

# **DECISION MEMO**

## **BROOK TROUT STREAM IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS**

USDA Forest Service Southern Region  
Chattahoochee National Forest  
Blue Ridge Ranger District  
Fannin and Towns Counties, Georgia

### **DECISION and PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE ACTION**

I have decided to carry out stream habitat enhancement activities on the Blue Ridge Ranger District in three streams in the Hiawassee River watershed which contain southern strain brook trout: Gurley Creek, Big Net Branch and High Shoals. Habitat structures are also to be constructed for Stover Creek in the Noontootla Watershed. Habitat improvements will be with the installation and maintenance of habitat structures. The proposed work will occur within an approximately one mile stretch of each stream.

Stream habitat enhancement will involve the maintenance of existing stream structures and the construction of new stream habitat improvement structures. The structures will be installed with hand labor. The logs used to construct the structures will be obtained from nearby trees. In many cases, recently blown over trees are available near these streams and will be utilized. This work will occur in 2008-2010.

Additional work involves the installation of a barrier to prevent the encroachment of non-native trout (rainbow and brown trout) on Stover Creek. This barrier would be installed with hand labor. Brook trout are not capable of out-competing the non-native trout, resulting in a decline in their numbers or in their extirpation from that particular stretch of stream. Non-native rainbow and brown trout would be removed from above the barrier through electro-fishing. This removal would eliminate the competition with the native brook trout. As needed, brook trout would be collected for stocking from streams where brook trout numbers are high. These fish would be transported to Stover Creek and released. These fish would be of the southern strain of brook trout, the ones that are native to this region.

All Best Management Practices (BMP's) and Forest Plan Standards will be followed. Any stream bank disturbance would be mitigated by seeding with native plants or non-persistent non-native species, and mulching any exposed soils that result from the proposed activities.

These projects are designed to enhance habitat for the brook trout, which is Georgia's only native trout species. The present range of brook trout in Georgia has been significantly reduced from historical levels due to a variety of factors, including historic land use practices and the introduction of nonnative rainbow and brown trout. This is part of an ongoing cooperative effort between the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Trout Unlimited, US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Chattahoochee National Forest, as well as other partners to protect and enhance Georgia's brook trout populations.

The streams are located in Riparian Corridors Management Prescription (MRx 11) which is embedded in the following Management Prescriptions: 3.C (Ed Jenkins National Recreation Area), 4.F.1 (Scenic and Wildlife Management Area), 4.F.2. (Regional Forester Scenic Area), 4.H. (Outstandingly Remarkable Stream), and 7.A. (Scenic Byway Corridor). These proposed projects will move streams toward the desired conditions in the Forest Plan. The projects also will address several Forest Plan goals and objectives including the restoration and maintenance of aquatic ecosystems for all native and desired nonnative species of aquatic flora and fauna (Goal 26). All of the stream segments proposed for work are in low gradient sections, with limited cover and pool habitat. The proposed stream habitat improvement work is designed to improve habitat conditions by deepening pools, constricting the channel to flush sediments, providing cover, and stabilizing stream banks to prevent further erosion.

## **REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE DECISION**

This action does not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment, and therefore, are categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environmental assessment (EA). The specific category, identified in Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 “Environmental Policy and Procedures” is Section 31.2 Category 7: Modification or maintenance of stream or lake aquatic habitat improvement structures using native materials or normal practices.

## **FINDING OF NO EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES**

The District interdisciplinary team screened these actions for the presence of any one of the extraordinary circumstances identified in Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, Section 30.3 paragraph 2. The team determined that there are no extraordinary circumstances existing that may cause the projects to have significant effects. Therefore, neither an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) nor an Environmental Assessment (EA) will be required. Specifically:

- There are no known Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, or species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat present within or along the sections of stream where the project is planned. The project will not adversely impact any Forest Service Sensitive species. (see Biological Evaluation in the project file).
- No flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds will be affected by these projects.
- Stover Creek is located within the congressionally designated Ed Jenkins National Recreation Area (NRA). The stream habitat improvement and brook trout restoration in Stover Creek will enhance recreational opportunities and is consistent with the emphasis and desired conditions of the NRA. None of the other streams are within any congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas.
- The projects are not within any inventoried roadless areas.

- The projects are not within any Research Natural Areas.
- There are no known American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites within the project areas (see Cultural Resource Report in project folder).
- There are no known Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas within the project areas (see Cultural Resource Report in project folder).

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

Public scoping began March 31, 2008. The purpose of scoping was to determine the issues and concerns related to the proposal. Five scoping responses were received on these projects. The comments received were used to refine the projects and analysis. They were also used to explore the possibility of extraordinary circumstances and potential effects to those resources. Scoping, both internally and externally raised no concerns that were determined to be extraordinary circumstances. (See project folder).

## **FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS**

Forest Plan Consistency – The actions in this decision are consistent with the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests (Forest Plan).

Endangered Species – Implementing the actions in this decision will not adversely affect threatened or endangered species, or result in loss of any other species' viability, or create significant trends towards Federal listing of the species under the Endangered Species Act.

Cultural Resources – The actions in this decision will not adversely affect any sites listed, or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places, nor will they cause the loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historic resources.

State approved Best Management Practices (BMP's) will be met and this project will comply with the Clean Water Act.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

This decision will be implemented beginning in summer 2008.

## **APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES**

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12 (f).

**CONTACT PERSON**

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**RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL**

**/s/ Alan Polk**

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**May 20, 2008**

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ALAN POLK  
District Ranger  
Blue Ridge Ranger District

DATE: