

DECISION MEMO

Johns Creek Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project

USDA Forest Service
Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests
Conasauga Ranger District
Walker County, Georgia

BACKGROUND

The Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) identifies forest-wide goals for achieving wildlife habitat improvement. These include:

- Goal 2: A diversity of habitat will be provided for the full range of native and other desired species (Forest Plan, page 2-4).
- Goal 3. Enhance, restore, manage, and create habitats as required by wildlife and plant communities, including disturbance-dependent forest types (Forest Plan, page 2-6).

Northern bobwhite quail and many other grassland/open woodland bird populations have been in decline in the eastern US since the 1960's. Breeding bird surveys in Georgia since 1983 indicate a steady decrease in the number of bobwhite quail statewide. Bird point counts conducted for the last 15 years documents this decrease in population across the Forest.

Pine forests comprise a substantial proportion of the quail's primary habitat. Within pine forests, the abundance of quail and several priority non-game birds is strongly associated with the structure and composition of understory vegetation. Northern bobwhite quail benefit from grass and forb ground cover that develops in open and frequently burned pine forests.

Bobwhite quail and other grassland/open woodland birds were once abundant in the Johns Creek area. Fire has been largely excluded from the pine stands over the last several decades in the project area resulting in a midstory canopy layer, beneath the pine overstory, made up of an estimated 300-500 stems per acres of fire intolerant species such as sweet gum and red maple. The numbers of pines that make up the overstory are also at a higher density than would be expected prior to fire being excluded from the site. The forest floor is now shaded, excluding native grasses and forbs from growing because they require fire to stimulate their growth and an open stand condition to thrive. As a result, the habitat conditions for bobwhite quail and associated species is poor and the populations are low in the Johns Creek area.

Based on this, there is an opportunity to conduct wildlife habitat improvement projects within the Johns Creek area that will result in improved conditions for species such as the Bobwhite quail.

DECISION

I have decided to implement the following projects in the Johns Creek watershed on the Conasauga Ranger District to improve habitat for northern bobwhite quail and other grassland/open woodland bird species:

- Thin an estimated 375 acres of pine stands,
- Use prescribed fire on an estimated 2025 acres on a 3-5 year basis to stimulate the growth of native grasses and flowering and fruiting plants, and to reduce midstory vegetation,
- Plant native grasses, install nest boxes, and install interpretive signs

These actions are categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment because they fall under the intent of FSH 1909.15, Category 6 of section 31.2, "Timber stand and /or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides and do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction (level D, FSH 7709.56)".

This categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects which may significantly affect the environment.

Monitoring of these projects will occur annually through 2 years post-implementation to determine whether or not objectives of this project are met.

Thinning of Pine Stands

Approximately 375 acres of pine stands will be commercially thinned over the next 2 to 4 years (see attached map).

Currently, the area is dominated by dense southern yellow pine, primarily loblolly with some shortleaf pine and Virginia pine. Some stands have a small component of hardwoods such as oak and maple. The intent of the treatment is to create an open stand condition, allowing an increase in the amount of sunlight reaching the ground. In order to achieve this, stem density will be reduced to average 50-60 trees per acre spaced about 30 feet apart.

These dense yellow pine stands have an average of 300 to 500 stems per acre of sweetgum, red maple, and other fire-intolerant species forming a midstory canopy layer beneath the pines. The midstory canopy will be cut down with chainsaws. Although these species are fire intolerant, the frequent prescribed fire may not be effective in suppressing these species because they are well established. This treatment, followed by prescribed fire, will control the existing midstory and allow for an open stand condition.

There was a concern identified during scoping that mature shortleaf pine or mast-bearing oaks might be removed in the project area. I have dropped an estimated 36 acres from the project to address this concern. In addition, the project is designed so that loblolly pine is the first priority

species to be removed in the thinning. Many of the mature shortleaf pines and oaks in each stand will be retained. Several patches of mature oaks have been identified for retention as hardwood inclusions. However, some of each must be removed in order to achieve the project objective of an open stand condition necessary to produce the diverse understory important for bobwhite quail and other grassland birds. I have considered this concern and I have chosen to exclude an older stand of shortleaf/oak and have determined that in the remaining stands, adequate number of shortleaf pine and mature oak will be retained to provide mast for wildlife species.

There was also a concern expressed that the thinning would reduce visual quality for people visiting Keown Falls and Pilcher's Pond. Mitigations for visual impacts will be implemented in order to meet the scenic integrity objectives. These mitigations are outlined in detail in the project file. In addition, pine forests managed by thinning and prescribed burning will result in a "park-like" condition which would be a desired viewing landscape along the scenic byway corridor. I have considered this concern and I expect that these activities implemented with the scenic integrity mitigation measure will protect, and has the potential to improve, the viewing landscape in the Johns Creek project area.

