

Decision Memo

Reforestation of the Sites in which Southern Pine Beetle Control and Suppression within the Ocmulgee River – Big Sandy Creek Watershed has Taken Place

USDA Forest Service
Oconee Ranger District, Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest
Jasper County, Georgia

Background

The Oconee Ranger District (Oconee) comprises approximately 115,000 acres. Of this, about 70-percent (80,000 acres) have a predominantly pine forest cover. The southern pine beetle (SPB), a native insect, is the most serious threat to southern pines. Although SPB is always present in southern pine stands, cycles of SPB epidemics causing widespread death of pines have historically only occurred at an average interval of 6 to 8 years. Each epidemic cycle typically lasts two years.

A SPB epidemic began on the Oconee in June, 2007. The 'epidemic' condition is reached when there is an average condition of one SPB 'spot' of dead or dying trees for each 1,000 acres of its pine host type. Thus far, about 800 'spots' affecting approximately 5,000 acres of pine trees were: 1) attacked, killed and are now standing dead snags; 2) attacked, felled in place (cut-and-leave suppression method), or 3) attacked, harvested in a commercial timber sale (cut-and-remove suppression method). An attempt was made to remove some of the dead and down material left by cut and leave operations using commercial timber sales, largely unsuccessful due to the condition of the material. Subsequently, the material on some of the cut and leave areas has been/is being chipped and left on site.

Early in 2008, the SPB population buildup was monitored using traps baited with an attractant. Those traps were collected and the numbers of SPB in comparison to the numbers of its primary predator, beetles in the *Clerid* group, were compared. Based on that information, SPB activity is now predicted to be low in 2008. The Forest Service is cautiously optimistic that most of the SPB activity, in this epidemic cycle at least, is over. Activity may increase before winter when SPB normally go dormant. New areas affected by the SPB are also included in this decision.

In recognition of the need to move the Oconee to a more healthy, insect and disease resistant condition, the Forest initiated a large scale assessment (LSA). The LSA is a collaborative process for: 1) identifying existing information about resources and ecosystem conditions on National Forest and surrounding lands; 2) initiating a dialog on desired future conditions for the forest within the context of the existing Forest Plan; and 3) developing a framework and timeline for moving the Oconee toward

those desired conditions. At the initiation of the LSA process, it was recognized that management of the Forest would continue in the interim and would dovetail with the results of the LSA process as it is completed (1-2 years). Reforestation, or the replacement of a forest with another forest, is needed to continue to meet the values of the American public for public forest lands as these values are embodied in law and the January 2004 Chattahoochee-Oconee Forest Plan goals and objectives. This decision bridges the gap between now and the time when it is superseded by decisions resulting from the LSA process. Information gained from these reforestation activities will also provide information that can be utilized in the LSA process. Implementation of this decision will in no way preclude options considered in the LSA or prevent implementation of decisions resulting from the LSA and may well provide valuable information for the LSA process.

Description of Decision

My decision is to restore a diverse and healthy forest on SPB-attacked areas while also being responsive to the ecological and social conditions relevant to each reforested area. The choice of the specific forest cover type and the number of desired stems will vary by individual SPB spot. That choice will be guided by the forest plan management prescription allocations, the physical and biological capability of each site, the availability of seedlings of the desired species if planting is needed, and the desires of the public. A more detailed description of the activities and timing of the reforestation process is in the project file. Reforestation would occur on those areas already attacked, or that will be attacked, by the SPB within the Ocmulgee River - Big Sandy Creek watershed.

More specifically, I have decided to:

1. Restore native desired forest cover ranging across the full continuum of pine, pine-hardwood, hardwood-pine, and hardwood types on most of the affected sites by preparing those sites for seedling establishment and development followed by planting or natural regeneration or a combination of both, and manual hand tool release of species of the desired composition;
2. Use some openings created by the SPB as an opportunity to restore or develop diverse wildlife habitats, including herbaceous openings and open canopy forest on selected sites; and
3. Leave some, typically small and isolated, inclusion areas within larger pine communities untreated as either; 1) appropriate to the forest plan emphasis, or 2) as a valued habitat element within overall wildlife habitat diversity.

