United States Department of Agriculture | Forest Service | Homochitto Ranger District | Route 1 Box 1 Meadville, MS 39653 601-384-5876

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The Homochitto Ranger District is proposing vegetative management and associated activities to improve forest health and maintain or enhance wildlife habitat within Block 22. This unit encompasses approximately 3,189 acres of National Forest Land and, specifically, sections 13, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, and 26 of Township 4 North, Range 2 East. This Analysis Unit is located entirely within Amite County, Mississippi, approximately 4 miles northeast of Crosby, Mississippi. The analysis area eventually drains east into Brushy Creek and northwest into the Homochitto River.

The Homochitto has changed a great deal since the time of the American Indians and the early settlers. Historic records indicate that southwest Mississippi supported extensive mixed pine forests with a significant longleaf pine component. Pines, favored by frequent fires, occupied the ridges and upper slopes. On lower slopes and in the drains, where fire burned at lower intensity, hardwoods flourished. Low-intensity, periodic fire favors oak and hickory over less fire-tolerant species such as sweetgum, yellow poplar, American beech and magnolia. Therefore, hard-mast-producing oaks were dominant in the drains. These forests not only supported such game species as white-tailed deer, wild turkey, and Northern bobwhite, but also the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker and a large number of ground-nesting songbirds. Populations of these species are declining across the nation as this important habitat becomes less common.

Widespread harvest in the 1920's coupled with the absence of fire has resulted in the loss of most of the longleaf pine component. Longleaf has been replaced with loblolly pine, which is short-lived . Fire-intolerant hardwoods, such as sweetgum, American beech, and magnolia, have, likewise, replaced many of the oaks and hickories which were favored by the lower intensity burns in the drainages. Where prescribed fire is scheduled to periodically occur, the emphasis of this project will be to improve forest health and restore a mixed pine/blue stem ecosystem. Where periodic burning is not anticipated, the emphasis of this project will be to improve forest health, enhance hardwood quality, and to restore a mixed pine/hardwood ecosystem.

The proposed activities include regeneration by several methods, thinning, ecosystem restoration and prescribed burning. This combination of treatments is expected to maintain the vigor of forest stands; reduce the threat of southern pine beetle losses; and restore a component of longleaf pine to the upland areas. **All management activities will take place on Forest Service lands.** A more detailed description and maps showing the location of proposed activities are attached.

We are in the process of gathering initial information (scoping) for an Environmental Assessment being prepared to evaluate the impacts of this project. You were contacted because you have expressed an interest in management activities on the Homochitto, or because you have been identified as owning or leasing land adjacent to the project area. Please assist us in this analysis by sharing any special knowledge, interests, or concerns you may have related to this project area or the proposed activities. Written comments may be submitted to: District Ranger,

Route 1, Box 1, Meadville, Mississippi 39653. Or you can contact either Charles Price or Michael Everett at (601) 384-5876. To be sure that your comments are included in my analysis, please be sure that I receive them by August 15, 2000.

Public comments will be addressed in an appendix to the Environmental Assessment and provide the basis for alternative actions and special mitigation. Individuals participating in this initial planning phase or who express an interest in the project will receive a copy of this analysis.

If you choose not to participate in the initial scoping, there will be a second opportunity to comment after the environmental assessment has been prepared and a preferred action selected. There will be a final 30-day public comment period at that time, which will be announced in the legal section of the Jackson, Mississippi Clarion-Ledger (Paper of Record).

Sincerely,

GARY W. BENNETT
District Ranger
Enclosures

BLOCK 22 ANALYSIS AREA
PROPOSED ACTIONS

The purpose of the Block 22 project is to manage vegetation within the area in a manner that maintains the health of the forest and sustains the forest over the long run. This would be expected to support diverse populations of wildlife and plant species, and provide the best mix of long term benefits to the public. Proposed activities are listed below by the type of treatment and the total acres involved. A project area map and purpose and need table are also attached to assist in determining the locations of the treatments and the benefits expected from these actions.

As an example of using this information, the map shows regeneration treatments in stands located within Block 22. The purpose is to sustain long term forest health and increase biodiversity by providing for an even flow of early seral habitat and in prescribed fire areas, restoring & maintaining a long leaf pine component on the site. When combined with fire, an open-pine, grassy-understory condition then develops.

