



File Code: 1950

Date: April 2, 2007

Dear Forest User:

The Blue Ridge Ranger District of the Chattahoochee National Forest is seeking public comments on a proposed vegetation management project located within the Etowah River watershed. This proposal addresses (1) ecosystem restoration, (2) forest health, (3) early successional forest habitat creation, (4) access/road management, (5) soil and water improvement and, (6) stream habitat enhancement. The majority of the project area is located within the Forest Plan prescriptions 9.H, Management, Maintenance, and Restoration of Plant Associations, 9.F, Rare Communities, and a small portion located within 9.A.1, Source Water Protection Watersheds. A description of proposed projects is listed below and followed by a summary table of all stands, acres, forest types and treatments.

An overview of the proposed projects and the corresponding Forest Plan goals, objectives and acreages are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Proposed Actions and Associated Plan Objectives.

Summary Table Of Proposed Action and Associated Land Management Plan Objective			
Project	Goal/ Objective	Paraphrased Language	Acres
Restore Table Mtn Pine Communities	OBJ-9.F-03	Restore table mountain forests on the Chattahoochee, reestablish these forest types on sites where they once likely occurred...(LMP 3-164).	107
Restore Oak - Oak Pine Communities	OBJ 3.6	Restore oak or oak-pine forests...on appropriate sites currently occupied by pine plantation of other hardwood species such as gum and maple (LMP 2-6).	119
Restore Canebrakes	OBJ-9.F-05	Restore 200 acres of canebrake communities over the first ten years of plan implementation (LMP 3-165).	2
Southern Pine Beetle Prevention	OBJ 40.1	Maintain forest-stocking levels at no more than 'fully stocked' for the species, age and site quality with priority for treatment given to those vegetation communities at highest risk of insect or disease attack.	433
Early Successional Forest Habitat	GOAL 2	Early successional habitat will be well distributed in all forest types, elevations, aspects, and slopes including riparian corridors (LMP 2-4).	84
Access/Road Maintenance	GOAL 48	Roads do not adversely affect soil and water resources (LMP 2-44).	8 mi.
Soil and Water Improvement	GOAL 24	Maintain or restore soil productivity and quality (LMP 2-20).	1 mi.
Stream Habitat Improvement	GOAL 26	Restore and/or maintain aquatic ecosystems...capable of supporting viable populations of all native and desired nonnative species of aquatic flora and fauna within the planning area (LMP 2-21).	0.5 mi.



1. Ecosystem Restoration

A) Rare Forest Communities: Table Mountain Pine Forest Restoration

Table mountain pine (*Pinus pungens* Lamb.) is an endemic species to the Appalachian chain, occupying xeric or dry sites and is often associated with pitch pine (*P. rigida* Mill.). In order to promote restoration of this locally unique species, the treated stands would be allowed to become self sustaining through seedbed preparation and removal of dense mid and understory, including mountain laurel. The proposed actions include commercially thinning 108 acres in compartment 571, stands 27, 29, and 31 from a current basal area of 130 square feet per acre down to an average of 40 square feet per acre, leaving about 30 trees per acre. Along with table mountain pine, species that shall be left include pitch pine, shortleaf pine and mast producing members of the oak group. Following the commercial thinning, the area may be prescribed burned. The burning block would be approximately 240 acres, refer to map for location. Stand information and proposed treatments are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Table of stand information for those stands to be included in the restoration of table mountain pine community.

Ecosystem Restoration - Table Mountain Pine Community					
Comp/Stand	ACRES	Stand Condition	Forest Type	Treatment	Age Year
571027	43	Sparse Sawtimber	Shortleaf Pine/Oak	Thin & Burn	1966
571029	16	Sparse Sawtimber	Shortleaf Pine/Oak	Thin & Burn	1966
571031	49	Sparse Sawtimber	Mixed Oak/ Yellow Pine	Thin & Burn	1966
571025	42	Immature Sawtimber	Bottomland Hwds/ Yellow Pine	Burn	1966
571028	27	Immature Poletimber	White, Red Oak/ Hickory	Burn	1974
571032	19	Immature Sawtimber	Upland Hwds/ White Pine	Burn	1966
571034	12	Immature Poletimber	White Pine	Burn	1983
571036	85	Immature Poletimber	White, Red Oak/ Hickory	Burn	1966

