# New Mexico Forest Restoration Principles

## Preamble

These principles were collaboratively developed by a team of dedicated professionals representing industry, conservation organizations, land management agencies, and independent scientists. These principles for restoration should be used as guidelines for project development and they represent the "zone of agreement" where controversy, delays, appeals, and litigation are significantly reduced. They may be appropriate for application to specific restoration projects in New Mexico. These principles were developed for use in designing and implementing projects with a primary objective of ecological restoration while promoting economic and social benefits.

## Participants

The Nature Conservancy in New Mexico
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Bureau of Land Management
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U.S. Forest Service
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Center for Biological Diversity
Restoration Solutions
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## Principles

1. **Collaborate**. Landscape scale assessment, and project design, analysis, implementation and monitoring should be carried out collaboratively by actively engaging a balanced and diverse group of stakeholders.

2. **Reduce the threat of unnatural crown fire.** A key restoration priority must be moving stands toward a more natural restored condition and the reduction of the risk of unnatural crown fires both within stands and across landscapes. Specific restoration strategies should vary based upon forest vegetation type, fire regime, local conditions, and local management objectives. Forests and woodlands characterized by infrequent and mixed-severity fire should be managed toward a stand structure consistent with their historical ranges of variation—including, in some cases, high-density, continuous stands. Discontinuous stand structure may be appropriate to meet community protection objectives in areas such as the wildland urban interface for these forest and woodland types.

3. **Prioritize and strategically target treatment areas**. Key considerations for prioritizing restoration treatment areas are: degree of unnatural crown fire risk, proximity to human developments and important watersheds, protection of old-growth forests and habitats of federally threatened, endangered, or listed sensitive species, and strategic positioning to break up landscape-scale continuity of hazardous fuels. Treatments should be done at a landscape scale to decrease forest vulnerability to unnatural stand-replacing fire. This priority-setting should take place during fire management planning, land management planning, and community wildfire protection planning.

4. **Develop site-specific reference conditions.** Site-specific historical ecological data can provide information on the natural range of variability for key forest attributes, such as tree age structure and fire regimes that furnish local "reference conditions" for restoration design. A variety of constraints, however, prevent the development of historical information on every hectare of land needing restoration. General goals should be to restore ecological integrity and function.

5. **Use low-impact techniques.** Restoration treatments should strive to use the least disruptive techniques, and balance intensity and extensiveness of treatments. In many areas, conservative initial treatments would be the minimum necessary to adequately reduce the threat of unnatural crown fire. Wildland fire use or management ignited fires may be sufficient to reestablish natural conditions in many locations. In the extensive areas where fire alone cannot safely reduce tree densities and hazardous ladder fuels, mechanical thinning of trees may be needed before the introduction of prescribed fire. Patient, effective treatments will provide more options for the future than aggressive attempts to restore 120 years of change at once. In certain areas, however, such as some urban-wildland interfaces, trade-offs with imminent crown fire risks require considerations of rapid, heavy thinning of mostly small diameter trees.

6. **Utilize existing forest structure.** Restoration efforts should incorporate and build upon valuable existing forest structures, such as large trees, and groups of trees of any size with interlocking crowns excluding aspen. These features are important for some wildlife species, such as Abert's squirrels and goshawks, and should not be removed completely just to recreate specific historical tree locations. Since evidence of long-term stability of precise tree locations is lacking, especially for piñon and juniper, the selection of "leave" trees and tree clusters in restoration treatments can be based on the contemporary spatial distribution of trees, rather than pre-1900 tree positions. Maximizing use of existing forest structure can restore historical forest structure conditions more quickly. Leaving some relatively dense within-stand patches of trees need not compromise efforts to reduce landscape-scale crown fire risk.

   The underlying successional processes of natural tree regeneration and mortality should be incorporated into restoration design. Southwestern conifer regeneration occurs in episodic, often region-wide pulses, linked to wet-warm climate conditions and reduced fire occurrence. Periods with major regeneration pulses in the Southwest occurred in the 1910s–1920 and in 1978–1998. Some of this regeneration would have survived under natural conditions. Restoration efforts should retain a proportion of these cohorts.