The following actions are proposed

- Mixed Pine Regeneration: Approximately 147 acres will be regenerated using a clearcut with reserves treatment on mixed pine and replant to longleaf in order to restore a historic species component to the sites. This method retains up to 20% of the total stand acres within wide drainages and clumps of up to approximately 1/2 to 2 acres. This type of treatment will save the best hardwoods, is more beneficial to wildlife diversity, and creates better visual corridors in the long term than a classic clearcut. This treatment will be applied to those sites which are currently under the forests prescribed burn blocks.
- Pine/Hardwood Regeneration: Approximately 53 acres will be regenerated using a clearcut with reserves treatment on mixed pine/hardwoods and replant to widely spaced mixed pine in order to maintain and increase pine and hardwood species on the sites. It does this by controlling the future pine spacing to allow growing space for hardwoods. This method retains up to 20% of the total stand acres within wide drainages and clumps of up to approximately 1/2 to 2 acres. This type of treatment will save the best hardwoods, is more beneficial to wildlife diversity, and creates better visual corridors in the long term than a classic clearcut. This treatment will be applied to areas outside the forests prescribed burn blocks.
- Seedtree Regeneration - Harvest approximately 89 acres of mixed pine by the irregular seed tree method. This method retains seedtrees in larger clumps of about 1/2 acre to 2 acres, distributed across the stand. These clumps break up the visual impact and provide mature areas within the young stands, after regeneration. These are upland sites outside the area where regularly scheduled prescribed burns are anticipated, and are suitable for shortleaf and loblolly pine.
- Intermediate Thinning: Thin approximately 381 acres of mixed pine and mixed pine/hardwood sawtimber. Within the area where regular burning is anticipated, the management objective is management of pine sawtimber on the ridges and side slopes to produce open pine and grass stands at approximately 70 basal area. In the areas where periodic burns are not anticipated, the objective is to remove some of the pine and lower grade hardwood trees to enhance the hardmast(oak and hickory) component of the stands. This treatment would reduce stocking levels, thereby enhanceing tree growth and vigor, resulting in reduced risk from the Southern Pine beetle.

- First thinning - Thin approximately of 321 acres of mixed pine pulpwood for the first time. These are pine plantations regenerated over the past 25 years. The objective will be to thin the pines to maintain growth and stand vigor.
- Site prepare planting areas by using a combination of herbicides, hand tools and prescribe fire on approximately 200 acres. Release with herbicides, chainsaws and/or handtools as needed.
- Site prepare seedtree areas by chemically releasing or prescribed burning approximately 89 acres before seed fall. Release with prescribed fire, herbicides, chainsaws and/or handtools as needed.
- Prescribe burn approximately 1,555 acres within the analysis area on an estimated 3 year cycle to improve wildlife habitat and forest health. Prescribed burns will support and develop longleaf pine ecosystems over time.
- Improve visual quality by cleaning up approximately 11 garbage dump sites.
- Locate and install 4 additional Red-cockaded woodpecker recruitment stands.
- Locate and repair present and potential stream head cutting sites.

*Note: Acres for this analysis are estimated by computer mapping methods and are only approximate. However, these estimates represent site specific areas bound by identifiable terrain features. Proposed treatment areas have received an "on the ground" analysis.

Block 22
Purpose and Need Table

Management Practice	Purpose & Need
Clearcut with/Reserves.	-To restore longleaf to the ecosystem. -Sustain long term forest health. -Maintain wildlife habitat. -Retain longleaf pine already present. -Increase biodiversity -Provide for an even flow of early seral habitat.
Saw timber & First thinnings.	-Increase forest health. -Increase growth of residual trees. -Improve habitat for wildlife. -Reduce susceptibility to southern pine beetle damage. -Provide for an even flow of early seral habitat.
Irregular seed tree.	-Creates a new stand naturally. -Contributes to providing a sustainable forest. -Mixed pine seed source is available on site.
(Site Preparation) -by prescribed burn -by chemical application -by chainsaw and/or handtool	-Prepare sites for new growth. -Makes planting easier. -Reduces competition. -Increases survival of planted trees. -Gain adequate stocking levels faster.
(Release) -by prescribed burn -by chemical application -by chainsaw and/or handtool	-Provides more nutrients and growing space for planted and natural seedlings. -Controls stocking -Increases stand health -Provide for more plant species diversity
Plant longleaf pine.	-Increase biodiversity. -Restores a historic component. -Helps provide a sustainable forest of long-lived species that is natural to the area.
Prescribe burning	-Reduce fire hazard. -Increase grass and forb growth. -Increases ground nesting cover for neo-tropical birds, insect production, small seed production and available browse for a wide variety of wildlife species.
Visual Quality	-Provide for a more enjoyable forest visit. -Discourage additional garbage dumping.
RCW	-Increase woodpecker population.
Streams	-Improve water quality. -Control erosion and improve soils stability.