



File Code: 1950

Date: December 20, 2006

## Scoping Notice

### Armuchee-Cohutta Thinning and Restoration Projects

The Armuchee-Cohutta Ranger District, Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, is beginning the environmental analysis process for thinning and vegetation restoration projects located across the District. These activities would be implemented over the next 5-10 years.

We are seeking your input and encourage you to participate by providing your comments on these proposed actions. Please provide your comments by Friday, February 16, 2007.

Scoping is an important “first step” of the environmental analysis process. Your comments will be used to identify relevant issues and help guide environmental analysis. The environmental analysis of the proposed activities will be documented in one or more NEPA documents.

### **Background**

In November 2005, the Forest initiated an effort to identify opportunities across the Armuchee-Cohutta Ranger District which would be consistent with vegetation management objectives identified in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). Referred to as the Armuchee-Cohutta Large Scale Assessment (LSA), this effort focused on identifying forest health and vegetation restoration activities. The Armuchee-Cohutta Thinning and Restoration projects proposed in this scoping letter were identified through the LSA process.

The public was invited to participate in the process in April 2006. Several public meetings were held, including field trips. Interest generated at the field trips resulted in additional trips to Experimental Forests to discuss topics such as oak regeneration, silvicultural treatments, riparian area management, prescribed fire, and water quality. Additional public meetings were held in September 2006 to present the results of the LSA.

### **Purpose and Need**

The purpose and need for action for the Armuchee-Cohutta Thinning and Restoration projects is to:

- Improve forest health in over-crowded stands to decrease the risk of insect and disease infestation, particularly southern pine beetle, and to improve wildlife habitat;



- Restore and/or maintain native mountain longleaf pine and native shortleaf pine forest types in areas that have been impacted by past southern pine beetle infestations and/or have a component of Virginia pine,
- Restore and/or maintain native oak and oak-pine forest types in areas that have been impacted by past southern pine beetle infestations and/or in areas with high amounts of fire intolerant species such as maple, sweet gum, and Virginia pine;
- Restore riparian hardwood old growth communities in hardwood stands located along streams; and
- Improve wildlife habitat through native plant community restoration.

In the early 1900s, areas that are today found on the Armuchee-Cohutta Ranger District were once cleared for agricultural lands or harvested for timber products. Many of these areas that were once mountain longleaf pine, shortleaf pine, oak, oak-pine, or riparian hardwood forest types were then re-forested with offsite loblolly pine.

In addition, fire was suppressed in these areas allowing fire-intolerant species, such as Virginia pine, to grow in areas it would not likely have grown prior to the land use disturbances of the early 1900s. As a result, Virginia pine is now found in higher densities and on sites that would not be expected with frequent fires.

In the last decade, southern pine beetle has moved through the District leaving patches of beetle-killed trees within these stands.

Today, some stands are extremely dense and crowded. These conditions result in reduced growth from water and soil nutrient competition. This competition stresses trees, which then become more susceptible to insect and disease infestation, such as southern pine beetle attack. In addition, dense forests cause decreased sunlight on the ground, resulting in insufficient forage, fruiting, insect production, and nesting cover for wildlife. There is a need to thin these stands to allow them to become more resilient to epidemic levels of insect and disease and to improve wildlife habitat.

Forest communities on this District converted from historic composition by land uses are typically very dense in that they have a high number of trees per acre, which allows little sunlight to the forest floor. They are considered less diverse in that they provide limited wildlife habitat, are typically more susceptible to insect and disease infestations, and are susceptible to fire in that a higher number of species found on these sites are considered fire-intolerant. There is currently a decline in the populations of wildlife species which are dependent upon open stands of native yellow pine and oak-oak pine forests.

Considering this, there is a need to restore or maintain stands with components of native forest types to improve wildlife habitat, to make areas more resilient to insect and disease infestation, and to move these areas back into more fire-tolerant plant communities.

The Forest Plan support these proposed activities. More specifically:

- Goal 2 states that, “A diversity of habitat will be provided for the full range of native and other desired species....” (Forest Plan, page 2-4);
- Goal 3 provides direction to, “Enhance, restore, manage and increase habitat as required for wildlife and plant communities, including disturbance-dependent forest types.”(Forest Plan, page 2-6);
- Goal 4 provides direction to, “Maintain and restore natural communities in amounts, arrangements, and conditions capable of supporting viable populations of existing native and desired nonnative plants, fish, and wildlife species...” (Forest Plan, page 2-6);
- Goal 8 provides direction to, “Contribute to the maintenance or restoration of native tree species whose role in forest ecosystems...has been reduce by past land use, or... is threatened by insects and disease, fire exclusion, forest succession, or other factors.” (Forest Plan, page 2-7);
- Goal 21 provides direction to, “Restore formerly existing old-growth community types (composition, not structure) where ecologically appropriate.” (Forest Plan, page 2-17); and
- Goal 40 states, “Through appropriate management, reduce populations of native and non-pest species or vulnerability to them.” (Forest Plan, page 2-39).