Site preparation activities would begin in 2008 and continue until completed, mostly likely in 2010 because funding levels may not be adequate to proceed more rapidly. Planting, where needed, would occur in 2009 and 2010, depending on funding. First year survival and natural regeneration surveys of areas treated would begin in 2009 and continue in 2010. Hand cutting release would likely occur in 2010 through

2013. Third year stocking surveys would likely occur in 2011 or 2012. Success will have been achieved when the objective vegetation community composition and structure is established and is on a natural development trajectory to maintain itself. For forest cover, this will be when the crowns of trees have touched, creating a complete canopy. Crown closure is anticipated to occur at about age eight.

Actions will be implemented, as appropriate to each site, to protect visual quality, wildlife habitat quality, soil productivity and water quality. For soil productivity Forest-wide standards in Chapter 2 of the 2004 Forest Plan will be implemented to minimize soil erosion and loss from site preparation, planting and release work. Water quality management is addressed with the implementation of Ephemeral Stream Standards in Chapter 2 of the Forest Plan, standards for the Riparian Corridor management prescription in Chapter 3, and compliance with Georgia's Best Management Practices for Forestry. Management Prescription 11 – Riparian Corridor is applied on perennial and intermittent streams within project areas.

The general location of my decision is displayed on the attached 5th level watershed map of Ocmulgee River - Big Sandy Creek. The watershed area is about 194 square miles (124,160 acres), of which 14,618 acres (12 %) are national forest. Major streams on national forest within this area include: White Creek, Wise Creek, Harmon Pye Branch, Rush Creek, Kinnard Creek, and Ocmulgee River, and 56 miles of perennial streams.

The management emphasis of the forest plan management prescription (MRx) allocations (Table 1) will be a primary factor guiding the selection of a forest cover type but it will also be tempered by the physical and biological capability at each site.

Table 1: Management Prescription Emphasis for Each Management Prescription in the Ocmulgee River – Big Sandy Creek Watershed.

| Management Prescription Name | Management Emphasis |
|---|--|
| Recommended Scenic Rivers | Recreation |
| Areas Managed to Restore or Maintain Old Growth Characteristics | Conservation of old-growth |
| Red-Cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) Sub-Habitat Management Area | RCW population recovery and sustainability |
| Rare Communities | Conservation of regional diversity |
| Management, Maintenance and Restoration of Plant Associations to Their Ecological Potential | Healthy and diverse ecosystems |
| Riparian Corridors | Retain, restore and/or enhance processes in riparian corridors |

The management prescriptions that occur in the Big Sandy Creek watershed are shown in Table 2 along with the acres by MRx and the acres affected by the current SPB epidemic as of July, 2008.

Table 2: Forest Plan Management Prescriptions (MRx), Acres and July 2008 SPB Acres in the Ocmulgee River - Big Sandy Creek Watershed.

| MRx | Management Prescription Name | Acres | July 08 SPB Acres* |
|-------|---|---------------|--------------------|
| 2.B.2 | Recommended Scenic Rivers | 3,043 | 87 |
| 6.B | Areas Managed to Restore or Maintain Old Growth Characteristics | 424 | 8 |
| 8.D.1 | RCW Sub-Habitat Management Area | 8,371 | 259 |
| 9.F | Rare Communities | 106 | 0 |
| 9.H | Management, Maintenance and Restoration of Plant Associations to Their Ecological Potential | 2,674 | 42 |
| 11** | Riparian Corridors | **0 | 0 |
| | Total | 14,618 | 397 |

*SPB acres do not include an estimate for 'monitor' spots that have had no suppression treatment because no polygon has been mapped for them as yet.

**MRx 11 acres are not mapped at the Forest Plan scale; they are delineated at the project level. MRx 11 acreage is included in the other MRx acreages.

REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE DECISION

Decisions may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment when they are within one of the categories identified in 36 CFR 220.6 and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative environmental effect.

