



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Chattahoochee-Oconee
National Forests
Chattooga Ranger District

200 Highway 197 North
P.O. Box 1960
Clarksville, GA 30523
(706) 754-6221

File Code: 1900/2070/5140

Date: December 5, 2005

Dear Interested Public;

I would like your comments on a proposed project on the Chattooga Ranger District, headquartered in Clarksville, Georgia. I am proposing a dormant season controlled burn during the winter of 2005/2006 in the Lake Russell Wildlife Management Area in Stephens County, Georgia. The proposal would burn approximately 310 acres of smooth coneflower (*Echinacea laevigata*) habitat in Compartment 213, and 15 acres in Compartment 211 (refer to attached maps).

The purpose of the proposal is to restore the area to a landscape of open woodland-savanna habitat that provides conditions for an entire suite of species, including the federally listed smooth coneflower, Georgia aster (*Symphotrichum georgianum*), Fraser's loosestrife (*Lysimachia fraseri*) and curlyheads (*Clematis ochroleuca*). These plants are rare in Georgia and are currently found within Compartments 211 and 213 on the Chattooga District. Some of these species are found only in these sites.

One of the greatest threats to this habitat and these plants is lack of fire (NatureServe 2005). Historically, habitat for the coneflower and associates consisted of dry woodlands, savannas, or grasslands that were maintained in an open condition by lightning caused fires or by indigenous peoples burning the woods and fields (Davis et al. 2002). Due to lack of fire, much of the forest in the proposed burn areas has an extensive woody, shrub layer which prevents the establishment of the coneflowers and associated plants, and does not currently provide this open condition.

To provide this open condition to address this need, two areas of mixed pine hardwood forest are proposed for controlled burning. The proposed burn would reduce the woody shrub layer, and would create open woodland habitat conditions necessary for establishment, growth, and vigor of the rare coneflower and associates. This habitat improvement would also contribute to the maintenance and increase of existing populations of these species.

The proposed burn would use existing roads and creeks as boundaries, and would require the establishment of only two short, bladed fire lines. The 310 acre burn would require approximately 0.2 mile of bladed line and 396 feet of hand-constructed fire line. The 15 acre burn site would require approximately 330 feet of bladed line and 66 feet of hand line. Due to the fact ground disturbance would occur when establishing these lines (i.e. potential for impact to archaeological sites or uprooting of rare plants), the Forest Service Botanist and Archaeologist surveyed the proposed blade lines on August 15, 2005 for the presence of rare plants, rare animal habitat, and for historical/cultural features. None were found in the 2 proposed fire line corridors. However, there are known cultural resource sites within the proposed burn acres, and these sites would be protected by exclusion of fire. Rare plants in the burn sites protected would be protected from any adverse effects of the flames by burning in winter when the plants are not actively growing above ground.



A meeting and field trip by state and federal biologists and other coneflower experts was held on August 31, 2005. Input provided from this meeting was used to develop this proposal. Controlled burning would be one method that would be used over 10 years or more to accomplish these objectives in long-term management to reestablish the Piedmont woodland-savanna habitat and associated species. This proposal will aid in the recovery of the federally listed smooth coneflower, and could contribute to the prevention of Georgia aster being listed under the Endangered Species Act.

The need for the project is generated by goals and objectives from the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP pp. 2-6 and 2-12 to 2-15) that specifically address open woodland, savanna and grassland restoration, and federally listed and other rare species (Objectives 3.4, 15.1 and 18.1). It is also generated by the requirement of the Endangered Species Act that Federal agencies “utilize their authorities in furtherance of the purposes of the Act by carrying out programs for conservation of T&E species” (Endangered Species Act, page 16).

The proposed 310 acre burn in Compartment 213 is within Management Prescription 9H. This is identified in the Land Resource Management Plan as an area proposed for management, maintenance, and restoration of plant associations to their ecological potential. The focus of 9H areas is on vegetative communities that are in decline, require active management for habitat maintenance, or occur infrequently on national forest lands. This proposal complies with the Desired Conditions for 9H (page 3-168) that states “management and/or protection of rare communities and species associates will be provided, along with management and/or protection measures for population occurrences of threatened, endangered, sensitive, and locally rare species”.

The proposed 15 acre burn in Compartment 211 is located within Management Prescription 4D, identified in the Land Resource Management Plan as areas with an emphasis on perpetuating or increasing TES species, and perpetuating unique plant and animal communities. This proposed project complies with the statement that a desired condition of the prescription includes “viable and increasing populations of threatened, endangered, sensitive, or locally rare species” (page 3-71) as well as “Active management to maintain habitat or increase the numbers or health of known proposed, endangered, and threatened populations commonly occurs with the written concurrence of the USFWS where a beneficial effect to the species has been established”.

I would like to have your input on the proposed project:

- **Do you agree with controlled burning to restore the woodland-savanna habitat and to aid the recovery and establishment of the coneflower and associated species?**
- **Do you have other suggestions as to how these goals might be accomplished?**

A recent Federal Court decision in [Earth Island Institute v. Ruthenbeck](#) invalidated the provisions of 36 CFR Part 215 that excluded categorical exclusions from notice, comment and appeal. The District Court further clarified that its order is to be applied nationwide after July 7, 2005. Since this project is subject to the Court order, I am making this proposed project subject to a formal notice, comment, and appeal period.

Comments must be postmarked or received within 30 days beginning the day after publication of this notice in the local newspaper of record the Northeast Georgian. Written comments should be sent to:

Cindy Wentworth
USDA Forest Service
P.O. Box 9
Blairsville, GA 30514
Attn: Lathan Loop Burn.

You may also phone in comments to Cindy Wentworth at 706-745-6928, or hand-deliver them to the Ranger District office in Clarkesville (200 Hwy 197 North) within the normal weekday business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. In accordance with regulations, all written comments received will be placed in the project file and will become a matter of public record. In accordance with 36 CFR 215.6(a)(3), individuals or organizations wishing to be eligible to appeal must provide the following information during the 30-day comment period:

- 1) Your name and address.
- 2) Title of the Proposed Action: (Lathan Loop/Brady Hill Burn).
- 3) Specific substantive comments 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.

Thank you for your time and interest in the management activities on the Chattooga Ranger District of the Chattahoochee National Forest.

Sincerely,

/s/ *David W Jensen*

DAVID W. JENSEN

District Ranger

cc. Ray Ellis

John Petrick