

**Appendix J**

**Pre-Decisional Environmental Assessment  
Comments and Responses**

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## Pre-Decisional Environmental Assessment Comments and Responses

### Identified Public Issues and Concerns

One group presented comments in the form of a letter. This comment came from Mr. Ray Vaughan of Wildlaw.

Each comment was examined carefully and used by the Interdisciplinary Team, with internal comments, to develop issues and concerns relating to the project area. An outline of the public comments, and the issues they raised is listed below. Following the table is an explanation of the issues and how they are addressed in this project. A listing of the comments and scoping responses presented by the public are also included in this appendix.

	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Issue #</b>	<b>Comment</b>
1	Other		Concern the LRMP FEIS is too old a document to effectively manage today's forest.
2	MIS	7	Concern there is no site specific data for the areas in this project for many MIS species.
3	MIS	7	Concern that the Forest Service may not have adequate information about all MIS species(Eastern Meadowlark) to make an informed decision.
4	Other	5	Concern that past EA's from this district have not given proper consideration to cumulative impacts.
5	Vegetation	4	Concern managing longleaf where LRMP states none. Instead do an EIS on longleaf restoration work.
6	Other		Concern for thickness of EA.

## **Explanation of the Issues and How They Are Addressed in this Project**

The numbers assigned in the third column of the table above relate to the issues defined by the Interdisciplinary Team. The interdisciplinary team divided issues into 12 general categories in order to track and address them through the analysis. These general issue areas are:

- Issue 1.** Soil Productivity
- Issue 2.** Water Quality
- Issue 3.** Air Quality
- Issue 4.** Vegetation
- Issue 5.** Forest Health
- Issue 6.** Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive Species
- Issue 7.** Management Indicator Species
- Issue 8.** Economics
- Issue 9.** Recreation
- Issue 10.** Heritage Resources
- Issue 11.** Public Health and Safety
- Issue 12.** Civil Rights and Environmental Justice

In addition, issues were classified an “Other” category. “Other” is related to process concerns rather than cause and effect relationships associated with the proposed action and its alternative. The second category is actions “out of the scope” of the analysis. The identified issues are described below, followed by the current conditions that appear to relate to these issues, and a response to the issue.

## Responses to Issues

- (2) Concern there is no site specific data for the areas in this project for many MIS species.**  
**(3) Concern that the Forest Service may not have adequate information about all MIS species (Eastern Meadowlark) to make an informed decision.**

**Current Condition:** Every project on the Homochitto National Forest undergoes a biological review, which is published as a Biological Evaluation (BE), part of the planning record. Before a BE is undertaken, the analysis unit is examined to determine actual and potential habitat for not only PETS species (which we are legally mandated to consider), but also those species of local concern, MIS which were nominated by the Mississippi Natural Heritage Program as having an SRANK (state rank) of at least S3. These species are considered because of our wish to head off future listing of species as endangered or threatened by insuring that viable populations continue to exist on the National Forest. Many of these species of local concern, as well as many of the PETS, occur in specific habitats which are not areas in which vegetation manipulation is occurring. For instance, *Stewartia malacodendron* and *Schisandra glabra* are two plant species of special concern which occur on mesic, north-facing slopes and moist streamside areas. These species can have their continued viability assured by utilizing expanded Streamside Management Zones (beyond that called for in the Forest Plan). Neither species is of Regional or National conservation concern, but they are indicators of sensitive habitats on the Homochitto National Forest, so we take every effort to insure their continued viability here. Not every acre of the Forest is habitat for sensitive species. Most have such specific habitat requirements that their occurrence can be predicted based on habitat characteristics. The areas proposed for even-aged regeneration in the Analysis Unit 22 project consist of older loblolly pine growing on ridgetops. No known PETS or state sensitive species (with the exception of the red-cockaded woodpecker and Bachman's sparrow) are known to occur in this habitat. For the red-cockaded woodpecker, a 100% survey of suitable habitat is conducted prior to planning so this species is ruled out before the project begins. Bachman's sparrow can utilize these upland pine forests only if the hardwood midstory has been controlled and frequent prescribed burning has taken place. Again, habitat determines the presence of the species.

It is not in the best interest of the U.S.D.A. Forest Service to ignore sensitive species, and we do not do so. Sensitive species, when ignored, go on to become listed species which cost the taxpayer much more to manage than does a sensitive species. Each sensitive species, both plant and animal, is fully evaluated during the planning process to insure that the continued survival of the species is assured. Most times, this can be done by simply restricting management activity in sensitive habitats. Not all species occur on every acre of the forest, so we must use predictive analysis to determine what may be present. If we cannot confirm the presence of a species due to conditions such as time of year, drought, or other issues, we assume that the species IS present, and plan for it as though it were.