B) Restore Oak Oak-Pine Communities

The proposed action includes commercially thinning compartment 566, stand 19, dominated by Virginia Pine, and neighboring stand 21, a shortleaf pine-oak stand (119 acres total). Both stands have several Southern Pine Beetle killed spots. These openings have allowed for the potential release of advanced oak and shortleaf pine regeneration. The proposed activities include removing merchantable, mature planted Virginia pine and younger naturally seeded Virginia and white pine in the two stands, further releasing the oak and shortleaf regeneration. Both stands currently have a basal area ranging from 120 square feet per acre to 170 square feet per acre and would be thinned to an average of 65 square feet of residual basal area. Healthy mast producing red and white oak species along with Shortleaf pine shall remain. These stand information and treatments are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Table of stand information for those stands to be included in the restoration of oak / oak-pine community.

Ecosystem Restoration Projects - Restoration Oak-Oak Pine					
Comp/Stand	ACRES	Stand Condition	Forest Type	Treatment	Age Year
566019	91	Mature Sawtimber	Virginia pine	Restore O-OP	1938
566021	28	Low Quality Sawtimber	Shortleaf pine/oak	Restore O-OP	1909

C) Restore Rare Communities: Canebrakes

The proposed action includes restoring a corridor of canebrake along the Etowah River near the Hightower bridge. This restoration area is contained within compartment 586, stand 1, where there is an existing patch of rivercane. Expansion of the current patch has been stifled by white pines that were planted along the river bank in approximately 1982. The restoration activities would include either girdling existing white pines or cutting them in place to allow the existing cane to continue encroachment into the area occupied by white pines. The white pines currently have a basal area around 120 square feet per acre. In order to temper any major shifts in shade regime along the river bank, approximately 50 square feet of residual basal area would remain. The restored area will be approximately two acres of canebrake.

2. Forest Health

A) Southern Pine Beetle Prevention

The southern pine beetle poses a persistent threat to all of the southern pine species. Maintaining a healthy and growing stand is the best way to prevent attacks. We are proposing to first-time commercially thin 405 acres in nine different stands that contain a heavy pine component or are overstocked pine plantations in order to maintain stand vigor. The stand ages for all nine stands range from 19-33 years. These stands currently have basal areas ranging from 110 to 150 square feet per acre. The stands would be thinned to 60 square feet of residual basal area per acre, leaving about 70 trees per acre. In cases where hardwoods are present, they would not be cut. Stand types and other information can be found in Table 3.

Table 3. Table of stand information for those stands to be included in the Southern Pine Beetle prevention project.

Forest Health Projects - Southern Pine Beetle Prevention					
Comp/Stand	ACRES	Stand Cond	Forest Type	Treatment	Age Year
567001	38	Immature Poletimber	Shortleaf Pine	SPB thin	1988
567005	13	Immature Sawtimber	Shortleaf Pine	SPB thin	1988
567012	14	Immature Poletimber	Loblolly Pine	SPB thin	1988
571010	161	Immature Sawtimber	White Pine – Upland Hwd	SPB thin	1974
586004	50	Immature Sawtimber	Loblolly Pine	SPB thin	1980
586013	37	Immature Sawtimber	Loblolly Pine	SPB thin	1979
586017	34	Immature Sawtimber	Loblolly Pine	SPB thin	1978
586040	6	Immature Sawtimber	Loblolly Pine	SPB thin	1980
586042	52	Immature Sawtimber	Loblolly Pine	SPB thin	1980

3. Early Successional Forest Habitat Enhancement

A) Creation of Early Successional Forest Habitat – Wildlife Openings

We are proposing the creation of 34 acres of early successional forest habitat around fourteen existing wildlife openings. Existing openings vary in size from one-quarter acre to approximately three acres. Approximately half of the proposed wildlife opening activities would occur within the Blue Ridge Wildlife Management Area. Enhancement activities around the wildlife openings include thinning forest habitat that surrounds the existing openings for a distance of 100 feet, to an average of 30 square feet of basal area. Trees that remain would be mast producing hardwoods like oak species, hickories and black gum or yellow pine. Table 4 contains the numbers of openings to be treated and associated road.