Category of Exclusion

The project is within a category requiring a project file and a decision memo at 36 CFR 220.6 (e) # 5 - *Regeneration of an area to native tree species, including site preparation which does not involve the use of herbicides or result in vegetation type conversion.*

No non-native species will be used in reforestation. No herbicide use is being approved. No vegetation types are being established that do not now, or did not historically, occur in the ecological subsection unit in which the Oconee Ranger District is located. However, in response to public comment and ecosystem health concerns, pine is not being returned on all sites. This could result in site-specific conversion of some areas from a pre-SPB pine forest cover type to a pine-hardwood or hardwood-pine forest cover type and some of these may occur within MRx 8.D or 8.D.1 allocated to emphasis RCW habitat management. Mixed or hardwood types are not suitable RCW habitat and therefore have potential to negatively affect an endangered species in the long term if suitable habitat is limiting. Site-specific US Fish and Wildlife Service concurrence will be obtained for any such conversion; ongoing conversations with them indicate agreement in concept. Should concurrence not be obtained for a specific site, it will remain in pine. In either scenario, the decision will remain a categorical exclusion.

Connected Actions

Existing travelways, currently blocked with a tanktraps or berms, may be re-opened and utilized for temporary access while work is being performed.

Extraordinary Circumstances

I have considered the Ocmulgee River - Big Sandy Creek watershed for the presence of extraordinary circumstances that could also be impacted by the activities of this decision. Though not currently designated, designation by Congress of a portion of the Ocmulgee River as a 'scenic' river in the national wild and scenic rivers system, as recommended in the forest plan, could occur during the life of this decision. I find that this reforestation decision will not preclude that consideration. I also find that no other extraordinary circumstances are applicable.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public involvement included listing in the Forest's Schedule of Proposed Actions, placing scoping documents on the Chattahoochee-Oconee web site and direct mailings on prior, similar projects to the Oconee mailing list. Numerous on-going phone conversations and meetings with varied interested individuals or groups have included discussions of the need to reforest the affected areas. A 'reforestation white paper' (see project file) describing the reforestation strategy for all SPB-impacted acres was shared with various groups and individuals. A widely-publicized open meeting was hosted by the District in June 2008 which touched on these and other issues as part of the LSA process. Little written comment has been received on this topic. Concerns identified include:

- diversifying the Forest through use of different species of pine and the inclusion of hardwoods where appropriate in species composition;
- protecting and enhancing habitat for the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW);
- providing a healthier, more insect and disease resistant forest to limit the possibility of future devastating SPB epidemics; and
- avoiding creation of "tree farms".

Received comments from all sources, including past comments on similar projects, were used to refine the project and analysis. In particular, both public and agency interest in a more diverse forest and a long-term lessening of SPB effects has stimulated inventory efforts to assess hardwood regeneration potential in pine stands and the capability to move toward mixed composition or even hardwood. Interest has included the full range of pine planting, especially longleaf pine, utilizing natural pine seeding, managing for pine-hardwood or hardwood-pine mixes, and promoting the retention or planting of desirable hardwoods, especially within the Redlands area on the north end of the Oconee which is not part of the RCW Habitat Management Area. Received comments were also used to explore the possibility of extraordinary circumstances and potential effects to those resources.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY AND/OR RELATED TO OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

My decision will comply with all applicable laws and regulations.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision may be implemented immediately.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL

This decision is not subject to a higher level of administrative review or appeal.

CONTACT PERSON

Further information about this decision can be obtained from Erin Bronk at the Oconee Ranger District (Address: 1199 Madison Road, Eatonton, GA 31024; Voice: (706) 485-7110; Fax: (706) 485-7141.

SIGNATURE AND DATE

I have concluded that this decision may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment as it is within one of the categories identified in 36 CFR 220.6, and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative environmental effect. My conclusion is based on information presented in this document and the entirety of the Planning Record.

/s/ Erin Bronk

ERIN M. BRONK
District Ranger

September 5, 2008
Date

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