### **Proposed Action**

Proposed actions to **improve forest health** and to **improve wildlife habitat** include:

*1. Reduce the number of trees in loblolly pine stands (Forest Plan, Objective 40.1), shortleaf pine stands (Forest Plan, Objective 8.1), and oak and oak-pine stands (Forest Plan, Objective 3.7), and improve wildlife habitat (Forest Plan, Goal 3) forest habitat by thinning and allowing sunlight to reach the forest floor, creating more diverse and more productive food sources.*

Treatments would include thinning using commercial timber harvest and prescribed burning. In young stands, the number of small diameter trees would be reduced by cutting stems which are less than merchantable size, also known as pre-commercial thinning.

Proposed actions to **restore/maintain native ecosystems** and **improve wildlife habitat** (Forest Plan, Goal 2 and 4) include:

*1. Restoration of mountain longleaf pine and restoration/maintenance of shortleaf pine (Forest Plan, Objectives 3.1, 3.5, 8.1)*

Treatments needed to meet this objective would include timber harvest if economically viable or site preparation by felling if not; usually followed by prescribed burning, then hand planting mountain longleaf pine or shortleaf pine seedlings in spring. This would be followed within 1-2 years with release of longleaf pine or shortleaf pine seedlings by hand tool cutting or very targeted and selective herbicide use. In mountain longleaf pine stands, prescribed burning would occur in the established stand for maintenance on a 3-5 year interval.

*2. Restoration or maintenance of oak or oak-pine (Forest Plan, Objective 3.6, 3.7)*

Treatments needed to meet this objective would include timber harvest if economically viable or site preparation by felling if not; usually followed by prescribed burning, then hand planting of a southern yellow pine species such as shortleaf or longleaf in the spring. The majority of the oak would be maintained on site. This would be followed within 1-2 years with release of the pine and oak seedlings by hand tool cutting or targeted and selective herbicide, with a pre-commercial thinning at about age ten.

*3. Restoration or maintenance of the riparian hardwood old growth communities in the Southern Ridge and Valley (Forest Plan, Objective 21.1)*

Treatments needed to meet this objective would include a ‘weeding’ by prescribed burning and/or hand tool cutting release around selected ‘crop trees’; or a area-based pre-commercial thinning .

Additional information on areas proposed for treatment can be found in the attached documents and maps. Overall, an estimated 10,364 acres are proposed for thinning or restoration projects across the Armuchee-Cohutta Ranger District. Individual stand data is available upon request.

### **How to Submit Your Comments**

Comments will be used to define any issues that may be associated with this project, to develop alternatives to the Proposed Action, and to refine the analysis of environmental effects.

Please be as specific as possible when responding. If you provide data or research results, please identify why the information is pertinent to the Armuchee-Cohutta Thinning and Restoration Projects and provide a copy of the information. Comments will become a part of the public record and, therefore, will be available for public review upon request under the Freedom of Information Act.

We would appreciate scoping comments by **Friday, February 16, 2007**. We ask that you include your contact information along with your comments, such as name, mailing address, email address, and/or phone number.

You may send in your comments as follows:

Comment Format	Send To:
Hard Copy letter or the Comment Form	Armuchee-Cohutta Ranger District 3941 Highway 76 Chatsworth, GA 30705 ATTN: AC Thinning and Restoration Projects
Email message or document	Email to: <a href="mailto:chatt_comments@fs.fed.us">chatt_comments@fs.fed.us</a> Subject Line: AC Thinning and Restoration Projects
FAX	Forest Service Fax Number-Chatsworth – (706) 695-1872 Subject: AC Thinning and Restoration Projects

Electronic versions of the information provided in this scoping notice are available on the Forest's website at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/conf/sopa/planning.htm>.

If you have questions related this project please contact the following individuals:

Ruth Stokes, Wildlife Biologist or Mike Murphy, Forester  
Armuchee-Cohutta District, Chatsworth – phone 706-695-6736

Dick Rightmyer, IDT Leader, Supervisors Office, Gainesville,  
Phone 770-297-3070

I look forward to your participation in the management of the Armuchee-Cohutta Ranger District.

Sincerely,

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

Attachments:

Comment Form  
Percent of District Affected  
Armuchee Map  
Cohutta Map

Acres by District Objective and Treatment  
Acres by District and Objective