A concern was also expressed that thinning the stands would make them more vulnerable to windthrow or storm damage. Events such as wind, snow, or ice storms happen on a periodic basis over the entire forest, causing trees to break or be uprooted. Recently thinned stands are vulnerable to wind or storm damage, but when or if damage occurs is unpredictable. I have considered this concern and I have determined that the need to accomplish the wildlife habitat restoration outweighs the potential for storm damage because the objectives for improved wildlife habitat would still be achieved even if storm damage were to occur.

Prescribed Fire

Following the thinning treatment, prescribed burning will be completed on an estimated 2025 acres every 3-5 years. These acres have been separated into three burning units, incorporating the 375 acres of thinning. Existing firelines will be used.

These dense yellow pine stands have an average of 300 to 500 stems per acre of sweetgum, red maple, and other fire-intolerant species forming a midstory canopy layer beneath the pines. The intent of the prescribed fire is to top-kill the midstory vegetation, reducing its height, to allow sunlight to reach the forest floor and to stimulate growth of native grasses and flowering and fruiting plants.

A concern was expressed that existing maple and sweetgum in the midstory will increase following the opening of the canopy; past prescribed fires have not controlled these species. The midstory will be cut down with chainsaws to suppress the midstory prior to prescribed fire. Prescribed fire on a short, 3-5 year rotation is much more effective in reducing hardwood midstory than prescribed burning on a longer rotation. Considering this, I believe that short rotation prescribed burning after the chainsaw treatment would achieve desired conditions.

Planting Native Grasses, Installing Nest Boxes, and Installing Interpretive Signs

Exposed soils in log landings and skid roads will be planted with native warm-season bunch grasses such as big and little bluestem, Indiangrass, switchgrass, sideoats grama, or eastern gamagrass. These native grasses are valuable for wildlife because of the cover provided.

Nest boxes for eastern bluebirds will be placed in open areas and along roads in the project area at a spacing of 300 feet.

Interpretive signs will be placed at key sites to inform the public about the unique vegetation communities, habitats, and associated wildlife for possible viewing.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public involvement was initiated by sending a scoping letter to approximately 92 interested parties on August 22, 2006. The project has also been identified on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests Schedule of Proposed Actions. Seven responses were received. Five responses were completely supportive of the project. Scoping both internally and externally raised no concerns that were determined to cause extraordinary circumstances.

FOREST PLAN CONSISTENCY

The stands proposed for treatment fall within Management Prescription (MP) 7.A - Scenic Byway Corridor and MP 9.H- Management, Maintenance, and Restoration of Plan Associations to Their Ecological Potential under the Forest Plan. MP 7.A has a recreation/visual quality emphasis along the Ridge and Valley Scenic Byway Corridor while MP 9.H emphasizes ecological restoration. I have reviewed the direction provided under this management prescription and have determined that these projects are consistent with the direction found for these Management Prescriptions (Forest Plan, pages 114-117, 167-170).

I have reviewed the scenic integrity objectives for the area. Mitigations for visual impacts will be implemented in order to meet the scenic integrity objectives. These mitigations are outlined in detail in the project file.

REVIEW OF EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES

I have considered the resources found in the project area and have determined that there are no extraordinary circumstances existing that may cause the project to have significant effects. The mere presence of one or more of these resource conditions does not preclude use of a categorical exclusion. It is the degree of potential effect of a proposed action on these resource conditions that determines whether extraordinary circumstances exist. I have considered:

- 1. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species.**

The Biological Evaluation indicates that there are no known threatened or endangered species in the vicinity of the project area(s).

Forest Service Manual 2670 direction requires analysis of potential impacts to sensitive species, those species for which the Regional Forester has identified population viability is a concern. Potential effects of this decision on Regional Forester sensitive species have been analyzed and documented in a Biological Evaluation. This decision will have “no impact” on sensitive species population viability.

2. Floodplains, Wetlands, or Municipal Watersheds

These projects will not result in the occupancy or modification of a floodplain. This decision will not affect floodplains. This decision will not affect wetlands. There are no source water/municipal watersheds in this project area. This decision will not affect municipal watersheds.

3. Congressionally Designated Areas

There is no designated wilderness, wilderness study areas, National Recreation Areas, or Wild and Scenic Rivers within the decision area. There are no inventoried Roadless areas (RARE II or Forest Plan) in the decision area (Forest Plan FEIS and ROD 2004). This decision will not affect inventoried Roadless areas. There are no Research Natural Areas in the decision area. This decision, with impacts limited to the immediate area of activity, will not affect Research Natural Areas.

