



File Code: 1950

Date: February 28, 2005

Dear Forest Stakeholder,

Homes and communities that are surrounded by forested lands, referred to as Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) areas, can be at risk to devastating losses from wildfires; especially when surrounded by dense trees, brush, or heavy amounts of dead vegetation.

In our continued efforts to protect neighboring communities and natural resources, Forest Service personnel are proposing eight mechanical fuels treatment projects that would total 299 acres. The proposed mechanical fuels treatment units are located in Habersham and Stephens counties, Georgia and are located on the attached map. Refer to Table 1 for unit descriptions.

Project Description:

The WUI Commercial Thinnings are adjacent to privately owned property on at least one side of each stand. Numerous privately owned homes and outbuildings are adjacent to the private property boundaries. The surrounding communities contain a larger number of residences (refer to the attached maps). Vegetation in the units consist of loblolly and shortleaf pine plantations, with the exception of Compartment 242, Stand 25 which consists of a shortleaf/oak pine type. Under story vegetation in the units consists of hardwood seedlings and saplings and various shrub species.

I am proposing to commercially thin trees in each stand to create an average spacing of 15 feet between the tree crowns and/or reduce stand density to a 70 basal area¹. Either method would be used to insure proper spacing between the trees. Extreme fire behavior in these stands could be greatly reduced by removing selected trees by mechanical means, thus removing large amounts of flammable vegetation, thereby making a wildland fire much easier to control. Hardwoods and snags in the areas would be left standing to meet the requirements of various wildlife species. In addition to the thinning project, a prescribed burn would be needed, on each unit, to eliminate the slash left over from the thinning project. A dozer blade line (fuel break), constructed to mineral soil, would need to be installed along or adjacent to each unit boundary to control the proposed prescribe burn. Natural and human-made barriers would be used in place of bladed dozer lines where available. Bladed dozer lines would be re-vegetated in the spring using a non-invasive grass mixture best suited to the area and beneficial to wildlife.

The proposed projects are consistent with the Goals and Objectives found in the Chattahoochee-Oconee Land and Resource Management Plan, January 2004. Specifically: Goal 58 *“Reduce the risks and consequences of wildfire through fuel treatments that restore and maintain conditions of fire regime Condition Class 1 to the extent possible”* and Objective 58.1 *“Reduce extreme fire behavior characteristics and spotting distances by treating fuels to create a defensible space within designated wild land urban interface (WUI) zones”*.



We are beginning our planning process as required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and your participation is important. It is very helpful to receive your comments, concerns, and ideas early in our planning process to help identify all of the important concerns and conduct an analysis of these proposed projects that meets the intent of NEPA. These projects appear to fall into a category of actions that may be excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment. I would expect to use Category #10 (Hazardous fuels reduction activities using prescribed fire not to exceed 4,500 acres, and mechanical methods for crushing, piling, thinning, pruning, cutting, chipping, mulching, and mowing, not to exceed 1,000 acres), Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15, Section 31.2. However, this determination would not be finalized until after consideration of your comments and concerns. My staff may also use your comments to modify the specific methods described in the proposals. Planning and analysis within the project areas is expected to be completed by late summer 2005. Mechanical fuel removal and fuel break implementation would begin sometime in late 2005, in 2006 or 2007. The proposed prescribed burns would take place in the dormant season over the next 2 to 3 years. Concerns may arise during the planning process that could further lengthen the estimated timeframes.

Please make your responses as specific as possible so that we can be sure they are adequately addressed. Comments received, including names, become part of the project record and available for public review. You may also comment in writing by e-mail (lwofford@fs.fed.us), or in person (200 Highway 197 North). Please note that you will be sent further correspondence on a project *only* if you comment on that specific project or if you request a copy of a specific project(s).

I would appreciate receiving your comments by March 21, 2005, as they will help ensure a thorough and complete analysis of the proposed projects. For additional information about this proposed action, please contact Lea Wofford at (706) 782-3320 or Wayne Herron at (706) 754-6221, or at the address listed in our letterhead.

This letter is being sent to organizations and individuals who have previously participated or been interested in our project proposals and adjacent landowners. This letter assumes some familiarity with the planning process as conducted by the Forest Service in accordance with NEPA. If you are receiving this letter and are unsure of the context or how to participate, please contact us. Management of the National Forest is a public trust and is best conducted with broad participation.

Thank you for your interest and involvement.

Sincerely,

David W. Jensen
DAVID W. JENSEN
District Ranger

Attachments: Project Area Maps

TABLE 1:

<i>Compartment</i>	<i>Stand</i>	<i>Acres</i>	<i>County</i>	<i>Pine Type</i>	<i>Mgmt. RX</i>
201	12	14	Stephens	Loblolly	9.H
203	18	10	Stephens	Loblolly	9.H
217	5	48	Habersham	Loblolly	9.H
219	24	4	Stephens	Shortleaf	4.F
	25	51		Loblolly	
230	4	19	Habersham	Loblolly	9.A.1
	5	25		Shortleaf	
238	24	52	Habersham	Loblolly	9.H
240	9	17	Habersham	Loblolly	9.H
242	24	24	Habersham	Loblolly	7.E.1
	27	35		Shortleaf/Oak	

4.F = Scenic Areas

7.E.1 = Dispersed Recreation Areas

9.A.1 = Source Water Protection Watersheds

9.H = Management, Maintenance, and Restoration of Pland Associations to Their Ecological Potential.

¹ Basal Area – a unit of measure for standing timber to indicate the degree of stocking. It is a cross-sectional area of trees at 4 ½ feet above the average ground line. Basal area is expressed in square feet and may apply to individual trees or all trees on an acre basis.



