



File Code: 1950/2400

Date: July 11, 2006

Dear Interested Forest Stakeholder:

My staff and I are proposing to restore oak in forest communities in the vicinity of Dan Gap and Buck Branch Roads (see attached maps). This would be accomplished by thinning encroaching white pine trees and other species in 2007 or 2008. These two projects would only be a first step in an effort to restore oak or mixed oak-yellow pine stands where the density of white pine (along with red maple, Virginia pine and others) has been increasing over the last half century due to fire suppression.

These two projects are summarized below, including the relation to Goals and Objectives from the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests (Forest Plan):

Compartment /Stand – Description of Location	Acres (est.)	Proposed Treatment	Forest Plan Goals, Objectives & Management Prescriptions
Compartment 44, Stands 1 & 3; Compartment 37, Stand 1 – Along Tuckaluge Creek Road and Dan Gap Road in the Warwoman Wildlife Management Area (see map)	67	<p>Dan Gap Oak Restoration: Thinning of the forest community within two units, reducing the density of stems in the stand and targeting the release of oaks and hickories from other species, most notably white pine and red maple, giving them more growing space and releasing them from shade. A secondary objective would be to give any shortleaf, pitch or Table Mountain pine trees more growing space by thinning trees (especially white pine and red maple) around them. A third purpose of this treatment would be to day light segments within the units and along Tuckaluge Creek and Dan Gap Roads, allowing sunlight to stimulate the growth of needed food sources and provide nesting habitat along the road edges. This treatment would be the first treatment in a long-term treatment strategy designed to slowly reduce the frequency of encroaching species (especially white pine and red maple) over the next twenty years or so.</p> <p>Post sale treatments would include cut and leave treatment to reduce the number of smaller, pre-commercial-sized white pine along with other species preventing the growth and development of oak and</p>	<p>Goal 2: A diversity of habitat will be provided for the full range of native and other desired species.</p> <p>Goal 3: Enhance, restore, manage and create habitats as required for wildlife and plant communities, including disturbance-dependent forest types.</p> <p>Objective 3.6: Restore oak or oak-pine forests on 1,250 acres on the Chattahoochee National Forest.</p> <p>Objective 3.7: Maintain existing oak and oak-pine forests by reducing stem density on 5,500 acres on the Chattahoochee National Forest.</p> <p>This area is within the 9.H Management Prescription. One of the purposes of this prescription is to focus on the restoration of plant associations on ecologically appropriate sites but unable to maintain themselves. In this case, the frequency of fire in the ecosystem has become non-existent, and forest generalists including white pine and red maple have increased in abundance and now are increasing in dominance within stands once dominated by oaks, possibly American chestnut, and other conifer and hardwood species. The thinning proposed would start</p>



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		<p>hickory species. This is a particularly prevalent problem with the dense low shade cast by species including white pine and red maple.</p> <p>Two (2) dormant season prescribed burns would be conducted over the eight years after the sale to deter future white pine establishment and improve the health of seedling and sapling oak trees.</p>	<p>the process of reducing the density of larger trees (greater than five inches in diameter), and the cut-and-leave combined with prescribed burning would reduce the number of smaller trees, inhibit establishment of sprouts and germinating trees, and increase the competitiveness of sprouting oaks.</p>
<p>Compartment 52, Stands 30, 34, and 47; day lighting along all stands adjacent to Buck Branch Road</p>	<p>68</p>	<p>Buck Branch Oak Restoration: Same as above. Day lighting, as explained above, is proposed along the entire length of Buck Branch Road, extending 10 – 100 feet out from the road, avoiding steep areas, riparian areas, and areas not in need of thinning for the objectives given. As detailed above, day lighting would reduce the density of heavy-shading tree species such as white pine and red maple, giving oaks and hickories more growing space, and increasing sunlight to the forest floor. This decrease in shading would also improve the condition of Buck Branch Road, allowing the road surface to dry quicker after precipitation, reducing maintenance costs.</p>	<p>Same as above. In addition, in some areas that are dense with white pine, this proposal will reduce the risk or vulnerability of these forest communities to southern pine beetle attack (Forest Plan, Goal 40).</p> <p>This area is within Management Prescription 9.A.3, Watershed Restoration Areas. This treatment is allowed within this prescription, and this treatment would help restore a small portion of the watershed using proper multiple use management practices.</p>

These two projects are based, in part, on an ecological classification system (ECS) drafted by the Chattooga River Ecosystem Management Demonstration Project (1995). This ECS has been used to guide this proposal by giving my staff an indication of the appropriate potential vegetation based on physical attributes (ECS guidebook is available for review at the Tallulah Ranger District in Clayton, Georgia). The vicinities of these two projects were identified in the Upper Warwoman Watershed Assessment (page 43), completed in 2005, as areas that have vegetative potential for hardwood mixtures including oak, but that now have white pine densities higher than predicted. The proposed actions would start moving these forest communities closer to the ecotypes predicted by the model, while also helping to meet Goals and Objectives in the Forest Plan.

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 these two projects include the following:

- ❖ Water control structures necessary for the control of surface water movement resulting from skid trails or bladed control lines would be constructed within 30 days of completion of the activity (Standard FW-066, FW-205).

- ❖ Re-vegetation of bare soil created by skid trails or control lines for prescribed burning 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 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 for the prescribed burning treatments (Standards 11-033 and 11-032). No thinning or cut-and-leave treatments are proposed for riparian areas.

I would like to hear from you regarding these two projects before making my decision.

Both projects appear to fall into a category of actions that may be excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment. Specifically, these two projects fall under Categories 12 (harvest of trees) and 6 (timber and wildlife habitat improvement activities including the cut-and-leave and the prescribed burning treatments) from the categorical exclusions in the Environmental Policy and Procedures Handbook (1909.15), Chapter 30 (available for review at the Tallulah District Office).

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. 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.

A recent Federal Court decision in Earth Island Institute v. Ruthenbeck invalidated the provisions of 36 CFR Part 215 that excluded the categorical exclusions identified above 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 either or both of these projects 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,

Steven N. Cole (for)
DAVID W. JENSEN
District Ranger

Enclosure: Map of Project Locations.