7. **Restore ecosystem composition.** Missing or diminished compositional elements, such as herbaceous understories, or extirpated species also require restoration attention. The forest understory, including shrubs, grasses, forbs, snags, and down logs, is an important ecosystem

component that directly affects tree regeneration patterns, fire behavior, watershed functioning, wildlife habitat, and overall patterns of biodiversity. Similarly, soil organisms, such as mycorrhizal fungi, are vital elements that can influence community composition and dynamics. A robust understory provides a restraint on tree regeneration and is essential for carrying surface fires. The establishment and maintenance of more natural patterns of understory vegetation diversity and abundance are integral to ecological restoration.

Restoration planning should include the conservation of habitats for diminished or extirpated wildlife species. Comprehensive forest ecosystem restoration requires balancing fire risk reduction with retention of forest structures necessary for canopy dependent species.

Recovery plans and conservation plans for threatened, endangered, and sensitive species should be incorporated to the fullest extent possible in planning for comprehensive forest restoration.

8. **Protect and maintain watershed and soil integrity.** Low impact treatments will minimize sedimentation, disruption of surface runoff, and other detrimental ecosystem effects. Equipment and techniques should be managed according to soil and water conservation "best management practices" applicable to site-specific soil types, physiography and hydrological functions.

   Reconstruction, maintenance, or decommissioning of existing roads to correct for poor hydrologic alignment and drainage condition can greatly reduce soil loss and sedimentation rates. Projects should strive for no net increase in road density.

   Managing forest density and fuels to avoid uncharacteristically intense wildfire events will reduce the likelihood of catastrophic post-fire soil erosion and nutrient depletion from forested landscapes. Soil productivity should be protected and maintained by avoiding soil loss and compaction, and managing for on-site nutrient retention. Avoid repeated whole tree biomass removal from the forest to maximize nutrient retention. Whenever feasible, green foliage should be recycled by scattering on site; followed by prescribed burning to release stored nutrients.

9. **Preserve old or large trees while maintaining structural diversity and resilience.** Large and old trees, especially those established before ecosystem disruption by Euro-American settlement, are important forest components and critical to functionality of ecosystem processes. Their size and structural complexity provide critical wildlife habitat by broadly contributing crown cover, influencing understory vegetation patterns, and providing future snags. Ecological restoration should manage to ensure the continuing presence of large and old trees, both at the stand and landscape levels. This includes preserving the largest and oldest trees from cutting and crown fires, focusing treatments on excess numbers of small young trees.

   Develop "desired" forest condition objectives that favor the presence of both abundant large diameter trees and an appropriate distribution of age classes on the landscape, with a wide distribution of older trees. It is generally advisable to maintain ponderosa pines larger than 41 cm (16 inches) diameter at breast height (dbh) and other trees with old-growth morphology regardless of size (e.g. yellow-barked ponderosa pine or any species with large drooping limbs, twisted trunks or flattened tops).

   Treatments should also focus on achievement of spatial forest diversity by managing for variable densities. Overall, forest densities should be managed to maintain tree vigor and stand resiliency to natural disturbances. Disease conditions are managed to retain some presence of native forest pathogens on the landscape, but constrained so that forest sustainability is not jeopardized. Guidelines must provide opportunities to apply differing site-specific management strategies to work towards attainment of these goals, and recognize that achievement may sometimes require more than one entry.

Stand level even-aged management may be appropriate for some objectives, including disease management, post wildfire tree regeneration, accelerating development of old growth characteristics, or for, forest types for which even-aged stands are characteristic, such as spruce or aspen. Treatments should be identified through collaboration with key stakeholders.

Some ponderosa pine forests contain extremely old trees and dead wood remnants that may be small but are important because they contain unique and rare scientific information in their growth rings. Such trees have become increasingly rare in the late 20$^{th}$ century, and the initial reintroduction of fire often consumes these tree-ring resources. Restoration programs should preserve them where possible.

10. **Manage to restore historic tree species composition.** Forest density levels and the presence of fire in the ecosystem are key regulators of tree species composition. Where fire suppression has allowed fire-sensitive trees like junipers or shade-tolerant white fir or spruce to become abundant in historical ponderosa pine forests, treatments should restore dominance of more fire-resistant ponderosa pines. However, fire intolerant species sometimes make up the only remaining large tree component in a stand. Retention of these large trees is important to canopy dependent wildlife species. In mixed conifer forests, landscapes should be managed for composition and structure that approximates the natural range of variability.