Table 4. Table of information for those wildlife openings to be enhanced with early successional forest habitat.

Early Successional Forest Habitat Enhancement – Wildlife Openings		
Location	# of Openings	Estimated Acres of Created Habitat
FS142	4	7
FS141	6	16
FS 28-1	2	4
FS 28B	2	7

B) Creation of Early Successional Forest Habitat – Road Daylighting

The daylighting project would occur on 1.6 miles of FS141, the Montgomery Creek Road, 1.4 miles of FS142, the Hightower Creek Road and 1.1 miles of FS28F, the Upper Nimblewill Road. Approximately 49 acres of early successional forest habitat would be created by thinning mid and overstory vegetation to an average of 30 square feet of basal area for a distance of 50 from each side of the road bank. Trees that remain would be mast producing hardwoods like oak species, hickories, black gum or yellow pine. Refer to Table 5 for acreages of habitat that would be created for each section of road. Refer to map for on the ground locations.

Table 5. Table of information for those sections of road that will be enhanced with early successional forest habitat.

Early Successional Forest Habitat Enhancement – Road Daylighting		
Location	Length in Miles	Estimated Acres of Created Habitat
FS141	1.6	19
FS142	1.4	17
FS28F	1.1	13

4. Access/Road Management

Reducing sediment from forest roads is very important in every watershed. The proposed activities within this project would require maintenance on 8 miles over several forest roads that currently pose a threat to water quality. The roads would have culverts replaced and other drainage structures such as broad based dips and wing ditches reshaped. Forest Service roads that would receive water drainage improvement include FS880 (Two Run Branch), FS141 (Montgomery Creek) and FS98 (Dunn Branch).

5. Soil and Water Improvement

The water quality improvement area would be on approximately 500 feet of an unnamed eroding road. This road will be blocked from vehicle passage with either natural barriers or a gate, revegetated and have suitable water diversion structures like water bars, check dams or broad-based dips installed. The road is located on the Hightower Church Road, just to the west of Pierce Cemetery, refer to map.

6. Stream Habitat Enhancement

The proposed action includes the enhancement of stream habitat conditions for trout and other aquatic species in headwaters of Montgomery Creek and the Etowah River. The work would involve the maintenance of existing improvement structures in Montgomery Creek as well as the construction of new stream improvement structures in both Montgomery Creek and the Etowah River. The stream segments proposed for work are low gradient, 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. These structures would be installed with hand labor. The logs used to construct the structures would be obtained from nearby trees.

This letter and the accompanying map can be found online at:
<http://www.fs.fed.us/conf/sopa/forest-health-nepa.htm>

We are currently in the process of determining the significant environmental issues and public concerns. You can help us in completing our analysis by providing comments on this proposal as we have described it. Your comments should be as specific as possible and contain the following information: your name and address, the project name (Etowah River Watershed Project), and specific facts or comments along with the supporting reasons you believe your comments should be considered by the Deciding Official in reaching a decision. You may respond to the Blue Ridge Ranger District office at the address below:

U.S. Forest Service
Blue Ridge Ranger District
Re: Etowah River Watershed Project
1881 Hwy 515 S.
Blairsville, GA 30514

You may also provide your comments by fax at (706) 745-7494 (Blue Ridge R.D.), or e-mail your comments to chatt_comments@fs.fed.us, with the subject Etowah River Watershed Project.

If you have any questions about this project please direct them to Alan Polk, District Ranger on the Blue Ridge District (706)745-6928. To have your comments considered in our planning process we need to receive your reply by May 11, 2007.

If you wish to have a hard copy map mailed to you, please call the Blue Ridge Ranger District at (706)745-6928.

Thank you for your time and interest in the management activities on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest.

Sincerely,

/s/ Alan Polk

ALAN POLK
DISTRICT RANGER