of brush would occur on slopes where mechanical treatments would not be feasible.

Mechanical methods would include the use of heavy equipment with machines such as masticators. Mechanical treatments would be limited to slopes of 35 percent or less, except for occasional pitches between 35 and 50 percent for short sections not exceeding 500 feet in length. Most of the cut vegetation would be treated by grapple piling or hand piling.

Mechanically masticated, cut, or shredded material may be left on-site to decompose if leaving it on-site would produce the desired condition of a reduced flame length. Fuels created by machine

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<sup>3</sup> “Community protection needs within the Wildland-urban Interface Defense Zone take precedence over the requirements of other forest plan direction, including other standards identified in Part 3 of the forest plan. If expansion beyond the 300-foot minimum width of the defense zone is needed due to site-specific conditions, projects will be designed to mitigate effects to other resources to the extent possible” (Forest Plan, Part 3: Design Criteria for the Southern California National Forests, page 5).

or hand work could also be piled and burned through pile burning, jackpot burning<sup>4</sup>, or a combination of these treatments when conditions were safe to do so and when smoke would be adequately dispersed. Piles would be located away from the canopy drip lines of any existing trees to prevent scorch.

## Project Design Criteria

The following measures would be incorporated into proposed activities to reduce, avoid or mitigate potential environmental effects to various forest resources.

### Cultural and Historic Resources

The Forest Service is electing to use the “Region 5 Hazardous Fuels Protocol for Non-Intensive Inventory Strategies for Hazardous Fuels and Vegetation Reduction Projects” to meet its National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) section 106 obligations for cultural resource compliance. This protocol is tiered off of the Programmatic Agreement among the USDA Forest Service (Region 5), California State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) regarding the “Processes for Compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act for Management of Historic Properties by the National Forests of the Pacific Southwest Region.”

A pre-implementation meeting is required with Heritage Resource staff to ensure Standard Protections are carried out during project activities. If cultural resources are affected in an unanticipated manner, work would immediately cease in that area and the Forest shall notify and consult with Region 5, the SHPO, and the ACHP, and follow the procedures of the Discoveries and Inadvertent Effects stipulation (stipulation 7.10) in the Regional PA.

The locations of historic properties and resources will be identified to the project manager to either avoid or limit project activities to the following Standard Protection Measures:

- 5.2(c) Vegetation may be removed and fire lines or breaks may be constructed within sites using hand tools, so long as ground disturbance is minimized and features are avoided, as specified by the Heritage Program Manager (HPM);
- 5.2(h) Vegetation to be burned shall not be piled within the boundaries of historic properties unless the location (e.g., a previously disturbed area) has been specifically approved by the Forest's HPM;
- 5.2(i) Mechanically treated (crushed/cut) brush or downed woody material may be removed from historic properties by hand, through the use of off-site equipment, or by rubber-tired equipment approved by the HPM. Ground disturbance shall be minimized to the extent practicable during such removals; and
- 5.2(j) Woody material may be chipped within the boundaries of historic properties so long as the staging of chipping equipment on-site does not affect historic properties.

The protocol allows for deferred cultural resource surveys in areas of impenetrable brush, hindered access, or obscured visibility. There will be a few areas in this project that will require

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<sup>4</sup> A modified form of broadcast slash burning in which spots of greater accumulations of slash are ignited and the fire is confined to these spots.

surveys after treatments due to impenetrable brush. These surveys must be completed within one year of project implementation.

The area of potential effects as originally mapped for the Gaviota/Refugio Canyon treatment area has been surveyed. However, the proposal has since been changed to allow treatment area to follow an old fuel break over a ridge, to rejoin the road, instead of following the road. This change is in the eastern portion of the activity area. Because the fuel break activity will follow the ridgeline and maintain the old fuel break, post-implementation survey will be required.