11. **Integrate process and structure**. Ecological sustainability requires the restoration of process as well as structure. Natural disturbance processes, including fire, insect outbreaks, and droughts, are irreplaceable shapers of the forest. In particular, fire regimes and stand structures interact and must be restored in an integrated way; mechanical thinning alone will not reestablish necessary natural disturbance regimes. At the same time, fire alone may be too imprecise or unsafe in many settings, so a combination of treatments may often be the safest and most certain restoration approach.

    The single best indicator of whether a proposed approach should be considered as “ecological restoration” is to evaluate if the treatment would help successfully restore the fire regime that is natural for that forest type. Approaches that do not restore natural fire regimes will not achieve full ecological restoration.

12. **Control and avoid using exotic species.** Seeding of exotic grasses and forbs should be prohibited as ecologically incompatible with good restoration. Once established, exotic species can be extremely difficult or impossible to remove. Seeding should be conducted with certified or weed free seeds to reduce the risk of contamination by non-native species or varieties.

    In general, it is ecologically desirable to allow native herbaceous vegetation to recover incrementally unless there is potential for serious soil erosion or the potential for establishment of non-native invasive plants. If enhancement of herbaceous vegetation is needed, especially for road closures and recovery, using locally sourced native seeds or transplanting individuals from nearby areas into treatments is ecologically desirable.

Restoration treatments should also routinely incorporate early actions to control the establishment and spread of aggressive exotics that can be expected from restoration-related site disturbance.

13. **Foster regional heterogeneity**. Biological communities vary at local, landscape, and regional scales, and so should restoration efforts. Ecological restoration should also incorporate the natural variability of disturbance regimes across heterogeneous landscapes. Heterogeneity should be fostered in planning and implementing ecological restoration and all spatial scales, including within and between stands, and across landscape and regional scales.

14. **Protect sensitive communities**. Certain ecological communities embedded within ponderosa pine or other types of forests and some riparian areas, could be adversely affected by on-site prescribed burning or mechanical thinning. Restoration efforts should protect these and other rare or sensitive habitats, which are often hotspots of biological diversity, particularly those that are declining in abundance and quality in the region.

15. **Plan for restoration using a landscape perspective that recognizes cumulative effects**. Forest restoration projects should be linked to landscape assessments that identify historical range of variation (reference condition), current condition, restoration targets, and cumulative effects of management. Ecosystems are hierarchical; changing conditions at one level arise from processes occurring at lower levels, and are constrained, in turn, by higher levels. The landscape perspective captures these complex relationships by linking resources and processes to the larger forest ecosystem. Forest restoration projects should incorporate plans for long-term maintenance of ecological processes.

16. **Manage grazing**. Grass, forbs, and shrub understories are essential to plant and animal diversity and soil stability. Robust understories are also necessary to restore natural fire regimes and to limit excessive tree seedling establishment. Where possible, defer livestock grazing after treatment until the herbaceous layer has established its current potential structure, composition, and function.

17. **Establish monitoring and research programs and implement adaptive management**. Well-designed monitoring, research, and documentation are essential to evaluate and adapt ongoing restoration efforts. Monitoring programs must be in place prior to treatment, and must evaluate responses of key ecosystem components and processes at multiple scales. Use research and monitoring results from a variety of sources to adjust and develop future restoration treatments.

    When possible, restoration projects should be set up as experiments with replicates and controls to test alternative hypotheses. The locations and prescriptions for all restoration treatments should be archived in a geographic information system, so that land managers and researchers have access to site-specific records of restoration treatments.

18. **Exercise caution and use site-specific knowledge in restoring or managing piñon-juniper ecosystems and other woodlands and savannas**. These systems are diverse and complex. Knowledge of local reference structure, composition, processes and disturbance regimes is lacking or uncertain for many piñon–juniper ecosystem types. Given the diversity, variability, and complexity of piñon–juniper systems, identification of local reference conditions is critical to the development of restoration objectives. Exercise caution and use best available science and site-specific knowledge in planning and implementing ecological restoration projects. Use the Grassland and Woodland Restoration and Management

Framework for development and implementation of specific projects (The Framework is currently under development).

Active management may be appropriate to mitigate soil erosion, community wildland fire hazard, or degraded hydrologic function in cases where historical ecological dynamics are insufficiently understood to justify ecological restoration. Piñon–juniper sites may be particularly susceptible to ecological damage from treatments, for example, soil erosion and invasion by non-native plants.