



File Code: 1950/2600

Date: July 31, 2007

Dear Interested Forest Stakeholder:

My staff and I are proposing to create and maintain open pine / oak woodland habitat conditions within and adjacent to an area known as the Georgia Mountain Orchard, located on the Chattooga River Ranger District in Habersham and Stephens Counties, GA.

Summary of the Proposal

The area known as the Georgia Mountain Orchard (a former peach orchard) is approximately 250 acres in size and was acquired by the USDA Forest Service in 1968. Since acquisition, approximately 100 acres of the orchard has been maintained as an open, early-successional (grass/forb/shrub) habitat through the use of rotational planting and prescribed fire. As a result, most likely due to the long history of early successional habitat management practices, this area (100 acres) currently provides suitable habitat for a suite of wildlife species which depend on early successional habitat.

Therefore, the primary purpose of this proposal is to take advantage of the existing early-successional habitat conditions by creating and maintaining an additional mosaic of pine / oak “woodland” conditions adjacent to the above mentioned early successional habitats. For the purposes of this proposal, woodlands are defined as follows: Open stands of trees at least 6 m (20 feet) tall, with crowns often not interlocking; tree canopy discontinuous (often clumped), averaging between 66 and 40% overall cover (at 40% the average diameter of a tree crown equals the average distance between crowns); shrub layer often poorly developed or present only in gaps in the canopy. (Source: <http://www.natureserve.org/explorer>). Historically, lightning fires and Native American burning were primarily responsible for creating and maintaining woodland conditions. Currently, piedmont woodlands are becoming increasingly rare due primarily to land use changes and fire suppression.

Piedmont woodlands provide important habitat for a variety of plants and animals, including “rare” or “declining” species. One declining wildlife species in particular which would benefit from this proposal is the Bachman’s sparrow. The orchard hosts the northern most breeding record of this species in GA. The primary management concern for this declining species is the provision of adequate habitat, which is ephemeral and often declines as a result of natural vegetation succession. Bachman’s sparrows were historically found in mature to old growth southern pine woodlands and subjected to frequent growing-season fires; a fugitive species, breeding wherever fires created suitable conditions. This species requires a well-developed grass and forb layer with limited shrub and hardwood midstory components (NatureServe 2006.) In addition to providing habitat for the Bachman’s sparrow, this proposal would also provide suitable habitat for a variety of other game and non-game wildlife species, as well as, providing habitat for a variety of desired native and/or “rare” herbaceous species.



Approximately 227 acres within the orchard area are proposed for woodland creation and maintenance (see attached map). Woodlands would be created by thinning identified stands to achieve a tree canopy averaging between 40 – 66% of overall cover. Therefore, the number of trees retained in any given area in order to achieve the desired residual canopy cover will depend on the size (diameter at breast height) and species of trees selected for retention. In this project, the largest diameter shortleaf pine and oaks will be prioritized for retention and white pine, loblolly pine, red maple and tulip poplar will be prioritized for removal. The following table (Table 1) contains more specific information relative to the stands proposed for woodland creation. As noted in Table 1, Compartment 209 Stand 005 and Stand 007 are both very near the minimum old growth age for their community type, which is 120 yrs. and 130 yrs., respectively. However, additional data will still need to be collected in order to sufficiently determine if these stands meet the four defining criterion for existing old growth as described in Appendix D of the Forest Plan. Regardless of the outcome of the data, additional small blocks of less than 100 acres will need to be identified and reserved to protect their old growth characteristics in order to meet the Forest Plan requirements of conserving 5% of the 6th level project area watershed in old growth or old growth compatible prescriptions.

Table 1.

Comp. / Stand	Regeneration Year	Age	Overstory Description	Acreage
216 / 012	1985	22	Loblolly Pine	29
216 / 002	1985	22	Loblolly Pine	30
209 / 012	1982	25	Loblolly Pine	6
209 / 011	1982	25	Loblolly Pine	33
0 / 1	1980	27	Loblolly Pine	2
0 / 2	1980	27	Loblolly Pine	13
0 / 3	1980	27	Loblolly Pine	16
216 / 006	1972	35	Loblolly Pine	15
216 / 010	1955	52	Shortleaf Pine	8
216 / 015	1951	56	Shortleaf Pine	27
209 / 002	1944	63	Shortleaf Pine	20
209 / 005	1888	119	Shortleaf Pine / Oak	16
209 / 005	1888	119	Shortleaf Pine / Oak	7
209 / 007	1884	123	White Oak / Red Oak / Hickory	4
Total =				227

After woodlands have been created, a 3-5 year prescribed fire rotation would be used to maintain the desired woodland vegetative structure and composition. Since acquisition, two prescribed burn units have encompassed either a portion or all of the stands proposed for woodland creation in the orchard area (see map 1). One burn unit is approximately 1850 acres in size and was burned for the first time in 1999. This burn unit was named the Comp. 209 / 216 Rx Burn. The second burn unit is approximately 190 acres in size and has been burned every 3 -5 years since the orchard was originally acquired, with the most recent burn completed in 2005. This burn unit was named the GA Mountain Orchard Burn. Although burning is effective in maintaining an open grass-forb layer by killing woody sprouts, it is not usually severe enough to remove the midstory and open up the overstory canopy. Therefore, a combination of prescribed fire and thinning would be necessary to create and maintain the desired woodland habitat which is described in this proposal. Figure 1 illustrates substantial progress toward the desired future

condition of the woodlands which would be created as a result of this proposal. This stand, which is located near the GA Mountain Orchard, was recently thinned to a woodland structure and followed up by a prescribed burn in 2007. A continued 3-5 year prescribed fire rotation is planned to continually maintain this open structure while eliminating woody sprouts and promoting herbaceous establishment.

Figure 1.



Current Management Direction

All of the stands proposed for woodland creation and maintenance are within Forest Plan Management Prescription 9.H – Management, Maintenance and Restoration of Plant Associations to their Ecological Potential. This project would meet the purpose of this prescription by restoring historical plant associations and their ecological dynamics to ecologically appropriate locations. This project would also meet several general goals and objectives of the Forest Plan which include Goal 2 to “provide a diversity of habitat for the full range of native and other desired species”, Goal 3 to “enhance, restore, manage and create habitats as required for wildlife and plant communities, including disturbance-dependent forest types”, Goal 7 to “manage forest ecosystems to maintain or restore composition, structure and

function within desired ranges of variability” and Goal 15 to “avoid the necessity for federal listing of other species under the Endangered Species Act (i.e., Bachman’s Sparrow)”.

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 this project 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 thinning and 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 prescribed 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).

I would like to hear from you regarding this project before making my decision. It appears this project would fall under the following Categorical Exclusion in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15 “*Environmental Policy and Procedures*” Section 31.2 - Category 6, Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction. This project complies with this category in that it would benefit wildlife habitat and it would not require any herbicide application or low standard road construction. This project would require the development of a Decision Memo and project file.

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.

This project is 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.

Please make your responses as specific as possible so that we can be sure they are adequately addressed. This would include the following information:

- 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 Northeast Georgian Newspaper. Send your written comments to the Chattooga River Ranger District office at the address given on the letterhead. You may also comment by phone (see letterhead), e-mail to Mike Brod (mbrod@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 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 Mike Brod at the Chattooga River Ranger 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,

/s/: David W. Jensen
DAVID W. JENSEN
District Ranger

Enclosure: Map of Project Locations.