In accord with this strategy, the Forest Service shall provide the funding and staff time necessary to perform all post-project activity identification, historic property treatment and protection, monitoring, effects assessment, and documentation recommended as a condition of project approval. All such work shall be completed within one year of final project activities. If the recommended work is not completed within this period of time, the Forest Service shall notify and consult with Region 5, the SHPO, and the ACHP on appropriate actions needed to complete the work within an agreed upon time period, or if failing to do so, shall comply with 36 CFR part 800.

### Terrestrial Biota

The south end of the Haney Tract West is very rocky and it would be nearly impossible to mechanically treat the section of this treatment area south of the road to Windermere Ranch. Manual weed treatments for cape ivy, purple veldt grass, and yellow starthistle are recommended to be incorporated into the proposed action.

Table 4 shows the results of surveys for botanical species, noxious weeds, and wildlife and provides design criteria to reduce the effects of the project on these resources.

**Table 4. Design criteria for biological resources of interest in the Santa Barbara Mountain Communities Defense Zone Project**

<b>Treatment Block</b>	<b>Botanical Resources/ Design Criteria</b>	<b>Noxious Weeds (A and B rated)/ Design Criteria</b>	<b>Wildlife/ Design Criteria</b>
Painted Cave	Sensitive plant species: Santa Barbara Honeysuckle and late flowering mariposa lily.	Red brome, tocalote, and Italian thistle with treatment area. Spanish broom and fountain grass on adjacent private land	California legless lizard habitat due to sandy soils.
Painted Cave	Try to avoid when flowering and fruiting, otherwise nearly impossible to avoid and species may benefit from disturbance.	Avoid Spanish broom and wash equipment prior to entering area.	
San Marcos Trout Club North		Cape ivy, English ivy, Italian thistle, red brome, black mustard, tocalote, periwinkle, and blue gum within the treatment area. Fennel, fountain grass, Spanish broom, onionweed, and castor bean on adjacent lands (private and NFS).	California legless lizard habitat due to sandy soils. No riparian areas within this treatment area. Adjacent potential spotted owl foraging habitat. No design criteria recommended

Project Description  
 Santa Barbara Mountain Communities Defense Zone Project

Treatment Block	Botanical Resources/ Design Criteria	Noxious Weeds (A and B rated)/ Design Criteria	Wildlife/ Design Criteria
San Marcos Trout Club North		Avoid staging in adjacent weed infestations, wash equipment prior to entering area, treat cape ivy and English ivy by hand pulling and try to avoid treatment when weeds are in seed. Remove blue gum as part of the fuels treatment.	
Haney Tract East	Sensitive plant species: Santa Barbara honeysuckle and Mesa horkelia.	Red brome, tocalote, black mustard, Italian thistle, purple veldt grass, and cape ivy.	California legless lizard habitat due to sandy soils. No riparian areas within this treatment area.
Haney Tract East	Try to avoid when flowering and fruiting, otherwise nearly impossible to avoid and species may benefit from disturbance. We may be able to avoid small population of mesa horkelia.	Manually treat veldt grass by mechanical treatment and hand tools, and avoid cape ivy.	
Haney Tract West	Sensitive plant species: Santa Barbara honeysuckle, mesa horkelia and late flowering mariposa lily.	Red brome, tocalote, black mustard, Italian thistle, Harding grass, and fennel along West Camino.	California legless lizard habitat due to sandy soils. No riparian areas within this treatment area. Adjacent potential spotted owl foraging habitat. No design criteria recommended
Haney Tract West	Try to avoid when flowering and fruiting, otherwise nearly impossible to avoid and species may benefit from disturbance. Sensitive plant populations are so spotty we may be able to flag and avoid.	Avoid fuels treatment when fennel is in seed.	
Rosario Park	Sensitive plant species: Mesa horkelia and late flowering mariposa lily. Both species could be easily avoided.	Red brome, Italian thistle, tocalote, black mustard, and Harding grass. Spanish broom, French broom, and English ivy periwinkle on adjacent lands.	California legless lizard habitat due to sandy soils. No riparian areas within this treatment area. Adjacent potential spotted owl foraging habitat. No design criteria recommended
Rosario Park		Avoid weeds on adjacent lands, wash equipment prior to entering area and try to avoid treatments when weeds are in seed.	

