



File Code: 1950

Date: August 22, 2006

Dear Forest User,

My staff on the Armuchee/Cohutta Ranger District on the Chattahoochee National Forest invites your comments on a proposal to improve forest health and wildlife habitat by thinning and prescribed burning approximately 500 acres in the John's Creek watershed on the Armuchee Unit. The need for this treatment was analyzed during the recent Large Scale Assessment, an ongoing vegetation management planning effort for this District. Other Large Scale Assessment projects are being developed and will be proposed later. Details about this proposal are described in the remainder of this letter (see attached maps).

The John's Creek watershed is located south of Villanow, Georgia. It is an approximately 28,000 acre drainage formed by John's Mountain, Calbeck Mountain, Horn Mountain, and Mill Mountain. This proposal involves activities in the north end of the watershed - National Forest land in Compartments 915, 917, and 927. The stands proposed for treatment fall within Management Prescription 9.H (which emphasizes ecological restoration) and 7.A (a recreation-visual quality emphasis, the Ridge and Valley Scenic Byway Corridor) of the Forest management plan. The Scenic Byway corridor is managed to protect and showcase the natural and cultural landscapes. Ground implementation of any activities ultimately approved following environmental analysis will include specific measures to protect and/or improve visual quality along the Byway. The area proposed for activities is also within the John's Mountain Wildlife Management Area and is managed in cooperation with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources for sustainable populations of game species; especially deer, turkey, and quail.

Specifically, I propose to reduce stem density using one or more competitively bid timber sales on approximately 500 acres of pine and pine-hardwood stands 20 years and older over the next 2-4 years. No new system roads would be necessary, only short dirt-surface spurs that would be re-seeded. Following the sale, there would be approximately 50 trees per acre spaced about 30 feet apart. The result would be a much more open condition for wildlife and a significant reduction in vulnerability to the southern pine beetle.

In addition, I propose to restore 36 acre stand (Compartment 917, stand 5) to a shortleaf pine-oak woodland community by reducing stand density to approximately 30 trees per acre and treating the midstory with a chainsaw felling. This community type was historically present across vast acreage in the southern Appalachian area. Restoration of this stand will provide habitat diversity and visual interest along the Scenic Byway and the road to Keown Falls Scenic Area.

The area proposed for activities is dominated by dense vegetation communities of native southern yellow pines (mostly loblolly, but includes shortleaf pine, Virginia pine, and pine-hardwood). The crowded condition of these stands is a risk factor for attack by the native southern pine beetle, the most destructive native pest of our southern pines. These insects



typically reach epidemic population levels every 7 to 8 years on average. The last outbreak was in 2000 to 2002 and affected an estimated 11 percent of the southern yellow pine host type on the Armuchee Unit. It is reasonable to expect another epidemic within 5 years. Thinning now will retain the best trees and improve their ability to resist attack and thereby meet the following Forest Plan goal and objective:

Goal 40. Through appropriate management, reduce populations of native and non-native pest species or vulnerability to them.

Objective 40.1 Reduce stem density in overstocked loblolly and shortleaf pine stands (annual average 1,500 acres, each forest type).

I am also proposing to follow up the timber sale by prescribed burning on an average 3-year rotation. These communities have approximately 300 to 500 stems/acre of sweetgum, red maple, and other fire-intolerant species forming a second canopy layer beneath the pines (that is, a 'midstory'). Burning will reduce the existing midstory vegetation, and – together with the thinning of the pines – will allow sunlight to reach the ground and stimulate an abundant herbaceous ground cover of native grasses and flowering plants. This non-woody vegetation on the forest floor will both; (a) increase wildlife food; especially insect abundance and seed production and (b) enhance nesting and brood-rearing habitat for grassland/open woodland species, such as the northern bobwhite quail, field sparrow, prairie warbler, and eastern bluebird. Existing firelines will be utilized. As an additional wildlife habitat enhancement, I propose that the exposed soil of log landings, skid roads, firelines, and an existing utility right-of-way be planted with native warm-season bunch grasses such as big and little bluestem, Indiangrass, switchgrass, sideoats grama, or eastern gamagrass; these grasses are valuable for wildlife primarily because of the structure of the cover provided.

If prescribed burning alone does not adequately reduce the midstory vegetation, I propose to mechanically treat this vegetation layer with a chainsaw felling. These treatments will contribute to meeting two goals and a specific objective of the Chattahoochee's Land and Resource Management Plan. They are:

Goal 2. A diversity of habitat will be provided for the full range of native and other desired species.

Goal 3. Enhance, restore, manage, and create habitats as required by wildlife and plant communities, including disturbance-dependent forest types.

Objective 3.4 Restore 10,000 acres of open woodlands, savannas, and grasslands within 10 years; maintain on a 5-year burning cycle or less.

We are interested in your comments about the implementation of this proposal. Should you have specific concerns, please tell us so we can respond to them. We would appreciate any written comments you may have by September 22, 2006. Send written comments to: Armuchee/Cohutta Ranger District, 3941 Highway 76, Chatsworth, Georgia, 30705, Attn: John's Creek Project, or by email at [rbstokes@fs.fed.us](mailto:rbstokes@fs.fed.us).

Thank you for your time and interest in the management of your National Forests. If you have any questions about this project, please contact Ruth Stokes at (706) 695-6736.

Sincerely,

*/s/ Tina R. Tilley*

TINA R. TILLEY  
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Attachments: 2 maps