

Decision Memo  
Big Shoal Commercial Thinning

*USDA Forest Service - Chattooga River Ranger District – Chattahoochee–Oconee National Forests - Habersham County, Georgia*

**DECISION and PURPOSE and NEED**

I have decided to commercially thin and prescribe burn an area to help reduce the risk of Southern Pine Beetle (SPB) infestation and to improve the health of 65 acres within Compartment 234 (see table below). This area is located approximately eight miles northwest of Toccoa, Georgia (see attached map).

This stand was chosen for thinning because of high pine density, including both planted and naturally regenerated. Based upon current conditions in the area, the risk of SPB outbreak is extreme. This thinning will release desired pine and hardwood stems that are overtopped, over crowded, or otherwise in competition with other stems for the available resources, including light, moisture and soil nutrients. This stand contains a mix of tree species of various sizes and densities with loblolly pine being the dominant species.

| <b>AREA</b> | <b>COMPT.</b> | <b>STAND</b> | <b>ACRES</b> | <b>YEAR PLANTED</b> |
|-------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|---------------------|
| 1           | 234           | 7            | 65           | 1974                |

Stems will be reserved to achieve an average basal area (BA) between approximately 70-80 square feet per acre (70-80 trees per acre). The leave trees will be selected based on a combination of site and individual characteristics, including height, physical condition, species and location in relation to the surrounding stems. The competing stems within an approximate 25 foot radius of each selected tree will be harvested. Reducing the density of trees on the site will also allow for natural regeneration of hardwood species, including oaks and hickories.

After the thinning is complete, prescribed fire would also be used on an average three to five year rotation to continually promote the natural regeneration of native, fire maintained tree species such as shortleaf pines, oak and hickories, as well as a variety of native grasses and forbs. In addition, the area would immediately be seeded with rye grass and wheat following the thinning and then after the first prescribed burn. Rye grass and winter wheat are cool season grasses that would provide cover and forage for local wildlife populations during the fall and winter while also not interfering with the natural establishment of native grasses and forbs during the spring and summer (these plantings typically die out naturally two years after planting.)

This project will move the area toward the desired conditions envisioned by the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests (Forest Plan) (2004) by helping achieve the following goal, objective, and standard:

Goal 40: Through appropriate management, reduce populations of native and non-native pest species or vulnerability to them.(Forest Plan, page 2-39)

Objective 40.1 Maintain forest-stocking levels at no more than “fully stocked” for the species, age, and site quality with priority for treatment given to those vegetation communities at highest risk of insect or disease attack.(Forest Plan, page 2-39)

The project area is within the Management Prescription (MP) 9.H. The desired condition of MP 9.H is restoration of historic plant associations and their ecological dynamics to ecologically appropriate locations. In this case, the loblolly pine forest community will be gradually shifted into other species since it is not ecologically sustainable. The commercial thinning and prescribed burning will start this shift, but would not convert the stand to another forest type.

Standard 9.H-005: Stands may be actively managed to reduce the risk of damage from native and non-native pests. In addition, biological control methods are used when available and effective (Forest Plan, page 3-169).

### **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

Beginning in September of 2007, a project identified as “Big Shoal Timber Sale” was listed for the Chattooga Ranger District in the Schedule of Proposed Actions for the Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forests. The Schedule was made available to the public via the Forest Service website.

Scoping letters were sent out on September 6, 2007 to the Chattooga Ranger District’s persons, agencies and organizations known to be interested in projects of this type. Only one response was received:

*Mr. Elmer Butler stated, “He was in favor of the project as long as the trees were immediately removed from the location.”*

### **REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION**

Small scale commercial thinning is an action that was determined by the Chief of the Forest Service to be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), unless extraordinary circumstances exist. A Decision Memo and Project File are required for this action, which is identified in Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 “Environmental Policy and Procedures”, Chapter 30, Section 31.2, Category # 12, as follows:

“Harvest of live trees not to exceed 70 acres, requiring no more than ½ mile of temporary road construction. Do not use this category for even-aged regeneration harvest or for vegetation type conversion. The proposed action may include incidental removal of trees for landings, skid trails, and road clearing.”

I have also determined that no extraordinary circumstances exist that may cause the project to have significant effects. Specifically:

- ❑ Ground disturbing activities will not take place on steep slopes. The canopy will be retained in areas along these roads that are greater than 30% slope. Appropriate mitigation measures will be applied such as prompt revegetation of exposed soils and installation of erosion control structures. Similar past projects in this area were determined to have no significant soil-related impacts.
- ❑ This project will not affect any federally Proposed, Endangered or Threatened species or their critical habitat (see Biological Evaluation in the project file.) This project is not likely to cause a trend toward federal listing under the Endangered Species Act, or a loss of viability on the Forest.
- ❑ No actions will take place in a floodplain, wetland, or municipal watershed.
- ❑ No congressionally designated area, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas will be affected by this project.
- ❑ This area is not within a current inventoried roadless area.
- ❑ The project is not within a research natural area.
- ❑ This project will not impact historic or prehistoric resources. No known historic or prehistoric sites that are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places will be affected by this project (see project file).
- ❑ The cumulative effects of this project combined with others in the foreseeable future will not be significant.
- ❑ This project will not involve the use of herbicides and will not involve the construction of any temporary use or low standard roads.
- ❑ The stand will not be converted to another type of species, but will allow for a progression toward a more diverse forest community.

### **FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS**

This project is consistent with the Forest Plan. The actions in this project fully comply with Forest Plan standards for timber harvesting and prescribed burning, and meet desired conditions, goals, objectives, and standards established for the Forest and Management Prescription (MP) 9.H. The vegetation management practices including thinning and prescribed burning are “recommended” for a loblolly pine stand (Forest Plan, Appendices, page F-55 to F-56) considering the purpose and need for this project.

State-approved Best Management Practices (BMP's) will be met and this project will comply with the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act.

This project follows the Forest-wide and MP 9.H direction as mentioned above. Specifically:

- ❑ The project actions are consistent with the desired conditions for MP 9.H, and will help meet a specific standard for this MP.
- ❑ The actions in this project were chosen after considering economic and environmental aspects of various renewable resources and protection of forest resources to provide for outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife and fish. These resource values are discussed throughout this DM.
- ❑ This project will contribute toward a diversity of plant and animal communities across the landscape based on the suitability and capability of the land area in order to meet the overall multiple-use objectives.
- ❑ This project will not produce substantial and permanent impairment of site productivity and will ensure conservation of soil and water resources.

### **IMPLEMENTATION**

Implementation of this decision may begin immediately. This sale is planned to be offered in the third or fourth quarter of fiscal year 2008.

### **ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES**

Pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12 (e) (1), this decision is not subject to appeal.

### **CONTACT PERSON**

For additional information concerning this decision, contact John D. Westbrook by phone at 706-754-6221, Ext. 150.

### **SIGNATURE OF RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL**

/s/ DAVID W. JENSEN  
David W. Jensen  
District Ranger  
Chattooga River Ranger District

January 10, 2008  
Date