Treatment Block	Botanical Resources/ Design Criteria	Noxious Weeds (A and B rated)/ Design Criteria	Wildlife/ Design Criteria
Gaviota/ Refugio Canyon	Sensitive plant species: Refugio manzanita and late flowering mariposa lily. One ephemeral pond on ridge and one stock pond to west.	Yellow starthistle, tocalote, red brome, cheatgrass, Italian thistle, black mustard, pampas grass, Harding grass, and purple veldt grass. Adjacent lands: Onionweed, Peruvian pepper tree, and fountain grass.	California legless lizard habitat due to sandy soils. No riparian areas within this treatment area. Adjacent potential spotted owl foraging habitat. No design criteria recommended
Gaviota/ Refugio Canyon	Avoid ephemeral pool and stock pond.	Manually treat yellow starthistle, veldt grass, and Harding grass with mechanical treatments and hand tools prior to seed set and prior to fuels treatments or avoid treatments when weeds are in seed. Pampas grass removed but need to monitor. Avoid spreading weeds from Highway 101 and state park land onto NFS lands.	Avoid ephemeral pool and survey stock pond once it has water in it during the California red-legged frog breeding season. Also might check ephemeral pool again for vernal pool fairy shrimp.

### Avian Species

- During the initial entry into the unit, operations should occur outside the March 15 – July 31 breeding window for the migratory birds, unless otherwise determined by a qualified wildlife biologist. After the initial entry this restriction shall not apply.
- If the initial entry is to occur during the March 15 – July 31 period, a qualified wildlife biologist will conduct a biological risk assessment to determine the severity of impacts to migratory birds.
- To the extent practicable, the Forest Service shall also conduct point count surveys for migratory birds within the project area so that it can more effectively identify which species are located in that portion of the Forest. This may be accomplished through Forest Service employees or volunteers.
- Riparian buffers will be incorporated into the project design to avoid impacting many species that nest in riparian shrub vegetation within or adjacent to the project area.
  - ◆ Riparian buffers (100 to 300 feet) will be left along stream banks with riparian vegetation in areas of potential habitat for Threatened, Endangered, or Proposed species. The riparian buffer zones will be measured slope distance, along each side of indicated streams. There will be no riparian buffer zones along upper headwater and ephemeral channels without riparian vegetation (i.e., those covered with chaparral).
  - ◆ Many activity areas do not have streams. Most streams do not require buffers. The actual buffers would be designed depending on the condition of the site:
    - Painted Cave: No stream buffers required.
    - San Marcos Trout Club: No stream buffers required.
    - Haney Tract: No stream buffers required.

- Rosario Park: At least one stream crossing the activity area near one of the mesa horkelia patches.
- Gaviota/Refugio Canyon: 100-foot buffer around the two ponds and 100-foot buffer along two small streams crossing the activity area near the two ponds.

### Aquatic Species

Project design criteria have been developed for aquatic habitats within the site of proposed action. These features are designed to minimize project-generated sediment delivery to aquatic habitats downstream of the project area following the steps outlined below. They include:

- Pre-planned placement and configuration of dozer lines and fuel breaks. Ridgeline units are surrounded by substantial amounts of vegetated sideslopes. Fuel breaks that encompass aquatic resources have RCAs around streams.
- Limit activities within 100-300 feet of stream channels where there is the potential for TEPCS in the area.
- Spread the effects of treatment over several years. Only a portion of the total acreage proposed for treatment will occur in any one year. Project actions are expected to be treated in increments of a three to ten-year cycle and continue into the foreseeable future.
- Leave mechanically treated brush onsite to decompose where practicable, to retain soil and minimize erosion.
- Limit mechanical equipment to existing roads.
- Implement BMPs (Project Record, Fisheries BA, Appendix C) to minimize soil disturbance and protect water quality.

### Mitigation Measures to Minimize Risks of Weed Infestation

- Hand treat and remove existing infestations at the project site.
- Monitor the site for new infestations.
- Hand treat and remove any new infestations.