**Response:** A BE is always signed and completed before publication of the Environmental Assessment. In addition, if any new data comes to light, the BE may be amended or revised

even after publication of the Environmental Assessment in order to protect the species and habitats of concern. Further discussion can be found in the Chapters 1 and 3 of the Environmental Assessment, the BE, and Appendix C, Mitigation Measures.

**(4) Concern that past EA's from this district have not given proper consideration to cumulative impacts.**

**Current Situation:** The standards for analysis of cumulative impacts are outlined in the Council on Environmental Quality's publication, Considering Cumulative Effects Under the National Environmental Policy Act. This publication identifies the need to analyze cumulative effects on both a temporal and geographic basis. However, it sets standards for the extent of the analysis over both time and area. The publication states:

“Not all potential cumulative effects issues identified during scoping need to be included in an [environmental assessment] or [environmental impact statement]. Some may be irrelevant or inconsequential to discussions about the proposed action and alternatives. Cumulative effects analysis should ‘count what counts,’ not produce superficial analysis of a long laundry list of issues that have little relevance the effects of the proposed action or the eventual decisions.” (Council on Environmental Quality page 12)

To clarify limits on the required extent of the analysis, the Council on Environmental Quality identifies the concept of “**project impact zone**,” which is generally an area for which the effects can be identified as associated with a project and is meaningful. Table 1-2 sets down the principles of cumulative effects analysis. Conceptually, this would apply to temporal relationships, also. The narrative for Cumulative Effects Analysis, Principal 4, states that cumulative effects should be expanded to the point at which the resource is no longer affected significantly....

Within the context of Considering Cumulative Effects Under the National Environmental Policy Act, significance is better described as an intensity that can be measures or is of interest to the affected parties. The Council on Environmental Quality clearly indicates that environmental assessments should include an analysis of significant cumulative effects or, essentially, effects that are not irrelevant or inconsequential. This is substantially different in context from the National Environmental Policy Act where the term “significant impact” is more closely associated with an effect, which elevates a project to the level of major federal action that must be analyzed in an environmental impact statement rather than an environmental assessment.

The Council on Environmental Quality recognizes that through this and direction related to determining the magnitude and significance of cumulative effects in Chapter 4, all activities on the earth have some interrelationship, but analysis becomes irrelevant when impacts are so small that their affects cannot be measured or are masked by the total universe of similar impacts. An example would be trying to measure the impacts of a single project on the Homochitto once waters mix into the Mississippi River, which may carry millions of tons of silt per day.

**Response:** Cumulative impacts over time and area are analyzed in Chapter 3 of this environmental assessment to the extent that they can be measured. The most meaningful potential impacts of this project relate to soil productivity and water quality.

This issue was classified under “other” because the respondent did not identify a resource area or cumulative impact to analyze. Failing to identify specific impacts that appear to have importance leads to the superficial analysis of issues that have little bearing upon the decision. This was not the intent of the Council on Environmental Quality or the National Environmental Policy Act.

**(5) Concern that restoration of longleaf pine habitats will cause impacts to such an extent that an Environmental Impact Statement will be required.**

**Current Condition:** The definition of an environmental assessment, according to 40 CFR 1508.9, is (a) a concise public document that serves to: “(1) Briefly provide sufficient evidence and analysis for determining whether to prepare an environmental impact statement or a finding of no significant impact. (2) Aid an agency’s compliance with the [NEPA] Act when no environmental impact statement is necessary.”

The test for significance is very specific in 40 CFR 1508.27 in terms of:

- (a) *Context.* This means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts such as society as a whole (human, national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. For instance, in the case of a site-specific action, significance would usually depend upon the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Both short- and long-term effects are relevant.
- (b) *Intensity.* This refers to the severity of impact. There are a series of ten criteria that the decision maker must answer, and these answers will then lead the deciding officer to the conclusion as to whether or not an EIS is required. These ten criteria listed in 40 CFR 1508.27 and the classes of action listed in FSH 1909.15, 20.6 are what determine whether or not an EIS is required. A decision maker does not arbitrarily make the decision. This first thinning project has no impacts that significantly affect the quality of the human environment. The number of acres alone does not require an EIS document to be developed.

Longleaf pine is a suitable species for the sites where this treatment is prescribed. The natural range of longleaf pine includes most of the Atlantic and Gulf Coastal Plains from southeastern Virginia to eastern Texas, and south through the northern two-thirds of the Florida peninsula. This range includes the present boundaries of the Homochitto National Forest. This range establishes longleaf pine as a southern yellow pine as described in *Silvics of North America*, Volume 1.

