



**File Code:** 1950  
**Date:** June 27, 2006

Dear Forest User:

I am requesting comments for the **Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Habitat Improvement and Canebrake Restoration Project** on the Oconee Ranger District of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests. Your specific comments to the proposed actions will help identify key issues and possible alternative ways of meeting the project's purpose and need. The key issues and alternatives will help focus the environmental analysis (effects) of the proposed actions. We would like to invite you to visit us at an open house at the Oconee Ranger Station at 10 a.m. on Thursday, July 13, 2006 to learn more about the project and to discuss any concerns you might have about the project.

**Proposed Action(s)**

This proposal is very similar to the two Red-Cockaded Woodpecker and Canebrake projects already being implemented within the Hitchiti Experimental Forest, and you may have commented on these. These projects will be implemented in a similar fashion. The proposed action is to improve habitat for threatened and endangered (t&e) species, including habitat for red-cockaded woodpecker and canebrake restoration (rare community type). The proposed project area is approximately 1,160 acres in size and includes compartments 7, 9, and 10 of the Hitchiti Experimental Forest in Jones County, Georgia. The majority of the project area is composed of mature to overmature loblolly and mixed loblolly/shortleaf pine stands. Hardwood stands are primarily located adjacent to Caney Creek and adjacent to major stream and drainage ways. Patches of canebrakes are located immediately adjacent to Caney Creek.

I recognize the interest members of the public have concerning management on the Chattahoochee-Oconee national forest. This is why I am requesting your comments concerning the following proposals:

- Restore 15 acres of canebrake patches by reducing the overstory shade through girdling. The girdled trees will be left standing in place.
- Red-cockaded woodpecker habitat improvement
  - Intermediate thinning to remove approximately half of the standing trees (residual basal area of 60 square feet per acre) of approximately 514 acres of loblolly and mixed pine stands to improve forest health.



- First thinning of approximately 254 acres of loblolly and mixed pine stands between the ages of 17 and 30 to improve forest health and habitat for red-cockaded woodpecker.
- Regenerate approximately 99 acres. Majority of sites were previously broken up by southern pine beetle mortality.
- Secondary treatments in the project area may include prescribed burning, midstory removal, development of wildlife openings, and installation of red-cockaded woodpecker inserts and squirrel boxes.

**Purpose of the proposed action**

This action provides an opportunity to follow the guidance of the forest plan. The proposed project (compartments 7, 9 and 10) lies entirely within the Hitchiti Experimental Forest. The Management Area 3b prescription was assigned to the Hitchiti in the Forest Plan. The portion of the Oconee Ranger District located south of Interstate 20, is part of a secondary recovery population for red-cockaded woodpecker *Piccolies borealis*. Therefore the 8.D.1 Management Area direction, Sub-Habitat Management Area for the red-cockaded woodpecker is embedded within the 3B Management Area prescription and must be complied with (Forest Plan, pg 3-51). In addition, Caney Creek which forms the northern boundary of the project area contains patches of canebrakes, a rare community type, is assigned Management Area prescription 9.F. The forest plan emphasis for each management area is as follows:

**3.B – Experimental Forest:** Lands are dedicated to experimentation and education by implementing national and international research programs with the primary purpose of producing scientific information useful to the public and private sector management of the represented ecosystems (Forest Plan, pg 3-48 through 3-52).

**8.D.1 – Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Sub Habitat Management Areas:** ...Management emphasis is to provide suitable-to-optimal habitat conditions in areas containing small red-cockaded woodpecker populations within the larger, designated habitat management area. (8.D). These red-cockaded woodpecker populations are at the greatest risk of local extirpation and in need of immediate, aggressive management action to create and protect suitable habitat (Forest Plan, pg 3-138 through 3-144).

**9.F – Rare Communities (Canebrakes):** Canebrakes are important habitats for a number of species, and have declined in extent and quality greatly within historical times. Canebrake restoration efforts will occur on sites currently supporting cane. Management actions will be designed to increase the vigor, density, and area of existing patches of cane (Forest Plan, pg 3-157 through 3-166).

Implementation of this project would serve several purposes:

- Restore foraging and nesting habitat conditions preferred by the red-cockaded woodpecker (Red-cockaded Woodpecker Recovery Plan)
- Restore rare canbrake communities
- Improve forest health and vigor of loblolly and mixed pine stands. Thereby potentially reducing:

1. The threat of Southern Pine Beetle mortality in key red-cockaded woodpecker habitat (nesting and foraging).
2. Habitat restoration costs associated with Southern Pine Beetle mortality.

A vicinity map and list of treatments by stand is enclosed.

### **Comments**

If you would like to comment on this project, or you would like additional information about this project, please contact the Oconee Ranger District. Comments must be postmarked or received within 30 days beginning the day after publication of this notice in the Eatonton Messenger. Written comments should be sent to: District Ranger, Oconee Ranger District, Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, Attn: Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Habitat Improvement and Canebrake Restoration Project, 1199 Madison Rd., Eatonton, GA 31024. Phone or hand-delivered comments may be made at the Ranger District office at 1199 Madison Rd, Eatonton, GA 31024 (Phone 706-485-7110) within the normal weekday business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Comments may also be E-mailed to this office, in a common word format (without attachments), at: [mailroom@r8.chattahoochee@fs.fed.us](mailto:mailroom@r8.chattahoochee@fs.fed.us); Subject line; **Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Habitat Improvement and Canebrake Restoration Project** on the Oconee Ranger District; Attention District Ranger. In accordance with regulations, all written comments received, including those submitted electronically, will be placed in the project file and will become a matter of public record.

Sincerely,

/s/ 

DAVID SCOTT HILL  
Acting District Ranger