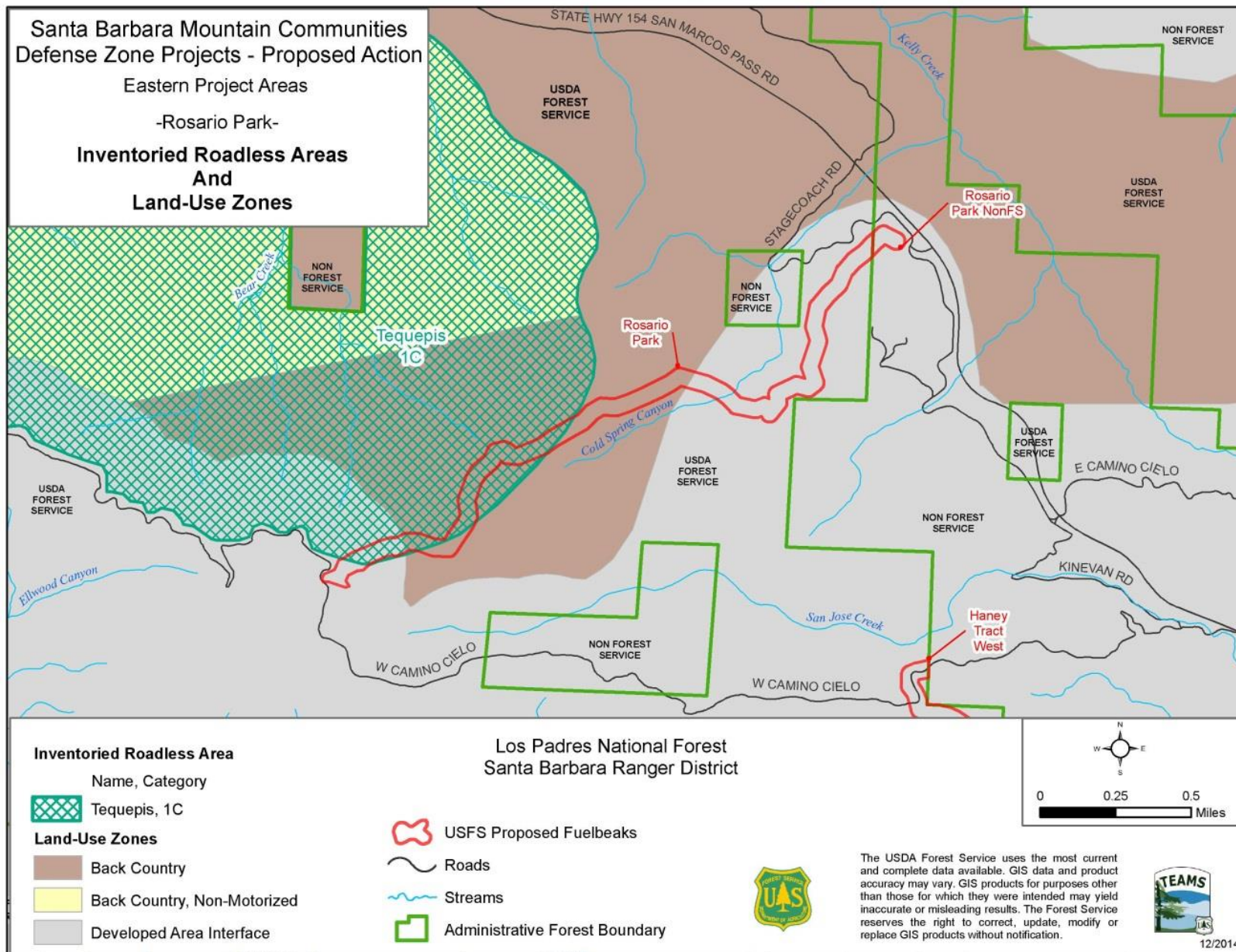
