



File Code: 1950/2470-3

Date: June 20, 2006

Dear Interested Forest Stakeholder:

My staff and I are proposing several projects across the Tallulah District. These projects are detailed below, and maps are provided at the end of this letter.

Early Successional Habitat (ESH) Treatments: Selected woody vegetation (mostly suppressed trees, rhododendron, and mountain laurel) would be cut down (cut and leave treatment) and two prescribed burns would be completed for the Coleman River (Flat Branch) and Lake Burton ESH project areas. The treatments would be completed over the next eight years, and one of the two prescribed burns would be conducted during the growing season.

Recent site visits and inventory plots indicate that additional treatments will be necessary following the previously approved (Decision Notice, 3/8/05) commercial removal of trees (planned in the next two years) in order to provide adequate sunlight for the regeneration of desired trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants. In particular, these treatments would promote the establishment of oak and hickory trees into the overstory of the forest community and also produce flushes of herbaceous plants. These treatments would also favor a minor component of native southern yellow pines (shortleaf, pitch and Table Mountain) and reduce the frequency of white pine in the areas treated. A total of approximately 130 acres are proposed for the cut and leave treatments and about 220 acres for two treatments of prescribed burning.

These treatments would contribute to providing a diversity of habitat, especially high-quality high elevation early successional forest communities (Forest Plan, Goal 2 and Objective 3.8) and also contribute to the viability of native wildlife species like the golden-winged warbler and the ruffed grouse (Forest Plan, Goal 1). All applicable mitigation would be carried out as detailed in the Forest Plan and the Best Management Practices for Georgia. Some selected important mitigation measures for the ESH treatments include the following:

- ❖ Water control structures necessary for the control of surface water movement resulting from bladed control lines for the prescribed burns would be constructed within 30 days of completion of the activity (Standard FW-066, FW-205).
- ❖ Revegetation of bare soil created by construction of control lines would be completed to a minimum of 85% coverage within the first growing season following the completion of project activity (FW-068, FW-197).
- ❖ The burns would be conducted with full adherence to Forest Service internal guidance for air quality and the pollution control methodologies prescribed by air quality regulatory agencies.
- ❖ High and intermediate canopy stream shade would be maintained within the riparian corridor (Standard FW-201) during these treatments. This corridor is defined on page 3-



175 of the Forest Plan. Within this corridor, only hand lines would be constructed (Standards 11-033 and 11-032).

Brook Trout Habitat Improvement: Selected segments (see maps) totaling approximately one mile would be treated over the next 10 years. Segments are located on Flat Branch and the North Fork of Moccasin Creek. Treatments would include installation of stream structures, deepening of pools, and removal of debris jams. Treatments would involve hand work and use of equipment.

Brook trout have been documented in each of the watercourses, and these treatments are designed to restore brook trout ecosystems in amounts, arrangements, and conditions capable of supporting viable populations (Forest Plan, Goal 26). These sites have been identified for restoration in a cooperative effort with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) (Forest Plan, Objective 26.4). Some selected important mitigation measures for this project include the following:

- ❖ Equipment use (back hoe or similar equipment) is limited to assisting with the construction and setting of log stream structures, deepening pools, and improving or enhancing aquatic habitat (Standard 11-004). No equipment will operate within the stream channel itself. Any bare soil created by the equipment would be seeded and mulched promptly, within 30 days after completion of the project (Standard FW-067).

Bird/Bat Box Installation (no maps included): Existing wildlife openings within the Lake Burton and Coleman River vicinities would have a total of 8-10 bird boxes and 6-10 bat boxes installed over the next eight years. This project would help move toward Goal 2 in the Forest Plan of providing a diversity of habitats for native and other desired species.

Bramlet Ridge Prescribed Burn: Approximately 2,280 acres in the Lake Burton Wildlife Management Area would be prescribed burned during the dormant season twice over the next 10 years. This area was burned in 1998, and continued burns in the area spaced out over 3-7 years would contribute toward Goals 1 and 2 of the Forest Plan. This would include contributing to the viability of native species and providing for a full range of habitat diversity for native species. Nearly all of the control lines for this prescribed burn would be natural (watercourses) or existing artificial firebreaks (roads), with a segment of bladed control line needed (approximately 1,000 feet) on the southeast boundary. All applicable mitigation would be carried out as detailed in the Forest Plan and the Best Management Practices for Georgia. For selected mitigation measures, see those applicable Standards listed under the ESH Treatments above.

I would like to hear from you regarding these projects before making my decision. All of these projects appear to fall into a category of actions that may be excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment. Specifically, the projects fall under the following categorical exclusions from the Forest Service Environmental Policy and Procedures Handbook (1909.15), Chapter 30 (available for review at the Tallulah District Office):

- **ESH Treatments** – Category 6, Chapter 31.2: Wildlife habitat improvements

- **Brook Trout Habitat Improvement** – Category 7, Chapter 31.2: Stream habitat improvements
- **Bird/Bat Box Installation** – Category 6, Chapter 31.2: Wildlife habitat improvements
- **Bramlet Ridge Prescribed Burn** – Category 6, Chapter 31.2: Wildlife habitat improvements

This determination, however, will 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 proposal.

These project proposals are a starting point for discussion and analysis and no decision has been made. Responses from the local community, interested individuals and groups, other government agencies, and Forest Service employees are needed to help determine the extent of analysis so we meet the intent of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Comments received help us to develop viable options to the proposal, and/or indicate additional mitigation and monitoring measures needed.

Responses should contain relevant facts or comments along with supporting reasons that we would then consider in reaching a final decision on these projects. Comments received, including names, become part of the project record and are available for public review. We would appreciate receiving your comments on the **Brook Trout Habitat Improvement and Bird/Bat Box Installation** by July 24, 2006. This will help ensure a thorough and complete analysis of the proposal. Please note that you will be sent further correspondence on this proposed project *only* if you comment on it or if you request further correspondence on it.

A recent Federal Court decision in Earth Island Institute v. Ruthenbeck invalidated the provisions of 36 CFR Part 215 that excluded categorical exclusions *for the **Early Successional Habitat Treatments and Bramlet Ridge Prescribed Burn*** from notice, comment and appeal. Since these two projects are subject to the Court order, I am making these projects subject to a formal notice and comment period.

In accordance with 36 CFR 215.6(a)(3), individuals or organizations wishing to be eligible to appeal *the **Early Successional Habitat Treatments and Bramlet Ridge Prescribed Burn*** must provide the following information during the 30-day comment period:

- 1) Your name and address.
- 2) Title of the Proposed Action.
- 3) Specific substantive comments (215.2) on the proposed action, along with supporting reasons that the Responsible Official should consider in reaching a decision.
- 4) Your signature or other means of identification verification. For organizations, a signature or other means of identification verification must be provided for the individual authorized to represent your organization.

Comments must be postmarked or received within 30 days beginning the day after publication of this notice in the Clayton Tribune. Send your written comments to the Tallulah District office at the address given on the letterhead. You may also comment by phone (see letterhead), e-mail to Steve Cole (sncole@fs.fed.us) or in person at our office in Clayton, Georgia. Phone or hand-delivered comments may be made at the Ranger District office at (address) within the normal

weekday business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. 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.

This letter is being sent to organizations and individuals who have previously participated or been interested in our project proposals. This letter assumes that you have 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 Steve Cole at the Tallulah District office (address and phone on letterhead). 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

Enclosure: Map of Project Locations.