The Forest Plan describes the yellow pine working group as consisting of loblolly and shortleaf pine dominated overstories. Pure stands (greater than 70%) of a single species do exist, but stands of mixed yellow pine are more common on the Homochitto National Forest. Longleaf

pine has been identified on the Homochitto National Forest as a component of these pine and mixed stands. The longleaf pine working group in the Forest Plan (4-26) occurs in mostly pure stands. The Homochitto National Forest contains few pure stands of longleaf pine largely due to the district's heavily dissected terrain, which results in considerable micro-site variation across the stand. Historically, longleaf pine did not occur in pure stands across the Homochitto National Forest. It dominated the ridges and upper slopes and was mixed with loblolly and shortleaf pines. The longleaf pine component diminished off the ridges and other southern pines dominated the lower slopes. Presently, only remnants of this past longleaf pine component remains to be seen mixed with loblolly and shortleaf pines. There is an insufficient seed source to restore the historic longleaf component by natural means. If not planted, the historic role of longleaf would not be restored, and the longleaf pine component would continue to decline much like it has in the past 70-80 years.

**Response:** There is no environmental relationship associated with this concern, where a cause and effect discussion of impacts is appropriate. The function of an environmental assessment is to determine whether or not an EIS is needed. The responsible official (District Ranger for this project) makes this determination based upon the analysis conducted in the environmental assessment and the criteria stated above. Unless the analysis identifies impacts that meet the above criteria, there would be no basis for an EIS. The responsible official provides a rationale in his decision, related to whether or not an EIS is needed.

Longleaf pine was a major component 80 years ago of most of stands on the Homochitto National Forest. Putting longleaf back is the most non-significant thing to do. Longleaf is a southern yellow pine that makes-up a component of many present pine stands on the Homochitto National Forest. The management activities used, simply increase the longleaf component they do not create pure longleaf pine stands. Loblolly and Shortleaf pine will still make-up a component of the mixed pine stands, thus the seed source and genetics for these species will not be gone.

People use longleaf the same as loblolly and shortleaf pines, their aesthetics and products produced from their wood are very similar. Longleaf pine is better adapted to drier sites and also lives longer. This makes harvesting activities less frequent. Longleaf can also be regenerated using small openings in the canopy or gaps. These qualities allow for more flexibility when trying to manage longleaf stands in the future.

The fact is that the mixed pine regeneration areas, are pine sites with pines before harvest, and a pine sites with pines after harvest. Prescribed fire is used in mixed pine stands to reduce hardwood competition and establish a grassy understory, but prescribed fire treatments are categorically excluded. The primary noticeable difference is the post regeneration treatments and not the species.

## **Other Issues Identified but determined to be outside the Scope of this Project**

### **Comment:**

**(1) Concern the LRMP FEIS is too old a document to effectively manage today's forest.**

**Current Condition:** Forest Plan revision was specifically delayed by Congress in order to evaluate and revise planning regulations.

**Response:** Although the Forest Plan states that “[it] will be reviewed and updated as necessary...at least every 15 years” (Forest Plan 1-1), it also “establishes management direction and associated long-range goals and objectives for the Forest for the next 45 years (through the year 2030) (Forest Plan 1-1).” This issue is, therefore, out of the scope of this project as the Forest Plan is still able to guide management decisions on the Homochitto National Forest.

### **(6) Concern for thickness of EA.**

**Current Situation:** The District shares this concern. However, an Environmental Assessment is an issue-driven document where both the number of alternatives considered and the depth of analysis are based on the internal and external issues identified. In past documents it has not been uncommon to receive 60 to 70 pages of comments from 3 to 4 individuals or interest groups when scoping and final comments are combined. In some cases, scoping comments and final comments may be identical giving the appearance that the initial response to comments was not reviewed.

One of the goals of the National Environmental Policy Act is to inform and share information with the public. Un-addressed issues potentially represent fatal process errors whether they have a cause-and-effect relationship to the project or not. For this reason, the District carefully discusses and provides detailed rationale for how each comment is handled in the analysis or eliminated from further discussion. When additional information is requested, data tables may be included and additional discussion provided in an attempt to share available information. This level of response does lengthen the analysis, but the District encourages involvement and actively responds in detail to assist interested publics in their evaluation of our projects.

**Response:** The analysis is issue-driven. The District believes that the length of individual documents is appropriate to our commitment to respond to relevant, non-relevant, and out-of-the-scope comments in an effort to assist the public in evaluating our projects. In that respect, the length of the documents is driven by external factors and not the complexity of the project or by Interdisciplinary Team design, so is out of the scope of this project.