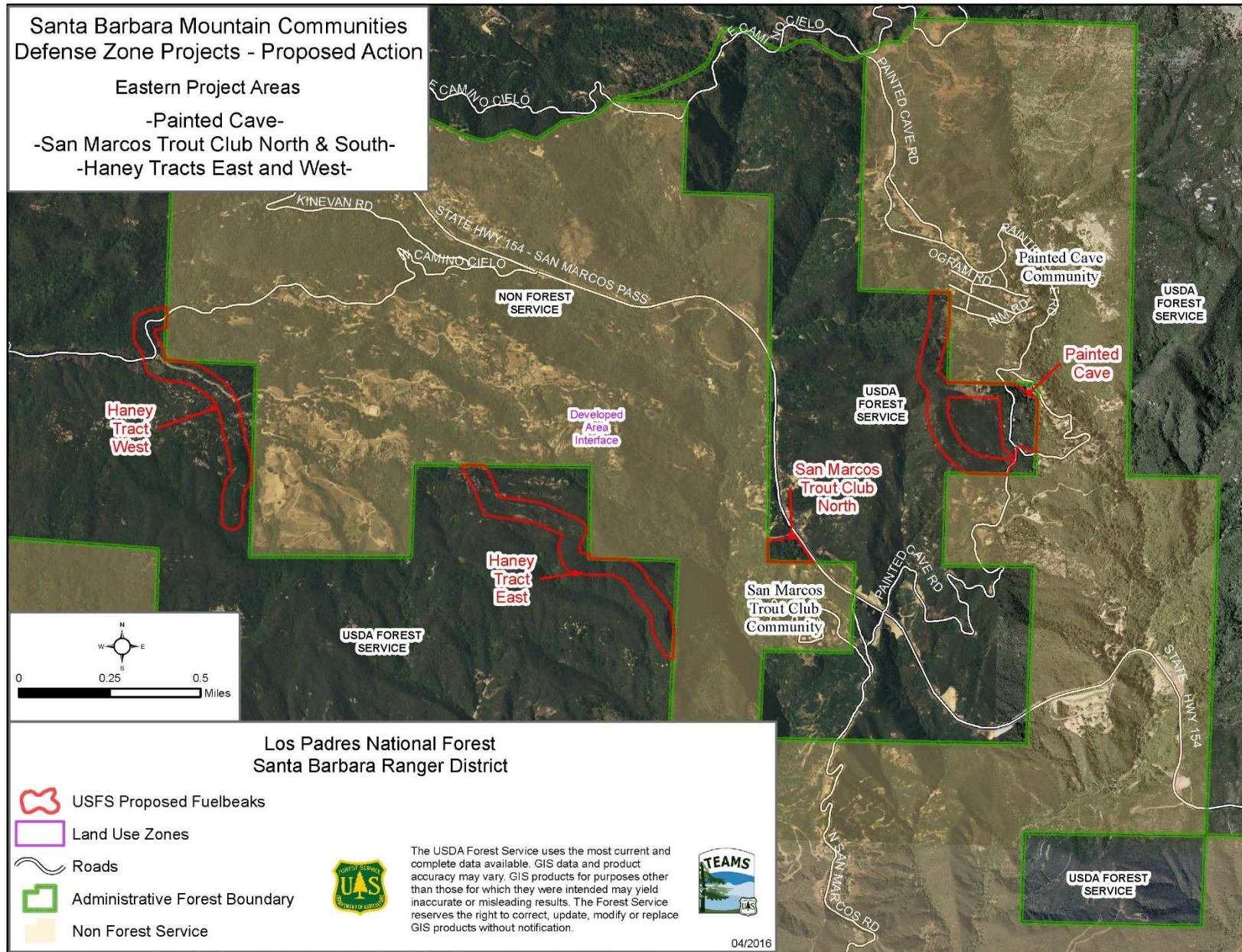