4. Native American Religious or Cultural Sites, Archaeological sites, or Historic Properties or Areas

No tribal concerns were identified for this project. Surveys were conducted for Native American religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, and historic properties or areas that may be affected by this decision. A ‘no properties affected’ determination was made.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

This decision complies with all applicable laws and regulations. For example, I have considered the following:

1. Clean Water Act

This Act is to restore and maintain the integrity of waters. The Forest Service complies with this Act through the use of Best Management Practices and Forest Plan standards. This decision incorporates Best Management Practices and Forest Plan standards to ensure protection of soil and water resources. The Forest Plan standards will be implemented to protect water quality and soils. Site-specific evaluations of soil conditions indicate that no soil conditions exist that requires special mitigations. In the event that any unusual conditions are found during project

implementation, activities will be modified to protect soils for compaction or erosion. All project activities should take place when soil moisture is conducive to equipment.

2. Clean Air Act

Under this Act areas of the country were designated as Class I, II, or III airsheds for Prevention of Significant Deterioration purposes. Class I areas generally include national parks and wilderness areas. The area covered by this decision is a Class II airshed. A greater amount of additional human-caused air pollution may be added to these areas. Georgia Department of Environmental quality regulates prescribed burning in the state in accordance with the State Implementation Plan (SIP). The State has been involved in the planning process. The prescribed burning authorized in this decision will be accomplished in coordination with the State and follow the SIP to protect air resources, including obtaining and following air quality permits, if needed.

3. Federal Cave Resources Protection Act

This Act is to secure, protect, preserve, and maintain significant caves, to the extent practical. No known cave resources will be affected by this decision.

4. Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898)

This Order requires consideration of whether projects would disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations. This decision complies with this Act. Public involvement occurred for this project, the results of which I have considered in this decision. This decision is not expected to adversely impact minority or low-income populations.

5. National Forest Management Act

This project complies with the seven requirements of the National Forest Management Act related to vegetation management (36 CFR 219.27(b)).

1. It is best suited to the multiple-use goals established for the area based on Forest-wide direction. This suitability is based on the potential environmental, biological, cultural resource, aesthetic, engineering, and economic impacts.
2. The areas will remain adequately stocked after treatment.
3. This action has not been chosen primarily due to cost considerations, although this was taken into consideration.
4. This action has been chosen after considering potential effects on residual trees and adjacent stands.

5. The action will avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and ensure conservation of soil and water resources.
6. The action will provide the desired effects on water quality and quantity, wildlife and fish habitat, woody regeneration, forage production, recreation uses, aesthetic values, and resource needs.
7. The project area has adequate access and no new permanent roads are necessary to implement this decision. This proposal is practical in terms of transportation requirements, and the total costs of preparation and administration. This project does not require a project-level roads analysis because there are no permanent changes in access into the area and road standards will not change.

APPEAL RIGHTS

This decision is subject to appeal, pursuant to the USFS regulations 36 CFR 215.11 by those who provided comments or otherwise expressed interest in this particular proposal during the 30-day public comment period. Written Notice of Appeal of this decision must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 215.14, "Content of Notice of Appeal", including the reasons for appeal. Appeals must be postmarked or received in duplicate within 45 days after the legal notice publication date in the *Daily Citizen*. The appeal should be sent to: Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, ATTN: Appeals Deciding Officer, 1755 Cleveland Highway, Gainesville, Georgia, 30501.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

If no appeal is received, implementation of this decision may occur on, but not before, 5 business days from the close of the appeal filing period. If an appeal is received, implementation may not occur for 15 days following the date of appeal disposition.

CONTACT INFORMATION

For further information about this project contact Ruth Stokes, Conasauga Ranger District, 3941 Hwy 76, Chatsworth, Georgia, 30705, or by telephone at (706)-695-6736 ext 105, between the hours of 8:00 a.m. & 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. E-mail should be addressed to rbstokes@fs.fed.us.

RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL SIGNATURE AND DATE

/s/ Michele H. Jones
MICHELE H. JONES
District Ranger

May 14, 2007
DATE

Table 1. John’s Creek Project Stand Data

Compartment	Stand	Acres	Forest Type	Condition Class	Management Rx	SIO	Burn Unit
915	4	85	31	11	7.A	1	2
915	5	24	31	11	7.A	1	2
915	12	27	32	12	7.A	1	2
915	13	34	31	12	7.A	1	2
915	15	13	32	11	7.A	1	2
917	4	109	32	11	7.A	1	1
927	2	83	31	12	7.A/9.H	3	2/3
Total		375					

Key: Forest Type 31 = loblolly pine, 32 = shortleaf pine
 Condition Class 8 = low quality sawtimber, 11 = immature poletimber, 12 = immature sawtimber
 Management Rx 7.A = scenic byway corridor, 9.H = ecological restoration
 SIO (scenic integrity objective) 1 = high, 3 = n/a
 Burn Unit 1 = Keown Falls (529 acres), 2 = Pocket North (675 acres), 3 = Pocket South (820 acres)

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