United States Department of Agriculture | **Forest Service** | **Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests Armuchee/Cohutta Ranger District** | **3941 Highway 76 Chatsworth, GA 30705 (706) 695-6737**

File Code: 2600
Date: July 29, 2004

Dear Forest User:

Populations of most bird species associated with early successional stage habitats (ESH) such as grassland, shrub-scrub, and seedling/sapling have declined sharply in recent years. A significant number of this group has been identified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as federally listed as endangered, threatened, or of conservation concern (Hunter et al 2001). Most of these birds are migratory and use these habitats for breeding and nesting.

The Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest (CONF) is charged with providing habitat for the full range of native wildlife species, including those associated with ESH. This habitat type is to be well distributed in all forest types and elevations. A specific goal of the newly revised Land and Resource Management Plan is the provision of breeding, wintering, and migration stopover habitat for migratory songbirds (goal 13, pg. 2-8). One such songbird is the golden-winged warbler, which is imperiled in the Southern Appalachians and utilizes ESH, primarily above 3000' in elevation.

The CONF accounts for 96.9% of all land above 3000' in Georgia. Approximately 72% of this is unavailable for sustained habitat management because it has previously been designated as wilderness, the Appalachian Trail Corridor, or has such steep slopes as to be inaccessible. Thus conservation concerns for the golden-winged warbler and other wildlife associates utilizing this rare habitat type must be met on the remaining acres.

The Armuchee-Cohutta Ranger District is proposing habitat improvement of high elevation ESH in three areas:

1) The Songbird Management Area on Grassy Mountain, where seven stands of timber were harvested in the late 1970's to create a diverse mosaic of ESH and mature forest to attract songbirds for viewing along a trail (elevation 3200-3400'). Maintenance of the area (keeping the harvested areas in an early successional stage) was accomplished by prescribed burning and a mechanical slashdown, but late winter burns in this area in recent years have been relatively unsuccessful because of late snows and wet conditions. Currently these stands are comprised of tall, dense saplings and poletimber and no longer provide ESH. This area is proposed for prescribed burning in early fall 2004 or 2005 in order to restore ESH condition to the old harvest areas. No fireline construction will be necessary. If early fall burning does not significantly reduce stem density and stimulate herbaceous vegetation, the woody stems will be chainsawn down and left on site. In addition, small pockets of ground disturbance will be created with a bulldozer in an attempt to stimulate herbaceous vegetation (this vegetation response has been noted elsewhere). No new roads will be necessary for this project.

2) East of the Songbird Management Area, along Forest Roads 68 and 64, six existing high elevation wildlife openings will be enlarged to create additional ESH above 3000'. Timber adjacent to the grassy openings will be harvested in order to make larger patches of suitable habitat for wildlife that utilize this specific type (a combination of grassy/brushy/dense saplings). These openings will range from seven to 33 acres, depending on the accessibility. Twenty to 30 trees per acre will be retained in each opening, and the edges of each opening will be "feathered" into the adjacent stands. If the timber is determined to be commercial grade, then the trees will be removed by timber sale. Otherwise, the trees would be sawn down and left on site or made available to the public for firewood. No roads will be constructed for this project.

3) Five stands of timber harvested in the 1970-1980's in the Crenshaw Gap and Rich Knob area, off Forest Road 64, are proposed for prescribed burning in early fall 2005 in order to restore ESH condition to the units. All are above 3000' in elevation and range in size from 25 to 40 acres. The units are currently comprised of dense saplings and poletimber, similar to the Songbird Management Area's units. The treatment of these stands will be similar to the Songbird Area as well, including the chainsawing of residual stems, if necessary. No new roads will be constructed for this project.

These projects implement the revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the CONF by enhancing, restoring, managing, and creating habitats as required for wildlife (pg. 2-6), specifically by creating and maintaining a portion of the annual forestwide average of 300 acres above 3000' in ESH (objective 3.8, pg. 2-6).

We are interested in your comments about this proposal and invite you to send site-specific written comments to us by August 26, 2004 at the Armuchee-Cohutta Ranger District Office, or by email to rbstokes@fs.fed.us. Thank you in your interest in your National Forest.

Sincerely,

/s/ Debra L. Whitman
DEBRA L. WHITMAN
District Ranger