Figure 2. Rosario Park treatment area showing approximately 30 acres of proposed fuel break within the Tequepis IRA.



**Figure 3. Map of the eastern project areas in the Santa Barbara Mountain Communities Defense Zone Projects. The map shows the Painted Cave, San Marcos Trout Club, and Haney Tract treatment areas.**



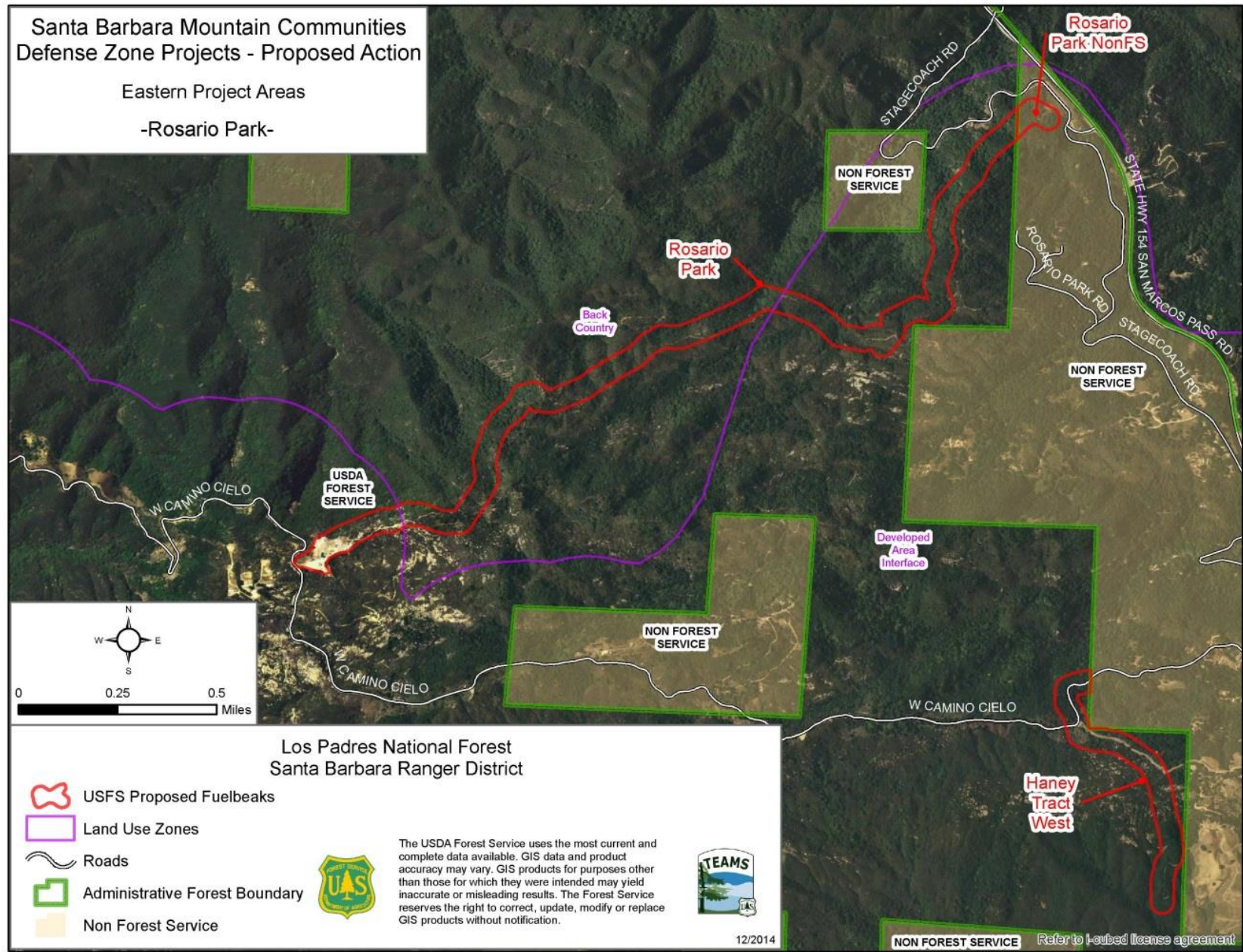


Figure 4. Map of the Rosario Park treatment area.

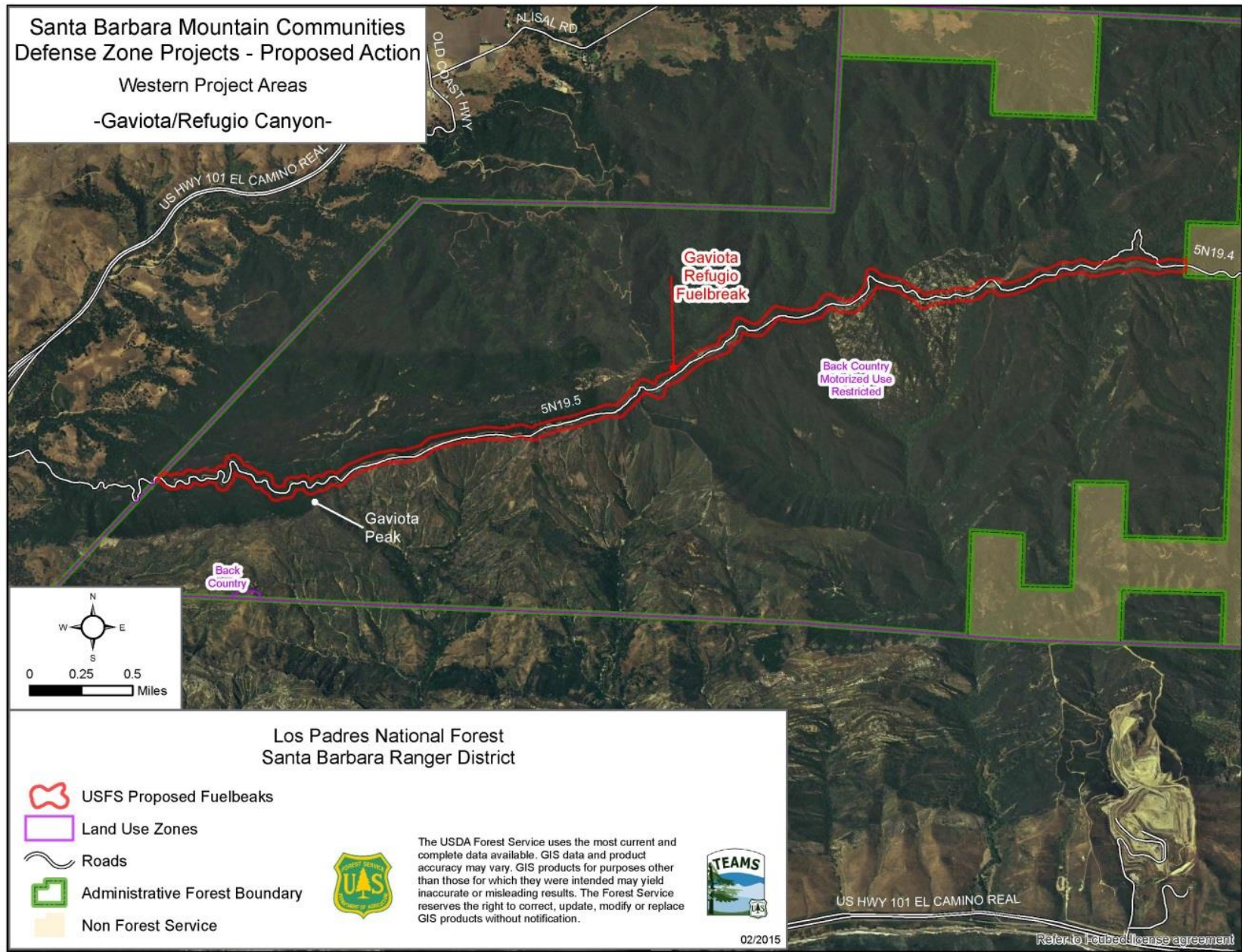


Figure 5. Map of the Gaviota/Refugio Canyon treatment area.

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